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Interview with Rebecca Katzman

John Marsh

Rebecca Katzman

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Interviewee: John Marsh
Interviewer: Rebecca Katzman
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RK: Rebecca Katzman

JM: John Marsh

RK: This is Becca Katzman. I am here at Kenyon College with John Marsh. It is Tuesday January 31, 2012, and we're here to talk about Owl Creek Produce Auction, and how it functions as a public space. Okay, so how often do you frequent the Owl Creek Produce Auction?

JM: Um, I would say that I start in May, and I go when school is in session every week at least once. And then over summertime I usually go once a week or once every couple weeks depending on how much people we have here and how much produce we have. And then when school starts back in September or in August, I go every day then—Monday, Wednesday, Friday.

RK: And why do you go to the auction?

JM: The auction has an ability, it gives me the ability to flex my produce so that I contract with some growers and I get what they produce for me, but I never tell them to produce all of what I anticipate what I'm going to use, so I make up the difference at the auctions.

RK: And what do you purchase there?

JM: Just about everything that's in season, um I would say, um, probably anywhere from 2/3 to a half of our produce comes from the auctions. Not necessarily Owl Creek—between Owl Creek and the Farmer's Produce Auction up in Mt. Hope

RK: And who goes to the auctions?

JM: Other than who goes with me? You mean who goes at all?

RK: Yeah, who's there?

JM: Well, um, by and large the bulk of the large lot purchases are made by farm markets or orchards or fruit stands, that kind of businesses. Some of them just kind of move around over the course of the season or whatever, but most of them are established brick and mortar and wood and metal kind of facilities. So that's where the bulk of their produce—they do have one large produce distributor, san falipo, out of Columbus that I do see trucks for, and there's a couple restaurant people that

come periodically. Knox County hospital comes, the Kenyon Inn, so there's some of that. I'm the only institutional buyer as far as colleges and schools that I know of that goes there.

RK: Who do you talk with at the auction?

JM: I try to talk with as few people as I can if I'm actually buying, cause I have a tendency to get sidetracked and then I don't pay attention to what's going on. But normally it's other growers that I know, or growers that I know there comment on, or ask them how things are going. So I'll tell them if I bought something that was good or if it's bad, which is not very frequent that I'll have a negative comment. Usually it's all good. So people that I don't normally see out of that whole sphere of growing and buying and selling. So I do look forward to it—it's good to catch up with people sometimes. You have some down time while you're there, they might be auctioning off something that I'm not too interested in. In the spring you have flowers, and in the fall you have pumpkins and I'm not too much in the market for either of those, but I have missed bids because I was talking [laughs]. Sometimes people will go and try to talk to you, and I don't try to be rude, but sometimes I can't pay attention to them.

RK: Yeah, um so what is the environment like at Owl Creek? What is the social environment like?

JM: Well, that's one interesting factor about Owl Creek. I've only ever been to that one, I go to farmers like I said, and I've been to Homerville. But Owl Creek has a tendency, and this is much to my frustration, they have a tendency to much tourist trade, or whatever. People just kind of come there to meet up with other people and they sit and talk, and some people will bring lawn chairs. Moms bring their kids in their strollers and all this stuff. It's nice that they get a kind of feel, and it's a social space that they can come socialize with other folks in. The problem from a commercial standpoint is it gets difficult for me or for other people in the auction to move around or to be fluid because you wanna see what's going to come up for auction beforehand so you know what you're bidding on. And you have to get there and you have to bid and you have to move around. So the more people that are just kind of jamming up the isle ways and stuff makes it more difficult. They're just there to kind of see.. some people, I watch them, they just like to kind of be there in the crowd, like just like to stand there for other people. It's a strange thing, but many of them are older and I'd imagine that they are retired or what have you. So this might be the only time they ever get to go out and be with people, I don't know, maybe church or some other thing. But it's just an inexpensive way to be with people. There's food there, not the expensive kind of food you can buy as far as produce or what have you, but the do have baked goods and other kids of stuff that starts out before the auctions typically on Fridays a concession stand there where you can buy other foods. So it's an environment where people come and socialize and hang out. People will come up from Columbus just to see what it's like. You can always pick them out because they always show up with their cameras or what have you. They

always look like tourists so you can always pick them out. And then um, there's a larger element of that than there is at the produce auction in Mt. Hope. Farmer's is much faster paced; they have much more to sell too. They have bigger buyers—they have a buyer there from a grocery store. So they show up with tractor-trailer trucks. I've never seen a tractor-trailer truck *pick up* at Owl Creek—I have seen them drop off before. Cause they do get items from outside the area. They were getting a lot of New York tomatoes this year. So a guy was bringing a truck down from New York, and he would drop off pallet fulls of tomatoes at all of the auctions to get rid of. Yeah.

RK: Wow. What is your interactions with the Amish like?

JM: Hm, well, hm. I mean, I have as far as the auction's concerned, since many of the primary growers are Amish, I have to interact with them, I mean I think it's pretty natural—it's just a matter of commerce and all that. Sometimes I'll engage in other business outside the auction with them. I might find out somebody grew another crop like tomatoes or potatoes rather and I'll go buy that in the off-season. Or maybe their wife makes bread and I'll grow that or something. Maybe they'd raise some chickens for me. So there's, I don't socialize too much with those particular Amish as far as at they're at that Auction outside of just work in general. Um, I think it's, I mean it just seems like a natural thing just like if you're anywhere else in a situation with other farmers that like to grow food and live off the land. So, I don't know it's just comfortable to me. I'm interested; it's always interesting to find out what's going on. I don't know much about them personally, like I said. I mean when Sara Berman was here, she knows all their names and everything. I must admit I don't. I may have known their names at one time but I don't remember them, I must admit I'm not very good with names and everything. And she would also ask their names and she would write it down—if you wanna remember people's names, that's what you have to do, which I wouldn't do it. That's a bad thing on my part. But I've been around those people for five years right now and I don't know all of their names. I'm kind of ashamed of that, actually. But it's, I can pretty much guess their last names [laughs], cause there's only like three choices. Um, but I know where a lot of them live, I've been to their houses or their farms before. So, I guess that's about it.

RK: Do you think there's like a division between the Amish and the English?

JM: Is there a *what* between them?

RK: A division?

JM: Oh, I would say the division there is more of a religious division than a cultural division, based on their religion more than anything else. I think that an Amish person would, if you had religious views similar to theirs, then the ways that they live and all that wouldn't be that different. Cause you'd understand a lot about their foundation for what they do is biblical. So if Christianity is your religion, well you'll

understand why they do a lot of the things that they do—there's biblical reason for it. It might seem frivolous or silly or archaic to people who might think that they're just making up social rules to have a group or a clique or something, I don't know. But if you understand the foundation for it, I don't think there's so much of that. I mean, the reason they live the way that they live is that they don't want to become so worldly and live in a culture that basically depends on a lot of what they consider to be frivolous and destructive things, so that's all. There's a natural division there, but I have, I remember being younger feeling as though the Amish were very stand offish and segregated, and the reality of it was that they were—many of them back then didn't speak English, so you know you had no way to communicate. Some of the guys that were my age can remember growing up like that when they were little boys or little girls. But now a days English is taught in school, and so the kids come away with a pretty good understanding of English, and their Amish dialect or Dutch or whatever you wanna call it, it's their first language, so they *think* in that language, you know, that's their first language. But there's an amalgamation of lots of English terms incorporated in that language. But that's the whole idea is that you instill that in your children, that this is your language initially. And many households of stricter sects, they won't speak any English in the household. That's kind of gone by the wayside more. So they have a good command of the English language. And I think that they get enough just fringe feel for what's going on in the world that they can relate to things. They won't necessarily know stars or TV shows or anything like that. Although I talked to Jonathan one time. I asked him, I said so when you guys go to a hotel or something what do you do with the TV, and he said, the kids watch it [laughs]. He goes yeah, yeah, every once and awhile we'll watch TV when we're somewhere. So it's not like they think that if you watch TV you're going to explode or go to hell or whatever, one time or several times or what have you, they're not that dogmatic about it. But it's very interesting they'll know some things. I was with a guy he was working on my house, and he was singing some song, this Amish guy. He was singing a song, or whistling a song. And I said, how do you know that tune? The only way you could know that is if you listen to the radio, and he got real cheekish and said, well we have a radio in the truck you know [laughs]. So, he told me about when he was a little kid he had a transistor radio, and he used to listen to it in his bed, you know, he used to turn it up and listen to it. And then his brother ratted on him and then his mom threw it away [laughs]. So it's, the thing is that especially with their kids, their kids are just like everybody else's kids—they suffer the same struggles as we all do, so I think you can relate to them on that. I think it's come a long way, um, as far as the boundaries between the Amish and the English. You know, we have a co-op here that's interested in English members. I haven't run into too many people here that aren't interested in doing business with us. They even come and visit, remember when we had our meal here? You know, I was really pleased with that. They weren't like, you know, we aren't coming to Kenyon College cause it's an evil horrible place or something. They were very open and generous and accepting the invitation. And they marveled over certain things in the kitchen, especially the women, some of the equipment and stuff.

RK: Um, why is the auction important in the county? Or is it?

JM: Well, I think they're probably economically, I'd see they're probably close to about a million and a half or two million dollars in sales a year. And you'll have to get Kelly; Kelly will give you that number. But I was just thinking, if I was a farmer and I raised five thousand bushels of grain, I mean if I had five thousand acres and I raised a thousand bushels, that's a hundred thousand times four would be two million. So there you are. If you had five thousand acres you farmed and you put it in corn, and you got a thousand bushels to the acre which is very poor yield now a days, and you sell it for four dollars which is cheap in this day in age too, then you would end up with two million dollars. So it's interesting economically that you would have, I don't know, thirty pretty much full vendors that are making their life off of selling produce at the auction. And yet collectively they don't make as much as the guy across the street that farms acreage across the street from me, he and his son farm five thousand acres, that's why I chose that number. So they actually, those two run a bigger business than what the Owl Creek produce is. Now the other side of that is, how many acres does it take to support that and then understand that wherever a farm of produce growers is, it's a very intensely farmed area, so better maintain better capita, so the guy who farms five thousand acres might have three hundred of it his own and the rest he leases. So he doesn't have the stewardship of maintaining the land the way that an owner would, and also much of the land that he owns, the farms have been left to deteriorate. In some cases the barns are all gone, the fences are all gone, the farmhouse is falling down and it's gone. So the farms have been reduced to nothing but just the simple value in the acreage. And that leads to a decay of your communities because there's less people in the land—less stability in the community because people are uprooted in this place; and less money in the community, because when the guy goes and makes the two million dollars here, it goes to pay for his John Deere tractor and it goes to pay absentee landlords, and it goes to pay archer daniel's midland, and it goes to pay for somebody to bring the fertilizer, it goes to Monsanto to pay for the roundup ready seeds and the roundup. You know so all those outputs, all of those expenditures, that two million dollars, is gone out of the community whereas what many of the Amish guys are doing, they'll buy the equipment from the local Amish guy that sells it, the guy who sells the plastic or sells the chemicals. They might come from a distance source, but they're actually bought whereas the guy who's doing five thousand dollars, he's buying from a regional—a much more regional thing, because he's buying more than probably the mill, or the former place where everyone went to buy all this stuff. He's doing more than all these farmers business, than what these places are now, so he can get a bigger discount than they did. So from the financial standpoint even though that two million dollars doesn't sound like a lot, it is a lot when you consider how many families live off of that two million dollars versus the expenses, the overhead expenses that they might consume. The guy that I know who farms five thousand acres is not a rich man; at least he doesn't outwardly appear to be. His son is a schoolteacher, so he keeps his day job, his dad has retired, as is the case with many farmers now a days. They're retired. And somebody helps them out. I think the average age of a farmer is my age or maybe a little older—58 years old is I think what it was. So that tells you right there what's

going on in farming. Whereas the produce growers, their average age of those farmers out there is probably in their late twenties. So it's really the next generation of farmers if you look at it that way. But it's important, the thing as far as the thing that I like, and a lot of people divide me on this, they don't like them, they don't like what they do and how they are and who they are whatever. But the thing is, when they live in a community, everything is within a horse buggy's ride from each other, and much of them is within walking distance. So they go to church, they have their own little stores, they have a community that people support one another—therefore they're not relying on government service or insurance services or whatever to help pay. They're doing it themselves, so as far as the burden on society, they're doing it less and so ways that they can build commerce in the community. The more land we will have preserved, the stronger our neighborhoods, our communities will be. They won't necessarily be the same as an English community, but they still have storage, they still have harness shops, they still have tarp shops, they have woodworking shops and everything else. These are all places people work, and they're all places that add value to the land and to the communities. The auction is just one of those things that helps do that.

RK: Would you consider the auction a viable public space?

JM: Oh yeah. It's very *viable*. I mean economically it's viable. It's legitimate in the fact that it's open to the public and it's a place where people conduct public commerce, or commerce in public. From that standpoint, I mean there's not much more public about watching somebody bring their product in and having somebody literally stand there and tell them what money in front of everybody, how much money they're going to pay you for it. And then, you know, drive away with it or what have you. That's all pretty public, I mean you can see what's going on. I think that's one of the reasons why people come there, is just to have a sense of a time that's forgotten so many things that used to matter. They used to see everything delivered. When we were younger, the older people used to see the iceman come, and the coal man used to come, and the egg man used to come, and the milkman used to come. You know, you just had this list of folks who came every week every month or whatever to bring you products that you need to have. And now there's no *guy*—there's no milkman, iceman, or egg man—none of those guys exist; none of those interactions exist. It's just a cold, methodic cal—florescent lit aisles hundreds of feet long, you know, you walk down and go get your stuff, put it in a bag. You don't have to even talk to a person or see a person; you can even just go and check yourself out. To people that grew up with a lot of interaction, that's very lonely. And so it's discomfoting to them to be in that position. That's why they like it, older people. Younger people like it I think because it's just human nature to be drawn to other humans, especially in commerce and places of business. My wife went to Brazil and there's a huge market in the city she grew up in—you know, a great big market in the city. And everybody has their stalls. I looked it up on the internet cause she wasn't exactly sure how to get there, and her sister wasn't able to tell her, so I looked at it and all these pictures with all these people just standing around shoulder-to-shoulder. But everyone looks like they're having a good time eating and

drinking and stuff like that. And I just think that it's good for your soul. Human nature derives an almost intangible, unperceptive benefit—we do it, we don't even know that we're doing it, that's what I'm trying to say. The benefit is very great, and we don't necessarily even notice it. We just kind of feel good but we don't know why, you know what I mean? It's not like if I go and buy a car I'm gonna feel better cause I have a new car. You know, you just kind of show up and it feels good and you kind of hang out but you don't even know why you do it. It just kind of oh I'm gonna go back to the auction, you gonna buy anything? Oh I don't know, maybe, I don't know. I just want to go to the auction. I just want to go to the shopping mall where there's people, or the library, whatever. And so it's a very viable space. From that standpoint I do like it because it draws people out into the community. The guy who farms the five thousand acres, where's he gonna see everybody? There's no potbelly stove or general store where he can sit down and kibitz with everybody, and talk about what the weather, right? Maybe there's some little restaurant or some place down in Bladensburg or Martinsburg or Danville or some place where farmers go hang out for a cup of coffee. But the days of the potbelly stove or going to the grain elevator, or getting your feed ground, picking up your feed, selling your feed; those days are gone too cause nobody raises the animals—these big farmers don't have time to raise the animals, it's a pain in the butt. So you know, they go home and watch TV, they look at the computer, and they've got a GPS in their tractor. I mean, I kind of feel sorry for them cause they don't have any kind of connection with people anymore. And the marketplace is a the virtual marketplace in many instances. That marketplace is real—it's a real, tangible thing that people have been doing as long as there's been people with something to sell—it's one of the first thing that ever happened; markets and auctions. One of the first things people ever did when they got together [laughs]. So I mean you're dealing with a thing that's tens of thousands of years old, or a thousand years old anyways. And it's a cool thing, cause so much of our culture has been stripped of all of the things going on in public.

RK: So I guess is there anything else, just from what we've talked about today, that you might want to add that you think might be helpful based on what we've talked about?

JM: No

RK: Or the auction as a public space?

JM: Well, hm.

RK: The million-dollar quote?

JM: ha ha yeah, I'm not up for a million dollar quote today, I didn't get enough sleep, um

RK: There were some good quotes in that last bit, though.

JM: You know, I kind of wish there was more; there were more places like it. So I'm kind of hoping that the guy I was just meeting with before you came here, he's looking at trying to bring back the old days where people would go to a market to buy the products for their stores, to buy the products for their restaurants. I remember we used to go to the wholesale produce market, which used to be in Baltimore, and then they moved it out between Baltimore and Washington in the '70's I think. And that's when I started going there, is I had a produce stand, and in the beginning of the season I had all the produce, and I would sell it and ended up buying cantaloupes and so fourth from the eastern shore a couple of weeks earlier. So that's how I got familiar with it: you would show up there, we would drive down and you would sleep in your truck and you would wait until the place opened at 2 o'clock or at 2 in the morning, and you'd rush in there and try to go. And you'd run by and try to find produce. And people would have a fixed price, and some people would have a little auction thing going on [laughs], but you would just run. It's kind of like you look at the stock exchange or something, you see all of these guys talking and its kind of like how does that work? [Laughs] I mean I understand the principle of it, but it's just amazing to me how that thing works the same way it did 150 years ago or whenever they started it. And this thing's kind of the same way. You're into a situation where it's kind of an old market, but the principles are kind of the same. He's talking about starting that. Now what it's become now is just a distribution center. You know there's so many places where you go now, and you just go down to the terminal and this bay this bay, or run it out by some guy's warehouse or wholesale produce place. You know, things come in like that. What he's talking about is that we need to have a.... and other people with trucks down there like Sirna or Lannings. They run down there and they pick it up from a bigger distributor, and then they turn it into a smaller distributor, you know what I mean? So then you have a national distributor that goes to a regional distributor that goes to a local distributor, that kind of stuff. But what he wants is he wants to reinvigorate it and make it the old concept of people who run stores doing it themselves, and people who run restaurants doing it themselves. And people who get real local buyers, not somebody that come from Mexico or Costa Rica or whatever. I don't have anything against that, but we're talking about as well as local foods, because he believes and I believe with him that we can supply a lot of our own food here locally but we just don't have the infrastructure to do it. And distribution is one of the things that doesn't happen. So in that extent, I would like to see more things like this—perhaps where local people can go to sell their products. We ran into this thing, okay we're gonna do this thing at Kenyon, we're gonna show people how to do it, and then other people are gonna emulate it. Well, nobody has emulated this. I've tried with the hospital, I thought okay this is really gonna work, this is an AVI account, it's not that hard, they're going to be able to kind of tap into us when they need to. And they did for a while, but if you don't just keep on fighting to keep it going, it just kind of fades away. And um, I think that we need to have a better way of getting everybody together. And the guys at the Owl Creek Auction, I mean that's a cooperation that has a board of trustees; it has a board that operates it of followers. I think they take turns or vote on it or what have you. So it

has that operating structure: these guys get together, they determine what they're gonna grow, they try to get people together perhaps somebody quits or what have you that's almost retired. They bring other folks into the whole thing. So it's an organized way of marketing the product, and we need more organized ways to market the product, and the Internet is one. But I think the Internet kind of skips the whole process of what local value is. You can end up, and this is one of the reasons why Joe Saliton won't do it and I agree on this one too; yes, you can raise great food, that's wonderful. But that's not really the most important thing of what you're doing. Great food's good, healthy food's good, but what you're doing in the community is what really matters. And that's one of the problems, you know I opened up the conversation maybe it was you, maybe it was AVI or other folks [laughs], you know, we only do about a third of our local actually

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