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Anita Ellis Oral History

Anita Ellis is a former educator who, as Assistant Director for the West Virginia Department of Education of Child Nutrition, directed the Nutrition Education & Training program. She has conducted training for teachers and food service personnel. She wrote the Kansas Department of Education, *Pyramid Builders, Nutrition Curriculum K-6* and the Mississippi Department of Education, *Pyramid Pursuit, Nutrition Curriculum K-3 and Grades 4-6*.

Mrs. Ellis has various experiences in school food service procurement as well as training. She has organized four (4) purchasing cooperatives in West Virginia and continues to assist them with brand approval and bid specifications. She does team teaching for the course, *First Choice, A Purchasing Systems Manual for School Food Service*. In addition, she developed the *Instructor's Guide for the first edition of First Choice*, designing relevant learning activities and transparencies.

JB: I'm Jeffrey Boyce and this is June 15, 2009, and I am here at the National Food Service Management Institute with Mrs. Anita Ellis. Welcome Anita and thanks for taking the time to talk with me today.

AE: Thank you for having me.

JB: Would you begin by telling me a little bit about yourself, where you were born and grew up?

AE: I was born in Elkins, West Virginia, but I grew up in the southern part of the state, in Mingo County, which you've probably heard about the Hatfields and the McCoys, down around that territory.

JB: What's your earliest recollection of child nutrition programs? Did you have a lunch or a breakfast program at school?

AE: We had a Special Milk Program, and they used to serve it in little, tiny half-pint jars, which I found the other day in an antique store. That really is my first memory of child

nutrition programs. We did not have a breakfast program at that time; we did have lunch.

JB: What were some of your favorite menu items in school?

AE: Probably pinto beans and cornbread.

JB: So you went to elementary school where?

AE: In Williamson, West Virginia.

JB: And high school there also?

AE: Yes.

JB: And where did you go to college?

AE: I went to West Virginia University for my bachelor's; came back to Charleston and worked for The Dairy Council.

JB: What was your bachelor's in?

AE: It was in Home Economics Education. And then I taught for a time at what was then called West Virginia State Institute, a college north of Charleston. Then I taught in public school and that's when I did my master's degree at Marshall University in Huntington, West Virginia.

JB: And your master's was in?

AE: It was in Education.

JB: How did you become involved in child nutrition as a profession?

AE: I was teaching in a local high school and an opportunity became available at the West Virginia Department of Education. A friend of mine who was working there at the time contacted me and asked me to apply, which I did.

JB: And what was this position?

AE: The position at that time was Director of Nutrition Education and Training. There were no funds at that time, but the director we had then was Faith Gregory Meyer, and she felt quite strongly about the importance of nutrition education and she wanted someone on her staff that would highlight that part of the program.

JB: Was there a mentor, or someone who guided you into child nutrition?

AE: Probably just a golden opportunity at the right time. I was teaching in a school that was very demanding. At that time it was very new; it was a modular schedule. It was a good time for me to leave the classroom.

JB: Tell us about some of the positions you have held since leaving the classroom and going into child nutrition.

AE: I was Director of Nutrition Education and Training and then became the Assistant Director for Child Nutrition for the State Department of Education. That was my career in the State Department of Education.

JB: And how did your educational background help prepare you for these positions you held, or did it?

AE: I don't know if anything prepares you for child nutrition programs. My experience, my experience in the classroom, understanding what it is that teachers have to do; there are many, many demands on their time, and if you can make something available and easy for them, they are very happy and very willing, most of them, to use it. Of course the nutritional background I had was essential. Sometimes we find that we have some people within child nutrition who really have no knowledge of nutrition

whatsoever. And I think they really have a difficult time trying to capture that part of the program without having had some formal education.

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

AE: At the time when I started at the State Department of Education we had what I feel was an outstanding director. Her name was Faith Gravenmeyer. And if I had a mentor Faith would be my mentor. Her attitude was that you go into a district or a county; you see what is going on. If there is some problem, if they are not complying with federal regulations as they should be, then you go back and help them with that problem before you do a formal review, so they at least have an idea of what they are supposed to be doing and the way to correct that problem. And I think that was probably the most unique thing about West Virginia. West Virginia was also one of the first states to establish what they called at that time a junk-food regulation. We disallowed the use of soft drinks and candy and chewing gum in the school during the school day. They could not be sold during the school day at any school. That later was reversed a little. It crept back into the high schools. But that regulation still stands in elementary schools and middle schools.

JB: What was a typical day like for you, or was there a typical day?

AE: Oh, there was no typical day Jeff. There's never a typical day for anybody in child nutrition. As a State Department personnel I did a lot of traveling throughout the state, and I don't know if you have been to our state -

JB: Unfortunately, I haven't.

AE: You need to come. It is challenging. It is less challenging now than it was when I was traveling. We have very, very mountainous roads, two-lane, most of them. My husband claimed that the part of the state that liked for me to come the most was the one that was the furthest away, the one that's over close to Washington, D. C. So travel was a great deal of my time. One of my most memorable times was right after I came to the State Department of Education. The USDA allowed some grants for nutrition education and training specifically. They were going to be an experimental program. We applied for that grant and were awarded that grant. I think that there were at least five other states including West Virginia who received it. We had a research program where we involved eighty schools. We had a new curriculum for the teachers which were basic nutrition because this was K-6. Then we had five menus that were test menus and on each day we had one food item that we measured the plate waste for because our goal was to see if we taught nutrition education and had what we called some "cooking experiences" in the classroom, would that in fact make a difference as to whether or not children would eat those particular foods. We had forty schools that we did this with and it was called Solomon for Design with the research department and the education department. So it was Solomon for Design and where forty schools did a pre-post test and four of those schools only did a post test and that was only to see whether or not children were influenced by a pre-test. We had the teachers involved and we actually paid them to come to training with that grant money and by the time that we finished the project we found that out of five food items the plate waste decreased in all but one

and that was coleslaw. [Laughter] So I am not sure that you are ever going to convince a child to eat coleslaw.

JB: Well, what were some of the biggest challenges that you have faced when you were there?

AE: I think the biggest challenge was the fight about the junk food thing.

JB: You got a lot of resistance for it?

AE: Oh yes! We had hearings over at the legislature. You know there were some legislators that were convinced that if they had a coke that the children could have a coke and that there was no reason that they shouldn't have a coke. And fortunately we had a state superintendent who shared Mrs. Faith Gravenmeyer's position that if we are an educational facility, and that's really what our goal is, then we need to be setting an example. So the only things that were permitted in the vending machines were juice or water. And we defined candy as to the percent of sugar in the product. They were allowed to have other things like chips, peanut butter crackers, and that kind of thing, but candy, soft drinks, and chewing gum were denied. Principals were furious with us and one principal quoted to us how much money he would lose if in fact that regulation was put into effect so he was rather upset. So that was probably the biggest challenge. The other challenge particularly with that experimental program that I was talking about was the rapport with teachers. You know, some teachers resented coming to training on Saturday or whenever we could do the training. The food service personnel, the coordinators within the state department of education, did the training and of course if they were going to do this project they were to do tasting parties in the classroom and

there was money furnished for that as well through the child nutrition program. So those are probably the biggest challenges that I faced in terms of what I would call a challenge.

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

AE: I think that the goal or at least it seemed to me that as I said before that Mrs. Faith Gravenmeyer's philosophy was that we have hungry children in our schools and we have a high percentage of free and reduced children in our state because we are a rural state and we have a lot of poor children. And her philosophy and her goal was that we were to feed those children and if those children wanted a second meal then they needed to have a second meal. We have had principals tell us about children who come to school on Monday morning for the breakfast program who are just famished. And West Virginia was the first site of the Breakfast Program in the entire United States. That was again sort of an experiment from the USDA. It was in a southern county in West Virginia. The Breakfast Program is mandated in every school in our state. So I think that I have seen that philosophy change to "Are you meeting this specific requirement of x number milligrams of sodium?" And it has changed from "Our goal is to feed children" to "Can we catch you doing something wrong," which I find very sad and that frustrates me a lot.

JB: What would you consider to be your most significant contribution to the field?

What's your shining moment you're proudest of?

AE: Oh Jeff, what a question - probably currently my contribution to help school districts with procurement. If we don't maintain the quality of food - if we can't

maintain the quality of food, and that is directly related to your purchasing practices, then again we're not providing our children with the nutrition that they need, and the food that they need. I really haven't contributed much, but I think that would be my biggest contribution, my effort toward helping with the procurement.

JB: Any memorable stories or special people as you think back over your career?

AE: Yes. When we were doing that experiment with the five menus, one of our food items was broccoli, raw broccoli, and in interviewing some of the students one little elementary girl said she hadn't eaten broccoli before. And one of the teachers said, "Why have you started eating broccoli?" And she said, "Well, somebody told me that if I would eat broccoli I would have big boobs." That one sticks with me. [Laughter] I think of that when I need a lift, and when I'm discouraged about something. And I think, "I'm not sure we taught that in the classroom", but somehow she got that out of it.

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

AE: Go into it with an open, flexible attitude. The most wonderful people I have ever met have been people involved in child nutrition. They are the most loving, sharing, caring people that I have ever met. And you're going to find that as you stay in the field, and as you go toward that goal. But be open-minded and flexible, and keep in mind that it's the children that we are concerned with, and it's their nutritional wellbeing, regardless of all this other stuff that goes on, all the little details that you get tangled up with. And take care of yourself. Many, many food service employees don't take care of themselves. And I hope no one sees that because they're going to say that back to me!

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

AE: Nothing except that I think it's the most wonderful career that you can strive for.

There are so many opportunities and so many different things that you can do, and it's a challenge every day. I still daily, as long as I've been with the program, I still find surprises almost every day.

JB: Well thank you for taking the time to talk with me today.

AE: You're welcome Jeff.