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Anne Gennings Oral History

Anne Gennings of New York State, started her career as a hospital dietitian and served as president of New York State Dietetics. Gennings then became the food service director at New Harvard Central School and stayed in that position for thirty-three years. She was president of the New York School Nutrition Association in the late 1980s and president of the American School Food Service Association in the early 1990s.

JB: I'm Jeffrey Boyce and it's October 11, 2011. I'm here at the National Food Service Management Institute with Mrs. Anne Gennings. Welcome Anne, and thanks for taking the time to talk to me today.

AG: You're welcome; a pleasure.

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

AG: Yes. I was born in Clinton, New York. I was born and brought up on a farm, the oldest girl of six children, two boys, four girls; a lot of responsibilities in the kitchen at home, and helping with the family farm. I worked on the farm.

JB: Was it a dairy farm?

AG: Dairy farm, and a lot of crops.

JB: What sort of things did you grow?

AG: Corn, beans, peas – the ones that stick in my mind.

JB: That's all commercial?

AG: Yes. Had a lot of fruit trees – had a BIG garden.

JB: Vegetable garden?

AG: Vegetable garden – and we preserved all our own pickles, pears, beets – had a root cellar and put the peas and carrots in the root cellar.

JB: Sounds like quite the bucolic life.

AG: And then you'd go down in the winter and bring up what you wanted. So that was always fun.

JB: And that would keep all winter?

AG: Yes. It was a cold part of the basement, and it was a dirt basement.

JB: Did you have to pack them in sawdust or anything?

AG: No. They were just bagged in the corner as I remember it.

JB: I had never seen that until I was in the Peace Corps in Ukraine, and a lot of people had root cellars there.

AG: Did they?

JB: They stored a lot of root vegetables because it was so cold in the winter – turnips – well, cabbage isn't a root vegetable, but cabbage, garlic, lots of beets and potatoes.

AG: Well actually – it's not part of this, but when we were married, we left our beets and carrots in the ground, my husband and I, in our garden, and we just left the tops so we could see and had a stick where they were, and we would go out and dig them up in the winter.

JB: And they would be good all winter?

AG: Yes, because they were down in the ground.

JB: And that kept them from freezing.

AG: Yes.

JB: Interesting.

AG: They were delicious.

JB: What's the earliest recollection you have of child nutrition programs? Were there school lunch or breakfast programs when you were in elementary?

AG: No, there was no breakfast. That was many moons ago you are talking about now, and the school lunch was very limited then too.

JB: What was it like?

AG: It was like soup and sandwich, and then sometime you would have – I remember I liked meatloaf. You'd have meatloaf, potatoes - always some fruit if you had anything – very seldom any other kind of dessert.

JB: Oh really? That's healthy.

AG: Yes. And then come high school there was a little bit more choice, but not a lot.

JB: Tell me about your educational background. Where did you go to elementary school?

AG: In Clinton, New York, and graduated from high school there too. And then I went to Morrisville State College in Morrisville, New York, and got a two-year degree, associate degree in Food Service Administration and Dietetics. I did both.

JB: What made you pick those choices?

AG: Well, it was a school nearby, and I was the first one in my family to go to college. So it was a state school, it wasn't far away. My parents thought that would be good, not to go too far from home. And it

was more inexpensive to attend, and I got interested a little bit – I didn't have a mentor – but I got interested in the food business because I worked at a very fancy, white tablecloth restaurant through high school and college doing everything. They were close to my family, the people that owned it.

JB: What was it called?

AG: Trinkaus Manor. I was the salad girl. I was the dishwasher. I made parfaits. I was the hostess. I was setup girl, waitress, the whole nine yards.

JB: So that sounds almost like an internship for what you were studying.

AG: In a sense, but that was before it every happened almost. It started that way, but I decided I wanted to go into the field I thought, so I did. I went there and then I went from there, worked one summer I think, at a college in Syracuse, Syracuse University, in the food service department while I was waiting. I had applied at some hospitals as a dietitian. And I finally became an assistant dietitian in a hospital.

JB: What hospital was that?

AG: St. Elizabeth in Utica, New York, which was a city just away from my hometown. While I was at Syracuse I took a class, and it showed me that I really ought to continue my education. So while I was at St. Elizabeth I started working on it through Empire State College, which was a lot mentorship program and testing and studying on your own back then even. So I did that, and I worked the 6-2 shift at the hospital, so that was early in the morning getting up. I can remember sliding around some roads from the farm down there. But then after I was married and had our first child, I thought it was hard, the hours and the weekends working. And an opportunity came up in a school nearby, so I thought well, I'm going to apply, because the hours would work having a family. I'd only work Monday through Friday, so I thought I'd give that a try.

JB: What position was that?

AG: The food service director, at the time, and that's where I stayed for thirty-three years.

JB: What district was that?

AG: New Harvard Central School, and then from there I took on a couple of other districts that lost their director and didn't have a program, and a parochial school too.

JB: About when was this when you went into school food service?

AG: It would have been in 1957 that I went into it.

JB: '57?

AG: Yes. You're aging me now. That's when I went into the first school food service position, and it was probably fifteen years later before we started serving some of those other schools. I can remember going over to the parochial school just because I knew some kids there. And they were having McDonalds or something else brought in, and I said, "You know, we could give you healthier food, and supply it to you every day, instead of once a week." So that's how that started.

JB: So you were doing three schools.

AG: Districts.

JB: So how many schools would that have been?

AG: Eleven. In fact that reminds me, when I became SNA President I was the first one to be from the smallest school district at the time - most of the time the presidents are from big districts. Now it's changed, but I was the first one to come from a small district. I followed someone who had been in Memphis, another director from Richmond, and someone from Fort Lauderdale – so you can see how big those places were.

JB: How many students were in your district roughly?

AG: About five thousand.

JB: And what were participation rates like?

AG: Participation rates back then were around fifty percent. It was small –four or five percent – free and reduced, so it was mainly full-paid students. So we didn't have the reimbursement rate that you would get for free and reduced.

JB: Do you remember what a lunch cost when you started?

AG: Seventy-five cents sticks in my mind – somewhere around that.

JB: It's gone up a little since then.

AG: Yes it has. Up around the two dollar figure isn't it?

JB: I think so.

AG: I didn't finish my education did I? I kept on, even with a family and ended up finishing my degree through Empire State College with a Bachelor in Nutrition and Community Food Service. And then I also became involved when I was at the hospital with a dietetic association, and was president of New York State Dietetic. And then I took courses and became a certified Dietitian/Nutritionist by New York State Department of Education, because they wouldn't license dietitians in New York State, but you could get certified, so I have that to my credit too.

JB: So you started in child nutrition as a director and stayed director for thirty-three years?

AG: Thirty-three years, yes.

JB: Do you feel like your educational background helped prepare you for your career?

AG: Yes, yes. And I remember one course I took in designing kitchens, and I can remember being brutally unhappy with how they laid out some of my kitchen counters, like if there was a mistake at this end, like the extra space would be down where you got your tray, and then you'd get your main meal, and where you came up to get your fruits and you milk, and the cash register – there was no space there to put a tray at all. And the year I went there they were opening another kitchen, and it was built the same way, like they didn't even correct their own mistake – the architects. So anyway I hollered a lot, and they finally were going to build a central kitchen, and they finally let me design it, the central kitchen. And I had learned that in school, and drew up plans and made floor models – cut out little squares – a refrigerator, a stove – and moved them around on my plan.

JB: And when would this have been that you put in a central kitchen?

AG: I would say about '78, right around there, '78 to '80.

JB: And did it serve all the schools in those three districts?

AG: Right.

JB: How well did the central kitchen concept work in your area?

AG: Fantastic, fantastic, and it still is today. And they're doing three or four more districts out of that same kitchen.

JB: I interviewed Frank Harris back in the summer and he was talking about building a central kitchen too.

AG: In Norwalk, Connecticut.

JB: Right.

AG: Isn't he something?

JB: Oh, he's an amazing man.

AG: Yes he is – a good friend of mine.

JB: He's a nice man – he and his wife both – but he was saying that it was highly successful in Norwalk and Boston came to look at it and he highly recommended that they not do it because of their logistics and all, but they went ahead and I don't think it was as successful -

AG: - as successful as his. And then it's how you do it and how you proceed with it too, and making sure the food's good when it gets where it's going – there's a lot of logistics.

JB: Was Gertrude Applebaum the first to do that, the central kitchen in Corpus Christi?

AG: I wouldn't be surprised perhaps. She's first for a lot of things.

JB: She was in there on the ground floor at least.

AG: Absolutely – good friend too.

JB: Is there anything unique about New York in regard to child nutrition, as opposed to other states?

AG: Well, they started quite a while back, farm to school programs – not while I was there - but they had a couple of people really get involved with that, probably twenty years ago.

JB: That was cutting edge.

AG: And I think that's been great – a couple of folks I know that have pushed that. And we have a 'Choose Sensibly' program.

JB: What's that?

AG: Choose vegetables and fruit – we've had that for a while – and of course not that's becoming The Plate -

JB: So is it trying to teach kids to make healthier choices?

AG: Right. Choose sensibly. And then I remember when I was New York State President we were able to get a bill passed – non-nutritious foods that we sold in competition with lunch – and I think that was a biggie too, because you had all these other things being sold while you tried to serve a nutritious meal.

JB: So how did that work – where they not allowed for sale during the lunch period?

AG: Right. And then we fought it year after year. The candy lobby would come in and make their big pitch, but we were successful.

JB: That's good. Tell us what a typical day was like over the course of your career as you progressed. Or was there ever a typical day?

AG: I don't there was ever a typical day. You never know what's going to happen in school food service. You don't know who's all of a sudden not going to come in and what food delivery might not come in, and you quickly had to make adjustments, and particularly in a small district you didn't have a lot of people to back up. I did dishes lots of days and helped serve lunch wherever needed.

JB: What were some of the biggest changes you saw over your career?

AG: I want to think this a-la-carte – seeing more of that disappear – and when skim milk came in, and when low-fat chocolate came in. I thought that was a great move, because the children – which not it's interesting when they're trying to stop it again – because children that weren't drinking their milk drank their milk. And so for a low-fat or a skim chocolate milk, for the few calories that are in it, for the fact that all the calcium that's in it, that I felt that was great. And I like the idea now of working the obesity

angle trying to get kids healthier. I'd like to see them get more back into recess. Another thing that I did with Cornell University way back was did a pilot study in one elementary school on go out and play before lunch, because they always had lunch and then went out to play - I think that's typical today – and they would half eat their lunch and throw it away, milk, everything, because they wanted to save the slide, or the soccer field, or this spot. So Cornell did this study with me, and for a week they came in and measured the milk and everything else – the garbage, bag lunches too from home – and then the next week the kids went out and played, then came in and ate, and they measured everything again and I don't think they had a half a quart of milk. You're thirsty; you're running around – the kids -

JB: When the kids played first?

AG: Right. They came in, they're hungry. They ate everything. They drank all their milk. And then even the teachers, I can remember, were amazed because they were quiet when they got back to the classroom.

JB: Frank Harris, speaking of him again, told me the exact same thing. He said he lobbied all of his principals to have recess first and then let them come in and eat their lunch.

AG: Right. And all we ended up with was a study.

JB: They didn't implement it?

AG: No. And I hear talk of that today and I think 'Wow, that was proven years ago.' It makes a lot of sense really. It doesn't take a rocket scientist to figure that out.

JB: What were some of the biggest challenges you faced during your career?

AG: Well, in child nutrition probably trying to keep the budget balances, which we did, when you didn't have a lot of free and reduced, so then our state aid would be minimal. That would be one. I would think that was maybe my biggest.

JB: Just making the numbers work?

AG: Yes.

JB: Ok. So not only were you a director, you were president of the School Nutrition Association in 1990-91 I believe.

AG: Correct.

JB: Tell me about that experience.

AG: Before that I'd been on a nutrition committee way back when, and I should backtrack. It makes me think of when I went to my first New York state meeting I went my first year as a director. There was a meeting not far away, and what I remember, the state president was there. She was from Syracuse, and what I thought was neat, she was the director and her husband was the superintendent.

JB: Do you remember her name?

AG: Yes, Elaine Bradley, and he was superintendent, and I thought 'Wow, wouldn't that make your life easy married to a superintendent? You got a problem? Solved.' I can remember that my very first meeting in '73, so it's really going back. So I was on the Nutrition Committee for SNA, someone asked me to serve on that -

JB: Well before that, did you say you were the state president in New York State also?

AG: After that. First I had been Dietetic Association President in New York State. That was before I went into school food service. Then when I was in school food service someone asked me – I can't remember who now – to serve on the Nutrition Committee, so I served on that committee.

JB: For the state or national?

AG: National. And then I guess I did a good job serving on that and they asked me run for Northeast Regional Director, which is to represent the seven states in the northeast on the national board. So I did that and enjoyed it very much traveling. I'm a people person I guess, and I enjoyed that very much, going to talk to the states. And after that I was thinking 'You know, it wouldn't be bad to throw my hat in the ring for national president, but you had to have been president of your state before you put your hat in the ring, and I hadn't been president of my state. So I went back and in '87-88 I was president of my state association. And then the next year I was chairman of the national convention in San Antonio. And then after that they asked me to put my name on the ballot and I did.

JB: It was still called ASFSA then, right?

AG: Back then right. You said that great, ASFSA, that's hard to say.

JB: I'm at NFSMI so I get a little practice.

AG: Absolutely. And[being national president]was great – enjoyed that – and that's what prompted me to take an early retirement too. After I was president in '90-91 I saw so much. I traveled to a lot of states, as Katie I'm sure has told you, and saw so much going on, and I thought '

Gee, people have got to start thinking outside of that box.' So many people didn't have salad bars, they didn't have choices. 'I can share.' So I talked my husband into it – I'm going to take early retirement and I'm going to open my own business, and I'm going to work with schools, and how to improve their participation, work simplification, marketing, and so I started doing that with some states. And I went to

a few districts and met with their student council, their administration, their teacher committee, the food service staff – get all this input – spent a whole day doing that – and then wrote it up and then met with the director and shared all my findings. And that was fun doing and sharing expertise that I had from traveling, from my position.

JB: Did you find that most people were receptive to change?

AG: Yes. Most of the people would have you in because they're paying me to come in and if they didn't want to take my suggestions 'Then give me my check and I'll run.'

JB: So they were already realizing that they had a problem and they wanted some help?

AG: Right. I can remember walking into a dining room and the first thing that caught my eye was an ugly garbage can right in the middle of the dining room. And it's one of those things, the forest so close to your face you can't see. That was fun doing, and then I also did workshops at state conferences. And meanwhile a couple of industry folks overheard me saying I was doing early retirement and asked me if I would work with them, and I put together a program, 'How to be a salesman, not an order-taker', and met with their sales staff. And then one gentleman that's here now that I now do some consulting for – now I do a lot less, I do a lot more playing and less working now, but he sat in on it and he asked me if I would be their consultant, so I stopped doing the state programs, because that took a lot more work. Now I just show up with the company. So that's kind of how I got to where I am now, but I guess I've always liked people, and children, and hunger issues. They are my passion. I just think a country as rich as we are and have the hunger we have – it disturbs me.

JB: What would you say has been your most significant contribution to the field so far?

AG: I think maybe getting people involved that I did back when. At the time several people came up to me and said, "You're the most people-person president that we've ever had. The little guy – and I

suppose that's coming from a small district – I realized that's who made me successful when I was president. Don't forget I was gone a lot, so it was that staff that I left home that picked up the pieces and kept the ball rolling, although when I was home I would spend Sunday in my office too.

JB: You said you traveled a lot while you were president. Did you see any major differences geographically as you went throughout the country – perhaps the way people did things, or the foods that people ate?

AG: What I remember a little bit is like up in Maine a lot of the food service people had two jobs. It was a poor area where I visited, and they might work on the shore, helping with fishing or cleaning after they did their job at school, because they didn't earn enough money. I remember that also in some of the farther out and poorer states. They struggled more. Salaries were very low. That I remember, but I also remember a lot of real home cooking too in those same areas.

JB: It's a shame that we've lost so much of that.

AG: But I think we're going back to it some. I think there's more scratch cooking coming back

JB: Do you think it will be successful?

AG: Yes.

JB: Any special stories that come to mind, special kids or people that you worked with as you think back over your career?

AG: Yes, a couple come to mind. One story that I think of that wasn't from me – I remember this lady telling me, but it reminds me of my story, that there was a time when everybody had to get two pats of butter. That was part of the program. And if you have a slice of bread, how can you put two big pats of butter on one slice? And they had tables like this too that the kids ate at [indicates round wooden table]

with tablecloths on, and they had a Clean Plate Club, and my friend sat down at a table with a skirt and she put her hands under the skirt and they were covered with butter. The kids had put their butter pats up under the table so they'd have a Clean Plate Club. I've often thought of her. And the butter on reminds me – I used to get good audits from the state department, I'll say that. And one time the lady came to audit me, and they always used to figure out if you used enough protein, enough milk for the number of kids you fed. And my menu was spaghetti with meat sauce, tossed salad, Italian bread and butter, milk, and fruit. Good menu, right? And it passes everything, the amount of food I used, except butter. I was twenty pounds of butter short for the number of kids I served. I can remember looking at her and saying, "Mrs. Titus, what can I do with twenty pounds of butter? You only can put so much butter on a slice of bread. Now that's a good menu I have." "Anne, you could have thrown it in the spaghetti sauce." I've never forgotten that. Of course now we don't have to serve that much fat to kids. I remember that one very well.

JB: What was the thinking behind that much butter? They just didn't realize it was not healthy?

AG: No, right. They didn't realize. That was back in the day and there was such a push on dairy products too back then, and it was just the Type A lunch and that's what it was that you served. I remember that well.

JB: So you said you retired and you've done several different things consulting. Tell me about what you're doing now.

AG: The only one I'm working for now is the Accutemp company that makes steamers and griddles, and steam cooking is such a great way to go because you don't lose nutrients in steaming food – and energy, they're the number one energy saving on the market today, tested by some independent folks in California, independent testing.

JB: Plus they don't add fat.

AG: Right. And I just think it's just great to be saving energy and going green. Right now we have developed a focus group program. I helped them develop it and we go to the states, anybody that wants us to, and teach about how to search the web for efficient equipment, how to compare equipment, how to get even dishwashers, that we don't sell - how to do all that – any advantages – and how steam started before the pressure cooker, before WWII, and when the Chinese made woks, or pits to cook food. So we have quite a two-hour program we do. In fact we're going to Texas tomorrow and do one. Another thing that I felt really good about that we did in the early '80s, we had a special education class across the hall from where I was located and the teacher there and I became good friends. They were high school, and I said, "Why don't I try and have them work for me?" So we developed a program where they went through - working papers, the tax ID, hygiene, dress – and they would come in, the boys in their white shirts and a black bowtie, and they worked in the kitchen, behind the counter serving, and the dish room, all over this program I had. And several of them got jobs after school. They were all handicapped or intellectually challenged, and they got jobs like in McDonald's and places like that, and I felt pretty proud of that.

JB: You should. That sounds like a wonderful program.

AG: And I would see one of them at Wal-Mart or somewhere with their mother. "Hey Mrs. Gennings!" They'd holler across the store. You know you're their buddy forever. I felt really good about that.

JB: That's wonderful.

AG: I often think of them and wonder where they are today.

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

AG: Love kids. Love food. Don't be afraid of hard work and challenges. And keep a smile on your face.

JB: Anything else you'd like to add?

AG: Yes. At one point I worked in the neighboring district that I lived in, which was very good for the fact that my children didn't have to be in the same school district I was in, which was probably good. But the district they were in gave up their lunch program one year and my second son was in high school at that time and could have the car some of the time. And one day he and his friends showed up at my high school for lunch, because it was hot lunch - and he had to take lunch because they did away with their program. So that was kind of neat.

JB: That was a testament to your good food.

AG: That's right. And I tell him that today. He's in the restaurant business and he talks about the obesity and that, and I say, "Come on. You liked it."

JB: Thank you so much for talking with me today.

AG: You're welcome. Thank you.