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Interview with Bob Tier

Molly McNamara

Bob Tier

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Researcher's name: Molly McNamara

Event: Interview with Bob Tier

Place: Gambier Village Market

Co-workers present: none

The morning was gray and chilly, usual for October in Ohio but unexpected after the warm weather we had had the previous day. I had eaten breakfast, but as sometimes happens to me in the mornings, I was shaky from low blood sugar. I was a bit nervous that this would make me look more nervous than I was.

I arrived at nine and saw Roger first. He recalled that I was coming to speak to him and his partner Bob Tier about their store. As he emptied the spoons from a cardboard box, I was wondering if he had forgotten and that this would be a bad time, so I asked. He said it was fine and that he was just trying to get stuff done. Roger called out to Bob, asked if he was busy, and reminded him that I had come to talk to them about the store. I asked if it was alright if I used a tape recorder, and Bob said no. At first I thought he was joking, but then he said he said “no verbatims.” They explained that they didn’t want to say anything that might incriminate them, and they asked what kinds of things I wanted to know. I explained that I wanted to find out about the store because we were interested in local markets and wanted to find out their views about local markets. They explained they didn’t want to say anything political that might offend anyone. I assured them that if there were any questions they didn’t want to answer they didn’t have to. Bob said I could lean up against the counter and do the interview there. I was at a loss as to what to do. Interviewing them at the checkout line was not exactly ideal, and the thought of trying to write down everything they said by hand was daunting. I told them I wasn’t sure what to do and explained that we were supposed to be interviewing and that this was our first interview. I asked if there would be a better time to come back.

“You mean when we’re not busy?” Bob asked. He raised his hand indicating a zero sign. “None.”

Roger asked Bob if he could just bring me back to the office for a bit. Bob did, and he said I could use the tape recorder if that’s what I had to do; he just wouldn’t answer if he didn’t want to. I said that was fine. I also explained that I had a release form to sign at the end, that if he didn’t want to sign it he didn’t have to, and that we would respect his wishes.

We sat down in the small office behind the deli counter. As I was taking off my coat I apologized for my jitters from low blood sugar. Luckily he understood because he said Roger had the same thing in the mornings. I took out the tape recorder, set it up and started to record. I was glad I had checked everything and tried it out, but I was still nervous that I would do something wrong like keeping the pause button on.

As I listened to the buzzing of some appliance (I believe a refrigerator or freezer), I remembered what Professor Sacks had said about trying to avoid this. Still, I knew that it could not be avoided since there was no other place to conduct the interview and believed it to be much preferable to interviewing at the checkout lane.

For the most part as we talked, things were a bit more comfortable. I tried to smile to lighten the mood. He seemed more comfortable as I asked my questions,

offering more information. Still I felt as if he were on guard against any questions that he felt might be incriminating.

We spoke first about how he got started in the business. He explained that they had bought the store in 1993 and recounted some of the history of the store including the names of the previous owners. The store had existed there since 1963 when they built Farr Hall, but there had been a market on the location previously as well. Mr. Tier had worked in the grocery business as a meat manager before buying the store. At his point, Roger came back with a note I believe dealing with the need to order more of some supply. I asked Bob why he wanted to go into this business. He explained that he wanted to into his own business because sooner or later you are the one you benefits. As with starting any business, it was important to consider the possible longevity and whether it would be possible to make a living.

I asked what his job entailed, and when he looked at me questioningly, I asked how the work was divided since I knew he and Roger were partners. He explained that there were no designated jobs. "From the time we open the doors you're either running the cash register, you're working the produce, you're filling coolers you're mopping the floors, I'm cutting meat (Roger doesn't cut meat), you're making sandwiches. Everything everyone else does in the store one of us does at some time or another....Then there's this circle which is the entire bookkeeping." There are nine employees, I learned, and anyone would be assigned to either the cash register or the deli counter for customer service. If there were no customers, they would be doing whatever else needed to be done.

We next discussed how decisions were made about what items to sell. "It's a turkey shoot," he said, but then he explained that most things are on a national trend and they carry the most popular items.

I asked if he kept research on these national trends and he said someone else did that. They belong to different grocery associations that send them information.

"There's the Ohio Grocery Association, the East Central Ohio Grocery Association, there's the Central Ohio Grocer's Association. These are all factions of the grocery industry. They do things like...grouping together for workman's compensation, insurance, lobbying to try to get things done through the grocery industry...Most of the people in these organizations are independent....It's there job to relay information to you about the industry. That's why you pay your dues."

We next discussed how prices are set. He explained that some items such as alcohol, were set by the state of Ohio, and the rest were set on curve that allows them to make money. They have to pay employees workman's compensation, and for full-time staff they pay full insurance. Bob also informed me that they would change things weekly when someone would ask for something, when there were new products, or when national advertising would influence someone to buy something.

Our discussion turned to customers. Bob explained their customers were within a fifteen mile circumference of the store, including Mt. Vernon and halfway to Fredericktown. The students were a big part of it and consequently the store was open for fewer hours when the students are not around.

I asked how often he interacted with the customers. Just then the bell rang at the deli counter. Bob said, "Ninety percent of the time... You can stop that," indicating the tape recorder because he had to go make a sandwich for the customer. So I did stop the

recorder while he left the room. When he returned, I repeated the question. He explained that it depended on what job you were doing, but that someone was always interacting with the customers at some point. Customers come to the store “Because it’s here.... Convenience... we have things other stores don’t have... if you want to get a sandwich or a hotdog.” He explained that they tried to provide everything that a full grocery store provided, but it was all a matter of numbers.

I asked how many people did their major shopping there. He said a very small percent. He recalled that in the 60s and 70s, items cost the same at every store, but now there was much competition and larger stores could sell things much cheaper because of the quantities they carried. “Price has restructured the grocery industry.” He explained that the difference in the prices of most items was usually less than ten cents, but the large stores were also always having sale items. He recounted that as a kid in Mt. Vernon there was a small corner grocery store within every couple of blocks. There were twenty-three in Mt. Vernon. He could drive through any town in the United States and pick out where the markets used to be.

We next discussed where their food came from. He said mostly one supplier but did not want to name the supplier. Ninety percent came from suppliers and there were many other smaller suppliers that sold certain items, such as candy. Only “a miniscule percent” of the food was grown locally. They sell tomatoes from someone down the road for about six months out of the year. The problem they’ve found in the past was that local producers were not able to meet the demand of the customers. There were other items such as local syrup and honey that they had sold until the individuals passed away. When I asked about the benefits of locally grown foods, he explained that people do come into the store looking for local foods, especially visitors, since it is a college town, but he didn’t think there was much of an advantage for them because they didn’t think it could be supplied.

I concluded by asking if there was anything that he wanted to say that I hadn’t asked him about, but he said there was not. He also did not have anyone in particular to recommend that I contact, and stated that he believed the people in Mt. Vernon would have the same issues of needing to have the supply meet the demand.

I brought out the release form and told him he could read over it. He asked “what if there’s something in here I don’t agree with?” so I told him he could cross something out if he didn’t agree with it and we would respect that. He bracketed the part that says, “I waive any right to inspect or approve the finished product or any of its components.” I tried to clarify exactly what he wanted to approve. He said it was fine to have the typed up interview archived in the rural life center but wanted to approve of anything that might be used for public viewing. So I put a note on the side of the form indicating this.

I thanked him for his time, saying I realized he was busy. As I shook his hand he remarked that I had lost my jitters. He mentioned that at first they didn’t know much about the college community, but that this was the third time someone in this class had contacted him this. Laughing, he told me I was lucky I caught him when he wasn’t too busy because last time he had told the student to leave the questions and he would write out the answers, and that was what he had done. I left at around 9:40 AM.

It was good to have a set of questions to use. Still, when he had already somewhat answered a question that I had not yet asked, I wasn’t sure whether to ask it anyway to see if there was any more information to be learned or whether I would just be

repeating myself. I also realized later that I had missed a question I had meant to ask on what influences customers' decisions. It was a short interview, but this was perhaps to be expected considering how busy they are in the store.