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Jerry Cater Oral History

Jerry B. Cater retired after 11 years as Research Scientist with the Applied Research Division of the National Food Service Management Institute. She served 19 years as Director of School Food Services in Long Beach, Mississippi. While at NFSMI, she served as project manager on numerous research projects including the development of Financial Management Information System model for school nutrition programs. The model served as the basis the design of FUNDamentals, a financial management reporting software.

MH: I'm Melba Hollingsworth. I'm the Education and Training Specialist at NFSMI. This is February 4, 2010, and I'm here with Dr. Jerry Cater. Would you tell us a little bit about yourself and where you grew up Jerry?

JC: Well, I grew up in rural Mississippi. I was the daughter of a dairy farmer, and the thing I remember most about growing up – I have two sisters and a brother and our parents were very concerned about our diet. They wanted us to 'eat right'. I think that rural environment created an interest in nutrition that's lasted forever.

MH: So what is your earliest recollection of the child nutrition program?

JC: Well, it's real interesting. I started to school in Neshoba County, and when I started to school we all had to take our lunch. They were in the process of building a lunchroom, and about mid-October the teacher came in one day very excited and said, "Children, tomorrow you can eat in the school lunchroom. You don't have to bring your lunch. The first meal will be free. After that you'll need to bring five cents for each meal." I went home and I told my mother, and I don't know who was more excited, my mother or myself, because in those days there was no store-bought food to prepare lunches to send to school, so it was a challenge every day. And I remember we had fried chicken, and I remember an orange, and beyond that I'm not sure what we had that day, but it was a very exciting day.

MH: So they didn't have the Breakfast Program then?

JC: No, they did not have the Breakfast Program, but I did eat lunch every day in the little cafeteria after that first initial day. I don't remember a lot about the menus, but from then until I graduated from high school I ate in the lunchroom, as they called it in those days.

MH: Tell us about your educational background; what schools did you attend and what degrees did you earn?

JC: Well, I attended USM, USM and USM. I received a bachelor's degree, master's degree, and PhD from USM, the University of Southern Mississippi.

MH: Which is located...?

JC: In Hattiesburg, and ended up working there in the Applied Research Division of the National Food Service Management Institute. My first major was Home Economics, as many of the School Food Service Directors, I believe, have that major. My master's degree I majored in Institution Management and minored in Business Administration, and then of course at the PhD level is was Food Systems and Nutrition.

MH: How did you become involved with child nutrition programs as a profession?

JC: Well actually my mother was a Manager at Decatur High School, and when she first started she actually had all twelve grades and it was a district. Decatur, Mississippi was one school, but it was also a school district. And she managed that program for probably thirty-five years, so I grew up with everything revolving around school lunch, and school lunch, and school lunch, and then eventually school breakfast.

MH: I see, wow. So was there someone, a mentor, who influenced you in directing you into child nutrition?

JC: There were a few people at the University of Southern Mississippi when I was majoring in Home Economics, and Fern Hesson, and when I say this a lot of people will recognize the name – there was a small elementary school actually on campus where many of the students did their student teaching – and she became very involved. She taught Nutrition and she became very involved in the little school lunch program, and therefore involved her students. And by the time we graduated we knew nutrition was the most important thing and nutrition in the school lunch was even more important. The second person was at the graduate level, Dr. Margaret McCarthy. She had been in the state agency and had taken a position at the university teaching graduate students, and after the first day she pulled me out into the hall and said, “Jerry, I don't know what you're planning to do, but I want you to give serious consideration to the child nutrition program.”

MH: So, tell us about the positions that you've held.

JC: Well, actually when I graduated I ended up teaching at the college level after I got my master's, did not go into school nutrition right away, but I kept returning to USM taking courses in the area of child nutrition and had the opportunity to have a course under Thelma Flanagan, which was so exciting. So after that I called the state agency – Dr. McCarthy knew – and then I talked to some friends who were school nutrition directors and said, “If there's an opening in the area of Harrison County, Mississippi”, where I was teaching at the time, “I want to be considered, so let me know so I can apply.” So Long Beach Schools came open; the superintendent called and asked me to come over for a visit, and he said, “Well, I called three places. I called the state agency and they said. “Call Jerry Cater.” I called USM and talked to Dr. McCarthy, and she said, “Call Jerry Cater.” And then I called your friend over in the Gulfport school system and she said the same thing, he said, so you must be the person for the job. The rest is history; I was there nineteen years.

MH: Nineteen years at that school. So, how did your educational background help you in your career?

JC: Well of course I had the master's degree in Nutrition, so it was a great background, and at the same time we studied Institutional Management at that time. So that gave me a background into what to expect. I think though the Business Administration minor was one of the strongest points because it is the thing that helped me understand the financial side of the school nutrition program. I had followed a management company, and in a very small district like Long Beach with three thousand enrollment, that was not a successful endeavor. The school was actually in the red and so I was challenged immediately to bring the school out of being in the red; bring it to a positive fund balance and still do a good job with the food quality at the same time. And I believe that business administration background and the strong accounting was a tremendous help.

MH: Is there anything unique about Mississippi in regard to child nutrition programs?

JC: Well of course everybody recognizes the Southeast as being a very strong group of states for child nutrition and Mississippi has always believed in child nutrition, and the parents in the state believe in child nutrition. So I think to that extent we're very lucky.

MH: What was a typical day during your career?

JC: Typical day did not exist. Every day was a challenge and every day was something new, and I think that's what made it so exciting. I looked forward to going to work. I looked forward to working with the people, and I knew that every day would bring a challenge. And some days I would say at the end of the day, "Well, I didn't get much accomplished today, but I put out a lot of fires."

MH: Can you remember any one particular challenge?

JC: Yes, I remember one that I've told the story about many times. Right in the middle of serving the students – at the beginning actually – a school called hysterical, the Manager was hysterical. "The water's off. We have no water. We can't run the dishes", because there were no disposables at that point, "We can't finish. We're batch cooking. We can't do anything." So I'm thinking 'Who in the world would turn the water off to a school, knowing they're serving meals to children?' So I get in my car and I head that way to see what we could do. And on the way to the school, just before I got to the school, I see a group of men. They are digging in the ground and I realize it's the water pipes that they're working with. So I stopped the car and I lectured those gentlemen about turning off the water and so they turned it back on; that was a typical day.

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

JC: I think the basic child nutrition program of serving healthy meals and nutritious meals to students has not changed. The changes have been in the regulation changes and I think most of them have been good, because they've been directed at improving the program.

So, we've had challenges with regulations, and I can remember some of them – I'm thinking 'How will I ever convince especially faculty and principals that we have to do this?' But once you approach it from a positive standpoint it usually works. So there have been many changes, but I think the reason this program is so successful is that the basis for the reason we have the program has not changed.

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

JC: Passion probably. Everywhere I worked I had a great deal of passion and it usually came through, and so people recognize that.

MH: They responded, huh?

JC: They do; they respond. Even now teaching, I think my success with training is the passion for the program; that's what I'm told.

MH: So tell me some memorable stories, either people or children that come to mind over all those years.

JC: I think one of the things that comes to mind is I had been in the program about ten years, eight or nine maybe, and the chorus teacher came to me and said, "I want to do a Madrigal Feast, but I want the school food service to be part of that." And she said, "I want to do a dinner theater and present my madrigal singers and a program that goes along with that, and I want to serve prime rib", and she laid out quite a menu. And the thing that also was real important to her was that we do a suckling pig, she said, "because in the fifteenth century they paraded a suckling pig through the crowds at the banquets and they sang songs to the suckling pig." She said, "I want to duplicate that." And so the first thing I'm thinking is 'Oh my goodness, in our high school cafeteria.' But I was never one to turn down a challenge, so we accepted. I talked with the staff and we accepted the challenge, and it was a smashing success. The cafeteria did not look like the cafeteria when her people and her booster club finished decorating. It was beautiful. We practiced for a solid week, because we had to deliver the food exactly at the right moment, because it was part of the program. And in the end, the last thing – and the suckling pig went over great; we did have a HUGE oven and so we were able to find one and didn't have to dig a hole in the ground outside – but in the end she wanted flaming pudding, so we were trying to figure out – we could not bring all this liquor in and flame the pudding – so we finally decided that we would soak sugar cubes in lemon extract. So we had an assembly line of little cut pieces of bread pudding and we had a whole line and one group soaked the cubes, took them out, put them on, and somebody else flamed them. And so when it they were flaming. Now there were times that the extract would get on us and we'd flame too. So it was always exciting and in the end we did that for ten years, and it grew every year. We developed quite a reputation. My feeling was that it improved the image of our program everywhere.

MH: And was it easy to get a suckling pig?

JC: It was not always easy. The first few years it was actually easy. I had a local company that some people might recognize, although they're no longer in existence, called Swift, at least they're gone from the coast, where I'm from, and they were able to order it. But one year I could not get it; it was becoming impossible. Well, in our area I remembered that there was a farm that was run by the prisoners, so I called one of the prison wardens that I knew worked up there and I said, "I need a suckling pig. Do you all have one that you could give the school?" Well, actually they did, so the prisoners cleaned the pig and brought it, and we cooked the pig from the prison farm that year and nobody was the wiser.

MH: What an interesting story; anything else that comes to mind?

JC: I did leave the Long Beach School District and started working at Applied Research at NFSMI in Hattiesburg, and I loved those years doing research. It was applied research so it was always exciting to go out and find things about school systems that we could apply and develop training material. But I have to say that at the end of the day when I'm no longer even consulting, I will probably think back on those years in Long Beach with the fondest memories of working with the students and those dedicated people in the school.

MH: So what advice would you give other folks who are going into child nutrition professions?

JC: Well I actually teach as an adjunct sometimes for the University of Southern Mississippi, and the course that I teach is called Management of Child Nutrition Programs. It's an on-line course and I usually have about twenty students from around the country, and I always tell them that they should always enjoy the camaraderie of working with other school nutrition directors and seek them out for advice because I think that's the success for anyone working in child nutrition; when you call another director and ask them something, they will always be more than willing to share, and I think it is that camaraderie of being willing to share that makes the program so great.

MH: So how many years again in total, because you've done a whole spectrum?

JC: I did. I started teaching at the college level, nutrition. That was five years, and then I went from there to Long Beach, which was nineteen years; eleven in the applied research, so you could start adding those up – and they add up.

MH: Tell us a little bit about what you are doing now.

JC: I actually retired in June 2006 from the Applied Research division after eleven years. And I had a call in the fall about doing training for the Institute. And I said, "Oh, I would love to" because I needed a transition. It was going to be horrible to just sit. I was having separation anxiety. And so I started training, and I've been training, I've been writing training material, and my background in research was a tremendous help, because we did a lot of research for instance on financial management that I'm now training and helping

write training materials. So in many ways, when people say to me, “When did you retire?” I look at them and say, “Retirement is a joke”, because actually I am working quite regularly now, and I think that that’s good to have that experience and the research background, because you understand ‘why’ behind the things you are teaching and training, and when the participants ask [questions] they appreciate the extra bit of information.

MH: Your expertise has been financial management.

JC: My expertise had been financial management, and I think that came about because I did walk into a district that was in a deficit and it required a lot of pencil pushing and crunching numbers to get to the point that we felt like we were going to see daylight. So in addition to the fact that I had the business background in the accounting courses, it was a natural. It was good that I had good people and good managers who were able to keep the menu portion of the regulations under control because essentially most of my interest was directed to the financial management side of the operation

MH: And you’re still doing presentations on financial management.

JC: Still doing presentations, Orientation for you that I enjoy, as well as courses.

MH: And I do have to say that we really enjoy your excellent writing skills. It has helped us a lot with our materials.

JC: Well thank you. That’s also a skill that you develop. The more you write, the better you are able to convey or communicate.

MH: Thank you for coming in.

JC: Thank you.