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10-31-2000

Interview Professor Mary Suydam

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Mary Suydam

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Recommended Citation

Lawton, Jenny and Suydam, Mary, "Interview Professor Mary Suydam" (2000). *Interviews*. 28.
https://digital.kenyon.edu/elfs_interviews/28

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ELFS-JCL-A103100.A
Jenny Lawton
Interview Professor Mary Suydam
Ascension Hall

JL: Alright, today is October 31, 2000 – Halloween. And I'm talking with Professor Suydam. This is Jenny Lawton. And we're talking about local food networks for Professor Sacks's Fieldwork seminar. What I wanted to do is just talk to you about how and why you buy certain foods, and how local foods figure in to how you manage your family's food stuff. First of all, how often do you go shopping for food?

MS: Probably every three days, I would say.

JL: So, do you ever find it difficult to go shopping for food?

MS: Yes, yes.

JL: Is that why you go so infrequently?

MS: Oh I think that's frequent to me. Do you think that's infrequent?

JL: Oh well, I come from a large family.

MS: Oh, I see. Well, that seems frequent to me. But yeah, it is difficult for me even though, believe it or not, we live right around the corner from Big Bear. So it shouldn't be that hard.

JL: And so you do find it difficult to find time to go shopping for food?

MS: Yes.

JL: Your schedule? Or your husband's schedule?

MS: It's just not something... "Oh, I don't want to run out to the store." That's not where I want to spend the time that I have. So, but, we do it.

JL: Do you often go to Big Bear? Or where do you buy your groceries?

MS: Most of the time we go to Kroger's, actually?

JL: Why do you choose Kroger's?

MS: For larger families – our family is a little smaller this year, we only have one child at home – but we had three (two teenaged boys) before that. And for larger families, Kroger's is cheaper. Especially in bulk, bigger sizes of things. And it's also easier to manage as a store. Big Bear is huge – I don't know, for me it's large. And now they're

going to be moving the Kroger's, I understand, and making it twice as large, so I don't know what it will be like once that happens. But I think the size that it is right now is actually very user-friendly – so, we like it.

JL: I like it too. I find that the people are friendlier. When you go to Kroger, what is most important to buy for you? First of all, are there any staples of your family's diet that you get every three days?

MS: Well the big one is milk, although now that the two boys are gone, we're only drinking a gallon or maybe two gallons a week. But we were going through a gallon-and-a-half a day. And there's only so much milk that you can store, so that's why we were going every other day or two – we had to go to get milk. So it's not as pressing a need as it was – my daughter is not a big milk-drinker. That was the major one. Now I think it's shifting over to salad stuff. Because my father lives with us and he has to have, or he *should* have salads at every meal and so, and again you can only get so many heads of lettuce – they'll only keep for so long. So that's seems to be the thing we're always running over for now.

JL: So when you go to the store, what are the most important things you look for? Quality, quantity, brand names...?

MS: At a grocery store, I'm not sort of thinking quality as much. I mean, if I really was I'd probably get the produce at Big Bear. I think when I'm going there, I'm thinking price and half-way decent – it's going to be edible, it'll be fine, but it's not going to be gourmet food.

JL: Are there any specific brand-names that you generally buy? Cereals or produce?

MS: I'm not very brand-name conscious. There's this one bread – I don't like most breads that we buy – and there's this one brand, Stoneground Whole Wheat, that's actually almost an edible bread. I used to like getting bread from the Amish, but that store went out of business, so I don't do that anymore.

JL: Do you ever visit, I know that they sell bread and pastries at the Gambier Farmers Market on Saturday mornings – have you ever been to that?

MS: I don't usually – Saturday morning is not a time when I'm usually out and around.

JL: Me either.

MS: It sounds good but I just don't tend to do it.

JL: Were the market at a more convenient time, would it be something that you'd probably be interested in?

MS: Oh yeah. I really like the one by Burger King, the Amish-run market. And actually, that's where I get most of my produce and bread and cheese, I really like their cheese. I get a lot of stuff there, all summer long and I think they close down, I don't know if they've closed yet but, right about now they close for the winter. So, it's easier if it's something with set hours during the day, like that one does.

JL: So what made you choose that market to get your produce?

MS: That one is for quality – because I love the produce. I was looking for something, they have some local but not all local, I mean, it sort of depends on what's available. But the quality is pretty high and mostly Amish cheese, and I really like the Amish cheese.

JL: So price-wise, is that a little bit more expensive?

MS: It might be a little more. I've been very surprised though. I also started getting their lunch meat, like smoke turkey and things there and it was pretty decent price too. I actually think it's fairly competitive and the quality is much better.

JL: Let's say...I know in a lot of our research we're finding that some of the locally-grown products may be a little bit more expensive. If you had the same two apples – one is locally grown, and one's a Washington apple – and...

MS: Oh, I'd go for the local.

JL: Yeah

MS: I don't mind paying a little bit more – if it were a whole lot, that would be something. Especially now that our family size is smaller too, it's not as big an issue as it used to be. Because we were spending almost \$800 a month on food when the two boys were home. That's gone down quite a bit.

JL: Boys will do that – and boys friends will do that to you. Let me just check in on my questions. So why, it's only quality that would lead you to buy from local stores? Is there, do you have any sense of community or any other reasons for that?

MS: No, I think it would really be that I would perceive it to be better food.

JL: Because you don't have to transport it, you don't have to preserve it. That's a correct observation.

MS: Exactly. And the other is if it was organic food – because I do like to shop at the organic store downtown – because I like things that have less pesticides and antibiotics and all that sort of thing.

JL: Does your family's diet change seasonally based on when the Amish market closes? Do you stop eating cheese? What happens during the year?

MS: We still eat cheese and things but well, we definitely, (words jumbled). I'm from California and I personally just can't eat a lot of the fruit that's here in the winter, even when they bring it in from the outside. So I just, I don't eat fruit as much. And then there's all the root vegetables which we do eat more of in the winter, you know like parsnips and sweet potatoes – you eat more of those in the winter, I think.

JL: That's interesting. Yes. Good answer, great answer. Do you grow any of your own foods?

MS: Not now. I used to, but now we live up in the woods and there's no sun, unfortunately, because I love especially homegrown tomatoes. And I have a really hard time eating tomatoes out of season.

JL: So in the winter no fruit, no tomatoes?

MS: Well, we've discovered the little cherry tomatoes, actually, are fairly decent. So I exist cherry tomatoes in the winter.

JL: That will have to do.

MS: Right, and apples I guess.

JL: How often do you go out to eat?

MS: Maybe twice a month – not very often.

JL: Where do you most often go?

MS: There's not a whole lot of places to go, so it's usually Hunan or...it stops right there, I think. If I'm with the kids, sometimes we'll go to Subway or Wendy's or something like that. But if it's us, actually...sometimes I have lunch at the Village Inn with a fair amount of people, but that's about it.

JL: So why do you choose to go out rather than bring a sack lunch or just have dinner at home? Is there a special occasion?

MS: Oh, well usually we...oh, pizza, we do do pizza...it's because I don't have time to cook, generally..."Oh, let's carry-out or go get something."

JL: Thank you. It's wonderful. Your answers totally fill my range of questions. I guess I'd like to tell you about some of the things we're doing in Sacks's class and maybe get your feedback on that. What we're doing is we're looking into establishing a local food network that would kind of supplement or maybe even replace some of the corporate produce that's being sold and giving Knox County residents more of an option to buy locally that would encourage farming and encourage the rural character. So we're trying

to find ways that we can replace locally grown produce with industrial stuff – so, asking Pierce to start using local corn instead of whatever comes prepackaged from who-knows-where. And I know that I'm interested on the day to day level with families, what would be the most convenient way just to get food in general, but...

MS: Well, if you want to these things now: I could get eggs from my neighbor over on DePaulo Road; I used to be able to get bread out in Millersburg; the produce was over by Burger King; if you got meat from D.J.'s or one of those processing places out in Fredericktown...it's a lot, it's a lot to do. I don't get eggs as much as I used to because (and it's only five minutes away!) but it's just one more trip. So I think the more centralized that things could be – like I say, the really nice thing about how this Amish-run place is that they not only have produce but they have cheese, and they've got jam, and cookies – it's really like a little market. I think that would be key – and I don't know how that would work. But to me, I think like a co-op. The way Farmer's Exchange does with...they have a drive-through that you go through where you can get birdseed and cat litter and all these kind of animal supplies. And it's run as a co-op – and I think they, I think a lot of stuff like the dried ear corn and the feed and stuff is local, you know, and it is a co-op. I think that's the most efficient way.

JL: So making it accessible and making it an efficient way to shop. And how often, how do you feel that price would come into that? Do you think that people would need to be convinced that it was more economical? I mean, not just better quality?

MS: Some people would, you know. There's the contingent, in this county the Walmart contingent, what I call the Big Bear contingent. You know, the people who shop at Big Bear really don't mind paying more. And there's that whole group of people. So they would no matter what, if they thought it was better. But then there's a larger number of people in this county for whom price is really an issue. I don't think you could ignore those people. I don't think there's enough of the former group to make a go of it. And I think one of the things the other market has been successful – I believe it's been here for two or three years, so I'm assuming it's been successful – is to have, maybe you'll keep the prices at least competitive, if they're not cheaper, you know, so people perceive they're not paying whole lot more and they're getting quite a bit more in terms of taste.

JL: How did you choose to come to Knox County? Through Kenyon?

MS: Yeah. It was, that was where my husband got a job, 20 years ago.

JL: And that's where you got a job.

MS: Well yeah, I'm sort of on the periphery. I have jobs sometimes. I don't have a tenure track, I don't have a permanent position. But that's why we came.

JL: How do you feel about living in what's now a changing rural community – you live in the woods but...

MS: But it's all around us – we're, like I say, we're right behind Big Bear. We're just down the road from the movie theater. So we're right in the center of it all. It's a tough area to live in, in a lot of ways. What I like about it is the rural quality, so that's the one thing I have to hang on to. If that were to vanish, it wouldn't be a very desirable place.

JL: What about that rural...

MS: Well I'm from a rural area myself – I'm from a small town – and I just like lots of open space. I don't like cities, I don't like crowds, I get lost easily.

JL: Me too.

MS: So, I just, I like small towns. That's just kind of the atmosphere that really really matters to me. That's one of the reasons we moved here. He actually had a couple of job offers but they were in more populated areas – well, one of them was in North Dakota, that was a little too unpopulated for us.

JL: Yeah. I'd say.

MS: But one of the reasons we actually came here – we really liked the area. It was a wonderful place to raise kids – much better than where we were in Southern California. The kids have had a lot more freedom.

JL: Hm, someone might say if you live in a city, you have more freedom – but you feel that there's more...

MS: How would that be? More freedom...

JL: More opportunities?

MS: Oh, well that's true, that's true. There are more opportunities. I feel that the constraints of safety, though, that's what I'm talking about. They have more freedom to, you can sort of let them loose in Gambier and they can be on their own for the day and nobody worries about them. That's the kind of freedom. And that's what I had as a child so I really wanted that for my kids.

JL: Very, very different from where I grew up. So, since you are so close to that commercialization, and that jail, does that make you nervous?

MS: Yeah, the jail is, I don't know. It's the whole thing with the city fathers mystifies me. I just wonder why the Holiday Inn and the movie theater would like a jail going across from them.

JL: Oh my gosh.

MS: It's kind of bizarre to me. I guess that's what they wanted to do.

JL: Do you, are you involved in any local government or any local councils? No. Do you have any desire to any of that?

MS: You know, that would be an exercise in frustration, I think. So.

JL: Do you think that there's a big difference between, you talked about the people who shop, who don't have the...the former group and the latter group, that don't have the option of buying the more expensive foods. Do you feel like there are divisions in the community between those two groups?

MS: Oh I think so, I think so. It's really hard I think, I don't know if most people at Kenyon realize that the average I think in Knox County is just over \$20,000. So if you have two Kenyon professors, each of them making \$50,000 a year, I mean, the income level that we have here is really out of whack compared to the rest of the county. There's a professional class in Knox County too. But it's very difficult and I think there is a huge difference between those two...

JL: Do you see any places where they mesh, where they come together?

MS: Not really. I suppose if you were, you do a church thing, probably the churches, because that's a big community thing. Now being Jewish, I'm sort of left out of that whole...

JL: I feel that too.

MS: I think that's part of it, sort of...less than a minority...invisible. But I think if you were part of that, that's where probably some of that gets together. I assume, because so many people belong to them here.

JL: Yeah, that's absolutely true. That's part of middle-America...

MS: Right...and schools.

JL: And schools. Did all of your children go through, or are they going through the Mt. Vernon public school?

MS: Mm-hm (yes).

JL: Neat. Neat. Well, I don't have any more questions. Is there anything else that you feel like I should know about food in your family and...

MS: I don't think so. But I applaud what you all are doing. I hope we can...it seems to me strange to live in an agricultural area and not be able to take advantage of that. That's always seemed rather, very odd to me. Unless you know somebody. Like I knew my neighbor who had eggs. But if she stopped getting them, I wouldn't know who else

might have them. And that's sort of the way this community works. It is kind of a word-of-mouth place. And if you're not part of it. So it's like, when they had the Amish store – where was that, it was off of Route 3 – it was quite a thing to get to – you had to go up Route 3 and you had to make this turn and go on this country road... you had to know where you were going. It was Yoder's yogurt store. And it was a little country store, a little Amish store – really charming place. And they have fresh bread and cheese and all this stuff. But someone had to tell me about it. There's nothing in the paper, there's no place you can go. So I think whatever you can do to publicize for all the people who *are* coming in, that would be a marvelous thing.

JL: Do you think that there is already a base of people who are already doing this stuff. I mean, part of what we're doing right now is trying to find out who's already exchanging things locally and how we can build on that. Do you think there is already...

MS: I think there probably are. I know there are people who sell eggs. I'm just learning about organic meat, which is a new thing for me this year, now that's a big price difference. And when we had kids at home there was no way that I could afford organic meat. But now that I can, because I'm just learning, and clearly there are people who do that here, it's just a matter of finding out about them. There's probably bread sellers somewhere, but I don't know about them. So I assume that there is some kind of base. Once you can find out who those people are...

JL: Have you ever gone to the Mt. Vernon Farmers Market?

MS: No...

JL: The Gambier one is very small but there's one in Mt. Vernon also.

MS: Yeah my husband went to it a couple of times this summer. Like I say, Saturday morning is... (laughs)

JL: ...meant for sleeping.

MS: Definitely. Definitely. And you had to get there early, everyone said, by 9:30 everything was gone. And that was the other thing that killed it. If you could show up at about 1 in the afternoon, I would have been fine. But definitely not by 9:30.

JL: I understand that.

MS: It's really popular. I think it worked really well. So obviously there are people who want to do this. The other thing is that I noticed that every Columbus suburb, I just was noticing in the *Dispatch*, has a farmer's market. And I'm thinking, if they could do it...urbanized as they are, surely we can to.

JL: Maybe it's just a question of building on...there are markets, Mt. Vernon is very popular and Gambier is very small...

MS: Right, but something like the North market or that market model, the one by Burger King where you had a permanent location to which people could bring things on a Saturday to – where you could get sort of both (words jumbled), but then also y’know the once a week thing. I think something like that would work really well.

JL: Perhaps indoors for the winter.

MS: Yeah, yeah, because there are actually things that Knox County people can sell all winter too – but I don’t know. Probably the organic meats, that would be the thing to connect there. And then they have all these jams and apple butter and candy, and if they sort of move into that and you could... I don’t think the Amish place can get enough business, though, to keep it open all winter. So that would be the other thing... but, geez, even half-a-year would be great.

JL: That would be great.

MS: And that might be something to build on, if you can kind of use them as a base and get more local stuff plugged in there – because they are already doing... it would be too bad to compete with them.

JL: Right.

MS: And they’re already doing something – and I do see a lot of local stuff – it’s just the thing would be to sort of get more local things. And to turn it more into a co-op, I guess.

JL: Great.

MS: Good luck.

JL: Thanks.