

Jean Gray

Interview at Aberdeen Heights 8/25/2021

[Note: All mentioned names are spelled based on our best knowledge.]

Jean Gray: My name is Jean Gray, and I live at Aberdeen Heights. This is August the 25th, 2021, and I will give you my memories of helping to start the Kirkwood Farmer's Market.

Now, realize I'm going back to the 1970s, when we were getting together, and by "we" I mean a bunch of women. I lived in Kirkwood – well, I've always lived in Kirkwood – at that time. I don't know how we all got together, but I know I felt the need to establish something here that would take care of a lot of empty storefronts we had along Kirkwood Road at that time. Also, my husband and I had been patrons of the Soulard Farmer's Market quite a long time, and we knew about it, but as I met younger women, when they found out about it, they thought that was the greatest thing that had been invented. So, every weekend they'd go down there. Somehow it came about, let's have a farmer's market in Kirkwood, and that's how we started in '74.

I'll give you just some of the preliminary things we had to encounter, and then in two years later, probably about '76, the City Hall appointed a Market Manager, so to speak. 'Cause there were a lot of legal things we had to – First we had to get the agreement of the railroad, to use the certain land that somebody had picked out, certainly not me, along the tracks there. And we secured their permission to use it, but also there were some lilac bushes planted there – memory lilac bushes – which are very difficult once they're planted to remove them to another safe place. Again, legality took over, and that was accomplished. Then somebody wrote, we got a – We received a grant, as well as I remember it, for \$25,000 to build this market. And we wanted to be a really nice asset to Kirkwood, architecturally speaking.

Well, needless to say, the cost ended up a lot more than \$25,000. And as we worked towards that achievement, we decided to publish a cookbook, 'cause we were all interested in cooking, and there were about 12 or 14 people – women – on our committee, and I'm sure a few men entered into this. I'm not sure exactly how. And I want to give complete credit to Carol Dark and Mary Beth Checkett. They were our guiding lights in leading us what to do next, and worked so hard, and their names are listed in our beautiful cookbook, which I'm looking at right now. We accomplished the cookbook finally. I have no idea what we made on that, but it was a very good collection, and it was dedicated to Siegfried Reinhold [sic], who was a well-known local artist at the time. He lived in the now historic district, right behind me, and at the moment I can't think of the name of it. [laughter] I'll come up with it later. He painted, I think, eight murals – long, big murals, maybe four feet by eight feet. That may be exaggeration, but we hung them from the rafters of our beautiful roof, inside, of course. It was quite a valuable acquisition, quite a drawing card for people to come and see them. They later had to be stored somewhere, because we were fearful of vandalism.

After we were well organized, and up and going – I'll tell you the process though. There was a brass plaque put up on one of the cedar posts, recognizing the 15 or so people who had kind of gotten this idea, but because of vandalism, I'm sorry to say, they had to take it down. So you can't see those names anymore. And our idea, not only to have a very popular market, but to have the local truck farmers and orchard people rent one of the stalls, rent the stalls. After the first year, I don't think it took us two years, to realize that once a local farmer sold his crop, he didn't have anything more to put in. So we looked at a lot of empty stalls that first year. So it was then we knew we would have to expand, and contacted people that did display down in produce row, and it kind of took off from there, as you all know.

I was on the quote "committee", Friends committee, for over 10 years, and somehow in my responsibilities I had collected a small treasury of money. We didn't charge dues, for goodness sakes. I don't know how I collected it, and nobody seemed to know that I have it. So after 10 or 12 years, I let City Hall know I had this windfall, so to speak, and what should we do with it? Because by then the market was really going pretty good. And they came up with the idea – and I suggested this because I'd seen the work of this person – they suggested a wooden plaque be made, a carved wooden plaque – let me just say maybe three by five, roughly – and that was put in front of the market. It was very, very attractive, and whether it's there today or not, I don't know. I don't know.

But we would rent it out at Christmas to, say, the Lion's Club or some other worthwhile organization, and they had to follow our rules, our safety rules on how to take care of the market, and not damage it. There were a few little problems with renting it out at that time, which I won't go into right now. More recently, it has been a joy to me to see when real estate agents advertise their new listings, quite often – 'cause I went into selling real estate after this – quite often they will say within walking distance of the home is the Kirkwood Farmer's Market. And to take up the valuable space in a small ad to add that really gave me quite a sense of joy.

And that's truly – I'm sure I'll think of some other exciting news to tell you after this.

Lynne Haynes: Okay, great! That's perfect, thank you so much.