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Interview with Richard Mavis

Kelly McPharlin

Richard Mavis

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Interviewer: Kelly McPharlin

Interviewee: Richard Mavis

Place: Mount Vernon City Hall

Duration: 00:19:47, 19 minutes, 47 seconds

Co-workers present: none

Kelly McPharlin: So, here we go... Okay, so, hello, my name is Kelly McPharlin and the date is Wednesday, February 22nd and I am here with Mayor Richard Mavis to talk about the public square in Mount Vernon. So would you please state your name and occupation?

Richard Mavis: Richard K. Mavis, and I am mayor of the city of Mount Vernon, Ohio.

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

RM: I've lived in Mount Vernon since 1967... so that makes it 70, 33... 43, 44... 45 years.

KM: And have you lived in the same house all this time?

RM: We, the house we live in we've remodeled twice, but we moved into the original house in 1971, so yeah we've lived there quite as long.

KM: Wow. Do you have family in Mount Vernon?

RM: I have, um, a brother-in-law and a sister-in-law that live just outside town. My sister and brother-in-law lived here up until two years ago, and then they retired and moved to Florida. I have a daughter nearby in Granville, and, uh, so those would be the, uh, I'm trying to think... You'll have to edit this tape. I do have a sister-in-law that had retired from California nursing, and moved in Mount Vernon, so she lives here although she spends winter in Florida. But, so that is it as far as relatives close by.

KM: Great, okay, so how long have you, um, been mayor, then?

RM: I am beginning my fifth term, so this is my 17th year. So... yeah. It's 16 years, and then this is my 17th, so at the end of this term it will 20.

KM: Wow.

RM: A long time.

KM: A long time. What is your favorite part about being mayor?

RM: Well, I served 20 years as county commissioner so I had five terms up there before I came down here, and eventually I was defeated in an election, but... Both jobs offer a

variety of ways of making a difference, whether it's dealing with personnel, or dealing with projects, dealing with other communities or other governments. It's always a challenge and so I don't ever get bored. And I think that's why I like the job, both public service jobs that I've had. And I did teach school for 10 years, so all three of them provided a variety of daily activities on, some of them unexpected, but that's part of life. So I think you, the favorite thing about them is each day presents different problems.

KM: So what work have you done with the public square?

RM: We were trimming trees one day, there are some trees that are identified for public enjoyment, and maintained for that purpose, and as our bucket truck was trimming trees they noticed that our main flagpole had holes in the top of it. Normally you would never have noticed that from ground level. We were still using it to fly the national flag and the Ohio flag, but that prompted an inspection and, um, clearly it was in danger of falling over, a heavy wind would have probably broken off the top of the flagpole. So we then embarked on a program of redoing the base of it and putting up a new, a little higher flagpole, and we raised some money, the city put some money in, that project was about a \$20,000 project, then, I know that sounds expensive for a flagpole, but it does have a, an extensive base on it, and, uh, flagpole. So, that's one of the major things we've done. We've also rehabbed the major fountain on the square, uh, it's an 1800, late-1800 vintage fountain, and some of the bowls needed to be repaired, so we had it dismantled and sent to Alabama for repair. We've replaced a number of plantings, we've replaced concrete, we've changed the flower beds, uh, we've installed an underground sprinkling system. So since I've been mayor, about the only thing that hasn't been changed is the monument in the center, the Civil War monument. However, we have had a contract come in and clean it and seal it, so that has been done to the monument. But other than that, I think that, you know there's always, during Dan Emmett festival it's a place, a venue where all the crowds meet and watch performances, so there's always repairs of the grassy areas and building back up, building the lawn back up, and that sort of thing. So it's a maintenance area that the, uh, groundspeople work on almost twelve months a year.

KM: That's a lot. Um, so what does the square represent to you?

RM: Well, it's certainly a focal point for the city. I mean it's, it's kinda the beginning of our central business district. It serves as a, what I think is, an identifier for the city of Mount Vernon among all the people who pass through here, because you have to go around. And what we find at least in Ohio and other states now, is the traffic, uh, structure, they put rotaries in. Most of the rotaries are smaller; we've had this rotary here for high over a hundred years. So it's larger, people are used to driving in a circle around it, with opportunities to park or to go on a different route. But one of the things is, I travel around, I talk to people about being from Mount Vernon, and the thing they say to me is "Gee, you have this great public square there." Of course it's really a circle, but everybody refers to it as a square. But, I think it, so especially in the summer time it does have an unusual beauty, and in the spring the flowering trees are out. Um, but it, it, it has a, it sends a message, I believe. You know, when you come to the center of Mount Vernon, in the older section of town, you have this Civil War monument, you also have

the fountain, you also have the Veterans Walk of Honor, and a place to sit in some sort of serene, outdoor area. And so it, in my opinion it not only means a lot to the people who come and live in the area, but also to the people who are passing through and say, and believe that that is, you know, kind of a beauty spot for our city.

KM: So what are your favorite events that take place on the square?

RM: Well, we have First Fridays, the first Friday of each month during the spring and summer and early fall. So it's the, we block off traffic so everyone can, they bring food, music, entertainment, car shows, and that sort of thing. So it's nice to see people outside experiencing downtown Mount Vernon, the shops are open... The big event we have there each year is the Dan Emmett Festival, the music and arts festival, so the entire downtown central business district is set off and impacted. And the public square is the focal point. It's where entertainment takes place, it's where people sit and watch local entertainment, the entertainment brought in for the event. It is shaded, so it's just, uh, a great venue for that. So it's kinda nice, at least from my office, during the day I'll see people sitting out there in the shade, I'll see people watching whatever events are going on. So that's, that's the big event, although we do close it off for other events. Occasionally we have major politicians come through, we have rallies, this sort of thing there. So it does represent a place to, to uh, tell everyone what the community is about as far as our support, promotions.

KM: Um, do you, what types of rallies occur in the square? Because I know you mentioned that.

RM: Well, they do, they have, uh you know, the political space, you know, during a state or federal election year, you'll get the politicians come through in buses and we'll make parking available and that sort of thing. We also, I failed to mention, we have the Farmers Market every Saturday morning, and it's a great social thing, but also a place to buy fresh fruits and vegetables. We also have, you know, the domestic abuse uses it for their couple of events a year, the patriotic memorial committee uses it for their, uh, honoring the prisoners of war. And in September of each year, a Memorial Day ceremony is held on the square, which is our probably biggest event outside of the Dan Emmett festival, because we easily end up with a couple of thousand people there for the Memorial Day event. There are, I mean there's, there's people who wanna have a gathering there, and we don't charge the way we, we don't charge to have an event on the square, but we schedule it so we don't have two rivals there at the same time. We don't allow signage or that sort of thing unless people are carrying it as part of their project there. I don't know, I guess I've never counted how many events we have there in a year's time but there are several.

KM: Do you find that there are any political protests that occur there?

RM: You know, we have had, a few years ago there was an issue with one of our local industries which has since closed and moved out of town, but there was an issue there with the health. There were claims that people had become sick because they worked

there and the company wasn't covering their, their illnesses. And so they did meet there. We've had some other protests of smaller nature, um, but they were generally, generally they are dealing with local, either work or local health issues, or something like that. So we have had those, and again, we ask that they schedule those. We also alert, I mean the, when we schedule them, every department gets a list, so the police department knows, the fire department, the parks departments. Everybody knows if something's happening, it may or may not involve them, depending on what the situation calls for. I guess I'd have to say in the sixteen-years plus that I've been here, I don't know if we've ever had any major issues that the police had to get involved with. Occasionally they'll spill over, and the police might stop by and say "Stay on the square, we're worried about traffic." One of the things they had done before I became mayor was they took the protective, ornamental fence around, that used to be around the base of the monument, they removed that. And of course that was the era of skateboarding, and so it became a place where the skateboarders would get a run down the hill, the square is on a little bit of a grade, so when they reached the side of the monument, which is marble, they would spring up on it and ricochet off of it, and it began to leave black marks. We put up signs that said "No Skateboarding," but again, that didn't stop them so we did put the fence back up, and we opened a skate park out at the Memorial Park, so it gave them some place to bounce off of legally. But the square has, I mean, uh, I suspect that if you lived long enough you could write a book about good things that happened. We have some weddings down there, people want to get married on the square. But it is noisy: sirens, motorcycles, trucks, all going at the same time. But we have, I have down some marriages down there, I don't, I defer them now, because it's just too noisy, so we don't do them. If a private party wants to come, they can do it, but I don't do them down there. I don't know if I answered your question.

KM: No, you did. Have you noticed any changes in the public square's activities since you've been here?

RM: The city ordinance says we can't put up signs or banners. Um, I felt there were a number of activities in the, in the town that we get involved with, in many cases it's community events that merited a sign. So we did make a place that faces South Main Street where you can put a banner up, There's one up there now about dating violence, I think, domestic abuse. We schedule those for a month at a time. Uh, that has changed and I was probably guilty of changing that. The law directory reminds me that I'm not within the, operating within the scope of our ordinances, but I do think that a community should recognize what they believe is important. So that has changed, but some of the poles we've painted green, we've replanted trees, when trees have become dangerous we've replanted new trees. But basically the four quadrants of the square, the fountain's the same, the monument's the same, the Walk of Honor, we add to that. If you have a family member that has served in the military, for fifty dollars you can buy a brick that's inscribed with their name and branch of their service. We do that once a year, you fill out the application and pay the money, and once a year we take out the fill bricks and put the name bricks in. So we expanded that a couple years ago because we were running out of space. So those sorts of things have happened since I've been here.

KM: When did the Walk of Honor Start?

RM: That's been since I was here... See, I came in '96. It seems about 2000 it started, it was a movement of all the veterans' agencies joined in. We had a core group of people that came up with the wall, there's a wall down there that says Veterans Walk of Honor. The designed that and had the help of an architect with that. Our people laid out the area of the park that would be used as the Walk of Honor, and so that's, we've added to it, I mean, it's larger than it originally started out. But that started in about 2000, I think, twelve or so years ago.

KM: And so before, um, before the Dan Emmett Festival began, before First Fridays and the Farmers Market began, were there different types of events that took place on the square?

RM: Over the years, they did have, in some summers they had, the local concert association would sponsor summer concerts with a local orchestra or band they would bring in. So that has been going on for a number of years, and they still do that occasionally. But there certainly is more activity now on the square then there used to be. Back in 1863, they had that huge, they said they had 11,000 people on the public square for a political rally. You know we haven't had rallies that large, but there are certainly more activities now then there used to be, simply because they never had First Fridays. We always used to have Dixie Days, and that was the forerunner to the Dan Emmett Festival, they still occasionally in the spring have a car show. But First Fridays, Dan Emmett, Farmers' Markets, there's a lot more happening on the square than there used to be.

KM: I know in the 1950s and 1960s the Mount Vernon High School band would sometimes play on the square.

RM: Yeah, I think so.

KM: So does something like that happen now?

RM: No, not unless it's a special occasion. At Memorial Day we have special bands come down. We did, and there are some old postcards that show this, during World War II they had a structure there, a wooden structure and they would list all the names of people that were serving from the community, and names of people that were killed. And that was, that was, I think a lot of communities had those. It was so that you could add names to it, it was a wooden structure, I remember. I used to have some postcards in here... [opens a drawer and pulls out several postcards of the square]

KM: I think these were done in the early 1900s.

RM: This one looks like it's got a postmark from 1921, I think, and there's even a note from somebody. And this would have been taken from the square looking straight south. There's occasionally you have one that shows that. You can look at this one and see the

cars over by the hotel, from the 20s. And you've seen that picture out in the hallway here. So, in the early days the road went straight through. I mean, it didn't, you didn't go around there was a crossroads right where the monument is, an intersection. At some point, before 1900 they made it into a square. So, anything else?

KM: I don't think so, I think that's great. Thanks so much.