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Interview with Donald Woolson

Mitra Fabian

Donald Woolson

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Mitra Fabian

10/30/95

Assignment 7: Interview with Donald Woolson, of the Woolson Co., Mt. Vernon,
OH

(Digits in brackets indicate counter number on transcribing machine.)

The Woolson Co. store, on October 23, 1995

* * * * *

MF: [002] This is Mitra Fabian. I'm interviewing Donald Woolson..

DW: Dudley and Donald Woolson.

MF: Okay..

DW: Just Donald Woolson would be okay.

MF: Alright. ..Owner of the Woolson Co. in Mt. Vernon, and today is October 23, 1995. Um, I guess the first question that I have is basically some biological information. I mean, obviously you.. it's seems like you've been in Mt. Vernon for a very long time.

DW: Yes, except ahh..., except when I was in the service when I... ahh, I've lived here all my life.

MF: Umm-hmm..

DW: I was in the service twice. Uhh.. I was in the first time in World War II. I was in the Air Force, Army Air Corps, actually. And during the Korean War, I was in Medical Corps. I'm not a doctor and I'm not a nurse, but uh, I was just, just a surprise sargeant in the Medical Corps.

MF: Umm-hmm..

DW: Uh, first time I was in almost four years and the second time I was in two years. Other than that I've been here in Mt. Vernon the whole time.

MF: So how long have you been doing- running the store?

DW: Well, uh, after World War II, I came back and, ah, went in the store here, and when I went back in the service, I was gone for about almost two years. Then I came back again. But as far as being in the store, I been in the store ever since I was just a youngster, almost.

MF: But, so you took it over- you and your brother took it over-

DW: Yes.

MF: ..in what year?

DW: Ahh.. well, my father died in 1960, but he wasn't active after about 1955. So,... when.. I think... when we came back from the service it was about 1945, so we'd been practically all the time since then.

MF: Okay. Um.. my next questions are how you personally may have a relationship, uh, to family farming. For instance, how often do you come into contact with family farmers around here?

DW: Well, of course, we had a large garden seed business. In fact, we still have quite extensive garden seed business. And, uh.. many farmers come here to buy their garden seeds.

MF: I see. For, like, floral seeds, or....?

DW: Well, not field seeds.

MF: Okay.

DW: Not wheat and oats, and so forth, but just regular garden seeds.

MF: Right.

DW: Ah, we limited to that because we didn't have the space for.. for field seeds like they do in the Farmers' Exchange and places like that. But we- we've had, ah, been here so long, and we've had contact with so many rural people because of the fact that we carried garden seeds. And, of course in the Spring we carry plants and things like that too.

MF: What about beyond the store, how do you come into contact with family farmers?

DW: Well, actually we don't have too much contact with them, except, uh, years ago we used to go out and hang window shades and things like that.. in houses, and various things.

MF: Umm-hmm.

DW: And uh, that's about the only contact, when we did, uh, custom work for people like that- hang window shades or something like that.

MF: I see.

DW: That we've had.

MF: Um, what sort of images do you think of when you think of a family farm?

DW: Well, my wife was raised- born and raised on the farm. And uh, they certainly had a good family, uh,... what would you call it? Uh,.. a good family relationship.

MF: Umm-hmm.

DW: In other words, uh, she has a brother who's still living- but he's incapacitated now. But they, they, they're a nice family, and they had a nice hundred acre farm down here, between here and Gambier, actually.

MF: Huh!

DW: And uh, they're very nice people. And uh,.. I met her.. met her down here inna skating rink, down here in town, in Mt. Vernon. [laughs] Uh, her cousin was there, uh.. Years ago they used to have a skating rink down here in Westana [sp?]. Her cousin was there and one night... and I knew her cousin 'cause her cousin had gone to school with, in Mt. Vernon, with me a little bit. And I..I.. She said, "You know... go see my cousin." And I said, "What for?" [laughs] And she said, "Well.." I said,.. she told her-told me..uh, "She's real nice girl, and I think you'd like her!" And I said, "Well, I'll see." So, I called her once.. Uh, she gave me her phone number and I called her once. And uh.. we talked quite a while and then a week or so later, I.. I went to see her. And..

MF: And that's how it all started! [laughs]

DW: That's how it all started, yeah.

MF: So, did you ever visit their farm? I mean, what sort of memories do you have-

DW: Well, no. When we first got married, I, ah, we di-, I didn't have very much. Really, I was, uh, not very wealthy, you might say. And we lived, ah, uh, the first couple, three months we stayed at the farm. But I was never a farmer. I, I, was born and raised in Mt. Vernon. Ah, ann- ah, I didn't know anything about farmin' at all.

MF: Wow.

DW: The only thing I.. I used to go out, uh, when we lived there for a month or two, I'd go out and gather the eggs. That's ah [laughs] the extent of it. Ann- ah, when there's some lambs were born, I helped feed the lambs with, umm, bottles to help keep 'em alive, 'cause th', the mother wouldn't, uh, permit them to feed. She disowned them or something, and they didn't want 'em to die, and so they got them- just uh, with nipples on, like baby bottles, you know. An' I.. I'd help feed the.. the lambs. But that's about the only thing that I know of about farming.

MF: Umm-hmm.

DW: I worked, uh, a little bit fer..fer a man out east of town once. And I used to go out and cut thistles out of pasture fields, and things like that. But that's all. That's all I know.

MF: [100] Huh. ..Are there any sort of, um, moral values you would associate with family farming?

DW: Well, yes. Uh, I think family farms, at least, uh, the families that live onna farm, are closer

to each other because they don't have the entertainment. They didn't when I was growing up. We didn't have television, uh, when I was a kid, you know, and things like that. Uh, you hafta', uh, if..if you're living on a farm in those days, you almost hafta' make your own entertainment. An- ah, it was a very hard life, you had to do a lot of things, uh, physical. Nowa'days they have so many-much equipment, that it's just nothin', you know, it's almost a routine. But in those days, a lot of it was physical labor.

MF: Umm-hmm.

DW: And I'm not, as you can see, I'm not physically strong enough to do that type of thing. Well, I did went on a tractor once or twice... for my wife's brother. Uh, helped cultivate the field, but that's all I ever did. I didn't do anything else.

MF: Umm-hmm.

DW: I wasn't very good at it either. But he neede help, so I helped him. He, he couldn't get anybody to help him, uh, a couple times, and I helped him out.

MF: So would you say that there was, there's a lot of cooperation involved-

DW: Yes! Yes.

MF: ..with family farming?

DW: Uh, and the members of the family are very close.

MF: Umm-hmm.

DW: An' uh, it's, it's, I think that uh, it's a good thing, probably better than when, uh, children growing up in town now. 'Cause they were closer, an' and uh, more supervision from the family. Ah, ah, my father died when I was six years old. Uh, uh, my mother, not my father. My mother died. My father never married again. He had the store to run an' uh, and my brother and I were raised- we had a house-keeper all the rest of our life. And uh, we didn't have the supervision that the uh, probably the children who were raised on a farm did. 'Cause my father didn't have time. He was down here runnin' the store.

MF: Umm-hmm.

DW: He used to tell me he used to write the checks on Saturday and hope that next Saturday that the money'd be in the bank to cover 'im. That's what he told me. [laughs]

MF: Well, so what would you say influences your image of the family farm?

DW: Well, the closeness, I would say. Closeness of the, of the .. the parents, and also the close-, the fact that they're, ah, the close supervision of the children. 'Cause the children have a lot of responsibility on the farm too. If, if you, you're raised on a farm, you, you work, most time.

Even, even, uh, girls. Even girls. [laughs]

MF: [laughs] I'm sure. Um, so have you noticed any changes in family farming since you've been in this area? I mean, you've been here your whole life, but...

DW: Well, ah, not, not really, except the fact that it's more, it's .. s' so much mechanized today than,.. so much machinery, an' so forth and so on. Ah, a hundred acre farm today, it would be difficult to make a living on a hundred acre farm. Unless you had a lot of money back of you, financially. Because you couldn't afford the equipment.

MF: I see.

DW: .. the machinery.. to run that farm. I don't know how the Amish do it. They, they stick together. The Amish people do... and they manage, manage, because, well, they, they don't have, uh, most of 'em don't even have electric lights, you know. So, ah, the Amish people, ah, I have to take my hat off to 'em. I have to admire 'em for what they do.

MF: Certainly. So you think technology has changed-

DW: Yes! Yes, much, much.

MF: ..the face of the family farming probably.

DW: Uh, if you have two or three hundred acres, an' and enough equipment, you could make a living on a farm and make a good living, I think. But, uh, I don't think you can make a living on a hundred acre farm today- unless you have a lot on money back of you. Financially. So you can buy the equipment.

MF: How, how have these changes affected your life at all? Or your store?

DW: Well, 'course it's affected everybody because, ah, the uh, a lot of the food, today, is produced by large farms that are controlled by, ah, large conglomerates.

MF: Um-hmm.

DW: It's true more outin' California than it is here, but, but, uh, even, even here there are lot, there are certain areas that they have, uh, hundreds and hundreds of acres, you know. An' the people who usually are living on the farm, do not own the farm. They just run it for the, uh, these industries. And that's, uh, where the food comes from actually. That's the reason we got these, these supermarkets, and everything, and they don't have 'em in many countries over-seas.

MF: Hm.

DW: I don't know if I'm helpin' ya a little bit.. [laughs]

MF: Oh yeah, no, no, no, no! I'm just thinking about what you said. Um, but do you still have

farmers who come in an', and buy seeds?

DW: Oh yes! Many, many. Many farmers come in and buy seeds. Yes, we do.

MF: [200] Um, do you know any people who belong to the Grange or 4-H?

DW: Well, I belonged to the Grange until, uh, a few years ago, an' I, I, my wife and I, both. She was a Grange member, uh, for, for a long time. We go, we still go out there when they have, uh, two or three times a year, there'll have these, uh, uh, dinners, an', uh, we, we go out there. There's a pleasant Grange out on.. Hopevale Road.

MF: Umm-hmm.

DW: Yeah. Yeah, I know a lot of people, ah, that are still members of the Grange.

MF: And 4-H also, or?..

DW: Ah, I don't know, ah, I'm sure that their children are in 4-H. But I do not know them personally.

MF: I see. Um, do you ever go to the, the Country Fair at all?

DW: Ah, I used to. I do not, I have not in recent years.

MF: Why do you feel, or do you not feel, that things like the County Fair and 4-H and the Grange are important?

DW: Well, I feel they are important for rural people. Very important. The ah, the 4-H people, I think, ah, ah, I still read a lot of the paper, uh, about th', about the Fair and so forth and so on, even though I haven't gone recently. And, uh, the 4-H members are very active in this, in this county. Very active. They have wonderful display out there. They take their animals out there an', y' show, for show, you know. And they win ribbons for things, which is, is very important, uh people, youngsters that are growing up on farms.

MF: And how important do you think farming is to this community?

DW: I think it's as important as anything that there is here, really. If we didn't have the farm, we wouldn't have, eh, we wouldn't eat. [laughs] That's my thought!

MF: Okay. Um, how do you feel that Knox County has changed, ah, I mean in any way, not necessarily just farming. H' how do you feel it's changed since you've been here?

DW: Well, I think it's, it's more urban today than it was when I was growing up as a youngster. Ah, although Mt. Vernon hasn't really grown that much. Ah, I can remember when I was growing up there were very few cars on the street. Since I'm eighty years old, I can say that, I guess. [laughs] Ah, my father didn't have a car until, we, we were sent for grade school.

MF: Umm-hmm.

DW: He'd walk to work, an' then he'd walk back, ya know, and, uh, we lived clear, clear up in th', the north end of town. And, I just think that, uh, that, the, there's more urban, uh, there's more industry, for example, things like that. But, agriculture is still very important.

MF: Umm-hmm.

DW: Very important. If we didn't have that, we wouldn't have clothes, we wouldn't eat, we wouldn't.. all these things.

MF: Yeah. Ah, what sort of problems or benefits do you see with the expansion of Columbus?

DW: Well, uh, Columbus, it keeps expanding out this way all the time.

MF: Umm-hmm.

DW: In fact, ah, I've been told that there're many people that used to live in Columbus that are now living in, close to Centerburg, an' an'

MF: Umm-hmm.

DW: .. areas, Sunbury an' Centerburg, an' ah, that's not too far away!

MF: Yeah.

DW: I may not live long enough to see it because I'm eighty years old, but, in in ah, twenty-five or thirty years, they're gonna be.. ah, this is gonna be a suburb of Columbus, actually. We don't have the crime and things that Columbus has. And that's what people are looking for today. They don't mind driving forty or fifty miles to go to work.

MF: Umm-hmm.

DW: Fact, we have a lot of people, th' that work in Columbus that live in Mt. Vernon because they prefer it here.

MF: Umm-hmm.

DW: We have a lot of people downn here in Apple Valley... I don't know whether you're familiar with Apple Valley, but..

MF: Sure.

DW: Ah, ah, that, ah, work both in Mt. Vernon and some a', lot of 'em work in Columbus too.

MF: So you think what might spill over with the expansion?

DW: Well, I think eventually we will be a suburb. W' we hope that, that Mt. Vernon will stay, retains its rural nature. At least in a limited way. I, I don't want another, uh, there's certain places in Columbus that I'm aware of, 'cause I've, I've spent a lot of time, ah, ah, going to Columbus on business and things. And there're certain areas that, ah, ah, I would not want to go in Columbus, especially at night. We don't want that here. Because, when I was a kid, you didn't even.. lock your doors, here, in Mt. Vernon. You didn't have to. But you don't dare leave 'em out over in ..[couldn't understand].. They'd clean you out. Somebody would.

MF: [310] This brings me to another question. How do you feel about the proposed by-pass around Mt. Vernon?

DW: I think it's.. ah... I, I'm not wholly in favor of it. I think in, in the first place, it was put too far out, for the time being, at least f-for what we've got here now. It's too far out. I don't think that would do that much good. And it would, ah, disrupt a lot of homes and places. Now, I, I talked, ah, I read about, ah, a lady, Mrs. Buchwald, that runs the orchard, and it would cut right through her orchard. Things like that. I'm not in favor of that. 'Cause then, then you're gonna start wan-, losing part of your rural nature of the community. So, I'm, I'm not, as a, as they put it there out on the paper, I'm not in favor of it.

MF: Umm-hmm. Besides cutting up some farm land-

DW: That's right.

MF: -perhaps, how else do you think it might change farming in this county?

DW: Well, ah, in a lot of cases, ah, the way they put it in the paper, it, it would cut right through these people's farms. And these are important, and some of 'em are pretty good sized farms.

MF: Umm-hmm.

DW: And, ah, I don't, I don't think it, ah, it would be a good thing at all. Not a bit. If they, they cou-, smaller and closer to Mt. Vernon- maybe. Then it would be alright. Bring it in closer to the center of the community. But they, they got it way out, and I just don't think it would, would be worth what the- they're proposed to do. I guess we're supposed to think, ah, progre-, you can't stop progress, or something. That, ah, that part of it I don't, I don't approve of.

MF: Do you see progress as..

DW: Pardon?

MF: Do you see progress as, as a bad thing for this community?

DW: No, no I don't. No. But I would like to retain that the rural image of the community as much as possible. Because that's, that's what people like about Mt. Vernon.

MF: Umm-hmm.

DW: They don't want another Columbus.

MF: So you think the, ah, the small town image is, is important to keep?

DW: It's very important, very important.

MF: So how do you feel about the strip malls out, out there?

DW: Well, I live out that way, and I'm not too in favor. Ah, ah, I've been out there since 1954. My house was built, was new when I moved into it. In fact th- they built it with the idea of selling it to me. I live on Steven St. which is close to, th-um, Vernondale. And one of the men came to me after I moved out there, and said that they were gonna, ah, sell part of it, and they were gonna put in this shopping center where Big Bear used to be. Then he said, "Would you sign, th- uh, the petition, f- , agreement to let 'em do it?"

MF: Umm-hmm.

DW: An' I said, "I'm not in favor of it." And he said, "There's gonna be whether anyway, whether y-, whether you sign it or not." He says that they're gonna come in. When I was out there, ah, less than a block away, I could go an' pick blackberries. I can't today! [laughs]

MF: [400] Do you think that, or, h-how do these big super markets an' and things like that, how do they affect family farming?

DW: Well. 'Course the super markets, they, they get th-their food, ah, indirectly from the farms.

MF: From this community?

DW: Yeah. Yeah. From the distributors, an' ah, an' then back further from the farms. So, y-you hafta' have super markets. I'm not against super markets. I don't, I think that, ah, they're a good thing. Ah, they've kept the price of food down for people so that people can eat, and live comfortably and well. And be healthy, reasonably healthy, I say. So I-I'm in favor of, of super markets. I really am. But I think, I think, ah, this, ah, the man, man who used to work for the r-, uh, the radio station here, Rudy Maxwell, uh, he used to kid me. He asked me, he said, he said, "You live out east..", he said, "What do you think of Gasoline Alley?" [laughs] That's what he called it. An' that, that was before they put all those resteraunts out there.

MF: Umm-hmm.

DW: Now it's ah, now they got, ah, ah, Pizza Hut and the whole, the whole bit, ya' know. [untranscribable].. an' Burger King, an' all of 'em. I think it's over-done, I think. I just wish it hadn't happened, I really do. I can, I can look fr- from my house, an' I look on down an' see Coshocton Avenue. S-see all that strip out there now. I, I don't like that.

MF: Yeah.

DW: I prefer the residential strictly.

MF: Hm. Would you, um, would you ever live on a, on a family farm?

MRS. WOOLSON: No, but I did.

DW: I got it. I got it. I'm not, I'm not physically strong enough to do anything like that, ah, farm work.

MF: What about fifty years back? [laughs]

DW: If I was, ah, stronger physically, I would, yes. 'Cause I like the rural. I liked, I like it when we lived out at her house. Except that, uh, we, we were married and, ah we had, ah, the time to, you know, move on, you know. They were nice to me, they were good to me. I... the family... they couldn't have been nicer to me. But, ah, I still, you know, when you're married, it's time to move on an' go establish a home of your own.

MF: Umm-hmm.

DW: My son still lives with us, incidentally. [laughs]

MRS. WOOLSON: No he doesn't, all the time.

DW: Well, part of the time. Part of the time. [laughs]

MRS. WOOLSON: He comes down once or twice a week. Don't put anything down there you don't want..[cut off by laughter]

DW: You want to correct me, come on back! [laughter]

MF: What do you think we, as a community, can do to serve the family farm?

DW: [500] Well, ah, that's the reason we're in the business, here. Ah, we feel that we give a-a service to the, to the rural people with our garden seeds and things like that. To serve them. We're here to serve people. An' ah, we have a lot of people who come in an' they will visit with us. Ah, they like t-, because in fact I have a lot of people come in an', ah, I call 'em by name. I know people. I been here all my life. An' I know many people.

MF: Umm-hmm.

DW: I don't know everybody, but, I, ah, know a lot of people. An' they come in, an' ah, to buy garden seeds, and they'll spend fif- ten or fifteen minutes and we'll talk. Nothing.. I like people. I,I [flip tape]

MF: I have a sort of dangerous question to ask because it might reveal some of my opinion, but, but do you think that the family farm in Knox County, or in general, is in danger at all?

DW: Well, there are few family farms today. There's no question about that. But I would feel very bad if, if all of the family farms were gone, very. Even if, even if, ah, we didn't need them for our, ah, food and clothing and so forth and so on. There're many.. there're many fewer family farms today and that part I don't like. Because I, I think, ah, that it's very important that we maintain a rural image.

MF: Umm-hmm. Why?

DW: Well, it's a good life. It's a good life. I think, ah, children that are raised on a farm, ah, is like I said, they're, they're more supervision...than, ah, than there in rural, ah..., raised rural. You know, if they were raised in the community. 'Course in my case, ah, we had house-keepers. I grew up with a house-keeper, most of the time, all my life. It's a, it's a different situation. I had a sister. She died when she was ni-, eighteen. She was a student at Dennison University.

MF: Ohh..

DW: And she had the streap throat. And in those days they didn't have [intranscribable] penicillin, and when she caught the streap throat, when that, ah, what they call, germ hit her brain, well, she was gone. Wa-n't anything they could do for her. I went down there two years, I went to Danville, Dennison. But I didn't graduate 'cause I didn' have any money. I ran out of money as the saying is.

MF: Umm-hmm. Would you be able to define the family farm? I know that's hard. [laughs]

DW: That's a hard thing to do.

MF: Umm-hmm! That's what my class has been struggling with the whole semester.

DW: Well, ah. You'd have to describe the family, ah. The family farm would be, ah, back in those days, was like a hundred acres, that was.. And you could make a living in those days with a hundred acres. But, ah, maybe there was a husband and wife, an' maybe, at least two children, sometimes three. But all three, two or three, two or three of those children would be wor-, would work on the farm just as much as the parents. They had chores to do, milking cows and things like that. An' ah, when the combined, or something like, they had ta', had ta' learn to drive, ah, wagon, an' so forth and so on. An' those folks had horses. They didn't have, ah, early on they didn't have tractors, they had horses.

MF: Umm-hmm. So would you say that it would be contained within the family?

DW: Yes.

MF: All the responsibilities and all..

DW: Yes, absolutely.

MF: So anything that would lean towards more corporate farming you think falls out of the family farming-

DW: Right. But, ah, today, th-these big conglomerates that run these huge farms, ah, it's necessary in order to produce the food for this country, 'cause population has grown tremendously since I was kid. Just tremendously in this country.

MF: Umm-hmm.

DW: Prob'ly ah, what is it? We've got 200 million here now? We prob'ly had less, ah, less than a hundred million when I was growin' up a kid.

MF: Umm-hmm.

DW: So, it, it, many changes have taken place, many changes. An' ah, these big conglomerate farms are necessary now to produce the food. 'Cause people would be ah, a lot of people would be hungry if they didn't.

MF: Do you think the corporate farms and the family farms can co-exist?

DW: Yes.

MF: How?

DW: Maybe, ah, we, we will probably end up with less family, many, many less family farms, but I still think there's a place for them. But you have to have enough acreage that you can afford with the machinery and so forth t- to run it.

MF: Umm-hmm.

DW: [600] You can't run it with, ah, ah, with horses anymore.

MF: Right.

DW: Well, the Amish do, but ah, they're different. They don't even have electricity. [laughs]

MF: So you say that there is a place for family farming-

DW: I do.

MF: And can you explain that a little more?

DW: Well, people that have been raised, youngsters that have been raised on the farm, they look

back fondly, when ah- their childhood. Because, ah, they don't have, didn't have the problems that the, the com-, urban people- children had. I think that's, that's one of the things. And they tend to, they remember these things, and they, a lot of people would like to go back and live on a farm, even though they don't... because they want that rural atmosphere. Even though they don't want to farm any longer.

MF: So, are you saying that family farming is more important to uphold family values-

DW: Yes!

MF: ..or is it, is it, is still also vital to the whole agriculture business in America?

DW: It's vital to that too.

MF: So both.

DW: Both.

MF: How, so how would you say that it fits in harmoniously with corporate farming?

DW: Well, 'course the corporate farming is, is something fairly recent.

MF: Umm-hmm.

DW: In odr' words you can, in like, the last 20, 25 years. An' ah, the family farm has been here many, many, many years. [laughs]

MF: Right.

DW: But I still think that there's a place for family farms. An' I would hate to think that they would be gone. Because that rural life is, is important.

MF: Huh, that's interesting. So you wouldn't leave it?

[shakes his head]

MF: No? [laughs] Well... this definitely of great value. Thank you for, for-

DW: Well, you're more than welcome.

MF: ..answering my questions!

DW: You're more than welcome. I hope I gave you something.

MF: Oh, most definitely, you did! Most definitely.