

**Interview with Diane R. Vaughn
Conducted by Gary Mercadante
Carlisle, Pennsylvania
November 5, 2007**

Preface

The following oral history transcript is the result of a tape-recorded interview with Diane R. Vaughn on November 5, 2007. The interview took place in Carlisle, Pennsylvania and was conducted by Gary Mercadante for an oral history research project for American Studies: Workshop in Field Methods, at Dickinson College.

Interview

Mr. Mercadante: How long have you been working here?

Mrs. Vaughn: Since 1982 [Laughs].

Mr. Mercadante: [Laughs] How did you get started?

Mrs. Vaughn: I knew the owners. When they bought the fairgrounds, I worked Chevrolet motor division, and one of the owners had a car dealership. When they bought the fairgrounds in fall of 1981, they needed additional staff, so, that's how.

Mr. Mercadante: Are you originally from this area?

Mrs. Vaughn: Central PA, the Colonial Park area, which is the East Shore suburb of Harrisburg.

Mr. Mercadante: What is your current position here, and what has it been in the past?

Mrs. Vaughn: [Laughs] Oh it has been a lot. Because when I started here, I was the facilities director and not everyone was here. So I believe I initially started as the promotions manager trying to get some things going at the fairgrounds. And my current title is director of customer relations.

Mr. Mercadante: Anyone who I told that I was going to Dickinson College knew about the car shows. It seems as if people all around the country know about the car shows here.

Mrs. Vaughn: That's correct.

Mr. Mercadante: I read on your website recently that over 500,000 people come through here every year. Is that correct?

Mrs. Vaughn: Yes, that is correct.

Mr. Mercadante: What effect do you think those crowds have on the town itself?

Mrs. Vaughn: Well, it has different effects. I mean obviously it is a boom for the restaurants and the hotels in particular. I can remember way back when, when there weren't nearly as many brand name hotels. Anytime anyone thought of opening one, they would call us to see what our fill ratio would be. So obviously we welcome all of the hotels because we book in a sixty mile radius. There is a huge trickle down effect that we bring to the economy of the whole area, whether it is gas, food, laundry mats, car washes, whatever our visitors bring. I'm sure Wal-mart gets a huge blast from us. When Sears Surplus Store used to be in town years ago, they got the blast from us. The hardest part that we have found is to try to integrate our visitors with the shopping in downtown. I believe now that it is becoming more of a project to really get some [people to the downtown area], such as the High I project and different Pomfret Street type areas. We run a shuttle bus; people just tend to not get off downtown.

Mr. Mercadante: So a shuttle bus during the car shows to the downtown area?

Mrs. Vaughn: Yes, spring and fall, we run three days of shuttles. We do a loop that goes from the fairgrounds through downtown, out to Wal-mart, over to wherever Target is, and back through town.

Mr. Mercadante: I have driven past during the car shows, and the traffic is crazy. Seeing all of those people and then returning back to campus, I do not see many people. I find it hard to tell myself that all of these people don't venture into downtown right down the road. Beside the shuttles, are there other things done by Carlisle Events to help spur the downtown economy?

Mrs. Vaughn: We are invested in the High I project. To the point, years ago when Judy Johnson was DCA (Downtown Carlisle Association) coordinator, they actually had a representative from downtown on the shuttles bus. We took various routes through downtown so that it wouldn't just be the main drag. So that someone could point out the different things to them in downtown. One reason why you don't see it on your side of town is because most people come to us through the eleventh corridor, coming off of 81 and the turnpike. That side of town has much more housing. For example, if our traffic had to pass through town all the time to get to the hotels, which there are some [hotels in downtown], and they are always filled, I believe there would be more knowledge of downtown. Our corvette parade is taken downtown, and they filter out into the taverns, restaurants, etc. A number of the stores don't stay open at night though. The restaurants do, but if the stores don't...

Mr. Mercadante: I spoke with Matthew from Matty's Kitchen about this problem. It has gotten to the point where the town shuts down around 4 or 5 o'clock. To the point where business men and women in town can't even shop because by the time they get off of work, everything is closed.

Mrs. Vaughn: Yes.

Mr. Mercadante: Do the car shows run all day and all weekend?

Mrs. Vaughn: Our spring and fall events are anchor events and they are five days events. Wednesday through Sunday. The other events are basically Friday, Saturday, and Sunday with a strong set up day on Thursday for about half of them. There are various sizes to the shows, and again, some you don't see any impact on the town. They vary in sizes, but the people are here. Our gates open at seven in the morning, close around five or six. It is a long day. That is another thing. Sometimes with a long day that the vendors put in here, they don't necessarily go out. Different times we have talked to the theater. The theater comes to us and says, "We're going to have a 50's shows, what do you think? We're going to put flyers out. Will your people attend that?" I'd like to say that they would, but they don't typically because they have to be up early the next morning and they have had a long day here.

Mrs. Mercadante: So they are just here and go back to their hotels right back down the road?

Mrs. Vaughn: Yes, or they stay on grounds. We have a strong community on grounds, but it is kind of like sometimes when you have had a long day, the last thing you want to do is go out. Especially when you know you are faced with a whole bunch of people looking at your stuff the next day.

Mr. Mercadante: Besides the car shows, has the fairgrounds ever hosted anything else in the past?

Mrs. Vaughn: Prior to the ownership of the Millers, there was a festival that was out here by a fire company. That ended when there was a tragic accident after one of the festivals. But for the most part we have tried a few things here. We did continue the fair for three years after we purchased the grounds. It was just a dying fair when we purchased it, so the fair continued here and then eventually moved. But it has never been a great gathering point for whatever reasons. As the population is spreading up the corridor from the West Shore, or from Gettysburg, Carlisle maybe will experience more activity. It used to be we were just off the face of the earth from Harrisburg. We had someone here once at the fair, a country singer, and she was at the top of the charts. We had more people come up from York than we did from Harrisburg. They were accustomed to the York fair and the town that was brought in there. When anyone has opted to rent the grounds for a concert, or anything like that, we always try to accommodate but caution them of the history. We would love to see them be successful and we always have to be cautious. We are smack in the middle of residential areas. So there is a limit on what we will do, or allow to be done here.

Mr. Mercadante: Do you find that because it is such a residential area that the people have mixed feelings on the flow of people coming through to the fairgrounds?

Mrs. Vaughn: There is always a strong mix. I will say that when I started here in the early 1980's, the Miller's just rented the grounds and couldn't upgrade it in the ways they wanted in terms of controlling traffic flow and all of that. That was one of our big things, and that is why we initiated a traffic plan. We are signed on Route 81. We now have coordinated signs in the community. The group that was formed, Concerned Citizens of Carlisle, with an attorney, had lots of meetings at the borough based on traffic. That is why we came up with a parking plan. This community down here [Hamilton Community next to the fairgrounds] doesn't have any parking on their streets because they didn't want anyone in there. So that means they can't park on the streets either. That was the downside to their agreement. The lettered streets up here have parking on one side for residents and the other side is open. Over the years there has been a better funneling of traffic and a better coordination of the police and the different municipalities. We have been able to handle the traffic more appropriately, and also, the residents realize the money that can be made from parking cars. A ton of non-profits make a lot of money.

Mr. Mercadante: I know the amount of vendors here during a big weekend must be very high. Are there ever businesses from town that come in, such as restaurants, which come in with stands during the car shows?

Mrs. Vaughn: No. The Carlisle High School Band Boosters have been here since I have been here. They are under the grandstand. The Gingerbread Man used to be here under the grandstand. While the Gingerbread Man is not here in their own stand they do operate three trailers for another vendor. The other ones [vendors on the grounds] have been here as longtime food operators. It takes real professionals to operate the crowds that are here. Hickory Town United Methodist Church used to be here at one time and their aging population was unable to handle the flow of people as the crowds grew bigger. It is basically professional food operators that don't necessarily have businesses in town or elsewhere.

Mr. Mercadante: Gettysburg is loaded with history and is a big tourist attraction. Carlisle also has a lot of history, but the town has become know for the car shows. Do you think that is a positive thing as a tourist attraction, or a negative thing, possibly taking away from the history in the downtown area?

Mrs. Vaughn: I think it is a plus because it gets people here. The tourism organization in town, as far as I know, is trying to market it with the whole valley. Just minutes away from Gettysburg and historic Harrisburg, Hershey, and Lancaster. Market the region, rather than just Carlisle. I think Carlisle is a quaint historic town. Not as well known for its history as Gettysburg would be. Or not as known as the Amish in Lancaster, or the chocolate in Hershey. Before the car shows hit their real stride, I think most people would know the town because of Jim Thorpe being at the Indian School. That adds a lot of quality, as does the educational campuses of both the Law School and Dickinson on the other side of town. There is history in Carlisle. I guess in my mind it is not as strong as some of the anchoring areas. I think if the car shows can get people to the area... what we promote is a family atmosphere and the idea of "come early, stay late." While here, go trout or fly fishing, day trip from here to surrounding areas.

Mr. Mercadante: Is Carlisle Events involved at all with Dickinson College?

Mrs. Vaughn: No, besides the use of the grounds for the U-Turn sale with United Way. I know people have worked with other people at the school in terms of the community, but to my knowledge the college has never used the fairgrounds for anything.

Mr. Mercadante: The biggest issue becomes the town staying open. If you drive through downtown now there a lot of vacant stores and business is suffering. Do you think the car shows can be used as incentive for people to come into the downtown area and open up a business?

Mrs. Vaughn: Restaurants, I would think so. Last week there was an article in the paper. The lady was employed to go out and solicit businesses to come into downtown. She moved from the West Shore to up here. She realized that while we have this incredible number of visitations by the car show population that she wouldn't necessarily capture that downtown. I think some people who only look at figures could be influenced by the shows. With the amount of traffic coming in certainly they would think they would get business. But they are probably not going to get the hit that they think they should.

Mr. Mercadante: So if they see themselves they will realize the true effects of the shows on the town.

Mrs. Vaughn: Historically, what we have heard over the years as far as shopping downtown...people say, "why should we get off when there isn't any shopping downtown," and for the most part they were correct because the shopping had migrated to shopping centers where people didn't have to look for paid parking. I think it is exciting if this whole project can really grab hold downtown. The buildings are being rehabbed. This past weekend I went through the five new luxury apartments in downtown.

Mr. Mercadante: What is actually going on with that project right now?

Mrs. Vaughn: It is open. They are for rent right now and they had open house this past weekend.

Mr. Mercadante: Is there anything with the High I project that is going on right now?

Mrs. Vaughn: Well as a constant, they actually have someone in place that is out actively soliciting and looking for the types of business...whether they are art galleries, or retail. They are trying to get the retail end of it closer down near the Dickinson area. They are looking at perhaps a higher end athletic wear store, which would be great. More for the college end. It is just like Dutry Shoes were in town forever, and he stayed open every night. Just because he can't expand in the area, he is moving out now. There are very few businesses that stay open at night. The antique businesses don't.

Mr. Mercadante: I feel as if Carlisle has that old school feeling to it. With the college community right there, I feel it has the opportunity to not turn into a college downtown, but to lean towards that a little more. Too maybe use the college community to its advantage. Would you agree?

Mrs. Vaughn: Yes. Yes. Because I think with the quality of Dickinson and the Law School...when you go to the smaller towns... for example a couple years ago my friend and I were out shopping for a weekend and we went through West Chester and that is a really quaint town. They had really significant shopping, some very neat stores and things like that. And that was a real good mix. You have on this end [in Carlisle] the War College, which is kind of the same frame and they would also frequent the same things [as the Dickinson students]. To get that corridor strong between the square and Dickinson and put more retail in that to draw the Dickinson community in would enhance downtown. Not only with the shopping experience, but probably that the people would see more maybe at night.

Mr. Mercadante: The night life just doesn't exist. The people that are in place who would have to make these changes feel as if the town is fine as it is. Therefore, do you think that making these changes involves bringing someone in with different ideas, or going directly through those people and getting them to change their perspectives?

Mrs. Vaughn: I would like to see both happen. I think you have a real hard sale. Some of them have been here a long time and have made it based on how they have operated. I can tell you from being on the DCA [Downtown Carlisle Association] board and working with a lot of the different coordinators who have been there that it was always this mindset: "Here we are...we stay open, and nobody comes...electricity is going, our time is spent, we pay to be here, and nobody comes." It is a big coordination. You have to have both things happening at the right time and pretty close to the right time. Whether it is better marketing, or just the enthusiasm of everyone. I look at Pomfret Street, granted, women have come in and filled the corridor, but they have said we are staying open, and we are going to feed each other [business].

Mr. Mercadante: You mean with the craft shops and other things?

Mrs. Vaughn: Yes. It is a wonderful shopping area to walk up. You have two quality restaurants there. They came in and were committed to being there, and I'm hopeful that they are doing okay. They seem to be. Their store fronts are inviting. They'll put stuff out in the summertime, or on nice days. I mean, it is hard to go by there without thinking, "Hold on just a minute while I look here."

Mr. Mercadante: Even kids from the college and their parents are attracted to that street. Yet the main strip down High Street has nothing of the sort. People venture off to the side streets. They all drive through the main strip to get to the college, or highway, but nobody stops.

Mrs. Vaughn: They go to other streets if they know they are there. That is the sad part about it. The visitors don't know that it is there unless their overnight lodging has directed them there, or if they just venture out on their own and find it. That is why those main corridors are main corridors. They take them in and out of town. Before the hotel was downtown [Comfort Suites] they had even less of a reason to stop because there was no main lodging in downtown.

Mr. Mercadante: So Comfort Suites definitely had a big effect on that area then?

Mrs. Vaughn: Well I don't know how much of an effect. The first year they opened, if they had 101 rooms, we had 98 of their rooms filled for the Corvette Show. That is how much our people appreciate that [hotel]. And the Bed and Breakfasts'. The Carlisle House is wonderful. Our people go there and they love it. I can't say enough about the very good quality Bed and Breakfasts' we have around, which is very nice.

Mr. Mercadante: It seems as if there are more hotels over towards this side by the fairgrounds and the highway. There are a few in downtown.

Mrs. Vaughn: Sleep Inn, Days Inn, etc. They are filled with us [people from the car shows].

Mr. Mercadante: So those people do venture that way at least for lodging?

Mrs. Vaughn: And the Cracker Barrel, and Chili's, and all that. I am sure people go to Wal-mart. They go to the flagships that they know. Our bus driver always went under the idea that if someone wanted off in downtown he would let them off at any corner and pick them back up there. We had established stops at one time and actually put out bus stops signs, so if someone wanted off, they could get off. But most people just travel through. I would love to be able to have them stop and get off.

Mr. Mercadante: The first half of our course we actually study the effects of "big-box" stores and their effect on the downtown area in terms of businesses not being able to compete. People hear Wal-mart and know it is an all-in-one stop, open 24 hours. Do you think that without those stores people would go to a local shop?

Mrs. Vaughn: Yes. Since I have been here, there has been some kind of major store, like a K-mart or a Montgomery Ward, which really predates you. That was like a general store that was known across that United States. Before Wal-mart, people still looked for Sam's Club. They would say, "What is the closest?" People go with where they are familiar...where they have their charge cards...where they know what they can get. That is why they [local businesses] can't really compete with a Wal-mart, but they can offer them something Wal-mart doesn't have. Which is personalized service, unique items, good food.

Mr. Mercadante: The problem becomes with all those unique things, how do you attract people to them? Obviously with the restaurants people will go to eat, but in terms of shops, how do you market that to people flowing through town from the car shows?

Mrs. Vaughn: First of all, we used to own our own shuttle busses. So we had more control over everything. But right now, I know that when that bus leaves here, it is never filled. We contract with a bus company. The amount of riders is not great on it at all. We run it from 9-5, Thursday, Friday, and Saturday of spring and fall. We used to do it at summer. We used to do it at the Corvette Show. A number of our events do utilize South Mountain Drag Strip. What we have started doing for most of our major events is we have created a women's oasis on grounds. There are seminars and merchandise more geared to the women. Like a little getaway on grounds. Give them something to do more than perhaps their husbands. Even the ladies on the show fields, rather than just sitting with the car, can go in there and get a free manicure, pedicure, massage, and things of that sort and then shop at the vendor's right in there. That is one thing we have expanded so that the folks don't necessarily have to go off grounds for something to do, but we can't offer them great shopping. We can possibly coordinate something...if someone wanted to come in and give a talk about what is downtown. We could probably set something up in the women's seminar area. If any of the merchants downtown, particularly that Pomfret corridor, wanted to do a consolidated booth, maybe we could get something there to show them a sampling. And say, "If you want more, come to downtown." We have gone so far as to put flyers on the bus telling people what is downtown.

Mr. Mercadante: Do the people who stay on the grounds come in with motor homes?

Mrs. Vaughn: Yes, we are a licensed camp ground. They are all self-contained. We don't provide hook ups or anything like that. A lot of them do stay here.

Mr. Mercadante: So not only do they come for the shows, but they are also staying on the grounds. There really isn't much incentive to leave the grounds.

Mrs. Vaughn: Right. A lot of people have the vehicle so that they can get out if they want. We used to run the bus until nine at night, and we were just looping with nobody on board. That is why we cut it at five. We just kept cutting back to seven, six, and then five. And it is to the point that if the airport calls us, and they have someone who can't get a cab, we will send over the bus. If we want to establish a different loop in downtown, we can do that, but I just can't do the snake up and down every street. So, we have tried the various avenues to try and awaken them.

Mr. Mercadante: It is something that everyone has to be on board with [revival of downtown]. Everyone has similar ideas, but those ideas just have not been meshed together.

Mrs. Vaughn: This was years ago, but the Redskins had training camp here. When the Redskins came to town you had the busses coming in for that too [along with the car

shows]. There was [banners that read] “welcome read skins” in the windows, and all that. Years ago there used to be welcome car show [signs], and I don’t mean banners or painted windows. I throw this out saying it might be something to do, but whether we could get the folks to go in, I don’t know. You know, “car show special.” If a number of the stores were on a flyer with their car show week specials, we could distribute them here. But it is a fine line we walk because we have vendors out here selling to the folks that are here, so we don’t want to necessarily draw them away. For the most part, we created the busses to have an avenue for the women to do something. Now a lot of the women will stay with the car shows out here because we have the women’s oasis. We also have kid’s activities on grounds. We have created an atmosphere here that gives people something to do, but the real shopper is still at a loss. The bus was created mainly for shopping for the women, while the men were here. But also an avenue if someone needed to get to a store and couldn’t pull their own vehicle out, they could go and come back.

Mr. Mercadante: I think it definitely would have an effect with marketing in the town. Walking through the town as a student when a car show is going on, I see that there are no signs about the shows. Sometimes we don’t even know when they are going on because it is not marketed at the college.

Mrs. Vaughn: Everyone has their mindset of what they have been doing. So it is to really create the new mindset to break that. And I know it has got to be frustrating as a business person downtown, other than perhaps the restaurants and the bars that get more of a hit, to have this many people come to their town and not help their bottom line. I’d be pulling my hair out.

When we had our non-automotive antique shows here, a lot of the folks, not all the antique stores were here because they thought they would get the overflow into town, and a lot of times they did. Ellen Hughes downtown was always a great one because she would come out and have a few things in her booth, but she’d have pictures of everything in her store, and she realized the business from that and sold a ton of stuff. There are ways to market, and there are ways to watch people market. She used to stay open; I don’t know if she still does, during the Corvette Show. For the most part, the highest mean income is that show. So if someone sees something in the window and just walks in, she will ship anything anywhere.

Mr. Mercadante: We just had our homecoming weekend at the college this past weekend. Saturday everything was open and definitely later than usual. Some stores that aren’t usually open are open on that day. Matty’s Kitchen was open and usually they are closed on Saturday’s. Yet when there is a car show in town with more than quadruple the amount of people here for homecoming, none of those stores are open.

Mrs. Vaughn: Right, and during the day I can understand that more than in the evening. But Saturday is the biggest day here, and at the same time, it is the longest day for people. How much will they go out at night? There are some that obviously have to, particularly the guys that leave from here and go eat. A lot of them establish their

favorite places and they keep going back to those places. Boiling Springs Tavern gets good business from us.

Mr. Mercadante: Well thank you very much for your time. I really appreciate it.

Mrs. Vaughn: Okay, you're welcome.

[END OF INTERVIEW]