

# To Everything There is a Season: A Photoessay of a Farmers' Market

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## *Introduction and Objective*

On June 28, 1986, three researchers embarked upon a research Odyssey along a two block strip in a midwestern city, as they spent the first Saturday of the selling season at the Midville Farmers' Market. This first day of the market was the first step in an ethnographic journey that would last nineteen weeks. They would witness the emergence of a variety of recurring themes, the reinforcement of several theoretic constructs specific to marketing, and the development of relationships with vendors, customers, and city representatives.

Using a variety of research methods and media—in particular participant observation, directive and nondirective interviews of customers and vendors, development of key informants, reflective journal entries, audio recordings, photographs and audio/video recordings—the researchers constructed a richly documented natural history of the market. In the course of the study, researchers participated in a variety of activities such as buying and selling products, as well as setting up and packing up produce and booths, in physical environments ranging from warm and sunny, through rainy accompanied by monsoon level winds, to snowy.

## *The Use of Photography in the Study*

One thousand two hundred and sixty-two photographs were made with a 35-mm single lens reflex camera using a standard (i.e., not a "zoom" lens), normal lens, and black and white film. A 50-mm lens is considered "normal" because it reproduces what we see most accurately. Photographs were printed full frame (i.e., nothing was "cropped" or removed from the original photographs while printing them in the darkroom). These consistencies in making the photographs and printing them unaltered facilitate visual comparisons between and within markets. The use of black and white photography allowed the photographer

to develop and print the photos. Contact sheets were made for all the negatives. Contact sheets are made by placing all the negative strips for a roll of film in a transparent 8 by 10 inch sleeve and developing a picture from it. That is, one 8 by 10 inch contact sheet contains the information from an entire roll of film and each picture is the size of a 35-mm negative. More printing was done selectively from the contact sheets to 5 by 8 inch photographs. This close relationship with the development and printing processes adds control and helps intimately familiarize the researcher with the photographic data. Valuable insights are often gained during the printing process while the researcher examines photographs in detail. This core data base is supplemented by 16 other black and white photos and 99 color photos, for a total of 1377 photographs. All photographs in this essay are from the core black and white data base with the exception of #2, #28, and #40 which were originally made with color film.

## *Visual Comparisons of Day 1 With Later Markets*

The objective of this essay is to capture, through a combination of photographs and text, something of the significance of the opening day of the market. A deeper understanding of the events of this day is achieved by supplementing the materials collected on June 28 with notes and photographs from later dates.

As the market season matured, and the vendors' wares ripened and increased in bounty and variety, the relationships between the researchers and key informants developed from cautious exchanges to comfortable, sometimes humorous and teasing, interactions. While the researchers observed and recorded a myriad of happenings on June 28, true understanding and insight into these events came at a later date, as the intimate familiarity with the Midville market developed over the course of the season.



Fig. 1. The Midville Farmers' Market.



Fig. 2. A researcher, laden with goods from being a participant consumer at the market, conducts an interview under an umbrella during a rainstorm.

In this essay, the focus is upon the photographs and field notes from this first day of the market. Photographs of the first market day, June 28th, are used in the first part of this paper to illustrate and document interpretations of the market day and of customer and vendor behaviors. When photographs of later markets are compared with this day's shots later in the essay, the dates are noted. The ability to compare and contrast findings on various days, and document findings over time, became a notable benefit of long term field immersion.

Using photographs and accompanying field notes from the first market day, the cycle of a market day can be illustrated and documented, as it proceeds from set up to close. The ethnographic present tense is used in the description.

### *The Cycle of the Market Day*

At 5:30 a.m. the streets of Midville are virtually devoid of cars and people. In the emerging light of dawn a single truck is parked at the market site. A mother and her two adult sons are unpacking tables and setting up produce for a display. They evince a degree of pride in being the first to arrive today. As they work, they reminisce about their participation in the first Midville Farmers' Market in 1975.

There were only three farmers there that day. We went home twice for refills.

At this first market of 1986 they are selling carrots, beets, green beans and lettuce. They anticipate that they will "sell out early," prior to the 2:00 p.m. market closing time. They complain that they have been allowed to rent double spaces in previous years, but that this year they are restricted to a single 25 foot long space. For a rental fee of \$110 payable to the city, vendors will occupy this space for the duration of the market season. A total of 40 spaces have been marked off on both sides of a two block long section of street.

By 6:15 a.m. there are 15 vendors setting up in the market area. The city police and tow trucks have cleared the street of four parked cars that are in violation of posted no parking signs. As the layout of the market has changed from the previous year, vendors are jockeying for space and there is discussion of the boundaries, most notably the appropriate width, of each booth. Since this is the first market of the season, the vendors seek to configure the equipment they have brought to display and protect their wares (tables, umbrellas, shelves) to the space available and to prepare the produce for sale.

As the farmers turn their booths into retail selling areas, they work continuously, yet this is a social time as well. Several of the farmers know each other and have worked side by side at this market and at others for years. The Midville Market has last met eight months ago, so this first market becomes a setting for the renewal of friendships and for catching up on what has happened over the winter.

Customers begin arriving by 6:30 a.m., and the market is in full swing by 7 a.m., even though posters and signs posted by the city indicate that the market opens at 8 a.m. It is warm, sunny and clear. Customers exchange greetings with vendors, whom they have not seen for eight months, and visit with acquaintances along the market midway.

By 10 a.m., the warm sun is engulfed by clouds, and the overcast morning becomes cooler. The crowd continues to grow, reaching its peak around 11:00 a.m. The majority of customers are white, with an estimated 10 to 15% minority population made up of Asians, blacks, and hispanics. The distribution of ages is wide and varied, with all groups being represented except teenagers. The presence of children in the infant and toddler age group is evident to consumers trying to negotiate the midway because of the many strollers and wagons in the market area.

After noon the market becomes quieter. The crowds have thinned, and several vendors have left early after either selling out or having their stock depleted to levels too low for what they perceive to be an adequate display. The afternoon becomes hot and clear, giving both the remaining produce and the vendors who have been standing for hours a wilted appearance.

At precisely 2 p.m., the Market Master removes the barricades blocking traffic access to the street and formally ends the market. At a later date the researchers learn about post-market, after hours socializing. Several vendors have lunch together at a local restaurant.

### *Consumer Behavior at the Midville Market*

Examination of the photographs of the June 28 market day and subsequent interviews with key informants at later market dates reinforced the researchers' sense of the cyclicity of the market day. On this first day all of those who would eventually become key informants are present and photographed at the market. On June 28, however, the researchers were not cognizant of the role that each customer or vendor would assume in the study. The photographs of this first market were a naive attempt to capture thoroughly the visual aspects



Fig. 3. A researcher works at a vendor's booth as part of her participant observation.



Fig. 4. The first vendor to arrive, a mother with her two adult sons, begins to unpack and set up.



Figs. 5 and 6. Early set up on the first market day.

of the market. There were no specific hypotheses or predispositions associated with this first day. An attempt was made to document the event through photographs and notes. Researchers did have an acute awareness of the transient nature of the market, its customers and the day itself, and it was with this awareness that photographs were made of vendors and customers present in the marketplace. The two researchers worked separately during a significant portion of the day, and several photographs made by one researcher were of persons who later became key informants of the other.

Later interviews with several key informants allowed the researchers to characterize the customers at the market by the time of day these customers chose to attend. The following is a chart of the etic segments.

- 6:00 to 7:30 a.m. *The Die-Hards*. These people attend every market, regardless of the weather or selection of products available. They want the freshest and the best selection.
- 7:30 to 9:00 a.m. *The Sociable Die-Hards*. This group is more social than the first. They want good selection, but they also want to visit with friends. They consider themselves "early birds."
- 9:00 to 11:00 a.m. *The Very Social*. These consumers arrive when the midway of the market is most crowded. There is still fairly good product assortment, but "the best" has already been purchased.
- 11:00 a.m. to noon *The Late People*. These people are of two types: those who complain that they are late, and those who do their market shopping after they have finished other errands. The socials have missed their friends. The purchase selections at this time period are not and cannot be very picky.
- 12:00 to 2:00 p.m. *The Bargain Hunters and Night People*. At this time of day, more minority group members and college students are in evidence in comparison to the white, middle-aged, middle-class complexion of the previously detailed groups. This later group does little socializing and shops in a less crowded marketplace.

Certain customers note a preference to come to the market at a specific time of day.

We come religiously at seven each Saturday.

We're late today. I don't like the nine o'clock people. They're too pushy.

I usually come late, around eleven, when my other errands are finished.

In general, consumers make mention of being late, rather than of being early or on-time. Their awareness of being late did not seem to alter their shopping or socializing behavior, however. Once

at the market site, they will visit if they meet their friends, and there is no observable evidence of shoppers rushing to complete their shopping in order to leave the market site.

Look at us. We were an hour late today, and now we've stood and talked for another hour. We had better start shopping soon, or we'll never leave.

The time sense of some consumers, and certainly that of the researchers, appears to correspond to the periodic nature of the farmer's market itself. Some sense of urgency and immediacy is produced by time compression. Consumers know that the freshness of the produce is a function of this periodicity; abundance and scarcity of individual items are daily and seasonal conditions. So, also, is the intensity and regularity of outdoor social relations governed by the seasons. Midville residents cherish the bounty of summer in the face of brutal midwestern winters; they know full well the market and its charm are evanescent. The researchers are acutely aware that they themselves must seize the day if they are to capture comprehensively the character of this periodic market.

Photographs of this first market meeting illustrate that the Midville Market is more than a place to shop for farmers' wares. Two musicians begin to play around 10 a.m., and open their instrument cases for donations.

A young man with a tricycle type ice cream cart parks near the musicians. In the absence of customers, he begins to juggle three balls. Several photographs show customers taking a break from their shopping and visiting at the market while resting on the grass or in a shady spot nearby. Consumers readily admit that they come to the market for reasons other than product assortment or to restock ingredients for physical sustenance.

This is recreational shopping. I'm here to try to amuse the kids. (Comments of a father with children aged 3 and 1.)

It's social, and people come for the gladiolus.

The cycle of this market day repeats itself on subsequent Saturdays.

In retrospect, it is this first Saturday that is exceptional in that customers and vendors appear to know and act out the script of the market without question after an eight month hiatus. It is the researchers who do not fully understand the plot and significance of the activities unfolding. After several weeks of building trust in relationships with





Fig. 7. Vendors decide how to display their wares.



Fig. 8. Vendors prepare their wares for display.



Fig. 9. Two vendors visit early on the first market day.



Fig. 10. Customers and vendors renew their acquaintances. A local nonprofit group sells coffee and baked goods at the south end of the street, and this area becomes a gathering place as customers consume refreshment while they socialize.





Fig. 11. Customers socialize at one of two bake sale booths.



Fig. 12. Children in and with strollers and wagons fill the market midway.



Fig. 13. As the end of the market day approaches, stock is depleted, and vendors and remaining produce begin to wilt.



Fig. 14. At 2:00 p.m., the market formally ends.



**Fig. 15. The Die-Hards.**



**Fig. 16. The Sociable Die-Hards.**



Fig. 17. The Very Social.



Fig. 18. The Late People.



informants, the researchers are able to document and interpret this script.

*Differing Perceptions of Abundance and Complexity*

Photographs of the first market of the season document the transformation of an empty street into what may appear to be a cornucopia of abundance. A journal entry of June 28 notes that "the colors of the market were dominated by pinks, reds, bright greens and yellows, the colors of spring." Tables appear heaped with merchandise and consumers mention specific items they plan to purchase (asparagus, mushrooms, gladiolus, etc.). While researchers perceive bounty and abundance in the marketplace, the vendors speak of anticipated bounty nearer the late summer and fall harvest time. Vegetable farmer Mrs. Theopolis mentions that she will open a roadside stand at their farm in the fall. Fruit vendor Maggie Moran tries to recruit an employee to help at this market later in the season, "when we have bushels of apples." The researchers better understand the significance of these remarks through observations of abundance and more complex assortments and displays at the late summer and autumn markets.

A series of photographs visually documents significant changes in assortment, abundance, and complexity of display. Photographs 25 and 26 allow a comparison of two-thirds of Blake's booth at the first (6/28) market with one-third of his booth at the thirteenth (9/20) market. The increasing abundance and complexity of display are illustrated as the tables evolve into two tier displays, signs are in greater evidence and detail, and produce is of greater quantity and variety.

Photographs 27 and 28 further document increasing abundance and complexity of display evident in the Wilcox booth at the second (7/5) market and the fourteenth (9/27) market. Both photographs include the entire display. Like many vendors, Wilcox's display area spills over the boundaries of his designated area as the season progressed.

In photographs 29 and 30, the Theopolis booth is documented on the second and eleventh markets. In the photograph of the Theopolis booth on second market day (7/5), several tables are lined up facing East. Mrs. Theopolis is waiting on a customer. On the eleventh market day (9/6) the photograph shows Mrs. Theopolis waiting on a customer on the Southeast side of a booth which is now shaped like a horseshoe. The increased abundance of produce, complexity of booth display, and number of signs is evident in this comparison.

Photographs 31 and 32 are a series taken of Mrs. Blake's booth on the second market day (7/5), and the last market day (11/1), respectively. The booth evolves from a straight line of tables facing East, to a much-expanded corner booth set-up with the tables facing East and North, and finally, on the last day of the market, to a free form style with produce piled wherever it can be placed. Again, increasing abundance and complexity is apparent.

The Jameson family often exhibits complex display configurations, as are illustrated in photographs 33 and 34. On the second day of the market (7/5) the Jamesons have mounted a multi-level display effort (Photo #33). By the fifth market day (7/26) the booth has evolved into a horseshoe shape that, unlike other vendors' horseshoes, is open to the market and designed to entice customers to enter. Other vendors enclose themselves with the horseshoe configuration, keeping customers on the "outside." By the seventh market day (8/9), the Jameson booth has become the most complex of the market. It now exhibits a horseshoe design around a central display area, and is open to the market. A sign invites the customers to "Walk on in." In addition to the increased complexity of the booth, increased abundance is evident as well.

An impression gleaned from interviews is that the farmers make a perfunctory appearance at the early markets to establish their presence among their regular customers, but that they do not anticipate their busiest or most profitable market days until later in the season. Attendance figures were not as helpful in demonstrating this as they were anticipated to be. Attendance at the first market by vendors is 70%, with 28 of the 40 assigned spaces filled. At the height of the harvest season in September, attendance increases to 32 vendors, or 80% of the available spaces. Four additional farmers who participate in the market at the start of the season cease to attend due to flooding of their lands and also being "harvested out" of the crops they have chosen to grow, most notably corn. Consumer attendance estimates were not recorded.

*Habituation of Key Informants to Researchers' Presence*

Several vendors and customers became key informants during the course of the study. A picture of each of these key informants was made at the first meeting of the market, though at the time their subsequent significance to the study was not known to the researchers. Journal entries and photographs of these informants on the first day of the market are contrasted with photographs made near the conclusion of the study. The use of a standard lens





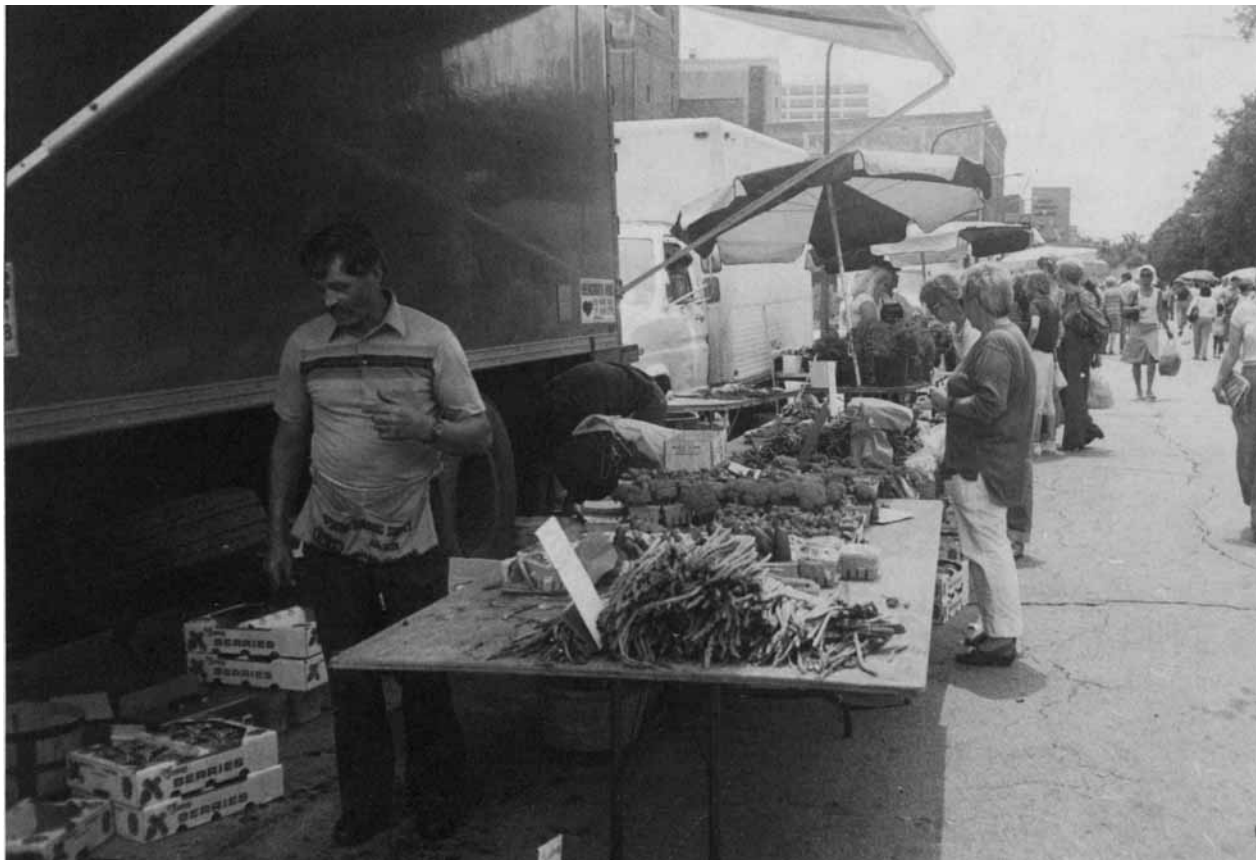
Fig. 19. The Bargain Hunters and Night People.



Fig. 20. Entertainment at the Market.



Figs. 21 VS. 22. Early and late photos of two vendors on this first day visually reveal the depletion of stock and consolidation that occurs over the course of a market day.



Figs. 23 VS. 24. Early and late photos of two vendors on this first day visually reveal the depletion of stock and consolidation that occurs over the course of a market day.



Figs. 25 VS. 26. Blake's booth at the first (6/28) market and at the thirteenth (9/20) market.

and full-frame printing gives full and consistent information about the photographer's position in relation to the informant. Therefore, valid statements and comparisons about this relation can be made. The comparisons reflect the levels of trust that developed between participants and researchers, that in turn led to a negotiated or collaborative interpretation of marketplace behavior.

In the earlier pictures, the informants assume the posture of unknowingly being photographed, ignoring the photographer, or of suspicion toward the camera in particular or toward the researchers in general. In the later photographs, the friendly relationship with the photographer/researcher is evident. The informants in the later photographs are smiling and demonstrate a tolerance of the camera and a willingness to be photographed. Differences are evident in the facial expressions, the presence of or absence of eye contact and posing of the body, and the angle of the bodies with respect to the camera. Several photographs demonstrate notable contrast between the first and later markets.

A photograph on the first market day is a photograph of strangers. Photographs of vendors are distant, removed shots. Photograph 39 is a first market day shot of a vendor who was later to become a valued informant. Circled, in the background of this photo, a man is looking with skeptical curiosity at the photographer. This man, we learned later, is the market manager, Tom McKensey. Tom became another of our most valued informants. The degree of rapport between the photographer and her informant, as well as that between another of the researchers and her informant are evident in the spatial relationships demonstrated in photographs 40 and 41; the former was made on the fifth market day (7/26), the latter on the sixteenth market day (10/11).

Another visual demonstration of the relationship between researcher and informant is a comparison of photographs 42 and 43. The first is of Mr. and Mrs. Theopolis on the first day of the market. Mrs. Theopolis is looking at the camera in a detached, distant manner. Conversely, in the photograph on the sixteenth (10/11) market day she exudes warmth and friendship. She has clearly become involved in the research process. Note too, once again the photographer's posture toward the informant has changed. That a greater degree of intimacy has been achieved is evident in the photographer's ability to be physically close to her informant with a potentially intrusive and invasive object (i.e., the camera) without being perceived as a hostile aggressor.

Some concern has been voiced within marketing that researchers should be concerned about using audio and video recording tools because they are obtrusive, they call attention to the presence of the researcher, they may alter behavior, and because there is an ethical issue if the recordings are made secretly, so as to be unobtrusive. However, visual researchers and audio/visual ethnographers believe that (1) certain patterns of behavior persist that will be informative, (2) a skillful audio or visual recorder will use the recording process to establish rapport between the researcher and the informants, not to spy on the informants, and (3) if the nature of the research calls for accurate on-site recording, then audio, visual, or written recording are the choices—audio and visual recording not being inherently more obtrusive than scribbling away in a notebook. In this study, a combination of visual recordings (the photographs) was supplemented with written notes and audio recordings. A limited amount of videotaping was undertaken on 7/26, the day a visiting team of researchers attended the market. In all cases the researchers explicitly revealed to informants the purpose of their study, freely answered questions, and shared photographs and notes with all involved in the study.

#### *The Emergence of Informed Field Notes*

Field notes of the first market may be described as naive and uninformed. An attempt was made to document as much as possible, but the commitment that the researchers had made to remain at the site during the duration of the market season reassured them that they would be able to supplement their observations or change their focus at a later date. Inventories of specific items and prices were started at the fourth market, when that information was deemed relevant. The researcher engaged in fewer, but longer, conversations at subsequent markets. As relationships with key informants developed, these informants would consume more of the researchers time each week. Informants would frequently watch for the researchers at the market each Saturday. One consumer informant in particular would think about the market each week, and come to the farmer's market on Saturday prepared with insights and stories to share with the researchers.

Researchers became more involved with the vendors as the study progressed. On the last day of the market, vendors who are key informants are thanked and given photographs of themselves made by researchers. Many vendors give the researchers gifts as well. Relationships have developed, as can be seen in Photographs 39 and 40. Photograph 39

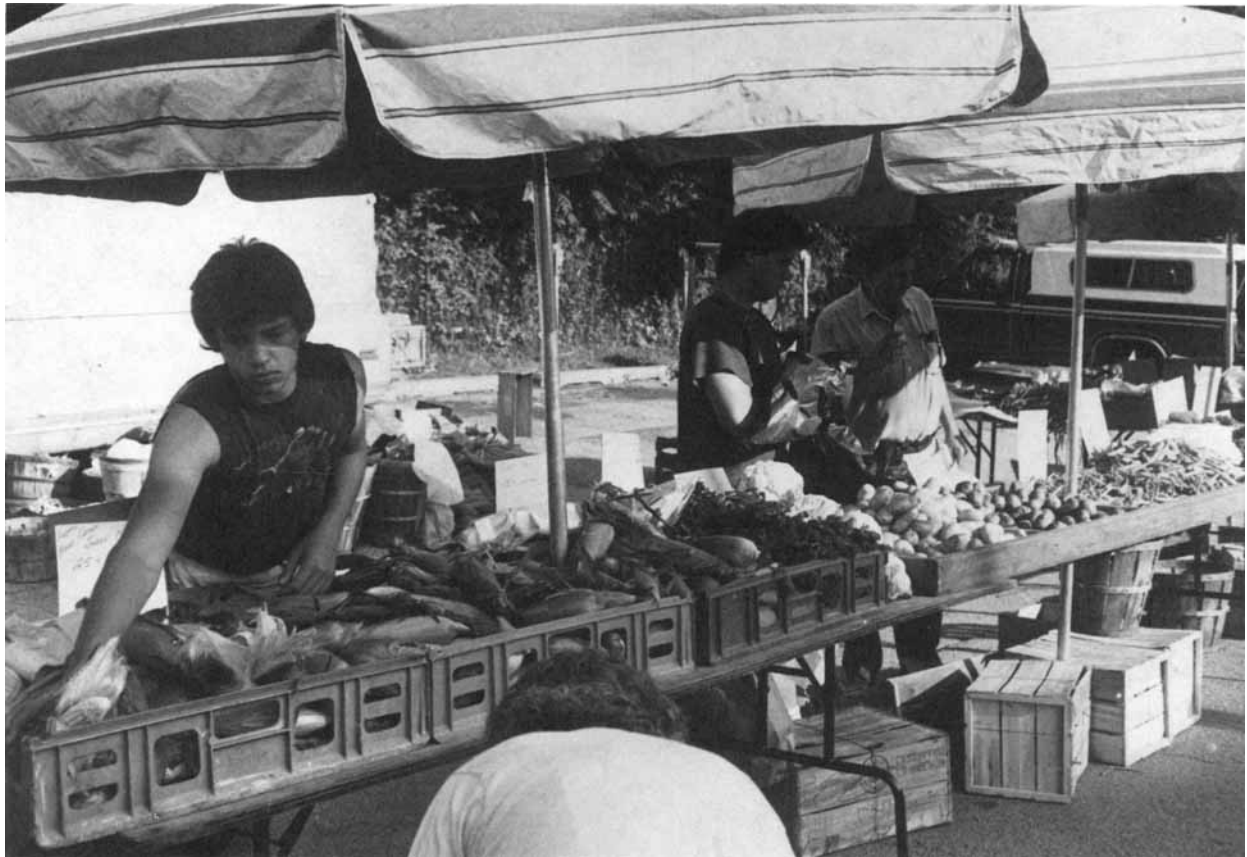




Figs. 27 VS. 28. A comparison of comprehensive photographs of the Wilcox booth on the second (7/5) and the fourteenth (9/27) markets.



Figs. 29 VS. 30. The Theopolis booth on the second market day (7/5) and on the eleventh market day.



Figs. 31, & 32. Mrs. Blake's booth on the second market day (7/5), and the last market day (11/1).



Figs. 33, & 34. The evolution of the Jameson family booth on the second market day (7/5), and the seventh market day (8/9).





Figs. 35 & 36. The habituation of key informants to the presence of the researchers evolves from the first market (6/28), and alters over the duration of the study (10/11).





Fig. 37 VS. 38. The changing relationship between photographer and informant is illustrated in photographs of the Mr. and Mrs. Theopolis at the first (6/28) and the eleventh (10/11) markets.



Figs. 39, & 40. Informant posture at the first market (6/28) contrasted with a gift-exchange at the last market (11/1).



Fig. 41. "The Walking Plant." A customer leaves the market accompanied by a newly acquired companion.

was taken near the end of the first market day (6/28). The photographer makes an attempt to move closer to her subject and is waved away with a scowl. On the sixteenth market day (10/11) he poses for the photographer with an unshucked pussywillow in his right hand and the finished product in his left hand. He has just patiently taught her his art of shucking. On the last day of the market, she gives Otis and his wife Andrea some photographs made of their booth over the season. In turn, he makes the photographer a grapevine wreath with which to remember them (Photo #40).

The leavetaking was an emotional experience, as one researcher notes in a final journal entry:

I had a lump in my throat as I said good-bye to everyone. I am grateful that I have gotten to know the farmers, and I value the trust they have demonstrated toward me. . . . The market has changed me—the way I shop, the way I eat, and the way I do research. I will miss these people.

#### *Conclusions*

This essay has illustrated how impressions formed early in an ethnographic study can, when viewed later in context, provide useful insights into

the processes of interest to researchers. The changing relationships with key informants clarified and enhanced several of the initial impressions formed by the researchers. These established bonds helped produce a negotiated interpretation of marketplace behavior. That ethnographic research is a labor intensive process that emerges over time is demonstrated in this essay. The incorporation of several, sometimes opposing, perspectives of a phenomenon over time yielded a deeper understanding of the setting and its participants that was not evident on the first day of the market.

On day one, we caught a colorful, noisy, fleeting glimpse of the budding market. Had we not continued to attend and observe, we might have mistaken the market as being in full flower. Our view of the vendors was as romantic and idealistic, independent, self-sufficient Americans engaged in an archaic, but quaint lifestyle. We perceived shoppers as a homogeneous group. We witnessed the market spring up, akin to a mushroom; we had no understanding of the historical and structural compost that formed its basis and nurtured its

eventual blossoming.

By the last day of this nineteen week study, we had seen the market mature, ripen, and culminate with the onset of the killer frost and the winter chill. Our understanding of the market encompassed not only its flowers and its fruits, but also its roots, its chaff, its fodder, and its seeds. At the conclusion of the study, we had greater understanding of the issues of complexity, cyclicity, and abundance. We saw the market as a complex system, interacting with the local city government, local retailers, and several market segments in the community. We learned about the farmers' business acumen; they were recognized as marketers, rather than merely producers. Their market planning was evident in what they chose to grow and where they chose to sell their goods, as well as their displays, layouts, pricing strategies, point-of-purchase advertising, and competitive

analyses. It was over the long term that we appreciated the cyclicity of the market day and the seasonality of the market itself. By the end of the market we appreciated the relationships between vendors, customers and vendors, and between customers; we found ourselves caught up in the relationships themselves. We ended the experience having grown with and become part of the market itself.

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