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**Ramona Gaudette**

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Institute of Child Nutrition

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Ramona Gaudette Oral History

Ramona Gaudette went to work in school nutrition at Southport School, Maine, in 1957. She was still working there in December 2012, when this interview was conducted.

JB: I am Jeffrey Boyce and it is December 13, 2012, and I am on Southport Island, Maine, with Ms. Ramona Gaudette. Welcome Ramona, and thanks for taking the time to talk with me today.

RG: I’m glad to.

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

RG: I was born in Damariscotta, Miles Hospital. I grew up in South Bristol, way down on the coast in South Bristol.

JB: All in Maine?

RG: Yes.

JB: So you went to elementary school there?

RG: Yes, kindergarten through eight in one room.

JB: How many students were there?

RG: Thirty-five probably in there.

JB: Ok. Was there any sort of feeding program there, a lunch program or a breakfast program?

RG: No. It was before they started doing that. We all took our lunch. Sometimes we heated soup on the old-fashioned black stove. There was one black stove that sat in the middle and then the pipes went up through and heated the whole building. It’s in the historical register now.

JB: Oh, it’s still there?

RG: Yes.

JB: How wonderful. So what about high school?

RG: I went to Lincoln Academy in Newcastle, graduated from Lincoln Academy, and I worked in that cafeteria.

JB: Oh, so there was a feeding program there?

RG: Yes. That was later on.

JB: So did you work while you were going to high school?
RG: I did, because my mother passed away when I was thirteen and I was taking care of my dad and my brother. And so when I went to Lincoln I asked if I could work in their cafeteria to help pay for my lunches so my dad wouldn’t have to. And my favorite food was Beef Wellington. I don’t think anybody makes it anymore.

JB: That’s a pretty high-end item for a school cafeteria.

RG: I used to make it here years ago.

JB: That sounds wonderful. What else did you like besides the Beef Wellington?

RG: I like the Welsh rabbit, and that’s what I’m making today for these kids. I worked with Helen Rand. She was my wonderful friend, and we had eighty-one students here. And then they started sending them over to Boothbay in the seventh and eighth grade so they could get into more sports and activities over there. She and I used to do the hokey-pokey together. We had no dishwasher. We used plain glass plates – green and white – which are still here, the old-fashioned white with the green trim. We had glass milk jars. It all came in half-pint glass jars. We had to wash all those every day. The milkman would come and bring them. It wasn’t in cartons like it is now.

JB: After high school did you go further on to school?

RG: I did not, no.

JB: Did you start here then?

RG: I started here, yes.

JB: And that was when?

RG: In ’57 I started for the town of Southport and cooked all the nutritious stuff. I’ve received many great awards and posters. I was Grand Marshall in the Windjammer Parade in Boothbay; so I was pretty lucky.

JB: Has there been someone, a mentor along the way, who helped sort of guide you in the field?

RG: I think it was my friend Helen Rand, who I started with.

JB: Was she already here when you came?

RG: She was already here, yes, and she was wonderful. And when the kids got too noisy she’d take the lid – we had an old-fashioned blue canner and we kept the flour in it; that’s all we had back then to keep the flour and stuff in – and when the kids got real noisy she’d drop it on the cement floor, and the kids would all come to attention when she did that.

JB: So you’ve been here in the one school then for fifty-five years?

RG: Yes I have.
JB: How long did you work with your friend Helen?

RG: She retired in 1977, so I've worked pretty much alone since then. I had a couple of helpers way back, but the rest of the time I've been by myself.

JB: Is there anything unique about Maine in regard to child nutrition programs?

RG: I think it's a wonderful profession. I think they're doing really well with it. I had trouble when they changed. They've changed all the rules now. Everything is whole wheat. I can't make all those yummy yeast rolls anymore, muffins and goodies. I used to make little mini-cookies and things like that for special days. They still let me do it on the holidays, but not as often. I know it's for their own good. It's a great thing, but that wasn't the way it was back then. My father ran an ice pond business in South Bristol.

JB: Now what's an ice pond business?

RG: Ice harvesting pond.

JB: Oh!

RG: And so I skated on that pond since I was three.

JB: Oh, wow.

RG: And I tap-danced down the street. I was busy; I was busy. I've worked for eleven principals already.

JB: Tell me what a typical day is like for you. What time do you arrive and what do you do?

RG: I always get up about a quarter of six in the morning, and then I come up here about seven, and I work until two-thirty usually. I do all the cleanup; I do it all.

JB: What's the first thing you do in the morning?

RG: The first thing I do is check my temperatures; turn my dishwashers on, turn my stoves on, and check my menus and write my menu board. I have to write a menu board every day of what I'm serving all day. And then at the end, before I start serving I have to check the temperatures again and make sure they're up where they need to be. I took a course of safe serve this year, which was really difficult, but it was a new course that we all had to do.

JB: So you're ServSafe certified?

RG: I'm ServSafe certified now. That was hard. That was hard.

JB: I know. I've sat in on some of those classes.

RG: So now I'm feeding the children of the children of the children, and they all love Welsh rabbit so they all come back and ask for Welsh rabbit.
JB: What is Welsh rabbit?

RG: It's like a cheese sauce. You put it on either little toast cubes or crackers. And I’m making macaroni and cheese today. It’s the same sauce, except you add macaroni. And one time one of my friend’s father died that went to school here years ago. Six of them, I fed all six of them, and their father died, and I said, “What can I do for you? I’d like to do something kind for you.” And they said, “Would you make us a big pot of Welsh rabbit?” Isn’t that cute?

JB: That is cute. Once you get everything prepared and all of your temperatures checked, then you feed the students. How many students do you have now?

RG: About thirty-five.

JB: And once they’re fed then I guess you do all the cleanup?

RG: I do all the cleanup and I do all the serving too – set up the tables, do the serving.

JB: So you’re a one-lady show.

RG: Yea, I’m it, I’m it.

JB: Do you do your own menu planning?

RG: I have always done it [but] this year I’m using the same menu as Boothbay. But I prefer doing my own, because I know what they like. But it’s a new rule I guess. The whole region’s doing the same menus.

JB: What are some of the biggest challenges you’ve faced in those fifty-five years?

RG: I think taking the ServSafe course was one of the hardest things – it really was. But not too bad; I’ve enjoyed it a lot and I think it’s a wonderful thing, and the kids love me to death.

JB: Well I think you’ve proved that it’s never too late to learn new things.

RG: Yea, right. I had a hard time with that because there was so much. I started school at four years old, because it was a one-room school and we lived right down the field from the school. So my sister went to school and I cried every day. So the teacher said, “Let her come. She won’t stay.” But I did stay, and when I got tired I crawled under my desk and sucked my thumb.

JB: What are some of the biggest changes you’ve seen in child nutrition over the years? You mentioned going to whole wheat.

RG: The whole wheat and the amount of the servings, and they can’t come back for seconds except fruit and vegetables. Because I like spoiling them, but I’m not allowed to spoil them anymore like I always did. I loved that. [The] computer was one of the worst things. I still don’t like it.

JB: I was going to ask you about that.
RG: I’m a wonderful typist, but I’m computer dumb. I’ve been a waitress since I was twelve and I’ve worked at many, many restaurants. And I work at the beautiful Rock Tide, which you may see when you go downtown.

JB: What’s it called?

RG: It’s the Rock Tide, and it’s across from Fisherman’s Wharf, right in the middle of town. I hope you get a chance to walk around down there.

JB: I hope so. What little I’ve seen is really beautiful.

RG: In the summer of course it’s busy. And I’ve been waitressing there forever. And then they went to computers and you had to order all your drinks by computers. That’s the first time I’ve almost quit a job. Then I thought, “Oh no, I’m not going to let that dumb computer get the best of me.”

JB: And are you still working there?

RG: Yes. I’ve been there forty-four years.

JB: Wow.

RG: It’s a beautiful restaurant, yes it is - nice people, fun, and immaculate.

JB: What would you say has been your biggest contribution to the field of child nutrition?

RG: Trying to keep the kids healthy I think, and make them love me like I love them. I don’t have to make them love me because I sing to them, and I do make special things on holidays now. I can still do that.

JB: That’s wonderful.

RG: And I go to all their concerts, and I hug them. I just love them.

JB: They sound like family.

RG: They are family, they really are family. This is an island and we’re all family.

JB: How many people live on the island?

RG: Probably six hundred maybe in the winter, probably thousands in the summer, because they all come here in the summertime. I’m sure there are at least three thousand here in the summertime. We have a few hotels.

JB: Other than the Welsh rabbit and the Beef Wellington what are some of the other favorites of the children, the menu items?

RG: They like the chop suey. Of course they love tater tots. They love those and the chicken nuggets. And I do hamburgers and cheeseburgers, hotdogs and beans and coleslaw, and those yummy yeast rolls that I’m not allowed to make anymore.
JB: Do you have any special stories about children over the years? I think you said you’re feeding the children of the children of the children.

RG: Yea, I am, and my own two children too. I didn’t intend to stay here, but I had two sons, and I wanted to be here as long as they were here, and then I never left. I think they’re all very special in my heart.

JB: Any special funny stories?

RG: I taught them how to play tap dancing at school a little bit. Of course they loved that. And I dressed up for them every holiday. They just think it’s pretty special – a lot of things we can’t do now.

JB: Sounds like you really cared about the kids over the years.

RG: I have. They’re my life, they really are. And I see them over town now all grown up. Now I’m feeding their children. But they’ll holler across the street to me. They always know who I am. Southport gave me this. I was really honored with that. [Newspaper clipping announcing Mrs. Gaudette being honored with the Southport Spirit of America Award for her fifty-five years of service.]

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

RG: I think it’s a wonderful profession. You have to really love children. You’ve got to give it all. The only one thing I think they should do is grant us some retirement. We don’t have retirement.

JB: Oh, you don’t have retirement in the state of Maine?

RG: I think some of the towns do, but Southport and Boothbay do not. It would be nice, because when you get all those years, and then when you get through – we work really hard to pass all the tests and take nutrition courses and pass the Safe Serve. So it would be nice if they could give us a little more, but it’s still a wonderful profession, and you’ve got to love the kids and like to cook and like to be on your feet all day on a cement floor.

JB: Anything else you’d like to add?

RG: I don’t think so. I really appreciate you coming up and interviewing me though.

JB: Well, thank you so much for talking with me today.

RG: You’re welcome. I hope I’ve told you something to help a little bit.

JB: It was very interesting.