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October 30, 2000
Fieldwork: Rural Life
Methodological Review of First Interview

This morning I interviewed Rob Hauf, Kenyon's SYSCO representative, in John Darmstadt's office on the third floor of Pierce Hall. I had written out an interview schedule, picked up the audio recorder and practiced with it, and labeled the two tapes that I was planning to use. I had some sense already of what SYSCO was all about, having worked in my fair share of kitchens all of which were supplied by SYSCO. Because of this I felt reasonably familiar with the basics of the business which meant that most of the questions would be aimed at details concerned with our interest in local foods. One thing that I wasn't sure of was what kind of person Rob would be. He had been referred to as the "sales rep." but it was hard to know if he would be an out going salesman, a salaried business executive, or the driver of the delivery truck. The tone of the interview would hinge on which one of the above he turned out to be, so I was anxious for those first few moments when all this would become clear. John Darmstadt (who arranged the interview) had also told me that Rob would be driving two hours from his office up near Marion to come for the interview, so I was feeling a little bit of pressure to really make this worth his time.

I arrived at John Darmstadt's office about ten minutes early and he sent me downstairs to wait. When I came back he and Rob were sitting in his office and he introduced us. We shook hands and John excused himself and close the door behind him. Rob was dressed in a well-made gray suit and charcoal tie with polished black wingtip shoes. He looked to be in his late fifties, with a close-cut white beard and ring of hair circling his head. He wore silver glasses with chrome frames and an expensive-looking silver watch. On the floor at his feet was an elaborate computer case. We hadn't even sat down yet, and my question about who he was had been answered. Definitely the salaried executive-type. (I was glad that I had chosen to dress up a bit for the interview.) The first thing he asked was what I wanted to know and I explained a little bit about the Rural Life Center and our interests on local food systems for this project. We sat down in two armchairs in front of John's desk as I answered his question. My notebook, a pen, and the audio recorder in its case all sat in my lap. Before I could completely finish my explanation he started talking. Panic. The recorder wasn't running yet, it wasn't even out of the carrying case, and he was pouring out potentially crucial information at such an incredible rate that notes seemed futile. He was very excited to be able to talk about what he deals with every day and his energy and intensity virtually pinned me to my chair. All the while I'm trying not to break eye-contact and still get the recorder up and running. It was about that time that I realized that there was no place to put the recorder. Our two chairs were catty-corner to each other without a table in between...I couldn't hold the darn thing the whole time either. I'm trying to listen, ask good questions, undo the latch on the machine and slide in a tape all as casually and silently as possible. In a moment of relative genius I balanced the recorder on the arm of my chair with the two sides of the microphone pointed in appropriate directions. I pushed 'record' and relaxed a little.

All of this panic spanned only about a minute or two and methodologically I'm unsure as to how much of it could have been avoided. I know I should have taken a closer look at the layout of the office when I came up earlier, but I don't think that I would have found a better solution. It didn't seem right to invade the space behind John's desk and there were no other tables in sight. I think the next time I will have the recorder in the case without the little leather holster around it and with the microphone on. That way I can pull it out faster and I need to be ready to start recording whenever the interviewee starts talking. The third problem was in my assumptions about his personality. I was equating a certain way of speaking, of conducting oneself with outward appearances. I had assumed that someone of his economic and business status would give highly organized and calculated answers to my questions, and that he would expect the same precision from me. This was not the case, and I should have known better than to just to conclusions.

Rob was a talker. He would answer each question (when I could get one in edgewise) with whatever seemed to come into his head and then he would just keep right on going. He was definitely very knowledgeable about whatever he was speaking about, but he obviously loved to talk and was taking full advantage. He also seemed to push for a more conversational tone. He told several stories of things he had read on some issue or other, everything from murder statistics among meat processing employees to his theories on the prevalence of asthma. In these instances my questions to steer him back to the topic at hand seemed random and out of place. I know that I should have found some clever follow-up question to his stories that would subtly nudge him back to food systems, but even now I can't think of any.

This is all sounding very negative, but on the whole things went well. After the initial struggle with the recorder it went smoothly and I remembered to turn it over and replace it when necessary. All of my questions on

the interview schedule got answered in whatever order he got to them. (That was another good thing. He had so much information that there was never a question as to whether or not he would tell me what I wanted to know. It was more a question of when he would get around to it.) I honestly did very little talking, though there were several instances where I would jump on a brief lull in his monologue and eek out the first syllable of a follow-up question before he started in again. I had thought that he had finished his thought, but apparently not. Interrupting is not a good thing in an interview situation. All things considered Rob was an excellent interviewee and a very friendly and enthusiastic one. Methodologically I don't think that I made any huge mistakes and I learned from those that I did make. Perhaps the most valuable lesson learned is that you can only plan so much. Each interview situation will be different in a thousand ways and it is not reasonable to think that you could plan for all of them. Some things are just plain going to hit you by surprise and you have to learn to deal with it without panic.