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Dennis H. Barrett Oral History

A native of Idaho, Dennis H. Barrett has spent his professional career in food service working in Alaska, Texas, Nevada, and California. After working thirty years as a food service director, he retired from the Dallas, Texas school district.

JB: I'm Jeffrey Boyce and it is March 7, 2011. I'm in Washington, DC at the LAC conference with Dennis Barrett. Welcome Dennis and thanks for taking the time to talk with me today.

DB: Thank you. I appreciate the opportunity.

JB: Would you tell me a little bit about yourself, where you were born, where you grew up?

DB: I was born in Albion, Idaho, a small town in southern Idaho; it's where what they called the Normal School used to be, one of the biggest universities west of the Mississippi in the mid to late 1800s. Now it's forgotten and no one knows where it's at, but a small farming community in Idaho. I lived there through the third grade and then we moved to southern Nevada, a farming community about a hundred miles from Las Vegas.

JB: What was it called?

DB: Mesquite, Nevada. It was a predominately farming and dairy farming community, and I spent the rest of my elementary, middle, and high schools years there in Mesquite, Nevada. I graduated from Virgin Valley High School. I'm probably unique in the food service field, one of the only people that graduated from Virgin Valley High School. The Virgin River went through, and it's called the Virgin Valley, named after an explorer who went through named Carl Virgin.

JB: While you were in elementary and high school were there lunch programs?

DB: Yes. There were meal programs both up in Idaho and in Nevada. I still remember the lunch ladies. I know their names, and they were some of my favorite meals.

JB: What were some of your favorite meals?

DB: They had one that they called Mexican corn. It was almost like a goulash that had corn in it, but it was a little bit thicker, but it was just delicious. I remember when I was a food service director in Las Vegas, Nevada, thirty years or so ago I went back to my hometown and looked up a school lunch lady to see if she could find the recipe for that. And she was able to get the recipe and we actually put it on our menu in Las Vegas thirty years ago or so.

JB: You'll have to share that with us for the Archives.

DB: Well, I don't know if I can find it anymore. Another item that they served was called Bean Chowder. They just took bacon and cut up the bacon and browned it, and took a can of stewed tomatoes that already had celery and onions and a little bell pepper diced up in it, and put that in there, and a can of pork and beans, and they just heated and served it – it was wonderful. We had bread and butter sandwiches – every day half of a bread and butter sandwich. And when I was in Idaho we used to have the little milk bottles. We had good meals.

JB: Was there much difference from the food in Idaho to southern Nevada?

DB: No. We had potatoes and gravy, and they used to have a canned meat that they would get and make kind of a gravy with the canned meat. It was wonderful – loved it.

JB: Sounds delicious. After high school where did you go after that?

DB: After high school I went to a junior college in southern Utah called Dixie College. I went there for a year and then I went on a service for my church for two years – so we call a mission – for our church for two years. And then afterwards I came back and I went to BYU for a semester, and realized that BYU was not my cup of tea – it was too big, it was just too large for me. So I went down and went back to Dixie. After I went back to Dixie I had some medical problems and had to drop out of school, but I didn't want to waste my time. They opened up a new culinary arts school in Las Vegas, so I was one of the first groups of individuals to go through the new culinary arts program that they started in Las Vegas.

JB: And when was this?

DB: That would have been 1968.

JB: Is that culinary arts school still in existence?

DB: I believe it is.

JB: What was it called?

DB: It was called the Southern Nevada Vocational Culinary Training Program. And while I was there I cooked at The Dunes – while I say cooked, I was on the staff – The Dunes, The Thunderbird, and The Sands.

JB: It must have been the Rat Pack era.

DB: It was, it was. I realized I did not like the atmosphere and I would not have enjoyed being in that type of setting, so I kind of put my emphasis into management, and was hired out of that school by J. C. Penney Co. J. C. Penney Co. hired me to start opening restaurants. They were experimenting with putting restaurants in some of their larger stores. So I got married in 1970, Valentine's Day 1970, and for our honeymoon we went down to where our new store was going to be in Carlsbad, California. I worked there for about six months and they moved me to another store for another six months and another store for another six months – and I ended up getting fired – the difference in philosophy with the new management. Normally when I went in I would set up all the procedures, the processes, hire the help, get it running smoothly, and then turn it over to a working manager. This particular store the management wanted young, good-looking girls – they did the hiring and they hired all young, good-looking girls, and that was back in kind of the hippie era, where they came in different modes of dress. They were great workers, wonderful workers, when you showed or told them what to do. The minute they'd done that, they had no idea what to do. They'd just stand there, or talk, so as some of those began leaving I began to replace them with people who were a little older, that knew a little bit more about how to work. And even though my food costs and labor costs and all of those were some of the best in the company, it was an image that the store didn't want. They didn't want to have older people there because these older people knew how to work. When they were done with their tasks they were always looking to see if there was something else they could do. If they were filling salt and pepper shakers or wiping or cleaning or restocking, they were always looking for something to do even if it wasn't on their shift. So they told me that people should be afraid of me when I came in. When I came in they said, "The people like you, and they shouldn't like you." And I said, "Well, it's probably time then that I move on, because that goes against every grain of any training I've ever had, and if you want me to just be an ogre and you don't want me to manage the store, then I'll give you my two weeks' notice right now." And they said, "You don't have to take two weeks. You're done now." So I said, "Ok." I want everybody to know I have been fired. It was a good experience.

JB: Good for you, good for you. Well, so then how did you get involved in child nutrition?

DB: I realized that I didn't have my degree yet, so I went back to Dixie College and applied for a job working for the food service program. And of course by this time I had been to culinary arts school for over two and a half years and I had some training, and within a few weeks they offered for me to begin running food services. And so I would take a class occasionally and run food services for the next five years.

JB: What were you studying at Dixie?

DB: Just trying to get my degree in Business – Business Management. It was just a two-year college, and then I would take a few weeks each summer of my vacation and go up to Utah State University where they had real good food service management program, and I'd take as many courses as I could take in one of the terms of summer school. And eventually I went up and got my degree, and my degree is in Food Service Management and Business Administration from Utah State University.

JB: Excellent. And how did you get into child nutrition?

DB: After I got my degree Dixie College said they wanted me to come back and I got my degree in Food Service Management and Business Administration, but my mother always taught me you never keep all your eggs in one basket. She had been a school teacher, so I stayed another semester and got a teaching certificate in Home Economics. So I had to take my sewing class and some of those classes you have to take, and while I was there I did a dietetic internship. But I didn't complete two classes – there are two chemistry classes. I was married and had a couple of little kids and working three jobs – so I'm not a Registered Dietitian, I have a background in nutrition. I think it's important that these people be certified, so I don't claim to be a nutritionist, but I have a background. Even though I've taught classes at the college and university level in nutrition, I just have a background in nutrition. While I was at Dixie College – and they asked me to come back – and now they put me over the student union, over food services, and over a couple of other student activities, and a few other things on campus. It was a position under the Dean of Students running those programs. And I stayed there for another couple of years. And my brother-in-law, who is a superintendent of schools, was at a superintendents' conference in Las Vegas, and he said he was walking down the hall and saw this big six-foot-seven guy walk by, write something on a piece of paper, and put it on the bulletin board. He went up just out of curiosity and saw that he was the superintendent of schools in Anchorage, Alaska, and they were looking for a food service director. 'If anybody's interested here's my room number and the phone number of the hotel.' So my brother-in-law picked up the phone and called me. It was a Sunday morning I remember, and I was just getting ready to go to church and my brother-in-law called. So I just called and we visited over the phone for about a half hour, and then he asked me if I could meet him that afternoon in his hotel room. So I drove from St. George, Utah, down to Las Vegas, which is about a three-hour drive, and picked up my wife along the way. She was down visiting her parents, with the grandchildren, along the way. And I didn't tell her or her parents why we were going. I said I just need to take her for a ride for a while, get away from the kids. So we went down and he offered me the job on the spot, so I went to

Anchorage, Alaska, and became the food service director there. I was there for about five years, and then they offered me the job in Las Vegas, Nevada, so I went to Las Vegas for five years, and they asked me to come back to Anchorage, so I went back for another thirteen years, and I was food service director at Anchorage, Alaska for a total of almost nineteen years – I'm rounding it to twenty years in Anchorage. And then I was the food service director in Dallas, Texas, for ten years, and I retired.

JB: Ok. Was there someone, or maybe more than one person who were mentors to you during your career – helped influence and guide your path?

DB: In the school food services, of course Gertrude Applebaum has been a mentor all my life.

JB: She's a wonderful lady.

DB: She's a wonderful lady. Sometimes in the early years I was just learning the business and I was trying to get my feet on the ground learning the school lunch program I'd call her and through ideas by her, suggestions by her. I guess if there's any real mentor it would be Gertrude Applebaum.

JB: Do you feel that your educational background helped you as a child nutrition professional?

DB: Oh absolutely, absolutely. I had worked in restaurants and things. My father had a brain tumor when I was twelve years old and my mother had to go back to school. She drove one hundred miles one way each day to go to school. And I went to work as well washing dishes in cafes, and so I was raised working in cafes. But especially the business part – we're running businesses – and you can hire dietitians, but to get someone that understands the business aspect of running a meals program – I think those skills helped me more than any.

JB: Because it is a business.

DB: It is a business.

JB: Compare and contrast the states you've worked in for me – Nevada, Alaska, Texas, and California – were there differences or similarities?

DB: You know, there's not a lot of difference in the kids. I was always in the larger districts of the states I've been in, and kids are kids and they like to eat, and they're influenced by television and marketing

and what's at the grocery store. The meal programs, what you feed kids, is pretty much the same. A lot of things the same, you are working in an environment of educators, and I do not mean this disrespectfully, but they're style of management is very different than the style of management we need. They're kind of situational management. They don't really need to do cost projections, needs analysis, feasibility studies, as we do, and so every place I've gone, to really get anything done you have to do end runs and take two or three times the time it should take, to go and talk to this person, get your allies, and what you've got to do, because food service in every district I've been in has been looked at as just a nicety for parents. They really look at it as a part of the educational day. So a lot of similarities, school boards, a lot of them are very the same.

JB: What about menu items? I would think that Texas and Alaska would be very different.

DB: You know, you'd think so, but there's not. In a three-week menu cycle there's about fifteen to twenty popular items that the kids like or will eat, and some people call them by a different name or have a little different twist, but we're all serving predominately basically the same thing.

JB: What was a typical day like?

DB: A typical day – since I've been in school food services I normally go to work, get there between six and six-thirty of a morning, even though a lot of the staff didn't come until seven, seven-thirty, or eight o'clock, because a lot of times that's the only kind of quiet time that you have to think. And I'm a list-maker. I make my list and I put A, B, or C on it. An A I've got to have done before I go to sleep, regardless. Planning and organizing, getting ready to go for the day, and twelve-hour days are normal. There were a few years after everything got organized when I would go home after eight hours, but of the forty years that I've been serving kids, it's only been a few years. A twelve-hour day is a typical day. I've been in the larger districts. I have not had to do a lot of things that a person in a smaller district has to do, because they have to do everything, I've been fortunate to have someone that could actually write the menus and do the nutrient analysis and things. I've had people in some supervisory positions. So my role had been mainly the vision, the direction, the leadership. I was the one to go to all the meetings and meet with all the groups, the parent groups in the past. Now I've got staff that can share a lot of that responsibility. In LA, being the second largest in the United States, I spend a lot of time meeting with principals, principals groups, superintendents groups, community groups, trying to set direction where we need to go, and doing all of the patting on the backs, and the politicking, to get something through that we need to do.

JB: What are some of the biggest changes you have seen in child nutrition over the years?

DB: The biggest change that I've seen is the attitude towards the program by administrators. Administrators in the '70s, they really weren't taking any money and trying to look for any way to charge

us for the program. Now districts are hurting and there's so much emphasis put on test scores, and teachers having time on task with students, they're cutting lunch hours – minimizing – they used to have three or four lunch periods. In Los Angeles right now the secondary schools have one thirty minute lunch period, all the kids turned loose at once. So they said, "Well, we have a lunch period; if kids don't make it that's their problem."

JB: That's impossible.

DB: I try and show them the error of their ways, but that's been a big change, and the amount of money, that districts look how much we can charge, and so what we have to actually put on a plate has really decreased over the years.

JB: My next question was going to be 'What were some of your biggest challenges?' but it sounds like those changes were some of your biggest challenges.

DB: Some of the biggest we have are USDA, Food and Nutrition Service, and Commodities Program. Those are our biggest challenges. They are our biggest challenges because they write things in generalities and then they turn it over to fifty other states to manage, with very little direction. Each state interprets things the way they want. One regulation is interpreted differently in one state to another. It's just a hodgepodge of mass confusion, and so to try and get what we can't do and what we can do, we have to take the attitude that we have to interpret the regulations, and then it's the state or federal government to come and prove us wrong. It's very difficult; it's not a well-oiled system that we have to work within. That's our biggest challenge.

JB: What would you say had been your most significant contribution so far to the field?

DB: I think my greatest contribution has been that I am a visionary. I'm forward thinking; a risk-taker. I am a mover. I'm not happy with mediocrity. I would like to think that I have some good skills as far as management and business skills. When I went to Dallas – Dallas was a program, a school district that hired Arthur Anderson. They were not pleased with the program, the direction of the program and the cost of the program. They hired Arthur Anderson and they did nearly a year study, and they came back with recommendations out of their study, and I was the person they hired to turn their program around. I was there for ten years, and wanted some additional opportunities. We put together a great team; we turned it around. It's probably as well-oiled and functioning a program as there is in the country. The same with Los Angeles – most every place I've been they've hired me to come in and see if we couldn't put some business model and KPIs in process – changing and oiling and refining processes and procedures. So I think my greatest contribution has been management, and helping teach and train other people how a meal program should run, and how it can run effectively.

JB: How many schools are you over in Los Angeles?

DB: We serve at about 954 locations. Next year it will be another thirty of so locations we'll serve at next year.

JB: How many students eat lunch every day?

DB: We serve about 711,000 meals every day – that's breakfast, lunch, and snacks combined.

JB: And your participation rate?

DB: We've increased it over the last four years from seventeen percent of our senior high students up to thirty-five percent, our middle school students from about 21-22 percent up to about 40-42 percent, our elementary students are about 70 to 75 percent participation.

JB: Is that breakfast and lunch?

DB: That's just lunch. We'd have a lot more participation at the secondary level if the students could get in to eat, if we had the physical means and the time to serve them. We've increased participation by over 35,000 students a day over the last four years, but we've almost come to optimize everything we can do in that timeframe.

JB: What's the answer?

DB: The answer is we've got to get educators to understand the importance of the proper fuel to help in their educational process. There are cells in our brain, and every cell's a little motor. Every motor requires fuel. Some take unleaded and some are diesel and some you have to mix oil with, like this weeder. That comparison is the same to our brain. There are cells in our brain whose primary function is to take in information; others store it; others recall it and synthesize it. If they're not getting unleaded, and they need unleaded or a high-octane of unleaded, or getting unleaded mixed with a lot of diesel, it doesn't matter what kind of classrooms we have, or what new innovative system there are. If these kids can't recall it, can't remember it, can't synthesize the information - we have not been able to get that across. In the four school districts that I've been in, over the years I've been there, we're not considered the

educators. We're considered food services. 'Well, yea, they help out once in a while.' We have more knowledge about nutrition and nutrition education than any of the educators, so it's difficult. That's our biggest obstacle, is being able to get students the availability of a good meal and the educational side to understand how it can help test scores and how it can help the education of these students.

JB: Has that message improved over the years?

DB: Not in forty. It's my soapbox. I'm harping it all the time, but "We've got to have more time with the kids. Our test scores are going to go down.' And we're beginning to just be perceived as the nannies. Many of the charter schools throughout the country now are just not even serving. It is not a requirement to have a meal. The Lunch Program is optional to a school district and many charter schools are saying 'If you want to, send a sack lunch', or 'It's 6, 7 dollars a meal.' We charge a dollar in Los Angeles for an elementary, a dollar and a half. We served one-third of the nutrient requirements last year 122,000,000 times on seventy-seven cents a meal. We can't continue to do that. The new regulations, the food components of them are dysfunctional.

JB: Any memorable stories, special children or people you've worked with over the years?

DB: The one story I would share, regardless of where you go in the United States, and the reason I'm in this profession, and I could make a lot more money, just as most of these people that are managing these programs could with their training background – we're got a lot of wonderful, brilliant people in this field that could make a lot more money doing other things – we stay in this profession because we care. We care about kids and we really feel we're making a contribution to society. So the one story that I'd like to leave with, and that is it doesn't matter where you go in the United States, if it's Elephant Breath, Montana, or Hotch Kotch, Wisconsin, or Hocus Pocus, Arkansas, there is one familiar single thread that ties every school lunch program together in America and that is – I don't care if any school district has had, or a school just had a fire at the school, a shooting at the school, an earthquake – it doesn't matter what emergency came up – these ladies and gentlemen in the school lunch program have never ever missed serving a meal, any school, any district, any state in the United States, ever. And that to me – we have the greatest hidden treasure in America – is the National School Lunch and Breakfast Program. It's unfortunate no one knows it but us, and that's a platform, a soapbox I'm starting to get on to our industry partners and saying, "We're serving good food. Why aren't you letting people know we are? Why isn't the federal government telling people about the worth of this program to young people?" We're not contributing towards obesity. The obesity rate is greater between the ages of three and six than it is between six and eighteen. We're not contributing towards obesity. We're meeting the rules and regulations But we're the blunt of everyone's jokes because everyone's experts. But we have to defend ourselves, and it's time that the federal government, USDA, the School Nutrition Association, the Dietetic Association, the Heart Association all stand up and start saying, "Your kids should be eating school lunch. It's the greatest hidden treasure in America."

JB: What advice would you give a young person today who was considering child nutrition as a profession?

DB: Don't just think because you know how to cook, or you've worked in a café, or you've got a background in nutrition, that that really totally qualifies you. You need to have the ability to look at it as a business model and how to manage effectively, and how to get the people to lengthen their strides, with correct information, and facts, and data, not just go in and start running the program by guess and by golly – but be prepared.

JB: Anything else you'd like to add today?

DB: That's probably enough isn't it? [Laughter]