



THE RUTH ANN OVERBECK  
CAPITOL HILL HISTORY PROJECT

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**Interview with David Fowler**

**Interview Date:** June 20, 2009  
**Interviewer:** Sharon House  
**Transcriber:** Betsy Barnett

TAPE 1/SIDE 1

**HOUSE:** Okay, we're here today with the Ruth Ann Overbeck Capitol Hill History Project, and we're doing an interview with David Fowler in connection with the Eastern Market history. Today is June 20, 2009, and we're at 536 Sixth Street SE. Thank you, Mr. Fowler, for agreeing to do this interview. I know it's a market day for you and you probably would like to be working. But ...

**FOWLER:** Never like to be working.

**HOUSE:** Never like to be working.

**FOWLER:** But I'm doing it anyway, so— [Laughs.]

**HOUSE:** Need to be working, maybe. So, tell me your full name.

**FOWLER:** David Lee Fowler.

**HOUSE:** And do you want to tell us when and where you were born?

**FOWLER:** Well, I was born in Sibley Hospital in Washington, DC.

**HOUSE:** And do you want to tell us when?

**FOWLER:** 1945.

**HOUSE:** Okay. I'd like to start with some history of your family, and particularly at the Market and in the Washington area. Do you know when your family first came to the Washington, DC area?

**FOWLER:** Well, I've gone back as far as the 1800's. Now, I don't know how long before then that they were here.

**HOUSE:** And the part that you knew in the 1800's, where did they live then?

**FOWLER:** Well, I don't know where they lived in the 1800's, but I know where my great grandfather lived in the 1870s.

**HOUSE:** And where was that?

**FOWLER:** Well, do you want the old address or you want the new address? Well, the old address was Benning Road; the new address is Route 4 or Marlboro Pike.

**HOUSE:** I see. So, because Benning Road makes you think it might even be in Washington, DC. So, it was in Marlboro Pike in Maryland.

**FOWLER:** Yes, it was two miles across the District line.

**HOUSE:** Okay. So, it's fairly close. And, were they farmers at that time?

**FOWLER:** Yes, they were.

**HOUSE:** And, do you know when they first began selling at the Washington, DC markets?

**FOWLER:** Well, I know it was before Eastern Market was built and that's before 1873. I suspect that they were selling long before then.

**HOUSE:** I think you told me something about you thought they sold at the Center Market, maybe during the Civil War. Is that true?

**FOWLER:** Yes, they sold at the old Center Market during the Civil War. But, I would imagine they were probably selling down there before the Civil War.

**HOUSE:** Okay.

**FOWLER:** But I can't tell you exactly how—when they started or how long they'd been doing it.

**HOUSE:** Sure. And who was this who was selling at the Center Market?

**FOWLER:** Well, it could have been my great great grandfather whose name was Benjamin Fowler.

**HOUSE:** Uh-huh.

**FOWLER:** And, then there was George A. Fowler, which was my great grandfather. And then there was Rufus Lee Fowler, which was my grandfather. Then was Marvin Lee Fowler, which was my father. And, now, it's myself.

**HOUSE:** Was George or Benjamin the one who was selling at the old Center Market during the Civil War?

**FOWLER:** Well, that's a very good—

**HOUSE:** Was it both?

### Fowler Family Photos



**George Alfred Fowler and his wife Rosetta, David's great-grandparents**

Left: George, ca 1900. Right: from an 1873 tintype; Rosetta and George, on west side of Eastern Market, two doors from the south end.



*Built cart himself. The horse was also used at Market*



**Rufus Fowler and his wife Mearle, David's grandparents**

Left: Rufus, ca 1918, near the house where he was born. Writing on photo says he built the cart himself and used the horse at Eastern Market. Right: Mearle and Rufus, ca 1920.

**FOWLER:** That's a very good question because I have an idea that probably the stand was in Benjamin's name, being that George was his son ... during the Civil War. I have an idea that, however, I can't be certain of that. This is just conjecture on my part. Because the earliest stand rents at Eastern Market say that George A. Fowler was the one at Eastern Market.

**HOUSE:** I think you told me a story once about during the Civil War when they were coming into Washington, DC, across the bridge.

**FOWLER:** No. Atop of Avenue hills here, [Pennsylvania Avenue SE near the Prince Georges County line] there's a park up there called Fort Davis. And that was one of the federal installations that guarded the entrance into D.C. from Maryland. All the entrances going into Washington, DC had federal installations around, which was essentially a earth bank fortification where they had federal troops stationed that would search for contraband, contraband weapons, and a number of other things going in and out of D.C. You see, at that time, all the arms in Maryland had been confiscated by the federal government because it was a state that could go in either direction. Matter of fact, it more favored the Rebel cause than it did the Union cause.

**HOUSE:** I remember reading that. So, are there family stories that were handed down about these searches of the farm wagons coming in?

**FOWLER:** The only thing that was told to me was that all the wagons and things were stopped at the top of the hill, both coming and going, and that the troops came out and would search them for contraband.

**HOUSE:** Okay, let's go then to Eastern Market. And, at that time, it was your great grandfather George?

**FOWLER:** Yes, it was George Alfred.

**HOUSE:** And his wife?

**FOWLER:** Rosetta.

**HOUSE:** Rosetta. We have a photograph of them at the Market.

**FOWLER:** The photograph originally was done on tin.

**HOUSE:** This is a copy of a tintype?

**FOWLER:** It's a copy of a tintype.

**HOUSE:** Do you have stories from those early days that you'd like to share with us?

**FOWLER:** Well, I do not know a whole lot about it except my great grandfather, like most of the men of that time, liked to drink a little bit. Well, let's put it, "the little bit," more boldly. More than a little bit. There are stories about him—he would get in fights. I guess some he initiated. Now, I don't know for sure, I wasn't there. I didn't know the man personally. There are stories about him getting drunk and making the rest of the family sing on the way home from market. And there are stories that he was pretty much a rip roaring S.O.B—to put it mildly. [Both laugh briefly.]

**HOUSE:** Do you know what they grew in those days? What they sold at the Market actually?

**FOWLER:** Well, in those days, market hunting was allowed. So, they sold—

**HOUSE:** Market hunting?

**FOWLER:** Yes.

**HOUSE:** What does that mean, market hunting?

**FOWLER:** In other words, you were allowed to go out and kill wild game and bring it in and sell it.

**HOUSE:** Okay.

**FOWLER:** Such as rabbits, ducks, birds.

**HOUSE:** Oh.

**FOWLER:** Deer, if you could find it. There wasn't too many of them around here at that time, contrary to what it is now. And, wild geese and things like that. You could also sell meat, pork, and any other farm products that you had. He probably had, sold more of a variety of things than what we sell right now in the line of vegetables and farm products. Because there was milk, there was butter, there was eggs, there was cheese, there was—they used to make cottage cheese. It was quite a variety of things.

**HOUSE:** So, he also hunted and sold things there that he hunted, you think.

**FOWLER:** I remember them talking about him doing a lot of hunting and a lot of fishing. I just have to put two and two together and assume that what they didn't eat that he sold.

**HOUSE:** Uh-huh. And you mentioned a lot of the produce. Do you know how often they sold at the

Market in those days? How many days a week?

**FOWLER:** Just what was on the permit which gave him the right to be there, I think it was three days a week. Now, whether he opted to be there three days a week, I don't know. I believe that's what's on your copy of the stand receipt that I gave you.

Permit No. 27 389-11

Office of the Market Master of the Eastern Market.

**FARMERS' STAND.**

Washington, D. C., April 25 1913.

Under the provisions of Section 13 of Article 4 of the Police Regulations of the District of Columbia, as amended June 28th, 1906; and under Act of Congress approved June 27th, 1906, I hereby assign on the payment in advance of ten cents for each space occupied each day or part of a day to G. A. Fowler of Benninges D.C. Space No. 27, on the east side of 7 Street Bet. G. N. B. An on which to sell produce of his own raising on Tuesday, Thursday, Saturday of each week until this permit is modified or revoked, said space or spaces not occupied by 7:30 o'clock A. M. of each day during the months of April, May, June, July, August and September, and 7:00 o'clock A. M. during the months of October, November, December, January, February and March, shall forfeit his right to use and occupy such stand for that day.

This permit is subject to revocation at any time at the pleasure of the Commissioners of the District of Columbia, and any transfer thereof other than by the Market Master will render it void.

Richard B. Fillius  
Market Master Eastern Market.

W. C. HASKELL,  
Superintendent of Weights,  
Measures and Markets, D. C.

**Permit to operate at Eastern Market, issued to G. A. Fowler, April 25, 1913**

**HOUSE:** In 1913, I think so. I don't have it right with me right now. Do you know if he sold year round? Like I suppose you could sell things you hunted and the meat and eggs and cheese year round.

**FOWLER:** And butter, and—yes.

**HOUSE:** So, as far as you know, he sold year round. I know on that permit, it, mentions that they were in

place 17, place number 17. Did you tell me once that's still the place you were in, more or less?

**FOWLER:** Yes. As far as I know that's exactly where I'm at now. If you notice on the picture that they have down here on the street of the Market ...

**HOUSE:** Yes, the one with your mother?

**FOWLER:** No. The one that shows the line of horses there.

**HOUSE:** Okay.

**FOWLER:** You notice that center way there's a picture of a white horse or a gray horse.

**HOUSE:** Okay. I'll have to go look again.

**FOWLER:** That's approximately where we're standing right now. I've got a picture of the horse at home.

**HOUSE:** Oh. Okay. So, that's about where you are. So that's the same 17.

**FOWLER:** I think that was the only gray horse in the line, I believe.

**HOUSE:** Mm-hmm. At that time they were—I guess the permit was ten cents a day.

**FOWLER:** Ten cents a day. Strange as it may seem, the permit is still in effect because there was no termination time on the permit.

**HOUSE:** Do you still pay ten cents a day?

**FOWLER:** Obviously not. [Interviewer laughs.] But, I haven't pushed it.

**HOUSE:** And your grandparents were also in business, right?

**FOWLER:** Yes, they were.

**HOUSE:** Tell me the name of your grandparents again.

**FOWLER:** That was Rufus Lee Fowler and Mearle Fowler was his wife.

**HOUSE:** Mearle.



**FOWLER:** Adele Fowler. Well, her maiden name was Payne, but—

**HOUSE:** And, do you have any stories that were handed down from your grandparents? Or maybe you knew them.

**FOWLER:** Oh, I knew my grandparents. Yes. Now, there's a lot of stories that was handed down by them. Do you mean the ones pertaining to Eastern Market or—

**HOUSE:** Yeah, in particular.

**FOWLER:** Well, we used to dress and sell a lot of chickens and turkeys during both World Wars. Now, when meat was rationed and people had to have ration cards to get their meat and their sugar and their flour and other things—I think poultry, if I remember correctly, was one of the only things that wasn't rationed. However, the government got the first choice of the poultry and what was left was able to be sold. Now, when they used to come up to the Market, there used to be a line of people waiting for them to arrive all the way down to Pennsylvania Avenue. We used to have a policeman there to keep the people in line. And—

**HOUSE:** This was during World War II? Or World War I, both?

**FOWLER:** No I think this was primarily during World War II. But, they never said too much about World War I. But, I have to assume that it was pretty much the same scenario, because they said that during World War I that having a stand at Eastern Market was the same as having money in the bank. That if somebody died and left you a stand there, it was not considered any mean inheritance.

**HOUSE:** That's interesting.

**FOWLER:** Because they used to have stands that were all way around the Market, even on the back side of it.

**HOUSE:** Oh, really.

**FOWLER:** Yes.

**HOUSE:** Oh, really. Now how recent was—that was during World War I or II or both, maybe.

**FOWLER:** Well, during World War I the Market was only about half the size that it is now. The North End was added at a later date than the South End was built.

**HOUSE:** Okay.

**FOWLER:** The South End was built, I think it was—I don't know the exact date on that. I'm sorry. I used to.

**HOUSE:** 1870s or something?

**FOWLER:** No, the North Hall—the South Hall was built in 1873. But the North—

**HOUSE:** The North is the one you didn't remember.

**FOWLER:** The North Hall was built at a later date.

**HOUSE:** Right.

**FOWLER:** I think it was around 19—I want to say 1919, 1920. But, I can't—I'm not dead sure on that date. I know that the shed was put up about 1928. That, before that there wasn't any shed in front of the building.

**HOUSE:** So, was there no cover at all for the farmers when they came?

**FOWLER:** There was no cover.

**HOUSE:** Unless they brought something.

**FOWLER:** Unless they brought their own. But, you've got to remember at that time most of the wagons that they brought, the doors on the back would lift up and form a shelf. They would lift up from the bottom and then—

**HOUSE:** Okay.

**FOWLER:** —two sticks would drop down and they would have some type of a roof. Now, I'm not saying that all of them had it fixed that way. I just said—saying that some of the wagons were fixed that way. So, they probably had some type of shelter fixed up along that line.

**HOUSE:** Okay. So, that's World War II.

**FOWLER:** That was World War I pretty much.

**HOUSE:** Right. And the World War II, I'm sorry, when you were talking about the people lining up to

get the chickens when they came.

**FOWLER:** The ones that they would talk about was World War II. But, since they were there during World War I—my grandfather was a very young man at that time—so, my great grandfather was the one who was taking care of the stand at that time. So, I can't really say for sure how the people lined up at that.

**HOUSE:** Right. It's interesting about how valuable those permits were. But, I can imagine how anxious the people who lived in the city were to get ... chickens and anything, you know.

**FOWLER:** Well, you have to understand that there was no Safeway, no Giants, no Kroger's, or whatever, that the markets provided the only source of food in the city, per se. One of the agreements when they tore down the old Center Market was that they would build, if I remember correctly, it was four markets and—to replace Center Market, the old Center Market. And they would put the four markets in four different compass points of the city for each neighborhood to shop at.

**HOUSE:** Hmm.

**FOWLER:** All the four markets were relatively built up on the same design plan pretty much. I think Grouse designed most of them of which the Eastern Market is the last one, from what I know.

**HOUSE:** I thought Cluss designed that.

**FOWLER:** Oh, Cluss.

**HOUSE:** The German, the man from Germany?

**FOWLER:** Yes.

**HOUSE:** Yeah. I'm not sure when they tore down Center Market, but I think it went into the early 1900s. But, I'm not positive about that. But I have seen some photographs. But we can check that.

**FOWLER:** No, that was—I think that was torn down earlier than that because—there were several Center Markets.

**HOUSE:** Oh, okay.

**FOWLER:** There was the old one, that, you know, went across in front of the Capitol by the Smithsonian Castle. And, then, they had built another one.

**HOUSE:** You think down where the Archives are now. Is that where one was?

**FOWLER:** Down near where the Archives is, I believe. And, then—they went from one to the other. And then the people that was in Center Market spread out to the four neighborhood markets. Evidently, ... both of those markets were pretty good, covered a pretty good size area.

**HOUSE:** As far as you know, your family, once Eastern Market was built, only worked at Eastern Market, only sold at Eastern Market. Is that right?

**FOWLER:** Now, knowing my great grandfather and his reputation, I would say that he sold wherever he could pick up a penny.

**HOUSE:** I see. [Laughs]

**FOWLER:** So, I hesitate to say that he only sold at the Eastern Market. But I will say the Eastern Market was probably his primary place of business.

**HOUSE:** Okay. When did you start in the business?

**FOWLER:** Ever since I can remember I was into it one way or the other; I was down here before I could walk.

**HOUSE:** Okay.

**FOWLER:** Because they used to put me in the car and I would set in the car or they would stroll around here with me in the stroller or whatever. So, I've been down here quite a while.

**HOUSE:** Do you have a working farm now?

**FOWLER:** Yes, we do.

**HOUSE:** And that is in Mechanicsville?

**FOWLER:** Mechanicsville, Maryland, yes, which is in St. Mary's County.

**HOUSE:** How many acres do you have there?

**FOWLER:** We have just about 200 acres there.

**HOUSE:** You must sell other places other than the Market.

**FOWLER:** Not really.

**HOUSE:** No?

**FOWLER:** Well, we do wholesale—we send cattle to market and things like that. But, as far as just—we're pretty much tied up so that we can't run all over the place selling, thank you. It's down to either you got to do one or the other. You got to either raise it or you got to sell it. And you can't do both efficiently if you're running from farm to market because it's—to come to market is an all day thing.

**HOUSE:** What time does your day start on Saturday when you come to market?

**FOWLER:** Four o'clock.

**HOUSE:** Four o'clock in the morning.

**FOWLER:** Mm-hmm. Sometimes earlier.

**HOUSE:** And what time do you get home at night?

**FOWLER:** Oh, when I get home, my day's not ended. We get home about seven thirty, eight o'clock.

**HOUSE:** Mm-hmm. Because if you have animals, you have farm chores every day, probably.

**FOWLER:** Every day. The cattle's got to be fed and watered. The truck's got to be cleaned out. Stuff that needs to be kept cool has to be put in a cold box. And it's just on and on and on.

**HOUSE:** So, in addition to the produce—you have a lot of produce there—you mentioned you have cattle and—what other kinds of things do you bring to the Eastern Market?

**FOWLER:** Well, we bring—well, we don't bring any cattle [Interviewer laughs.] up here, obviously. We've always brought eggs and vegetables and we used to raise quite a number of chickens, which we dressed and brought up here.

**HOUSE:** Do you still have chickens? Obviously, if you have eggs, you have chickens.

**FOWLER:** No, we get the eggs from the neighbors, because something had to go. Because there's not too many of us to do the work anymore.

**HOUSE:** I see.

**FOWLER:** At one time, we raised all the corn, we ground it, made feed out of it. We got five hundred baby chicks every three weeks. We had five chicken houses, six chicken houses full of chickens. We had our own feed mill. After we finished at Eastern Market, that was only half a day. Because when Eastern Market closed at six o'clock, we would pack up everything and go to Florida Avenue Market and stay over there 'til one or two o'clock in the—Sunday morning.

**HOUSE:** Oh.

**FOWLER:** Before we went back home.

**HOUSE:** When was this, about?

**FOWLER:** This was up until I graduated from high school in '63.

**HOUSE:** So, I noticed there are some things that are somewhat unique among the things that you bring to market. In addition to the eggs, I've seen okra there a lot and a lot of nuts.

**FOWLER:** Well, we have pecan trees at home and I sort of got into the nut business on a whim, sort of. I added some shelled pecans there. One of my customers came up and said, well, "I have arthritis so bad I can't crack nuts. Do you know where I can get some shelled nuts?" "Well, yes, I know where you can get some shelled nuts." "Well, could you bring me some?" Okay, I brought her some and somebody else wanted some. So, pretty soon I was selling shelled pecans. Nobody wanted them in the shells anymore. Then somebody came along and said, "Gee, I like cashews but I can't find them anyplace. Do you know where I can get some cashews?" It just so happened that the people who shelled the nuts also handled cashews. "Yes, ma'am. I can get you some cashews." "Could you bring me some?" "Yes, I'll bring you some cashews." "Oh, by the way, my friend would like to have some, too. Could you bring here some, too?" Add another line of nuts. And they just kept going on like that. Then—so, eventually I was selling dried fruit and nuts along with the produce.

**HOUSE:** I'm a big fan of your black walnuts. You don't see black walnuts very often so I've appreciated those. I even took some to my mother in Arizona.

**FOWLER:** Black walnuts are hard to find. They're getting more so and they're getting very expensive.

**HOUSE:** And they're very hard to shell. So, the fact that yours are shelled—. I was going to ask you how what you grow and sell at Eastern Market has changed over the years that you've been working there, but you've answered that with regard to the nuts. Are there other things that you've done really in response to

the customers, products they've asked for that you've ...started doing?

**FOWLER:** When you're selling vegetables or you're farming you have to be able to go to different varieties, newer varieties, when they come out. Sometimes people want—your sales are for a newer variety; sometimes they want the older varieties. Now, the trends come and go. Most of the newer varieties have long shelf lives. They're resistant to insect pests and, then, obviously you get more off of an acre of ground with them than you do with some of the older varieties. However, some of the older varieties taste better than some of the new varieties. But, then, again, you're battle—

END OF TAPE 1/SIDE 1  
TAPE 1/SIDE 2

**HOUSE:** Okay, I'm sorry. You were talking about—

**FOWLER:** Well, being flexible in the amount and what you grow because peoples' tastes have a tendency to lean one way, then to lean back. And a lot of the things that you hear about organic is primarily just a marketing tool. It has, really has nothing to do with the quality of what's there. Because, if you take and look at it from a point of view, all organic fertilizer is contaminated with something. All commercial fertilizer is completely sterile. Now, you have a much greater chance of picking up some kind of disease from organic fertilizer than you do from commercial fertilizer. And not too many people realize that. But, that is the facts. Most of your salmonella, the contamination usually comes from farms that's using organic fertilizer. Because let's face it. Animal manure is animal manure. And rotted plant products is rotted plant products. Both of them contain bacteria and viruses and hormones and a lot of things that you wouldn't think, that people don't associate with organic fertilizer. But, it's there.

**HOUSE:** So, you aren't doing organic farming.

**FOWLER:** I'm doing as much as possible because commercial fertilizer costs money. But, we do use commercial fertilizer and I try to keep away from it as much as possible, but then there are times when you have to use it. And it's just like, it's just like your pesticides. People think they wouldn't buy organic peaches or organic apples because they're just plain ugly and they're full of worms. And just the same way with sweet corn that's organic.

**HOUSE:** You sell fruit, in the summer?

**FOWLER:** Yes, we will.

**HOUSE:** It's been so long since last summer I've forgotten. So, you have fruit trees or berries or both?

**FOWLER:** We have strawberries; we have fruit trees; we have nut trees.

**HOUSE:** What about Christmas time? Are there special things you do in the winter? Like Christmas?

**FOWLER:** Not any more. We used to dress a lot of turkeys for Thanksgiving and Christmas, but we don't do that anymore. The artificial trees and wreaths and stuff, they've gotten so cheap and so plentiful that it's very difficult to make wreaths, hand make wreaths, and sell them because it's expensive and it's time consuming to make them. And not only that, but you can only use them once and then you have to throw them away. So, there is a expense involved in that. However, I can see people wanting real trees because of the smell of them. But, then again, some of the artificial trees look pretty good. I mean, you have to be pretty close to tell the difference. So, anyway, I used to hand make a lot of wreaths and we used to sell a lot of holly. But, it's got to the point where the demand has fallen off for them so right now we're not doing anything especially.

**HOUSE:** And, your mother, Martha Fowler, I know from reading the Shriner history [copy of typed paper, *The Living History of Eastern Market*, by Sara G. Shriner dated 1973], that you and your wife Valerie gave us, that she used to make a lot of things out of the old feed sacks, right? She made dish towels, maybe?

**FOWLER:** My grandmother used to make a lot of things out of the feed bag. My mother did, too, but most of, a lot of our clothes and shirts was made from the feed bags that we—and, of course, we, having 500 chickens, took a lot of feed. So, we would be getting a supplement put in with our corn when we ground feed. And, we used to grind three tons of feed at a time. One batch was three tons, that's 6,000 pounds. So, we accumulated a number of feed bags.

**HOUSE:** And she sold those at the market.

**FOWLER:** Yes.

**FOWLER:** Now, let me clarify that because the feed bags in those days was about a yard and a quarter of material and they were printed. They're not what you consider gunny sacks.

**HOUSE:** Right.

**FOWLER:** Some of them, they had designs on them and they were as good as any of the material that you could buy. In many cases they were a lot stronger than a lot of material that you could buy.

**HOUSE:** Right. I had some clothing out of those too, when I was young. So, has your family business



always been called Sunnyside Farm?

**FOWLER:** No, that was only after we bought the farm down in St. Mary's County.

**HOUSE:** Which was when?

**FOWLER:** About 1955.

**HOUSE:** Okay. I've heard the term farmers' line to refer to the farmers who sell produce outside. Is this the term that you use at the Market, the farmers' line, or—what do you call that?

**FOWLER:** That's pretty much the term that we use. It's the farmers' line.

**HOUSE:** You've told me a couple other things about the Market. Maybe you'd like to share them now. One of the things you talked about was the National Guard training at the Market.

**FOWLER:** From what I understand, during World War I—there's a basement underneath the Market. The National Guard used the basement as a rifle range, because one of the old market masters showed me the backboards they had at the other end of the basement with the bullet holes in them.

**HOUSE:** Hmm. And you also mentioned something about patients at the Old Naval Hospital, when that was still open, doing some cleanup after the Market.

**FOWLER:** Well, let's put it this way. Horses are not always clean. So, the—well, I want to say patients but it's kind of hard for me to say patients because they were perfectly able to push pushcarts and to carry a shovel and a broom. They may have had some other problems, but they were perfectly capable of doing a few things. They weren't—they didn't force the ones that were the shot up or in bed or sick to come out and do these things. However, they would use the ones that were able to work to come out and sweep the streets and clean up the streets. Because at that—at one time, you got to remember that most of D.C. was powered by horse power.

**HOUSE:** Right. And this is before your memory, of course. This is—

**FOWLER:** This is, of course, before, pretty much before, my memory. I came in on—I remember just a little bit about it. Because there were still a few there when I was a little kid.

**HOUSE:** In the late '40s there could have been still some horses.

**FOWLER:** In the late '40s there were still some horses.

**HOUSE:** Are there any other facts about the Market, I'm sure there are lots, but things that are of particular interest that you can think of that people today wouldn't know?

**FOWLER:** If you're talking about which customers shopped there, there is probably a number of facts that people don't know about which customers shopped there. President Grant owned a townhouse about two blocks away from the Market and I'm sure that he showed up there on occasion. "Red" Berry, the one that fought Joe Louis, I remember seeing—now, wait a minute, I don't remember seeing President Grant. [Interviewer laughs.] But, I do remember seeing Joe Louis come by.

**HOUSE:** Joe Louis himself? Or the—

**FOWLER:** No, I mean, Red Berry, I should say. He was still punch drunk from the fight he had with Joe Louis because he could hardly hold a cup of coffee in his hand he would shake so much. There's the old White House maid that they wrote the book on, I think she was 80-some years old. She worked at the White House. She used to come by and buy stuff. There's a lot of your movers and shakers and people that, when you're seeing them out of their element that you don't realize who they are and a lot of times you don't. You really try to go out of your way to make sure that they are not pressured. You treat them like you treat anybody else. And—

**HOUSE:** Probably there's a lot of congressmen and senators and other people who live on the Hill.

**FOWLER:** Oh, yes, Senate—the staff and—well, the mayor comes by occasionally and—I'm not even—I can't even say for sure that the president hadn't been across there a couple of times. So—I'm pretty sure he has. So— [Both laugh.]

**HOUSE:** Now, somebody told me this. I'm not sure it was you. Did the D.C. government once store trucks at the Market? Perhaps down at the north end, sanitation trucks or something.

**FOWLER:** No.

**HOUSE:** No.

**FOWLER:** The fire company—there used to be a firehouse over where the natatorium is now.

**HOUSE:** Okay.

**FOWLER:** The firehouse that was there also repaired fire equipment for D.C. At one time they would store stuff that they were repairing on in the upper end of the Market. Now getting back to the upper end

of the Market, at one time years ago there was a store in there called The Sanitary, which was ...

**HOUSE:** Sanitary Market?

**FOWLER:** No, it was The Sanitary Store. It was something on line of a food store that was in the North Hall. Now—

**HOUSE:** When would that have been? Do you remember?

**FOWLER:** That was in my grandfather's time. I don't—

**HOUSE:** Okay.

**FOWLER:** —know for sure. But, I do know that it was a precursor of the Safeway. So, the Safeway got its start probably at Eastern Market.

**HOUSE:** Hmm.

**FOWLER:** So, that's something that not too many people realize.

**HOUSE:** No, I didn't realize there was a market there. I knew there was a Safeway across the street for a long time.

**FOWLER:** Yes, but The Sanitary—

**HOUSE:** Was a precursor.

**FOWLER:** —was a precursor of the Safeway.

**HOUSE:** I know you said a lot of things have changed in terms of the food that you can sell there. I assume there are a lot of rules that govern how you sell and what you sell. Is that true?

**FOWLER:** Yes—if you're selling meat products there are several health department things that you have to go through. I'm not up on the current regulations, but at one time you had to satisfy the D.C. Health Department and being in Maryland I would have to satisfy the Maryland Health Department. And then going across D.C. line you would have to satisfy the federal health department, because it was interstate commerce. And all three of them would have different regulations.

**HOUSE:** Is that not true of produce and eggs?

**FOWLER:** Not as much. This was primarily with chickens and meat and things along that line.

**HOUSE:** You don't have to have a license to sell there. You have a permit, I guess, that same—an updated version of that 1913 permit that you—

**FOWLER:** You have to have quite a few licenses. There's a business license, there's a—of course you have to have your permit. And then you have to have product liability insurance. And then you have to have your scales licensed every year, which is another fee.

**HOUSE:** Somebody comes around and checks them or something?

**FOWLER:** Actually, it's \$150 a year registration fee for your scales. If you have two sets of scales, it's \$300.

**HOUSE:** And does somebody come and check them ...?

**FOWLER:** Yeah. They come around and check them and make sure that they weigh accurately.

**HOUSE:** That's a D.C. government—

**FOWLER:** That's the D.C.—

**HOUSE:** —weights and measures?

**FOWLER:** It's weights and measures.

**HOUSE:** And that's the reason you changed from the hanging scale?

**FOWLER:** No, no. That was mandatory.

**HOUSE:** But everybody—that was a D.C. rule that you had to change from those scales?

**FOWLER:** Yes. I can't remember the exact figure on the registration number, so I'm going to have to correct whether—it's up there but I don't remember whether it was \$150 or not.

**HOUSE:** We can always—

**FOWLER:** We'll just have to—



**Martha Fowler, David's mother**

Left: at Eastern Market, using the old style scale, ca 1968-69. Middle: ca 2004–2007.  
Right: 2009, photo by Andrew Lightman, Hill Rag.

**HOUSE:** —edit the transcript. Sure. That’s no problem. What time do you come to the Market in the morning? I know you said your day starts at 4:00 a.m. Is there a certain time you have to be at the Market on Saturday?

**FOWLER:** No later than 7:00.

**HOUSE:** Okay. Otherwise you forfeit your place?

**FOWLER:** Yeah.

**HOUSE:** Okay. And you come just on Saturdays now, right? You and your—

**FOWLER:** Right now that’s all we come. It’s very difficult unless you have another crew in the field picking and another truck at home to come home from market and get a truck cleaned out and reloaded and get back here Sunday morning. It becomes almost an impossibility to do so.

**HOUSE:** And regularly it’s you and your mother, Martha Fowler, and your wife, Valerie?

**FOWLER:** Yes.

**HOUSE:** And occasionally there’s another person there helps you?

**FOWLER:** Yes.

**HOUSE:** Let's talk a little about the fire at Eastern Market. Did you hear about it right away?

**FOWLER:** I heard about it the morning it burned, yes.

**HOUSE:** People just called you?

**FOWLER:** No, it was on the news.

**HOUSE:** It was on the news. And did you stop coming to the Market on Saturdays for a while or. . .

**FOWLER:** Nope.

**HOUSE:** So, you were there the next Saturday.

**FOWLER:** We were—actually I was there that morning.

**HOUSE:** What day of the week was the fire on?

**FOWLER:** I think it was a Tuesday.

**HOUSE:** Okay.

**FOWLER:** I don't know for sure, but I think it was a Tuesday. But I was actually there that morning. I didn't set up a stand but I was there that Tuesday, or the day that it was.

**HOUSE:** And then you came in on the Saturday after that?

**FOWLER:** Came in on the Saturday after that.

**HOUSE:** Were a lot of the farmers here then?

**FOWLER:** I would say most of them.

**HOUSE:** Most of them were.

**FOWLER:** The Market never technically stopped, ceased operation. At least on the outside.

**HOUSE:** Was the business way down for a while?

**FOWLER:** Business, yes, business was down for a while because everybody assumed that the Market had been closed during the fire. But, like they advertised, it's the only continuously operating market, farmers' market, in D.C.; and it was continuously operating.

**HOUSE:** Has business pretty much recovered now?

**FOWLER:** Hmm. That is kind of a question that I can't answer for sure, because I am not—I don't think I am selling the volume that I did before, because people are buying in smaller quantities. Now, I'm selling a lot of smaller, more smaller quantities than I was before. But we would sell tomatoes by the box and cantaloupes by the bushel and beans by the bushel and so forth. Now you're selling them by the pound, by the quart, by the pint, and sometimes by the piece. So—

**HOUSE:** This was comparing to just right before the fire.

**FOWLER:** Yes. So, it's in one way yes and another way no. So—like I said volume wise we're not moving as much volume wise, I don't believe, as we did before.

**HOUSE:** The things you sell now come from your farm and from your neighbors' farms and, I assume, out of season you have to get things from other places, too.

**FOWLER:** Well, it's like this. When you farm, you got expenses 12 months out of the year. You grow things, if you're lucky, four months out of the year. You're going to have to fill in with something for those other eight months. So—you fill in what you think that people will buy. And that's pretty much the way it is with any farmer around. He raises what he can raise and, if he has to fill in, well he has to fill in. Because you can't pay your taxes on four months out of the year.

**HOUSE:** Did you have any interaction with the people who were trying to bring business back to the Market, the Capitol Hill Community Foundation? You know they had bands there and stuff.

**FOWLER:** Now that's hard to say. I went to several meetings, EMCAC [Eastern Market Community Advisory Committee] meetings when they were trying to get this thing organized which they still are trying to get the thing organized. I've had some interaction with them. I have made several things known to a number of people. I don't know whether they had any influence on what happened or not. Like I said, we treat everybody pretty much the same way and if we don't like anything, it doesn't make any difference who—we tell it to somebody. It didn't make any difference whether they're the janitor or whether the congressman.

**HOUSE:** Well, you do have your old place back at the Market. So—

**FOWLER:** Yes, we do have our old place back at the Market.

**HOUSE:** I know that was possibly in doubt for a while. Or—maybe not your old place, but having your truck there and everything. So—

**FOWLER:** Well, the truck was a major issue because we bring in quite a bit of weight on the trucks. And you cannot haul that kind of weight for a block and a half to set up a stand. A bulk bin will weigh about 1800 pounds.

**HOUSE:** A *which* will?

**FOWLER:** A bulk bin. That's a bin that's four-by-four-by-four. It's a palette with a cardboard box on it.

**HOUSE:** And that's what you bring in?

**FOWLER:** When we bring in cantaloupes and watermelons and pumpkins, they don't very comfortably fit in a cardboard box. So, that's—so, they have to go in something a little bit bigger. And they typically weigh between 1600 and 1800 pounds. And moving them several—a block and a half or so is just unacceptable. Now if you move them one at a time, that's all you'd be doing is running back and forth with that and that's unacceptable also. So, you have to be somewhere close by that you can take them off and put them back on. Because, let's face it. You don't sell everything every day. So, you've got to remember that it's just as much work loading it as it is to unload. Sometimes more so.

**HOUSE:** Right. So, well, that's resolved, I think. You have your truck now by your stand and—

**FOWLER:** Yes, for the time being that's—

**HOUSE:** Is there anything else you'd like to talk about?

**FOWLER:** Well, I think we've pretty much covered a lot of areas as—

**HOUSE:** You mentioned to me at one time there was a Minie D. Argo. Did you want to say anything about that?

**FOWLER:** Oh, Minie D. Argo, yes. She was a lady that was about five foot tall. She wore brown corduroy jeans. She had salt and pepper black hair that she—it was cut pretty much in a bowl fashion like you would put a bowl over your head and just go around the bowl. And, for all practical purposes you



would assume that she was a man. However, she was a very wealthy lady. And she was very well known. She used to have a dairy out there near where we lived on Marlboro Pike at that time. And they would deliver milk and sold milk around. Her father, I remember him; he was 96 years old and he would still go out at a run. I've seen him run and kick the cat up in the air and cuss the cat because the cat was in the way.

**HOUSE:** Oh.

**FOWLER:** Getting back to, as this pertains to the Market—she had a stand down there near where the main entrance is going into the Market. And—

**HOUSE:** When was this, about?

**FOWLER:** In the '57, '58, into the '60 area.

**HOUSE:** Okay.

**FOWLER:** And at that time the Market wasn't a real popular place and they were talking about tearing it down. They were talking about putting office buildings in there. And they were talking about just about everything else that you can imagine. They were talking about putting in a museum in there. And there wasn't very many stands in there anymore because the older people had died out and had retired and business was down. We were one of the few people that was out there with Miss Minie. And, anyway, she set her lawyer down at the Library of Congress and made him go through all the papers pertaining to Eastern Market and consequently she was able to keep it from being destroyed by the administration—the District government, or, let's see, I can't remember whether it was the federal government at that time or whether it was the District government. Because at one time, the federal government was the one who owned and was in charge at the Market and then it went over to the District government.

END OF TAPE 1/SIDE 2  
TAPE 2/SIDE 1

**HOUSE:** Okay. So, you were talking about whether the Market was owned by the District or federal, but—

**FOWLER:** It was under different jurisdictions. The D.C. didn't always have home rule. A lot of—it was ruled by the federal government to a certain point and then the federal government was responsible for the upkeep and maintenance of the District buildings.

**HOUSE:** Okay. And so how did she save the Market by having her lawyer go through all the papers at

the Library of Congress?

**FOWLER:** Well, I don't know the exact thing of it. I only know rumors and legends, you might—if you want to call them legends. I know that one of them was that—now this has been denied by the District government, but I don't know for sure.

**HOUSE:** Mm-hmm.

**FOWLER:** That if the farmers stopped coming to Eastern Market that it would revert back to the original donor's estate of the property. The property that it was sitting on would revert back to the original donors of estate. So, in other words, if they closed the Market so that the farmers couldn't come to it, then they would lose the property.

**HOUSE:** Mmm.

**FOWLER:** Which they didn't want to do that either.

**HOUSE:** Mm-hmm.

**FOWLER:** So, they couldn't—so, evidently, they couldn't tear it down. So that's—now, like I said before, this is legend. I'm talking about something I do not have any first hand ... knowledge of it. Only, only hearsay.

**HOUSE:** Okay. Well, at least we remembered her in the interview.

**FOWLER:** And, so, also, from what I understand, when she died, she had her funeral cortege bring her past the Market. That was in her will.

**HOUSE:** That would have been an interesting sight.

**FOWLER:** Well, I—that's what I understand. I didn't go to her funeral but that's what I understand happened.

**HOUSE:** Okay. Are there any other stories, current or a long time ago, or any other thing you'd like to say?

**FOWLER:** Well, there'd probably be about 250 once I get this microphone off me. But, right now I can't think of any.

**HOUSE:** Well, I thank you very much for making time for the interview. I appreciate it very much.

END OF INTERVIEW