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Recommended Citation

Smith, Barbara and Institute of Child Nutrition. Child Nutrition Archives., "Barbara Smith" (2008). *Oral History Project (all interviews)*. 44.

https://egrove.olemiss.edu/icn_ohistories/44

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Barbara Smith Oral History

Barbara Smith taught Home Economics for six years before becoming Food Service Director in Russellville, Arkansas, for four years. She then worked for the Arkansas Department of Education until her retirement in early 2008.

JB: I'm Jeffrey Boyce and it is July 21, 2008, and I am here in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania with Mrs. Barbara Smith. Thank you, Barbara, for sitting down to talk with us today.

BS: Thank you for listening to all of our stories. I know that has to be an interesting job.

JB: It really is and there are some wonderful stories that people have to tell.

Could we begin today by you telling us a little bit about yourself, where you were born and grew up?

BS: I was born in California but actually grew up in Sheridan, Arkansas.

JB: That's a big switch.

BS: Absolutely. Mom and Dad had moved to California after the war, and then came back home, I guess when I was about two or three years old. I lived there all my life. I went to elementary, high school, the whole nine yards in that one little bitty town.

JB: Okay. What's the population of that town?

BS: It's probably, when I was there, it was just over a thousand people. Now, it's up to about 3,000, so we are growing.

JB: It sounds like my little town, except it is going the opposite way.

BS: Is it really? Bless your heart. Well, it's close to Little Rock. It is about 30 miles out of Little Rock. So, it's a pretty good drive and we have a lot of people who drive in.

JB: So you are close enough so that you can really enjoy the big city, too.

BS: And you still get a little bit, well a lot of the small town.

JB: What are some of your earliest recollections of child nutrition programs?

BS: You know, we had a wonderful child nutrition program when I was in elementary school. I was just thinking, one of my favorite stories is the ladies in the cafeteria used to let us work in the cafeteria if we were really good students. You had to be really good to get that honor. And if they let you work in the cafeteria, they would always give you a free lunch. They would give you a quarter to work. And I never told my mom that I was working in the cafeteria. So, I ended up getting a quarter from my mom for lunch, I got a free lunch, and then I got paid a quarter. So, I started earning money in the child nutrition program back when I was in elementary school.

JB: Building wealth even in elementary school.

BS: Absolutely. Absolutely.

JB: So how did you get involved in the child nutrition profession?

BS: Silly story. I taught Home Economics for six years. I decided I wanted to get out of the classroom. I was teaching school at the time when all of the dress codes were coming in. I ended up spending half my class measuring girls' dress lines. I got a little frustrated with that process. So I ended up deciding that I was going to quit and find another job, and a friend of mine whose husband happened to be my insurance agent, had an accident in Little Rock, had an automobile accident. I had to call her, him, ended up talking to her. She had a food service job that she had to turn down. She had accepted it and then

had to turn it down in Russellville, Arkansas. And she said, "I promised the Superintendent I'll find him someone to at least apply for the job. You don't have to take it or any of that. But at least come up and interview." So I went up to interview for the job and actually accepted the job a week before school started. And I had absolutely no preparation whatsoever to be a Food Service Director. I had a Home Economics background. So, I had the nutrition and menu-planning and that sort of thing. But, I had no concept that food came in Number 10 cans. And I had never seen a 60-quart mixer, and that sort of thing.

JB: They can be intimidating, can't they?

BS: Yes, for sure. I literally took that job and God bless Ernestine Camp. She is the one who saved me.

JB: So was she your mentor then?

BS: She absolutely is. She was with the Department of Education. And we called, the Superintendent called and said, "I've got a new Director that needs someone to come in." Ernestine came down and spent some time with me and over the years taught me what I needed to know in order to be able to do that job.

JB: She is a wonderful lady.

BS: Isn't she absolutely divine? Just divine.

JB: She sure is. Could you tell me about the different positions that you held then, how your career developed?

BS: Basically, I have a Home Economics background. I taught school, Home Economics in high school for six years. I was a Food Service Director for four, and then went to the Department of Education. So, I worked actually with Ernestine. I ended up not only working with her in the school, but working with her in the Department of Education.

JB: So you have seen the career from every aspect, every side.

BS: Absolutely.

JB: Is there anything unique about Arkansas regarding child nutrition programs?

BS: You know, I think right now the really unique thing is that we still do a lot of cooking. We have not moved to that pre-prepared, pre-cooked, thaw and serve food yet. We still do a great deal of that. We also do a great deal of training. The state department does. In the summertime, we have a four weeks worth of workshop that Food Service Managers come to. We literally teach them how to cook, food service principles, and all of those kinds of things.

JB: It sounds like a wonderful program.

BS: It really is. Ernestine started it back when she was at the Department of Education. They began the program. Ernestine, when I guess 1962 or 3 was when the program started. It has always been associated with a university. And we did it at the University of Arkansas from 1962 to 1980. And then we moved it to the University of Central Arkansas in Conway. And it has evolved over the years as programs have changed. But it really is wonderful.

JB: And you said it is four weeks of workshops?

BS: It's four weeks of workshops and we have a certification program for Managers in our state. And it requires the four weeks of training for two years and then it also requires an on-the-job evaluation. They literally have to go home. They have to be a Food Service Manager for a year. Their immediate supervisor has to evaluate them and

say that in fact they did learn what they needed to learn and should be certified. And then after that third year, they are certified.

JB: Excellent.

BS: And then they have to maintain their certification once every six years.

JB: And then what do they do?

BS: They have to go back to training.

JB: For the four-week workshop?

BS: It is not a full four weeks. It is usually the major part of a week.

JB: Just a refresher course.

BS: Yes. Just to update them on rules, regulations, you know, sanitation requirements and all of those kinds of things that change.

JB: What was a typical day like for you when you were working in food service? Or was there a typical day?

BS: There isn't a typical day. As a Food Service Director, absolutely, my job as Food Service Director was my favorite job I have ever had. Now, I love working for the state and always did. But my superintendent was a man who let you know that you had the responsibility but you also had the control. And he literally let me run that program. And it was exciting. It's running a business is what it is. And I had, I guess, seven sites at that time. So it was small enough that I really could be involved in what was going on at all of the sites. So it really was a good, interesting, nothing boring about that job, ever. Not a boring day came up that I can think of.

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

BS: When I started, I guess it was in '72 is when I became a Food Service Director, the major paperwork we had to do was the free/reduced price meal application. That was pretty well it. We weren't required to do production records at that time. We weren't required to do edit checks and we weren't required to do all that. So, I think the paperwork and the complication of the program. The program has gotten a great deal more complicated than it was when I started. Thank God all I had to learn was a meal pattern, you know the meal pattern and, to keep the financial records that had to be kept, and review those applications. That was really what I had to learn that first year. I would hate to be a first year Food Service Director right now because there is just so much. It is so complicated.

JB: What advice would you give to that first-year person or someone thinking about going into the field?

BS: Do it, because I think it is a wonderful job. I absolutely think it is wonderful. But, I really would do a lot of preparation, listening to other people and I would take it just one step at a time. You could go into a situation and see a lot of changes that need to be made or a lot of improvements or whatever and you want to do it all at one time and you just simply can't. You've got to take it one bite at a time. You've got to eat that elephant one piece at a time, not the whole thing. But like I said, I think it is an exciting job. It's almost a losing proposition because you can't please all of the people all of the time. But you really can make some improvements and some changes. And you can see those improvements and changes. You actually can look at what you have done and then you can look at those kids and know that you have done what you are supposed to do.

JB: What are some of the biggest challenges that you faced in your career?

BS: I tend to be a person who is very practical and regulations are not written that way. They are very precise. They are rules that you have to follow. And literally, there are times when that is what you have to do at the Department of Education. When we were doing our training program and all of that, what I would end up doing was simply saying, "Don't try to make it make sense, because it doesn't always make sense. It is a rule and you just have to follow that rule." That is hard for me. That really is hard for me because when I can see an easier, better way that still accomplishes the goal that we are looking for, I have a tough time following those rules. I am not much of a rule follower.

JB: What are some of the most memorable stories from your career? Any special kid or...

BS: Oh yeah. One of my favorite stories, I used to do a lot of nutrition education in the classroom. I loved it. That was the part of the job that I really enjoyed the most. So, what I basically did was develop lesson plans for different age groups of kids and all that, and made sure the teachers knew what I had. So I could easily go in and do a presentation for a classroom. Well, in the fourth grade, I had "Nutritious Snacks." That was one of the things that I would go into the classrooms and do. And I would always take food from the cafeteria, whatever we had that was easily accessible to take into the classroom. Well, this was the year that we had gotten tons and tons of cheese and also prunes. So, when I went into the classroom, I had peanut butter crackers and some fresh fruit. And I took cheese and prunes and you know, all of that sort of stuff. So we talked about the nutritional content and how good it was to eat good nutritional snacks rather than unhealthy snacks and all of that. And, this one little boy, and I explained about prunes, that prunes were basically plums that had been dried and how good they were for you. And all the kids had to promise to taste everything that I brought in. They did not have to eat it all, they just had to taste it. One little boy loved the prunes. He just fell in love with the prunes. And so, to use up the prunes, it is a rather hard thing to use that kids could eat. We used to put a dried prune on the plate with other things. And so we did that one day. And this little boy who liked the prunes so, so much, ate his prune and then got the prunes from some of the children around him. It was wintertime, and he stuffed his little coat pockets with prunes, and his little pants pockets with prunes. And then he went out to the playground. Well, he ate prunes all during recess. Well, when it came time to go back to the classroom, he really couldn't go back to the classroom. He ended up going to the bathroom and they ended up sending him home before the end of the day because he really almost made himself sick.

JB: Anything else you would like to add today?

BS: I can't think of anything right now.

JB: What is your proudest moment or what do you think is your biggest contribution to the child nutrition field?

BS: You know, I don't really know that I could say. I think the training program. I worked with that training program. Once Ernestine retired, that became my responsibility. And so, that would probably be the thing that I am proudest of, is all of the Managers that we trained through that program.

JB: You had some big shoes to fill.

BS: Oh listen, I didn't even come close, didn't even come close. But I've got the gray hair. And you also know that she and I are from the same hometown.

JB: Wow. There must be something in the water there.

BS: I think there is. I wouldn't be a bit surprised to find that to be true.

JB: Well thank you so much for taking the time today.

BS: Oh, thank you. I had a good time.

JB: I enjoyed it too.

BS: Oh listen, I can talk about stuff like this all of the time.