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Interview with Professor Mary Suydam

Ascension Hall

On October 31 at 1pm, I visited Professor Mary Suydam in her office to talk about her interaction with local food networks as a Knox county resident and consumer -- specifically, as a buyer of food for a family of 5. She explained that last year, when all three children were living at home, she (or her husband) went to the store once every three days. With two growing boys in the house, it was not out of the ordinary to consume a gallon-and-a-half of milk every day. Suydam shops at Kroger's because she feels that it is cheaper for larger families -- it offers many products in bulk. Moreover, Kroger's is "easier to manage as a store (than Big Bear)...the size that it is right now is user friendly." Spending almost \$800 a month on food, price and convenience proved to be the most important factors when she shops: "at a grocery store, I'm not thinking quality as much...I'm thinking price and half-way decent."

Now that there is only one child living at home, Suydam's family's consumption habits have changed dramatically. Now the most important staples of the diet are vegetables for making salads, a prescribed part of meals for her father, who now lives with them. With a smaller family, she has the option of buying more expensive products. However, time can still be a factor in her family's food selection. Not only is it difficult to find time to buy foods, the family goes out to eat when there is not enough time to prepare food. She and her husband go to Hunan about twice a month. With the kids, Suydam buys food from a fast food restaurant with about the same frequency -- occasionally, they order pizza.

During the summer months, Suydam buys most of her produce, bread and cheese from the Amish market "near the Burger King" in Mount Vernon. She feels that the products there are consistently higher in quality than those at the local grocery stores. She noted that the market prices are competitive, but that she does not mind paying a small amount more for the better product. She also likes to shop at the organic food market in Columbus, although trips there are proportionally rare. Generally, her patronage of small food markets (instead of Kroger's) is based on purchasing specific products; for example, she is particularly fond of Amish cheese.

Better quality produce does not always cause Suydam to make the choice to buy locally. When I asked if she had attended the Gambier Farmers' Market, she laughed and explained that "Saturday morning is not usually a time when I'm out and around;" if it were at a more convenient time, however, she would be interested. She and her family used to grow some of their own vegetables, but when they moved to a more wooded area, this was no longer an option. Although she knows where to find a range of locally produced foods, the locations are very scattered. The "key" to providing the most efficient way for buying locally, Suydam suggested, would be to bring the products together. She mentioned the Farmers Exchange, a drive-thru co-op that sells animal supplies/food, much of it locally produced. One tactic our research team might pursue is to see if a market like the Amish market she described might be able to extend its season if its revenue was supplemented with additional products. She pointed out that some

Knox County products can be sold all winter: meats, candy, jams and apple butter, for example.

Suydam explained that while she is willing to pay "a little bit more" for higher quality food, price is a big concern for the majority of Knox County residents. She described two groups: "the Walmart contingent and the Big Bear contingent." She explained that "the people who shop at Big Bear don't mind about paying more...they would no matter what if they thought it was better." However, there are a larger number for whom price is an issue: "I don't think there are enough people in the former group to make a go of it (on a large scale)." She elaborated on the divisions between two groups; with a countywide average salary of just over \$20,000, her family's collective income is "out of whack" in contrast. She feels that this division runs deep socially as well, and that it is likely that the two groups only come together through the church and schools. (As a member of the almost non-existent local Jewish community, she realizes that her family is "less than a minority here.") She does not sit on any local government councils as it would be "an exercise in frustration." Clearly, there are (*at least*) two very separate markets in Knox County.

When the interview was running a bit short, I asked her about her decision to live in Knox County and her observations about the changes which have taken place since she moved here 20 years ago. Her family initially moved to Mount Vernon because her husband, Professor Michael Levine, got a job at Kenyon. One of the reasons they chose the school was because of the surrounding area. Suydam likes the rural quality and explained that it is a "wonderful place to raise kids." As a child growing up in a rural community, she enjoyed the same freedoms of open space and safety. Living behind Big Bear and just down the road from the new movie theater, her family is "right in the center" of the changes caused by the commercialization of what is often called "the strip" (a.k.a. the commercial developments on route-36, east of the historic downtown). The rural quality is "the one thing I have to hang on to -- if that disappeared, it would not be a very desirable place."

"It seems to me strange to live in an agricultural area and not be able to take advantage of it." Suydam explained that the only way to do so is to "know somebody... that's how this community works, it's kind of a word of mouth place." She suggested that this is an area to address and work on: "Whatever you can do to publicize to the people who *are* coming in, that would be a marvelous thing."

METHODS:

It did not take me long to realize what a novice I was (am) at conducting an interview. Although I had checked the machine and tape the evening before, somehow the tape was cued to the beginning of Side *B* instead of *A* -- I recorded the interview on Side *B* and made the appropriate notes on the cassette insert. Although the levels were a little low, the microphone was positioned correctly to pick up Suydam and I on opposite stereo tracks. From a technical, mechanical perspective, the interview went very well.

However, s I played back the tape, I was horrified by moments in the interview. While I accept that I may be one of my harshest critics, it was clear on recording where I could have been more focused. The irony of that to me is that even while the interview was going on, I knew I was making poor decisions; there were moments when my awkwardness seemed uncontrollable, even inevitable. I was nervous, but not on my toes.

This kind of problem could have been solved with a clearer head going into the interview, and a *memorized* schedule of questions. I heard myself asking questions Suydam had answered not 5 seconds before.

What was more dangerous was the *way* in which I asked most of the questions. I "lead the witness" far too often. Listening to the tape, it was clear that I had an agenda; I was not gathering information, but looking for specific information. This was not altogether a problem, but listening back on the interview, I found that I was sometimes looking for the *wrong* information. For example, after a question about seasonal vegetables, I floundered and covered by saying, "Certainly, yes, good answer, great answer." None of these comments had to do with the actual answer; what's more, I may have suggested to Suydam that she answer later questions in a particular way -- a way in which I was actually *not* interested. Instead of answering in a way that qualifying her response as good or bad, a better comment on my part would have been "thank you, that was a helpful answer," followed by a moment of silence to collect my thoughts. Although this incident probably had little to no effect on the interview, it helped me realize how important it is to prepare in terms of the topic and mentality...and amply at that!