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### Interview with Troy Cooper

Kelly McPharlin

Troy Cooper

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**Interviewer:** Kelly McPharlin

**Interviewee:** Troy Cooper

**Place:** OSU Knox County Extension Office, Mount Vernon.

**Duration:** 00:33:51, 33 minutes, 51 seconds.

**Co-workers present:** none

**Kelly McPharlin:** Let's try again. Okay, hello my name is Kelly McPharlin and I am sitting here with Troy Cooper, the OSU extension agent for Knox County. And the date is February 6, 2011.

**Troy Cooper:** 12.

**KM:** 2012! And today we will be talking about the Farmers Market in downtown Mount Vernon and the public square. So thank you so much for coming, Troy.

**TC:** Well thanks for thinking of me.

**KM:** Of course. Can you please state your name and occupation.

**TC:** I'm, my name is Troy Cooper, I'm an extension educator for Ohio State University. And I basically just cover Knox County, I'm responsible for livestock, forages, and of course local foods, which includes the farmers market.

**KM:** Great. So how long have you lived in Mount Vernon?

**TC:** I've lived in Mount Vernon a total of about eleven, twelve years roughly.

**KM:** Great. And do you have family here?

**TC:** I do, I live here with my family. I have a wife and two children, a daughter that's a senior in high school and a son that's in the fourth grade.

**KM:** So where did you grow up?

**TC:** I was raised in the West, I was raised in Idaho and so was my wife. We were both raised in Idaho, and when we were going to school and getting my masters degree, just on a whim applied to a job in Ohio, and that's all it was, and here we are.

**KM:** So what do you think about Mount Vernon?

**TC:** I think that, although all of our family is out West and we have no relatives out here, I think it says a lot about the quality of life and the community here that we're here. We're close to our families and it's kind of difficult to be away from them. But we love Knox County, we love the community, and we just love everything about it. We were

talking last night, we were going somewhere as a family, and my daughter said, I don't think I could live anywhere else in Ohio. It's just a great place to live.

**KM:** Why do you like it so much?

**TC:** For me personally, I like it because it's still so rural, it's very agricultural, it has a good strong sense of community, and the people here, they're just great people. Um, and I like the diversity of the farming, I've really learned to like how they grow things, it's really nice being raised out West where you had irrigation, to come here and be able to grow about anything without irrigating, so that's really kind of nice too. The green, the trees, it took us awhile but we like the humidity now. And parts of my job have just been so fun, and I enjoy farmers market, which is what you're here for. I've been involved in that since the very beginning, and it's just a good challenge and I've really enjoyed it.

**KM:** So tell me about how that began.

**TC:** Um... excuse me. In working with Dr. Sacks, Howard, we, there was just a small group of us that decided, you know it had been talked about for a few years but it never really got going. And when I came on board here in the office it just seemed like the timing was right. We met as a group and started looking at locations, and started talking about things and pushed through and finally got it organized. I think I remember, I think it was the summer of 19-... no, it was the year 2000 when we first had a market. It was six vendors that first Saturday. And it went to the next Saturday, and it's always been nine to noon on the square. And by the next year there were 40, 50, 60, and that's about where we've leveled out. In July and August, we can have about 60 or 70 vendors on the square.

**KM:** Oh really? Cause I went in September and it seemed like there were only 20

**TC:** Yeah, they're starting to go down in September, but in July and August we have a lot of vendors. And we kind of balance it out, because we've changed some of the rules of how we let people in. We kind of stabilize that number. So first, whoever can manage to sell, if they had a few extra tomatoes or zucchini that were three feet-long. We want the highest quality, and people weren't well established they would just come for a Saturday or two. We are trying to get it more where people are bringing in what we consider industry standards, what people want to eat. Three foot zucchinis are not what people want. People don't want sweet corn that's ten days overripe. So we're looking, I don't want to say controlling, but we're monitoring what comes in so it doesn't detract from the farmers market itself. Now over the years the market has evolved into a very social event. People, we have the loyal customers that come every week and it's just packed on the sidewalks. But they're there because they like the feel of it, they like the square. And it's just, it's just a beautiful sight. All those trees, the parks department, Jeff Oliver and his crews, they just do a phenomenal job to maintain that. The city has just been fantastic to work with and allowing this to keep going. We've had precedence, we have that good relationship. It also has created, I don't want to say challenges with

parking, because it is limited and because it can be so congested they're not able to spread out. So some people aren't real fond of that either.

**KM:** So why do you think it was started originally? Was it your idea?

**TC:** I think it was, you know I had the thought, but Dr. Sacks might remember. He really was the initial thrust there, and I think they had been talking before. I think he just called me and said "Hey, we're thinking about this, would you like to be involved?" And I said definitely, because of the connections we have through extension and working with growers. And so, um, I think there was, people were just, it was during that mid-90s, late-90s where that local foods was just starting to catch on, and Dr. Sacks had that vision of the wide scheme of things, so we were on the way. And people started to come, they wanted those local foods, they wanted that fresh stuff in front of them to eat. So that's how it got started.

**KM:** So did you get a lot of support from the community?

**TC:** Oh yeah, just phenomenal. You know we talked about the vendors being 60 or 70 during the peak, but I bet there's 300 people that come through on a busy Saturday. There might even be more on some Saturdays. It's just packed. And you'll see most of it in the summertime they're there around 9 o'clock. By 10 o'clock it's wall to wall people, and that probably goes till about 10:30, almost 11 o'clock, and then it dies. And by noon there's hardly anybody left on the square. They come, they see, they buy, they go.

**KM:** So you mentioned that it's a social event. Do you think people primarily come there for food or for social reasons?

**TC:** They're there for the food, primarily, that's the main reason they come, I think. But, they're to talk. They bring their kids, they bring their dogs. They talk to one another and they just like the feel of it. It just kind of connects them back to their roots, their community. And so they like that feel of it, they like seeing, over the years a lot of these vendors have been here since the opening day, so they have a lot of loyal customers. They come and they go to this stand to get their tomatoes, they go to that stand to get their bread, they go this stand over here to get their meats. And they, they know these people, they're talking about, "Oh, how's Hannah in college? Is she getting married?" They've been doing this for eleven, twelve years now, and they know each other so they're asking questions. So I think the story behind this is the connections that keep it so strong.

**KM:** So what is your job, how do you work for the farmers market now?

**TC:** It's kind of evolved over some time, there's been times where I've had a little bit more of an administrative role, but really our role as extension is educational. So what I'm trying to do this year is more, we have as a requirement to sell as a vendor, to sell at the market, we have our vendors go through a quality assurance training. We talk about good agricultural practices, we review the food regulations that people have to have, we

talk about meat and eggs. And we do some training, some we try to do it hands-on, some interactive so it's beneficial for them. So I train all of them before they come on, they get a little certificate that says they attended the training. And also to kind of help promote the market, I'm trying to get more weekly education events, so to speak. Um, working on getting the, say the local sheep growers, or the beef cattlemen, or the dairy service unit to come and do just 20, 30 minute presentations, something so they can just talk to people about their projects. Free samples of what they've cooked or whatever, so that people, we are trying to teach consumers more about the foods, what they're getting locally. What else are we trying to do... We've done spotlights in the past, in season. We have people come in May and wonder where the sweet corn is, where the pumpkins are. We don't have sweet corn and pumpkins in May. Or they'll come in October and say where's the asparagus? You know, we don't have asparagus. So it's kind of a continuous opportunity for us to educate consumers as well. And we're trying to include the vendors in this more and more, so they're educating their consumers. So that's what I'm trying to do. I'm trying to shift it more and more to educational, but there's still some administrative, and if people aren't following rules we have to ask them to conform or just not come back.

**KM:** So what are the rules?

**TC:** I can get you a copy of that, printed. But just briefly, they have to live within 25 miles of the square, they have to grow or make the product themselves, they can't go to a store and buy it, repackage it and sell it. So they have to do it themselves. No selling before 9 o'clock, no parking on the square. No crafts, we want it to all be food-related. And so those are the main rules that we have.

**KM:** So why are those rules in place, and how did you come up with them?

**TC:** Well, we wanted it to be local. I mean, there's a lot of vendors that divide their families up and they'll go to different markets. Dublin and Westerville, New Albany, Granville. They'll go to these other markets, so they're not people from here. We want it to be a local program, a local event, so we just decided to limit that. So we get some frustrated people who want to come in, but we've been very successful and we want to maintain that.

**KM:** So why do you think local is so important?

**TC:** Again, different people have different reasons why, but they like the connection it makes to their neighbors. It kinda takes them back to their community, that neighborhood feel. And knowing where their food comes from, they feel better and safer about eating something where they know it comes from and how it's been raised, rather than something that's been trucked for miles and been imported, and who knows what else.

**KM:** So what role do you think the farmers market plays in the community?

**TC:** You know, we've seen that. It's the featured event, we have precedence on the square. I mean, if someone calls in and asks, they say the market's there, you better ask

them. So we're seeing them, that it, that is, the downtown wants that, they want us to be there, and so we're having people who will call us and say, hey we want to do this, we're a charity organization. They're using us, they're riding on the coattails because they know so many people come, they'll get some good exposure if they come.

**KM:** So they try to plan events after the market?

**TC:** After, or join us. And so they're intertwined there, they know the audience is there and it draws a lot of people.

**KM:** So do those events ever happen?

**TC:** Yeah, people will come in with bands and play. Erin Salva will come in with the community garden and set something up there. We'll have 4-H clubs that will bring their kids and sell some things, baked goods for a week or two. Some kids from Kenyon, I think books... I'm trying to remember how that goes. They're promoting a book, or an author's come. I'm trying to remember, don't hold me to that. But we've had kids from Kenyon come out to just, with their club or organization, just share things like that. One thing we started last year and we hope to continue, is how the market can provide outreach to the community, give back to the community. We started last year, going to the vendors and asking if they had any extras for the day. And we would collect that and we would take it down to the local soup kitchen, the local food bank. And they would donate back, so the following Monday, people would have local fruits and vegetables. We're gonna try this year, in having two farmers markets in the evening at the Knox County Health Department, the third Tuesdays in July and August. And we'll be targeting, I guess that's not a good word to use, but we're focusing on low-income families that have wick coupons so they can have access to that. There's a program that the state offers where they go to farmers markets and tap into this local fruits and vegetables. So we're gonna actually be there the nights they have clinics at the Health Department, so as they walk out of the building, there's gonna be however many vendors, so they can use their wick coupons to get sweet corn and tomatoes and whatever.

**KM:** Great. There are people who don't go to the farmers market, I'm sure.

**TC:** Yes.

**KM:** So why do you think they choose not to?

**TC:** It's not important to them to have that local food, too big of a nuisance, I can just go to Kroger and get it all at once, why do I wanna go down there and fight the traffic, fight the parking, and it's no big deal. And it's just, sometimes they're just caught up in the time, they've got kids in soccer, kids in baseball, it's a busy time of year and so they just don't have time, and they prioritize their families, which they should. So that's probably why we don't see some of them.

**KM:** So do you think that, um, the foods that are sold at the farmers market are more expensive than the foods sold at Kroger or Walmart? Is that a possible reason or detractor?

**TC:** Yeah, I think it could be. I think it's a minor one because I don't think the cost is significantly higher than stores. I think some might be, but not all of them. I think most of our, our vendors try to be closer or a little bit more expensive, but it takes a little bit more. There are also studies that have been done that show that people are willing to pay a little bit more for fresher food. But they try to keep it fairly close, I don't think it's usually too far out of range.

**KM:** So do you go to the farmers market every week?

**TC:** I'm not there every single week, but I'm there regularly throughout the year.

**KM:** What do you like about it?

**TC:** Everything I've said. Now again, I've got those relationships now, those friendships, so it's nice to go see those people. It's nice to see it packed and know that the vendors are just providing something that the community really, really wants.

**KM:** How would you describe the mood at the farmers market, or the vibe?

**TC:** How would I describe the vibe...It's happy, it's excited, but it's relaxed. And that's kinda how I'd say it. It's a fun and exciting thing, people are happy, um, but it's relaxed. People are taking time to catch their breaths, stop, and talk to someone. During the week it's always on your cell phone, driving down the road, no time to stop and smell the roses, so to speak; but they do it at the Farmers Market on Saturdays.

**KM:** Do you think there are other events where the community can gather like that and have the same sort of happy, relaxed atmosphere?

**TC:** (laughs) Well, kinda a loaded question. I'm sure there are. They offer First Fridays, they do the First Fridays every month. The Dan Emmett festival, you'll see a lot of people come, laying on blankets on the grass, listening to music. So yeah, there are other events where people will do that, and it draws different audiences. But this is definitely one that people do like.

**KM:** What are your favorite community events or gatherings?

**TC:** The largest event in the county every year is the county fair. That is the biggest event in the county. Dan Emmett festival draws quite a bit of people. But just because of, I think that the farmers market has to be one of those. I guess it all depends too on the circles that you run in. If you have kids who are in sports, you're gonna say the baseball games or the soccer games, so it all depends on the community and the culture that you belong to.

**KM:** Do you ever go to the public square outside of going to the farmers market?

**TC:** Not very often, not very often. Sometimes, I've volunteered at the Dan Emmett festival one day for the past several years, so I'm there for the Dan Emmett festival begins to remove trash cans, to move cones and signage and stuff like that. So I'm not really there to enjoy it, I'm in a volunteer role and I'm working. So, my wife keeps telling me I don't take enough down time so I don't get a lot of relaxation.

**KM:** Yeah, do you think...It's interesting to me that whenever I see the public square it's just a place for cars to circle around. Do you think that there are other events or opportunities to have, you know, something like the farmers market there?

**TC:** In addition to the farmers market?

**KM:** Yeah, because it's such a successful thing to have it on the public square, it's such a great location.

**TC:** I think it would depend on what it was. Dan Emmett festival is there in August, and they just close off the whole square. And that creates frustration in drivers cause they can no longer go around that circle. But yeah, there's other events that could go on there. The Makers Market started there a couple years ago, they're on the outer edge of the farmers market. It hasn't grown quite as fast, but it's getting momentum.

**KM:** So do you think the farmers market has changed over time?

**TC:** Oh yeah, yeah.

**KM:** How has it changed?

**TC:** Um, just in how people mainly they're, the vendors change their displays and how they present things. You know again, the first year was just a card table and some baskets that were there, and now they do displays. They have pictures, they tear down, they have nice labels, they're paying attention to detail. Some of them have changed what they've grown. We've seen more of our growers do, use management techniques to kind of extend their season. We have a family who built a greenhouse, but they plant their things in the ground. They planted raspberries in this greenhouse, so instead of picking them in July, they're picking them in May and maybe going through November. So having raspberries growing that much longer that increases your income. Tomatoes are another thing. Don uses some of this stuff, they can have tomatoes as early as June. So that's kind of changed, when some of the produce is available by using these techniques.

**KM:** Do you think as a result of the farmers market, has the public square changed in how people perceive it or use it?



**TC:** Boy, I think that question would better be answered by the mayor or somebody. In my perspective I would say no, because they identify the square with the farmers market, the Dan Emmett festival, and First Fridays. And that's about it. And I don't think people stop to think about what else they could do there.

**KM:** But before the farmers market began there was no farmers market.

**TC:** Yeah, it was just the Dan Emmett festival, yeah. So it, I think First Fridays started after that. Now when you say the farmers market people say, "Oh, it's on the square right?" And you go, "Oh yeah, yeah." So they do identify the market with the square.

**KM:** Do you go to First Fridays?

**TC:** Sometimes. Sometimes.

**KM:** Do you like First Fridays?

**TC:** They haven't been bad. I'm just more of a keep me home on the farm, let me work with the cows or the sheep or the garden. Cause come Friday I'm just burned out, I'm ready to relax for the weekend. Or just spend time with the family, we'll go out to a movie or go out to dinner or float down the river or something like that. But just stay away from town. We're country people.

**KM:** How many children do you have?

**TC:** Just two.

**KM:** How old are they?

**TC:** Senior in high school and fourth grader.

**KM:** Oh wow. Big difference.

**TC:** Big difference. Two only children. Not planned that way, but that's just how it worked out.

**KM:** Do they get along well?

**TC:** Oh, 95 per cent of the time. They know how to push each other's buttons.

**KM:** So having kids, what do you like to do with them as a family?

**TC:** In the community? We do all sorts of stuff. We'll garden, just stuff around the house. Playing catch at the house, wading in the creek that runs down, we like to camp. We like to go fishing, we'll go out and visit friends. One of the things we really like to do is go to the zoo in Columbus. That's a phenomenal zoo, we love it there. Of course then

you have soccer games, things like that that we do too. So we stay fairly busy. We have lots of church socials so we go to those a lot.

**KM:** Do they like going to the farmers market?

**TC:** Yeah they do, and my daughter is a pretty good salesperson. She does very well, she likes that, she likes to interact with people so she can do that. But I think we kinda stay away from that, because if I'm there in an administrative role or something, I just try to avoid that appearance that I may be playing favorites or something like that, so we don't sell a while lot at the market. I'll look around and buy, we'll walk around together and I'll buy a few things while I'm asking questions and taking care of things, but we don't sell.

**KM:** But you do have a stand, no?

**TC:** We have occasionally did, but again it just kinda made me uncomfortable, so we just don't go there anymore.

**KM:** So what do you grow on your farm?

**TC:** We raised sheep for a long time. We've raised broiler chickens, so we've sold those in the past year or two. Green beans, peppers. We have a big, big, big garden, we have 25 acres. So we probably have about a half acre worth of garden, so it's a lot of work.

**KM:** That is a lot of work. Do you have any favorite memories of the farmers market?

**TC:** You know there's not particular events, they just become, they just blend all together. It's just week to week of seeing the people come, there are displays of people there. You know you look at pictures and think, oh yeah, I remember that. So there's nothing that sticks right out at you. But just every week is kind of a memory.

**KM:** Do you have any good anecdotes or funny stories about the market?

**TC:** I'd have to think about that for a minute. I'm sure there are. I'd have to think about that... You have to pause that for a second, I have to think out loud... There's nothing real, I do remember some of the bad ones.

**KM:** Okay, you can tell those too. Or not.

**TC:** Okay, I'll say some of the challenges. Is it still going there? 99 per cent of the time, people get along very well and it goes very smooth. And it's just fun to sit there and watch people with their bags full and talking about things. But there are a few things we have to take care of. We did have one time when someone brought in pokeberries. That's a weed that gets really, really tall, maybe six or eight feet. And they are bright red, dark berries, and they were selling them and they're poisonous. And so fortunately one of the

vendors, said “He’s selling pokeberries,” and so I went over there and said, “Oh no, you can’t sell that, get out of here.” And so, yeah/.

**KM:** First time vendor?

**TC:** Oh no. There’s a long story behind that one, he’s just trying to cause problems.

**KM:** Oh no, that’s a big problem.

**TC:** And then we’ve had some where the vendors are pretty protective of their spots, and if anyone invades they get pretty testy. We’ve had a few where they just, that’s why we have a code of standards of behavior. And you know, we don’t allow that verbal, loud, cursing, abusive type language. We’ve had it a little bit, but not very often.

**KM:** Do you have any, um, particularly favorite vendors? I know you don’t want to play favorites, but some people who have been there a long time or sell really great produce.

**TC:** There’s a lot, and that’s the thing, the longer they’re there, the newer ones you don’t know as well. So people who come consistently, I like them all. They all have their strengths, but really I would say all the vendors who come and have been there awhile, they have good products. They’re all just nice to talk to. I can sit there and talk 15 to 20 minutes to every single vendor, so I don’t get very far on Saturdays. Cause I just sit there and talk. I’ve known some longer, so again, I’m asking those questions-“How are your kids doing? How are your grandkids doing?” So it’s an unwinding time for me because I get to catch up with people that I don’t get to see other than at the market. “How’s your ice cream project coming? How’s your dad doing?” You know, stuff like that. Cause I think I get along with most people there, the new ones you get to know them, it takes a couple weeks. I don’t mention this, but we started a winter season, and we’re gonna start again the third of March, I believe.

**KM:** On the square?

**TC:** No, it’s indoors at the Place at the Woodward, on South Main street. And again, try and extend that season out for people. We know people who have lettuce that will probably be ready by March, the baked goods people are ready to amp up, too. And then the first Saturday in May we’ll be back out on the square.

**KM:** When you go to the farmers market, what do you buy?

**TC:** We’ll usually buy baked goods of some kind.

**KM:** What do you like?

**TC:** Depends on what’s good. Sometimes we’ll buy a pie, sometimes we’ll buy brownies. My wife’s a good bread maker so we don’t usually buy bread. They also have some cinnamon breads that are different than the types she makes, so we’ll buy those

kinds. Cookies. In the springtime we'll try and buy some plants, some bedding plants so we can put them in the garden. We've bought honey there before, maple syrup. But we don't grow a whole lot of that.

**KM:** Well is there anything that I haven't asked you about that you think we should talk about?

**TC:** The future of the farmers market.

**KM:** Oh yeah, that's a good question. Yeah, the future. What are your plans?

**TC:** I mentioned just a few of them. Again, having winter markets, something year round, so we're offering something year round. That was probably the top of the list. We're looking at ways we can make the square a little bit more convenient, maybe expand and enlarge the number of people that we have there. Some discussion that has been had is moving it.

**KM:** Really?

**TC:** I don't think it's gonna happen.

**KM:** Why?

**TC:** Cause people associate it, they like it on the square.

**KM:** Why would they want to move it?

**TC:** Because there's more room. And although we have a loyal following of people, how many are we not getting because they don't want to come to the square? So could we expand our customer base by moving somewhere that's a bit more accessible.

**KM:** Where would be more accessible?

**TC:** Oh, there's the station across the viaduct. They've talked about foundation park, the career center, and the fairgrounds. A lot of vendors would like to, because parking is limited, they have to unload everything, and then park off the square, then come back. And if they could just sell right out of their truck or have it accessible so they don't have to walk a long distance, it would be easier on our vendors. So that's another reason we're looking at it. We're looking at putting designated two sides to truck. Now we're not gonna let them have their dirty truck there, but they can have a table or sell out of their truck. And it's gonna reduce parking, and that's just kind of a, we're not sure how it's gonna work. But we hope it might be a little more convenient for people, and see what happens. If we can do that, I don't know, there are gonna be some challenges this year. But I still see that if we continue to offer high quality products, a wide variety, that we'll have people follow the farmers market for a lot of years to come. So, that's about all.

