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Louise Lepeze Oral History Transcript

After several years of working as a nutritionist in hospitals Louise Lepeze joined the Louisiana Department of Education child nutrition programs as an Area Supervisor in 1980. She later became the Section Chief. Lepeze left the state in 1991 to join USDA at the Southwest Regional Office in Dallas as the Net Coordinator, Nutrition Education and Training Program. She has been back in Baton Rouge since 2005, working for USDA in the area of School Meals Initiative.

January 27, 2009

Baton Rouge, Louisiana

MH: We're here in Baton Rouge, Louisiana. And I am here with Louise Lepeze. Will you tell us about yourself and where you grew up?

LL: I actually grew up outside of Baton Rouge, in a community called Central. I went to Central High School, and to LSU.

MH: So what is your earliest reconnection of school nutrition programs? Was it a school breakfast or lunch?

LL: There was no breakfast. But there was a lunch program. I remember the smell of roast cooking. I learned to eat red beans and rice, because my mother never cooked red beans. She always cooked other beans. I learned to eat real Louisiana food, red beans and rice. I also learned to eat broccoli. My father had a garden always, but he never grew broccoli. Lunch was the big part of the day. Just about everybody participated. This was before free lunch.

MH: Everybody paid huh?

LL: No, actually there were a few people who received free lunch but it wasn't a part of a federal program. There was no such thing as privacy back then.

MH: So this was in Central?

LL: It started in the first grade back then. We didn't have a kindergarten. And I went to first and second grade in Baton Rouge at North Highland Elementary and then we moved to Central when I was in the third grade. And from then on we were out at Central and I graduated from Central.

MH: So tell us about your educational background.

I graduated from Central and then I went to LSU and I took a Bachelor's in Institution Management and Dietetics and a Master's in Foods and Nutrition. I actually had a 4-H scholarship when I went to school and the scholarship required that I take a class in the College of Agriculture. Miss Ona Smith was my advisor, my freshmen advisor, and she guided me into Nutrition as my class in the College of Agriculture, because Home Economics was in Agriculture. I had planned on majoring in chemistry; what I was going to do with it I don't know. When you go to a little high school and you don't have much knowledge of the world – I was going to be a chemist, whatever that meant. Ms. Smith asked, "Why don't you take your course in nutrition?" And so I took freshman Nutrition and she kind of steered me into Dietetics, and it was a happy match. I remember Miss Ona and some of the other teachers that impressed me. I remember Dorothy Mochet, who taught us Advanced Nutrition, and Dr. Virginia Williams, who taught Bio-chemistry.

MH: So, is that how you got directed toward child nutrition?

LL: Well actually not really. When I finished school, I didn't take an internship. I went directly to grad school and married and was living in Alexandria, Louisiana. I really can't remember. I do remember Ms. Helen Watson. She was a long-time dietician that worked at Huey Long Hospital, called and asked would I be interested in working part-time. She was consulting for St. Francis Cabrini Hospital at the time, and she helped me get all the

paperwork done to apply for registration. This was during the time they instituted registration exams. So I took it and I passed and I became an RD. and I worked at St. Francis Cabrini Hospital as a dietician and I also taught at Alexandria Trade School. Mr. Grimmia, who was the director there was very adamant that it was the Alexandria Trade School, it wasn't the Alexandria Vo-tech School. Back then you had to trade, so I taught some classes to food service workers. That was my involvement in Alexandria. When my husband and I separated, I moved to Baton Rouge and worked full-time at a food service management company, re-established and got to know some dieticians who worked at the Louisiana Department of Education. They said "You would love school food service." An opening developed and I applied there and was accepted. This was how I got involved in school food service. It was sort of through the back door because I was not involved in the beginning. But I found home when I got with school food service.

MH: Do you remember what year it was when you got there?

LL: 1980.

MH: 1980, and who was the state director at the time?

LL: Harold Denning.

MH: Ah, Harold Denning. Ok.

LL: Yes, he was there a couple of years and then Joan, geez, I can't remember Joan's last name, but she was in food distribution and she became the director for a few years and the Nelle Brouette was the director after that. That was back in the heyday of school food service when schools prepared almost everything. It was wonderful. It was very little processed food. I remember giving classes on how to bone a turkey. Commodities

provided a lot of whole turkeys to school food service. They had to bone the turkeys so they could slice them and serve them to the students.

MH: I remember getting those whole turkeys and only the folks that have been there a lot longer knew the process, you know.

LL: One of the first things we learned was the Food Buying Guide, and it was our Bible, so to speak, for ordering and making sure we met the requirements. We had basic food like whole turkeys and so forth. You had to figure out how pounds of turkey you needed for however many students you were serving.

MH: So what was your position name back then? What was it called?

LL: Area Supervisor, and we each had school districts, some parish school districts and private school districts and some RCCI's. We each had to work with them and be a resource as far as information and we also did reviews. It was a great time. Louisiana has always had outstanding school food service and had a lot of state support in the form of financial aid as far as for staff and provided a meal reimbursement and of course that is gone by the way side because the money was getting tight and everything. They also had requirements for certification for school food service directors in the school systems at the state level.

MH: Which made a tremendous impact, didn't it?

LL: Yes, everybody basically had to have a certain level of qualifications and certain level of knowledge and experience to be able to operate a program or to be able to go in and serve as a resource or to do the reviews. So, we at the state level had to have the same level of certification that those at the parish level had to have.

MH: So, what happened from that point on? You weren't to the state until how old?

LL: In 1991, I became the Section Chief. Nell retired and Sue Cromwell became the Food Service Director, and my boss Jane Mandel became the Assistant Director and I became the supervisor of the supervisors. I was the supervisor for the school food service and then there was an opening at Southwest Regional Office in Dallas for nutritionists and I applied.

MH: This was with USDA?

LL: USDA. I left the state in 1991 and actually started with USDA April 1st, April Fool's Day in 1991, and I was the Net Coordinator, Nutrition Education and Training Program. I served in that position for several years and then became the nutritionist. I worked with all the special nutrition. Then in 2005, I remarried my ex-husband, and wanted to move to Baton Rouge and I had been through the school meals initiatives since it started. I wasn't originally with it but shortly after SMI was created I became involved with it. So when I wanted to go to Baton Rouge, there was really nothing at the regional level in Baton Rouge, but Headquarters wanted to retain my SMI knowledge, I guess you would say, and they transferred me to Headquarters and out-stationed me in Baton Rouge and I have been here in Baton Rouge since 2005 working for USDA.

MH: Are you still working for SMI?

LL: Yes. I work with the Child Nutrition Division at Headquarters. We did some accompanied SMI reviews and we have undergone changes there. Claire Miller who used to work with me in the Louisiana Department of Education became my boss at Headquarters and was the Senior Nutritionist there until her retirement. Jane Mandel is now my boss again. She's taken over Claire's position. So you know what goes around

comes around. I started off in school food service with Jane Mandel as my boss, and she's my boss again.

MH: And now she is at Headquarters.

LL: Yes.

MH: So you've gone all the way from Louisiana to Regional, to Dallas.

LL: I did a detail at Headquarters for four months. So I was up in Washington for four months but I was never permanently up there, so when I left Dallas I actually came back to Baton Rouge.

MH: Do you feel like your educational background really prepared you for this career?

LL: Oh yeah; plus the people I've worked with. Everybody in school food service is always very generous with their knowledge and their time. When I first started out the people there at the Louisiana Department of Education and the people in the local school districts were also very generous with their time and knowledge.

MH: All so very generous in time and knowledge. I hear that a lot about the state department being in that manner.

LL: That was the most enjoyable part about it. We were not just reviewers when we were with the state department of education; we were educators. It was our job to train new supervisors. And I remember training you when you first went to Ascension Parish.

MH: Yes, I remember too. Thank God somebody knew what they were doing.

LL: Yes. It was a wonderful experience. And the fact that there were so many of us from Louisiana who have ended up in positions of importance really shows the level of knowledge, training, and experience that we got when we were at the state that we got to move into those other positions.

MH: And people wanted us. It's unbelievable. What would be a typical day in your career?

LL: Well, since I have been so many people in my career, there's not much of a typical day. I guess the outstanding thing about it is that we worked in every area of food service from personnel to food safety to procurement to making sure that meals met requirements so we were able to do different things. In fact, if you weren't very flexible you couldn't survive in your job. It was a challenge. You never knew when you went to work in the morning, for sure, what you were going to be doing. You thought you knew what you were going to be doing, but sometimes you got sidetracked. It was always interesting, and always a challenge.

MH: Give us some of your challenges that came about.

LL: Not really anything blew me away. It was something to do always. Learning to do nutrition analysis and working with the issues that you had to look at when you were trying to calculate nutrients in a meal. Claire really got us back on board with that. Until she came on board at Headquarters we really had not had any SMI national training for 8 years. Those were some of the biggest challenges. We did the Economy Fuse. They discontinued that because we'd had it for three years and Headquarters felt like we had determined basically what issues there were with SMI and reviews and what the school districts would face in meeting nutritional requirements for meals. We learned a lot by going out into the school districts. There's no national reporting for SMI. So when we started that initiative, we really didn't have any idea how the states were even doing their SMI reviews. So it became really important for us to go out and learn more about the state's challenges were and what the local districts challenges were and what we could do

to help facilitate and help them do more what they could do to make sure the meals met nutrient requirements.

MH: And then you had the CRE that came after.

LL: Well the CRE came after AIMS. CRE are not nutritional reviews. They are accountability reviews. And when I was with the state, CRE was just coming in actually when I left Louisiana and went with the Southwest Regional Office of USDA in Dallas. So I really was not involved with CRE that much other than having the AIMS and the review background. I could probably pick it up real quick if I had to do it again, but I hope I never have to do that.

MH: What changes have you seen in the child nutrition profession over the years?

LL: Well there were two big changes. There's the change in the food industry with more processed foods and less people skills coming into food service. When I first started we still had moms coming in who had been trained in food service at their mothers' knees, so they learned food safety and brought that knowledge with them. They also had food preparations skills that they brought with them. And those kinds of people are hard to find nowadays. The challenge of staffing has gotten much greater than it was when I first started. The use of more processed foods, pre-prepared foods; was much more self-preparation. Almost every school in Louisiana made homemade rolls every day; just prepared food from scratch. Just like the turkeys they learned to debone in school food service. Another thing is the complexity in the programs has increased considerably and that's a real challenge for school food service now. When I first started, it took a while to learn the programs, but I couldn't even guess how long it would take for somebody now who had no background, to learn the programs.

MH: And for those who were not like working under somebody who was like a mentor or something because there is so much information to learn for a very short transferr....

LL: Oh yeah. There was only one menu planning system. When I first started, there was food-based menu planning and everybody used the same menu planning system. And your meals were supposed to meet nutrition requirements over the long haul, over a period of time, but there was no review to determine that you actually met it. There was research done nationally to determine that “yes” we were meeting the requirements that we were aiming for, but there were no nutritional reviews of school food service, there was no SMI review. There was no nutrient standard menu planning. There was food-based menu planning.

MH: And of course now we have five options.

LL: Right, and it has now gotten considerably more complicated and more difficult to run an excellent program.

MH: So what do you think is been your most significant contribution to the field?

LL: Perseverance. I’ve been around for a long time now. Maybe SMI I guess. For a while, I would say that I was one of the few people in the United States that really understood SMI. That’s not something I like to brag about because SMI is very complicated.

MH: That’s School Meals Initiative, right?

LL: That’s School Meals Initiative. That’s the nutritional component of the meals. And the requirement to review to meet nutrient standards and the requirements for states to review the school districts to ensure they are meeting those nutrient standards.

MH: So what advice would you give someone who is thinking about entering the child nutrition profession today?

LL: School food service is actually to me – I've been in hospitals, I've been in nursing homes as a registered dietician which I think that certainly gives somebody an advantage because of the way that we're trained in food production and food safety and almost all the things that we need to know in school food service. A Registered Dietician brings that education and knowledge along with him or her, that's a strong solid background and you're working with people who are caring and who are very knowledgeable and who are really generous with their time. I think I made that comment earlier. I learned and developed all the skills that I needed because of the generosity of the people that I worked with and their education and willingness to share. To me, it's the best form of food service you can do, the best form of dietetics that you can do, is school food service. And you're feeding children, you're providing nutritious meals for children, and the children are our future.

MH: Absolutely. Well do you have any memorable stories? Looking back at your profession, what would you say?

LL: I'm really not a storyteller. Certainly, there have been great memories, all the people that I've worked with over the years. I fondly remember people who were at the Louisiana Department of Education when I first started who took me in hand. And there is one story about how I almost didn't make it. The first week I started at the Louisiana Department of Education, I went in and signed up and everybody waved good bye to me and said we were going to a meeting in Dallas, for our training meeting. So, the whole of the Louisiana State Department of Education school food service staff went to Dallas for

a meeting, and I sat there and read regs for a week and I almost didn't make it. If you can imagine anything worse than somebody ... I had come out of being an active food service manager, and on my feet all day long, working all day long, doing a lot of things, and sit at my desk and read regs for a whole week until the staff got back. I almost checked it to them right there.

MH: We're such high-energy people to ask us to sit down.

LL: Yes and you know that's something when you're working with the Federal programs you've got to know the regs. And it was essential that I do that but to be the only person in there reading regs all day long ...

MH: Yes. Well, we certainly want to thank and appreciate you for taking the time out to do this interview. I mean really I've always appreciated all the help you gave me during the time as a food service director.

LL: Well that was one of the better jobs, was training new people and helping them understand their obligations and the parameters within which we work, the regulations. So that made the job exciting, to be able to educate and ensure that the program was operating according to the regulations. I thoroughly enjoyed my school food service career.

MH: It's still going on isn't it?

LL: Well, I will be retiring soon. I'm not sure exactly when, but I'm at that point where it's time to give it over to the younger generation.

MH: How long has it been? At least twenty-five?

LL: Well, I started in 1980. So that's twenty-nine.

MH: Thank you Louise.

LL: I enjoyed it.

MH: Bye bye.

LL: Bye Melba.