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Interview with Troy Cooper

Maggie Higby

Troy Cooper

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Interviewer: Maggie Higby

Interviewee: Troy Cooper

Date: Thursday, October 27th, 3:00pm

Place: Knox County Extension Office

1025 Harcourt Road

Mount Vernon, Ohio

Maggie Higby: Could you tell me what you had for breakfast this morning?

Troy Cooper: Had some toast, and some cereal.

MH: Okay, that's great. Okay, so...how long have you lived in Knox County?

TC: Cumulatively, I've lived here for...nearly eleven years. Now, I lived here for awhile, I moved, and then I came back.

MH: Why did you decide to come back? [laughs]...Or why did you leave is the better question?

TC: Why did I leave...well, my wife and I are both from out West and so we decided that it would be nice to live closer to family and we moved out there and we enjoyed being closer to them, but we missed here and an opportunity came and so we came back. So...

MH: Wow. Um...and could you describe what you do for me? What your job is.

TC: [laughs] Uh...my official title is Extension Educator. So...we belong to what's called an extension service. And every state has a land-grant university. Ohio's happens to be Ohio State. And what a land-grant university means is that they try to...- historically, they've tried to have a presence in every county through an extension office. And they have program areas. We have FCS, which stand for Family Consumer Science; 4-H Youth Development which is for the youth of the state, and then we have Agriculture and Natural Resources; and CD, or Community Development. And basically what our role is, is we're the eyes and ears of the university in a county, but we're also the mouthpiece for helping to strengthen our communities in whatever way. So, we take research, we take information from not only OSU but other credited universities and things and we try and teach the people in the county to use new technology skills. Historically, it gave, it – it- it was to help with families and canning and sewing and those type of things and then, extension agents were really a pivotal part in farming operations. They would help the farmer with different plowing techniques, with fertility, and their fertilizer and how to manage their livestock. And as times have changed and evolved, so has what we've taught. Um, I was on a webinar yesterday...some extension agents in North Dakota have developed an App for the Smart Phones that is to be used during emergencies – flooding, tornados, hurricanes, whatever. Uh, out of all these different...ah, I don't know what you call it...resources for people to use if they find themselves in this situation, so you can see how we've kind of changed over time. But I still think it all comes back to being in the community, teaching and helping others. And so, my role has been with livestock and horticultural and I do a lot with our local food.

So, farmers' markets, the Home Grown guide, those type of things. Of course the fair is always a big one for the 4-H, and so we...we have our hands in a lot of different things.

MH: Um, so, you said "historically;" do you know when this, uh, sort of thing started?

TC: [sighs] Yeah, you would ask me that

MH: Sorry! I mean, if you don't know the answer, obviously...

TC: Uh...I think it was 1914. With the Smith-Lever Act.

MH: Okay...early...

TC: We're coming up on a hundred years. So...

MH: Mm-hmm. And for the eleven years that you've lived in Knox County, were you always a...was this always your position, or you just came upon this?

TC: Uh, yes it has been. Horticulture was a little bit of a more recent addition. Ah...but it's always had some livestock. And I've always worked with the farmers' market, right from the very beginning. One recent addition has been...ah, I think it was 2005 or 6, we started...there was a produce auction house started – Owl Creek Produce Auction. And that really jump-started vegetable production in Knox County. We hadn't had a whole lot of that. And in the Northeast corner of Morrow County, in the Amish community up there. And so, now we've got over a hundred acres of vegetables, and so that requires a lot of time. And being out in the fields and helping teach them about how to identify pests and diseases, and then how to manage that. And...food safety has been another one lately – er, lately – we've really jumped onto so that they're producing safe food for consumers. So, it kinda always grows and changes. Yeah, I think we've been around about a hundred years. Close.

MH: Yeah. Um, and, do you work specifically with Mount Vernon or is it all of Knox County?

TC: It's all of Knox County, yes.

MH: Did you have a...sort of an 'ah-ha' moment, or anything that kind of...how did you find this job? Or decide that you wanted to do this?

TC: [laughs] That's a good question. Um...I had been in 4-H one year as a young person and as a kid, and I'm not sure I really fully realized that that's what I was doing, but I did. And so that was really my only exposure to extension. Where I came from it wasn't really a huge deal. Um...so, when I was going to school and getting my master's degree, you're getting close, and they always tell you as you get close to graduating you have to submit twenty or thirty applications before you get your first interview; you have to interview three or five, ten times, whatever, before you get your first job. So I was just happened to be in the dean's office at the university and they had a box there and I saw, it was all a bunch of job announcements. And I picked it up and I sat down, and I went through - the very first one on top was an extension agent in Ohio. Ah, well...I - I'm not really sure where Ohio is, so that'll be kinda – so if I get a trip it'll be great! Well, I didn't even think of it...so I just randomly just submitted it and I ended up here, been here eleven years.

MH: Wow. Um...and, you have a family. Wife and kids? How many kids?

TC: I have two kids.

MH: How old are they?

TC: One's a senior in high school, and the other one's a fourth grader.

MH: And they...were they alive when you guys moved out West and then came back?

TC: We had one while we were here, and then the other one was born while we were in Wyoming.

MH: Have you found that, uh, this is a good community to have them in?

TC: Knox County's great.

MH: Yeah.

TC: Uh...again, being kinda transplants, uh, we've pretty well determined that Knox County's about the only place in Ohio that we would want to raise our family. Nothing against other counties, but we just really, really like Knox County.

MH: Yeah. That's great. Um...so, in that same vein, with your family, where do you go during your leisure time? Where do you guys spend time outside your home?

TC: [laughs] That's a good question.

MH: Or, I mean, are there certain events that you guys look forward going to – with, like – as a family? I know 4-H has a booth, like, at the county fair and stuff, right? Do you, are you involved with that?

TC: Our office is very, very heavily involved in the fair. And so, my wife becomes a fair widow. And my kids are – don't participate in 4-H, they've chosen not to do that. So, they don't see me much during fair week. I live at the fair, they come just one or two days. So, I'm trying to think...we...we enjoy just being together. We kind of have a small farm, and so a lot of our free time is just taking care of the gardens and the animals that we have. Ah...um...we try to get out to see family every few years. And, we'll go...we like to kinda go around the state, just to see the different things. And we've gone to Kentucky, and Massachusetts, and D.C. and, uh...where else have we gone? Really, those are the big trips that you plan. Take planning to go do. Ah, for the most part if we go out and do something it's usually toward Richland County or Franklin County, we go down to Columbus. Eat out. Go to a game. Something like that.

MH: Um...is there, are there events or places that the community as a whole gathers that you guys are a part of?

TC: Tomato Show. We will occasionally go to the Dan Emmitt festival. Um...then, high school games.

MH: Tell me about those a little bit. What sort of stuff do you...?

TC: Football, basketball are the main ones we go see. Um...just trying to support the local kids. Whether it's through our – where our kids go to school, or through our church.

We go and support those kids that are involved in those activities. We'll go to some...my daughter, who's a senior, has friends that are in drama, so we'll go see the school plays, wherever that will be. Um...trying to think what else.

MH: Do you find that those are good places to socialize? You get to see a lot of people?

TC: Oh yeah...yeah. Um, we like to walk on the Kokosing Trail. For us, personally, a large part of our social life is our church. We spend a lot of time with people from our church in a wide variety of ways. So, that's probably where most of our free time is spent.

MH: What sort of activities does the church do?

TC: Well, like last night we had a trick-or-treat at the church. So, we had a hundred and fifty...a hundred and seventy-five people there. And it was just kind of a nice, safe environment for kids to go trek-or-treating – *trick-or-treating* – whatever, and so um...My wife and son are involved in Scouting - Cub Scouts right now, and so that's usually a weekly event, lots of things related to Scouting. So that could be a summer camp, it could be other things...a pinewood derby – you ever been to a pinewood derby? Ooohh. [laughs]

MH: Tell me about it. [laughs]

TC: Ohh, Cub Scouts make little cars out of a little block of wood. And they race them down a track. Some years it's hard to tell who's the bigger kid: the dads, or the kids. Um...but it's fun, we turn it into a dinner and awards, and it's kinda fun. So we'll do that, get quite a few people at that too. Um...

MH: How many people would say go to a pinewood derby?

TC: Oh I'll bet you they'll have fifty, seventy-five people there. Because then grandma, grandpas, aunts, uncles, cousins, all come to watch little Johnny race the car down the track. [laughs]

MH: Is it, is it inter – different kids, from different towns or areas?

TC: No, it's just our church.

MH: It's just your church.

TC: Now, there are levels, we've just never gone further than that. But then every troop has something that has one of these and then they combine into a regional and then a state, but we've never...never gone beyond that.

MH: Sounds fun. Um...is there something that you would say maybe people, strangers who are coming to Knox County or people who haven't been here before, wouldn't necessarily understand about the county?...Seeing it for the first time.

TC: Hm.

MH: Is there...maybe...does Knox County ever get a bad rap, you think?

TC: [laughs] I hesitate to say.

MH: Not necessarily something that's true.

TC: Right. Right. Um...

MH: It seems like all these events are really great things, and you've obviously chosen to raise your family here...

TC: Well we go out to – oh, another thing we'll go out to is the Fourth of July parade out there at Kenyon, er, at Gambier.

MH: Yeah, yeah.

TC: So, there's things like that where...we kinda go. But if there's something that different to me, is...is Gambier and Kenyon College. Kinda like a little island. I have no issue, but you know, something as you first move into, you learn that that's kinda they're out there a little bit. And for a number of years, I think...my perception is that that was almost fostered. They liked to be seen as just a little bit different. But, ah, I think Howard and...and other professors and some projects they've had have really tried to reach out, in the last several years. And I think they're making some improvements. And so that's really nice to see. That's really good to see. Um...and, personally, for us, when we first moved here – the Knox Community Hospital. It's one that advertises, you know, the top 100 in the nation, and our experience has not been that real positive. So, I just...to me, the...personally, I think the medical services provided in Knox County are...not what I choose to take my family to. We'll drive a distance. Um...but, really, I guess Knox County has always been pretty open. They've been pretty inviting, they're pretty accepting, as a rule, ah...um. They're just, they're just good, honest, hard-working people that still like a community, they like that sense of community, they don't ah...I mean there's always the politics and uh....good ol' boy club in some areas, but just as a rule, they're pretty good.

MH: So when you first came, ah, to Knox County, did you find it was pretty easy to integrate and meet people?

TC: By virtue and nature of my job, yes. Yes.

MH: And your, and your church?

TC: And church, yes. Because we went from the same church, basically, out West and we came here and same organization and everything was set up and that was probably what really helped us because...And that's one thing I really like about my church is, I can go here, in Japan, I can be in Mount Vernon the next weekend, they're the same. So, we like it, and that was an immediate, just kind of, to fit in there. And so, yeah that really, really helps.

MH: Um, you mentioned about how Howard and some of the other professors are trying to change that view of Kenyon in Knox County, are there other things about the community that have changed since you've been here?

TC: [pause] As far as...there's always change with new buildings, but you don't mean that you mean, socially...er?

MH: Yeah, socially, sort of. Is it a...if you came ten years ago, or if *I* came here ten years ago, because I didn't know it, would I recognize the place? Would it be pretty much the same, inviting people...and...same events?

TC: Pretty much. Yeah. Yeah, I...probably, the downtown area has probably been something they're remod - revitali – they're in revitalizing mode and COTC and some of those...that's probably something to me that's been a pretty big change. Um...if you had been here ten years ago it wouldn't have looked like that. So, that's something that's in the midst of changing.

MH: Um, is that something that you're in favor of?

TC: Oh yeah. Yeah, I think it's great. I like change. [laughs] For the most part.

MH: Um...what would you say, you enjoy about going to those community events like the Tomato Show and the...?

TC: Just the people.

MH: The people. Are there...uh, do you have specific...are there...I guess, are there characters and regulars in the town that everyone knows?

TC: Oh, yeah. But...but I think it depends on what circles you run in, too. There's the sports circles and so if you're that your kids kind of run together in that way. And I'm in agriculture sector, so pretty much I see everybody in the same type of events. So, you come to get to know and recognize faces and names and get to know them that way. And so that's...there are just people who have been there forever.

MH: So, uh, most of these events are pretty well attended – I went to the Centerburg Oldtime Farming Festival -

TC: Isn't that amazing? It's a little Podunk little town, and all those people come to that.

MH: I know. It was so amazing. And I did... I thought I was probably the only out-of-state license plate. But yeah, people just flock from all over.

TC: [laughs] I mean they just light up all those old, antique tractors and everybody walks around looking at those antique tractors. They look at the longest stalk of corn, they look at the longest ear of corn, you know, and...and see, there are some names that pop out: you've got Wally Thomen, who's always been instrumental in that. He's a long time resident of Centerburg and he's got his fingers in a lot of different things. And he's...nearly eighty years old. Yeah.

MH: Um, so. At events like that, why do you think people in the community continue to attend? Why do they love them so much?

TC: Because, that sense of community. And I think there's too, they still try and keep it to the roots. They like that...to know where they...kind of ground themselves back to where they've come from, all living in the present and looking to the future. To me, they're trying to span that whole spectrum. And that's why, if...the Tomato Show, and I'll say again, that's why I go to the Tomato Show because I like to see those vegetables that are all judged and laid up there, and I like that and...then I get to see the people I haven't seen in awhile and get to talk to them and...um. Or from the other event, the fair,

and we haven't seen each other since the fair so we sit around talking. And so, it's a lot a social event. The farmers' market on the square: a social event. They come, they have their regulars they go to, the vendors talk. They're used to setting up next to one another so they develop a friendship; people come, they see each other, they talk, they relax. I mean, it's just a sense of community.

MH: Uh...that's all I've got. But is there another question you think I should have asked? Anything that you want to add? Something that I'm missing?

TC: I think you...you asked me the question, what was an ah-ha for me. To me, one of the biggest ah-ha's was, again, I had just randomly selected...I didn't know what an extension agent was. And so they...I get hired, and I come, and it was like holy cow, what have I gotten myself into? I mean, I didn't realize all the different aspects that I would be involved in. Radio stations, radio tapes, newsletters, um...all the public events that we're involved in. And all the different...I mean, we – we meet with local officials, county – county commissioners, um...I – er, city councils, mayors, librarians, school teachers, principals, superintendents. I mean we're...it was just...every...veterinarians, park people. I mean we get...to me, it's just oh my word, it's just so much bigger than I thought it would be. And so there's days ninety-nine and a half percent of the time, it's great. And I love having and getting to know so many people. There's that half a percent, you just...it gets a little overwhelming, I'll be honest. There's days. But that was my biggest ah-ha, was holy cow...It just was how far-reaching – how many aspects of the community, I mean you...I really got to know the community. So that's probably why it helped me, because I'm not from here. I'm a complete outsider and...and...you know, family's not from here, ah, religion's different than ninety-nine percent of the people that live here and so...it was just, it helped me integrate into the community much faster I think than I would have in other areas. So. That was...but I wouldn't ask any other question.