

MARJORIE OAKLEY
The Oakleys of Chatham County – Chapel Hill, NC

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Date: August 18, 2011

Location: Oakley family home, Chatham County, NC

Interviewer: Kate Medley

Transcription: Shelley Chance, ProDocs

Length: 43 minutes

Project: Carrboro Farmers' Market

[Begin Marjorie Oakley Interview]

00:00:01

Kate Medley: I'll start by saying this is Kate Medley interviewing Marjorie Oakley at her home near Chapel Hill, North Carolina on August 18, 2011. And I'll get you to start Mrs. Oakley by introducing yourself and telling us your name and who you are and your birthday.

00:00:27

Marjorie Oakley: *[Laughs]* I'm Marjorie Oakley. I live near Chapel Hill, North Carolina in Chatham County. And my birthday is November 22, 1930, so I'm getting on up in age but I can still dig a long row. *[Laughs]*

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KM: And tell us what it is that you do.

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MO: What do I do? I go to the Farmers Market carrying vegetables, flowers, and fruits. Otherwise, I'm a housewife that looks after a husband that is sick that keeps me busy from early morn 'til late at night.

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KM: I bet. And tell us where you're from originally.

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MO: Whew; I was born in Person County. I have lived in oh four or five counties. [*Laughs*] I went to 10 different schools before I graduated from high school. My father died when I was six. My mother had—I'm the oldest child. I had three brothers and she farmed and we still continued to farm after my father died and because a woman couldn't get a job in commercially anything. We'd still farm and she thought the children needed to learn how to farm and make a living for their selves. So it was a long battle.

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KM: And where was her farm?

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MO: Well when my father died it was in Person County but she bought a farm in Caswell County, near Prospect Hill. And there we tried to raise tobacco and with second help. But the War come along and all the men went to the Service, and there was nobody left to help you with the farm.

00:03:00

KM: And so your father was a tobacco farmer is that correct?

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MO: Uh-hm.

00:03:04

KM: And then your mother, what did she decide to farm?

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MO: Oh well we grew—. Well we grew all of the vegetables that we ate, so there wasn't much. We had our own chickens. We had our own hogs. We had our cows for the milk. We had all the things we needed basically right on the farm. And [*Laughs*] I don't know what to—until we had finally because of the War situation and everything she gave up. We sold the farm. We couldn't make enough money you know to support the family and everything and tried to—. Why all the moving around and doing different jobs as time went on.

00:04:02

KM: Like what jobs?

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MO: Well one job she worked in—I'm trying to think Burlington like working as a telephone dispatcher working for a telephone dispatcher. And then from that job she worked at Carrboro at the factory where they made the bullets for the War. I forgot what that was called. And then she drove to Roxboro and made parachutes, sewed parachutes for the War.

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Oh let's see; from then we started farming then in Orange County. And from Orange County we saw a place in Chatham County that was rented and had tobacco so we rented that place and started in Chatham County in 1945 I think it was growing tobacco and we grew all of our food that we ate ourselves.

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I graduated from Chatham County Pittsboro High School [*Laughs*] in 1949. Then what— from me personally after I graduated I got me a job with Leggett and Myers Tobacco Company in Durham and worked there for 10 years until my—well I got married in 1954 and when my second child come along I decided I didn't need to hire somebody to raise my children. I quit the tobacco job, come home and looked after my own children until they got big enough and started doing some more farming. [*Laughs*]

00:06:14

KM: I'm going to hold this [microphone] just right in front of you.

00:06:16

MO: And more farming and we raised tobacco and of course our vegetables and everything. And then when I got involved with the Farmers Market was—I don't even remember the year now. But when the Market first started we had a parking lot at the Church of the Reconciliation. And from there we went over to the Catholic Church and had a Market there without cover I have to say—out in the open. And then we—East Gate; we had a Market at East Gate, which we had no cover and it was out in the hot sun. And from East Gate we had a Market on Airport Road on a Wednesday and from why we were moving around with the Market from place to place this place in Carrboro that had a covering over it that had been built for some other people that were going to do a Market and they failed through, so they let us use that shed for several years until whoever we were renting from wanted back that space. After the Federal government time that they had the Market—when that ran out, the lease ran out there we started to look for another place which Ellie Canard helped us get one started next to Town Hall which had a covering over it too.

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And so that's where we are now. And the Market has kept growing and growing and growing. We would have—first we only had just the Saturday Market and then we started a Wednesday Market which we didn't have a lot of people but you didn't make any money but you held on trying to get the Market to grow. And so now we have Wednesday's Market and a Saturday's Market.

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KM: I want to go back for a minute to when you worked at the Tobacco Company. What did you do there?

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MO: I—well they called it a—I was a catcher. They called it a catch. You know when the cigarettes, you were like a part of the machine. When the cigarettes come down you picked up five packs and put them in the back, picked up five packs and put them in the back. Then if you—it's hard to tell—picture. [*Laughs*] Well anyway we'd box them up—

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KM: It's been a while.

00:09:41

MO: Yeah; it's been a long, long time. [*Laughs*] Listen my oldest child is way in the 50s; you ain't—I'm not in the tobacco factory. I tell you what; that's why I love farming. I can make my own decisions [*Laughs*]. I'm not part of a machine. I can quit when I want to. That's why I like

outside work. I like to be outside. It's good exercise, good and healthy for you. And I try to use good practice in growing things and making decisions about what you're going to grow and how you're going to treat it; how you're going to treat your soil and how you're going to treat what you plant.

00:10:33

KM: And so when you left the Tobacco Company you came home to raise your children.

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MO: Uh-huh.

00:10:40

KM: And did you start back to farming then?

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MO: Yes; we rented some land. We didn't own enough land right at that time. We rented land from somebody else and started planting tobacco. And then I'm trying to think; what else did we—? Oh, I had cantaloupes and I had watermelons and they finally got contributed to the Market, but usually the neighborhood got to sharing all of that. But Lord have mercy; the things that I have done it's too much to think about.

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KM: It's a lot.

00:11:34

MO: Yeah.

00:11:35

KM: Was your husband in farming or was he in a different profession?

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MO: No; he worked for the University of North Carolina in air-conditioning. He was the first air-condition person. He looked at the chill water plant which furnished the air-conditioning for the University and that's where he worked there. Well he was in—he was a Soldier but he got to buy two years of his Service time in so he retired from the University of North Carolina with 30 years, because he could get the two years that he served County and then he went to work for National Environmental Health Sciences for the Federal government and he worked there for 12 years before he retired.

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KM: Uh-hm; and so overall how long have you been farming?

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MO: All my life. [*Laughs*] Here and there and everywhere, all of my life I've been in farming even when I was working at the Liggett and Myers I still had some hand in farming.

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KM: How did you learn how to do it?

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MO: By my mother [*Laughs*] showing me what I had to do and teaching me what I needed to do.

00:13:03

KM: What did she teach you?

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MO: To work hard and don't give up. [*Laughs*]

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KM: That's important.

00:13:16

MO: Yeah.

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KM: And for a while—am I correct—you and your mother would go to Market together?

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MO: Yes; yep I would help her out and she would help me out but my mother was a workaholic. She worked all the time. I guess that's where she [*Laughs*]
—I learned to work hard. She always kept her fingers busy. She was quilting if it was wintertime or Lord, she would can

for us to keep four children alive, 1,000 cans of everything during the summertime to get through the wintertime, so her fingers were always busy.

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KM: What would she can?

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MO: Oh she'd—anything—would can tomatoes and string beans and butter beans, all of those sorts of things that you grew on the farm.

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KM: And that's what she was growing? She was growing diverse vegetables?

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MO: Uh-hm.

00:14:28

KM: Like what kinds of vegetables?

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MO: Oh she used to—even tried to make a go of it and all, she used to carry—before we had the Farmers Market, she would go to Durham. She had people she delivered vegetables and things to all over Durham and everywhere. That's one of the reasons—when the Farmers Market got started and all that gave her an outlet closer to home where you didn't have to travel.

00:15:01

KM: Uh-hm.

00:15:03

MO: And carry vegetables, which she had a lot of customers that missed her when she didn't come anymore.

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KM: And so when y'all would go together would you both bring vegetables?

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MO: Yeah; she usually drove in—most of the time she drove her vehicle and I would drive my vehicle and what she couldn't get in her car I would carry in my car.

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KM: Were you farming the same plot of land or did you have separate farms?

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MO: I'm trying to think. See, we had a farm that we rented here in Chatham County and she grew a lot of things on that farm and then when—we got married we bought this land over here and we had this land to grow things on, so they were separate lands. And then at one point in her life she worked in Durham at Belk Leggett Department and she would drive to Durham. But then she bought her little house in Durham and when she sold that little house her son, my brother

built another house for her here in Chatham County. So she had a garden space with that house, too.

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So she had a hard life but she was tough. She lived to be—she died on November 12th and on December 9th she would have been 95 years old.

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KM: Wow; of this past year?

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MO: No, in 2000. She died in 2000.

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KM: Two thousand, okay; wow. And for how long did she go to the Market?

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MO: She went to the Market until she was—I think it was around '89 when she totally you know couldn't drive anymore. And sometimes I would take her stuff that she had to the Market for her.

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KM: What was she known for? Would there be people that would come to the Market and they just had to have her beans or her tomatoes or her—?

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MO: And her flowers. *[Laughs]* Oh, there was—oh she grows some beautiful flowers and Carol Woods had you know a lot of the retirees over at Carol Woods would come. And there was one gentleman; he had to have—every week he came for her flowers. *[Laughs]* And oh my goodness; even when we were at the other Markets, people that's alive—I've seen you—I know you. She knew them and they knew her from just moving around with the Market.

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KM: Hmm; and these days what do people come to the Market to buy from you?

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MO: *[Laughs]* Purslane for one thing; they love it, figs for another thing and well up until this year we had beautiful dahlias and you know just the big purple dahlias and things that they loved to have. Unfortunately due to all the drought we do not have that this year. And so I do—let's see—the brown turkey figs. Everybody loves my brown turkey figs.

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KM: Including the birds, right?

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MO: Yeah; including the birds, oh my. This year they're working hard. And the purslane, I've been carrying the purslane when the weather is suitable for—about seven, eight years, but that people learn about it—we told them about the benefits of purslane to their health. It's a very healthy vegetable and so over the years we've got people say, if I don't have it, they get desperate for it. *[Laughs]* They tell me they're getting addicted to it. Oh okay, but now each year

has been something special that we had. We've had oh my, some of the prettiest cosmos which blooms in September. October we have these big yellow blooms and all this, so each season we have different types of blooms coming along that everybody is looking for. And greens, Lord have mercy; then the million bags of greens that I have picked [*Laughs*], all kinds.

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Turnip greens, mustard greens, Southern broad-leafed greens, oh I can't even think of all the greens that I've grow(ed) besides arugula and spinach sometimes when the weather was suiting. Kale, kale, another thing that people wanted—had beautiful kale, but just about any type of green you can think of. And I still have the green customers all over Chapel Hill. When are you going to bring your greens? [*Laughs*] So they love it.

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As Southerners love their greens and cornbread and fried chicken, [*Laughs*] I don't carry any chickens anymore though. But I did. You know we have grow(ed), I mean had guineas around here and they would fly up in the tree and roost at night 'til the dogs and foxes got after them you know and all. So I got out of the guinea business. I didn't carry any of those to the Market. I gave them away. [*Laughs*]

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KM: [*Laughs*]

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MO: They just are cute.

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KM: They were just cute?

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MO: Yeah; to have. Oh my let's see; well, anyway if it's a green I've grown it. And tomatoes I've had years that were very good for tomatoes. This year because of the drought, tomatoes I haven't had any but I have had oh my—worse tomatoes. I've had corn; people love my Kentucky wonder string beans and you know you got to have places for those to run. And it's been about three years since I've been able to grow any corn because of all the drought. And pink-eyed purple hull peas, I used to shell them by the bushels and pack them up and Lord have mercy. I wish I had some of them now. But the deer just—you can't even grow them now 'cause they come up in my yard and eat my azaleas and everything. The woods are full of them, so we have that bad, bad problem.

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KM: And am I right that nowadays you go to the Market with your daughter is that right?

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MO: No; well she drives her vehicle and I drive one together. We grow things together.

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KM: Do y'all grow on the same plot of land?

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MO: No; we got different places where we're growing.

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KM: But y'all sell from the same booth at the Market?

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MO: Uh-huh; yeah well it's two spaces we have at the Market, the same place all the time.

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KM: And what's your daughter's specialty?

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MO: [*Laughs*] Well she's more into the plant part you know. She has a hothouse and she has lots of plants and generally she's had lots of flowers too but this year it's been dry for her, too, and so we haven't had that many plants. In the springtime I try to have a lot of parts of the plants that I have you know—perennial plants and things. I get some of the perennials and bag them up and carry them to the Market and people look for them.

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KM: And what's your favorite part about going to the Market on Saturdays or Wednesdays?

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MO: [*Laughs*] I love meeting the people. And I love talking to everybody and trying to give them knowledge of what's good for them. It's sometimes—well like people come to the Market and they've never tasted purslane or people come to the Market and they've never tasted a fresh

fig. And you have to give them how good it is for you and why it's good for you. Well let's see artichokes, there is a thing called a Jerusalem artichokes that the deer about run me out of that, but that Jerusalem artichokes is very, very healthy for you. And I introduced that to a lot of people who had never had them before. And so they want to know; when are the artichokes coming in? I said well it's—you don't dig them to about October. And so they look forward to that. They will not be getting any this year due to the drought and also the deer eating the tops off.

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KM: And who are some of your regulars at the Market?

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MO: Oh well we got one woman, she loves—her husband is a vegetarian and he loves purslane. She buys three or four bags of purslane every week and another lady, she loves purslane too and she gets purslane every week and shares her experiences of how she fixes it to new ones that come along.

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Oh my it's—all kinds of ones come to get flowers, men and women look for them every week, and then the ones—when I had plants the people will come by. I know them and they'll—have you got this; have you got that? I want this and I want that type of plant. And so they've gotten used to me every year bringing perennials and they know that I—they're going to be healthy and I tell them what to do to how to plant it and that it's going to live for them.

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KM: You were talking about the purslane; how do you tell your customers to prepare it? What's the best way?

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MO: Well you can eat it by itself raw in a salad or you can mix it with tomatoes and cucumbers in a salad and put a little garlic vinegar over it or any dressing you would like. You can put it in stir-fry right at the last two or three twirls around. You can steam it but very quickly; don't over-steam it and all. You can—it gives great flavor to meat. You can—if you are doing stewed beef put some in stewed beef. It gives great flavor. And to get your children—I have children that love it by itself but if you have children that won't eat vegetables chop some up, put it in your hamburger and make your hamburger patty and cook it 'cause it gives a great flavor to the meat and they get all these healthy vitamins through their hamburger.

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Oh if you're doing roast, goat, or anything put some in. It gives great flavor to meat. The Spanish people recognize it right off because they are used to using it with their cooking and they know that it gives great flavor to meat. Most of the times I have a little tasting bowl; you eat it stem and all because the stem has like a little lemony taste to it, where it's—it's high in—.

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KM: Take your time.

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MO: Cut [the recorder] off a minute. It has the Omega 3 Fatty Acid which is one of the—about only known plant that has this is so great for you that it's better to eat that than have to buy pills at the drugstore to make your health better.

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KM: Tell us about your growing practices. How do you grow stuff at your farm?

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MO: Well I try to compost all the leaves off the yard and make a compost. We try to put that in the soil. We try to use—well you go to horse farms and get the horse manure which they get out of the things and they mix it with sawdust and things and you put that in your rows and things like that, which it builds up your soil and makes it really healthy. And then when it comes to sprays unless it's environmentally protected we don't use any sprays at all on anything you're growing.

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There is a few things that environmentalists say that you can use to protect your things if they get real bad. A lot of it I do with my fingers when it comes to squashing bugs and whatever. I try to get the little eggs on the plants before they hatch up. I check them every morning and get those off it, so it's an all-day thing when you're growing a garden.

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KM: And what's the hardest part about farming in North Carolina in 2011? Are there things that you have to deal with now that your mother for instance never dealt with as a farmer or maybe it's the same hard things?

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MO: Well farm work if you're doing it it's going to be hard work, so that doesn't change. You might take pride—use most of mine is done with a hoe instead of with a tractor. We do some tractor work but most of it's done with a hoe and—. With the drought situation we have to have drip hoses and that's a lot of work moving drip hoses around from place to place to keep things alive, which the—when my mother came along and all, most of the time if it was a drought you just had to live with the drought. You didn't have all these things that you have to deal with droughts now, which if I had a pond [*Laughs*] it would help. I don't have a pond though. It's too late in life to do a pond now.

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KM: And in your years of going to the Market how has it changed?

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MO: Well first of all I guess it's letting the people know where you are and what your hours were has built up. Each year it's built and built and built, and make the people aware of how important farm and farms that's close to you and close to the Market; that you have food growing close to where you live and you know the people personally who is growing the food. And it's good for the person that's shopping as well as the person that is selling, the interchanges of friendships with one another and also it's for future years, if we don't have small farms around and big corporation growers take over then you don't have much control of what kind of food you're going to have to eat.

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Sadly that's happened a lot to the dairy farmers—that they just couldn't make it.

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KM: Who are some of your friends at the Market?

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MO: I consider them all my friends. [*Laughs*] And there's been some come and some gone. I'm the only one that's hanging on. [*Laughs*]

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KM: Who do you look forward to seeing on Saturday?

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MO: All the customers that's coming in [*Laughs*]. Well as far as the sellers, I look forward to seeing them all. I go around and speak to them and so we all are like a big family and if we have some problems you know in our family we try to express sympathy to one another and whatever—if you needed any help they certainly would help you. And I don't know; it's just the good life. [*Laughs*] Farming is just a good life. I like it.

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KM: What do you like about it?

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MO: I like being outside and having the sun on my back. *[Laughs]* And I don't know—I'm just an outdoor person and I like digging in dirt.

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KM: Good; are there things, Mrs. Oakley, that I haven't asked you about that you want to tell us about either about farming or your family or the Market?

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MO: I don't know; the Market is growing. Sometimes I wonder if we maybe have gotten a little ways away from the small farms—which I think is so, so important that we keep small farms. And if young people are going to start out you know farming and all you—they need support from the Market. It's a good life for a young person to choose and I would stress for them to think seriously about you know farming and not pass it by. Can't everybody be doctors and lawyers and dentists and—whatever. They make the money; we don't make it. *[Laughs]* I don't know.

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KM: And so are there a lot of young people that are coming along that the Market is supporting? Are there mentors at the Market and that sort of thing?

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MO: I don't know if you would call it farming that some of them are doing, you know young ones coming along that—

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KM: What would you call it?

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MO: I don't see it a lot of the—well I guess they're diversifying you know a lot of things but a lot of that is not dealing with farming. What they're doing it's a lot of other things that are happening that isn't really what you'd call farming at the Market.

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KM: Like what?

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MO: Well they've got— [*Laughs*]*—*they got a person that makes pasta, just bringing pasta and some of them are cooking pasta right at the Market. And they—well it's hard for me to even tell you what some of the things that I see—. I don't want to—it could get controversial and I'm not going to get in that.

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KM: But what you're saying is that it's less strictly a Produce Market now and there are other products that have entered the Market?

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MO: Uh-hm.

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KM: And do you have any comment about whether that's a good thing or not?

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MO: In the long run I'm afraid it's not going to be a good thing.

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KM: But there are also some young farmers that are bringing produce to the Market, right?

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MO: Yeah, there is some young ones, too trying to get a start at it. I see that.

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KM: Who are some of the people that you admire that are great farmers?

00:41:01

MO: Well I ask questions from other people that are growing and what kind of practice they use and if I have a problem in what I'm growing I'll ask other people if they have that same problem or if they—do they have an opinion about what's causing it you know. That sort of thing; we learn one from another. But I'm going to be interested in farming, if I was a young person, I would just go and look around to see who is farming and talk to them and ask them what problems they had and what—. One problem you're going to be having—it's very expensive to buy land to start farming. If you're lucky enough to have a parent to still have some land you better hold onto it. *[Laughs]*

00:42:05

KM: Well are there other things that I haven't asked you about that you want to tell us about?

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MO: I believe I've talked enough. [*Laughs*] I done gone to 80 years I believe—.

00:42:24

KM: Well we appreciate you telling your stories Mrs. Oakley.

00:42:27

[End Marjorie Oakley Interview]