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Institute of Child Nutrition

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Jeannie Sneed Oral History

Jeannie Sneed is a former director of the Applied Research Division of the National School Food Service Management Institute. Sneed now holds a position in the USDA Food Safety unit.

JB: I’m Jeffrey Boyce and it’s October 6, 2010. We’re here at the National Food Service Management Institute, and I’m here to talk with Jeannie Sneed. Welcome Jenny and thanks for sharing your time with us today.

JS: Good morning Jeff. I’m pleased to be here.

JB: Would you tell me a little bit about yourself and where you grew up?

JS: I grew up in rural Oklahoma; went to very small schools. I graduated in a class of about twenty-two students.

JB: What was the town or towns?

JS: I graduated from Coyle High School, which was in rural Logan County near Stillwater, Oklahoma.

JB: Ok. I’ve heard of Stillwater at least.

JS: That’s the home of Oklahoma State University, so that may be why you’ve heard of it.
JB: Right. What is your earliest recollection of child nutrition programs?

JS: Probably as a young grade school student participating in the program.

JB: So there was a program at your elementary school?

JS: Absolutely. I particularly remember the Milk Program. I remember taking that afternoon break and going to the cafeteria and having the carton of milk.

JB: Whole milk, chocolate milk?

JS: I’m pretty sure at that point it was probably whole, white milk, because that would be in the early to mid-60s.

JB: With the little red and white carton, or I guess different brands.

JS: I think with milk it depended on what part of the country you were in.

JB: You should check out the Child Nutrition Archives website. We have a photo collection of the School Milk Program from the ‘60s.

JS: Ok.

JB: Was there a lunch program and a breakfast program, or just a lunch program?
JS: I kind of pre-date the Breakfast Program I think. The Breakfast Program started in 1966 and there was no breakfast program in my school – and I graduated in 1972. I’m sure that they were very late adopters of that program, so it was the Milk Program and the School Lunch Program.

JB: And you did eat school lunch then?

JS: Yes.

JB: What were some of your favorite menu items?

JS: I most remember at this point in my life the cinnamon rolls, and they were humongous. They were home-made in the food service operation. And we had a cook who was a lady in the community - Faye, and Faye was a fabulous baker, and so we always had wonderful home-made rolls, and then the cinnamon rolls. So you walked in the school cafeteria and the aromas just wafted through the cafeteria and they were just so wonderful.

JB: Everybody remembers the bread items, especially the home-made rolls.

JS: Isn’t that funny.

JB: I think it’s that smell.

JS: I think so.

JB: Did Faye have any help, or did she run the program on her on?
JS: She had some part-time people, but my guess looking back, they probably served about 300 kids at most, and so it was a very, very operation. I remember it being in a kind of Quonset hut type building that was semi-circular.

JB: So it was separate from the school building?

JS: It was separate from the school building. I remember another lady, Arlene Hicks, worked part-time and helped cook. And then over the years I’m sure there were others, but there were never more than about three people that worked in the kitchen.

JB: So they got to know all the kids.

JS: Absolutely. And they were all ladies that lived in the community and so Arlene had a daughter in my class, and Faye had a daughter that was a little bit older. So it was really a small community and it was community kind of environment.

JB: It sounds like you have good memories of it.

JS: It was good. It was good.

JB: Tell me about your educational background – where you went to school and what degrees you earned.

JS: Ok. I went to Oklahoma State University.
JS: That’s in Stillwater, Oklahoma, and I grew up about twelve miles from Stillwater, so I was very fortunate that I could live at home and attend college, so it made it a cost effective way to be able to obtain my degree. Very early on, probably because of 4-H and the influence 4-H had in my life, I chose Food and Nutrition and Dietetics to be my major. And so I went to Oklahoma State and majored in Dietetics, finished my degree in about three and a half years and then of course in the dietetics profession you have to do a dietetic internship. And it the old days you could apply for two and hope you got selected. And I was fortunate enough to get selected for both of them, so I chose to go to Indiana University School of Medicine in Indianapolis and I did a six-month internship.

JS: An internship really provides a dietetics student with an overall viewpoint of dietetics and experience in all the areas in which a dietitian might work. Part of it was food service management, and that was certainly the part of it that I enjoyed most, because my background and my interests have always been a little bit more towards the food service side. So we had a cafeteria, and then we did various patient floors, so we might have a renal floor, we had a pediatric rotation. We had a separate pediatric hospital, James Riley Pediatric Hospital, because it was a university medical center it was a referral hospital, so it gave us lots of opportunities to see unusual diseases, and children with very special needs, and that kind of thing.

JS: At that point it was really medical dietetics and what were the nutrition needs of the children, or the patient, the client, based on renal failure, or if they were
diabetic, or maybe post-surgery, but what were their needs, and doing a lot of patient instruction and that sort of thing. I did all of those and it was interesting and I learned a lot, but I really liked the management part.

JB: Was there someone special, a mentor perhaps that helped guide you in your career choices?

JS: I would say over the years that I’ve been very fortunate that I’ve had several career mentors at different points in my career.

JB: Tell us about your career, some of the positions that you’ve held and how the different people influenced that.

JS: Ok. I would say very early on Dr. Esther Winterfeldt was my Department Chair and certainly made an impact on my career, and continues. I continue to keep touch with her today. After I completed my internship I went back to Oklahoma State and worked half-time with Cooperative Extension Service, and I served as a nutrition specialist and worked on my master’s degree. And I finished my master’s degree and started working on some research projects there.

JB: And the master’s was in?

JS: It was in Food and Nutrition. But at that point in time, which is kind of interesting, I decided I really needed to learn more about food microbiology, because at that point we were teaching a lot of food preservation with the master gardeners and master food preservers, and so I took Food Microbiology, which ended up later on coming into play in my career. And I stayed at Oklahoma State for about five years and realized if I’m going to be at a university I need to have a PhD, so Dr. Lee Ebro was one of my colleagues, and Dr. Ebro had gone to Ohio State, as had Dr. Winterfeldt, and so they really me, and so I ended up going to
Ohio State, and I got my PhD in Food Service Management with a minor in Organizational Behavior with the business school.

JB: How interesting.

JS: So, I did that, and then accepted my first position out of grad school at University of Georgia. I was really interested in research related to organizational behavior and I was particularly interested in employees and how you motivated employees and how you influenced employees. And so when I went to the University of Georgia I was on an Ag Experiment Station appointment, which meant that I had some funding to work on research. And so at that point I was really interested in school food service employees, and so it was then that I met Dr. Josephine Martin, who at that point was the Director of the Department of Education, Child Nutrition Programs.

JB: For the State of Georgia?

JS: For the State of Georgia – met her and actually conducted a research project in Georgia, related to school food service employees. Then I went to the University of Tennessee and taught in a Hospitality Management and Dietetics program. And about 1990 there was something going on called the National Food Service Management Institute, and that was being developed. And so I kind of had my ear to the ground, but didn’t know a lot about what it was, and I saw an announcement that they wanted a director for their Applied Research Division. So I thought ‘Hmm, that might be kind of an interesting next step for me’, and so I thought about it, and I applied for the job, and lo and behold I went to Hattiesburg, Mississippi and interviewed for the position, and received an offer, and in June 1991 I moved to Hattiesburg lock, stock, and barrel, and started the new position there. And so I was the first director of the Division of Applied Research.

JB: And how long did you hold that position?
JS: I was there from 1991 to 1994, and I’m very proud that I was involved in, not really establishing the first research agenda, some of that had already been established, but certainly helping to shape that, but also to implement it. And we made a lot of great strides in those three years in terms of conducting the research, getting publications, really starting to get the Institute, in the area of research, to be recognized and known.

JB: So you were there laying the groundwork for the research.

JS: Right. So that was exciting.

JB: What were some of the highlights of that period?

JS: I think for me it was probably really getting to know people in school nutrition better, learning more about the programs, learning more about the program needs, but also feeling like I was involved with shaping the direction of the Institute, but also research related to school nutrition, and it was at that point that I continued on with research related to child nutrition and have been very involved ever since. So it shaped my career as well as hopefully made some impact on research at NFSMI.

JB: It sounds like your educational background was really a good fit for your career choices. Sometimes people sort of take different directions, but it sounds like yours was pretty tailored.

JS: Right. And I am a Registered Dietitian, and so absolutely. I have not gotten out of my field very much at all.
JB: Tell us about what you’re doing now.

JS: I’m currently at USDA and I work for the Food Safety unit. In fact, as of October 10th we will be the Office of Food Safety and we will be under Special Nutrition Programs, and we work with food safety issues across nutrition assistance programs, but particularly with school nutrition programs. Some of the things that we are working on – I particularly have been involved with food allergies and helping people out in the field understand food allergies, understand their role and how they can meet the needs of students with food allergies. The interesting thing about that was when I was at the Institute is when we started doing things with children with special needs, and so early in my career I made a presentation in Columbus, Ohio at a national conference that the Institute sponsored related to serving the needs of children with special nutrition needs. So it’s interesting how in one’s career things sometimes come full circle, and you don’t realize at that point, fifteen years later you would be involved in almost the same kind of endeavor, so that’s exciting. I also am fortunate that I’m the one that works with National Food Service Management Institute to coordinate the Food Safety Cooperative Agreement. So that means that I am in close contact with the folks at NFSMI and the projects that they’re working on. We’re currently working on projects related to norovirus, employee health, food defense, inventory management tracking. So we have a lot of exciting projects that are going on the hopefully will help improve the quality and operations of child nutrition programs.

JB: Are you involved with food recalls when something comes out?

JS: I am. Not as much as other people in our group, but our group is the one who deals with food recalls related to the USDA Foods.

JB: What’s a typical day like for you now, or is there a typical day?

JS: I would say the exciting thing about my job is there’s not a typical day – kind of a balance between being in the office and traveling.
JB: You do travel a good bit?

JS: I do travel a good bit. We do have a research project, a cooling study, that’s being conducted at Illinois Institute of Technology, which is the site of the National Center for Food Safety and Technology, which is a USDA Center of Excellence, so I go back and forth there a little bit. I also go out upon request to make presentations related to food safety.

JB: To what sort of groups?

JS: Sometimes it’s state school nutrition groups. Later this month I’ll go to Saratoga, New York and present at the New York School Nutrition Association meeting – the Annual National Conference of School Nutrition Association – we typically do presentations there, regional meetings, state agency meetings, so any kind of group related to school nutrition programs. Another interesting thing I just did on my travels was visit two school districts that have Farm to School. USDA has a Farm to School Initiative and they have a Farm to School Team that’s going out to see what’s going on - what are the best practices, what are the needs for technical assistance, what are barriers - so that hopefully we can make better connections with Farm to School. So that was very interesting.

JB: What sort of food safety issues do you encounter with Farm to School?

JS: It’s very interesting. We have some concerns because we know that there are so many factors that affect particularly fresh produce, because much of that will not be cooked. And so we’re concerned about such issues as what is the source of water, what is the soil like, how is the product handled, what’s the refrigeration and temperature control? So there are lots of those issues that we think could be an issue. When we go out and talk to people in schools I don’t think they perceive that that’s a big issue, but to address our concerns our group, the Food Safety
office, just initiated in August something called Produce Safety University. And we’re bringing people to Fredericksburg, Virginia. It’s an effort that we’re doing in cooperation with Agricultural Marketing Service, and the trainers that train all the produce inspectors across the United States are actually doing a training for our school food service folks. And so we’re hoping that through that process we can have a train the trainer effect, a multiplier effect so that we can reach out and impact more people. We’ve done two of those so far. We have another one scheduled this year. Five were scheduled for next year, and the evaluations have been really super. And so hopefully we can early on make some impact – that’s our goal.

JB: Before there are problems.

JS: Before there are problems. We know that in the commercial world there have been several outbreaks related to produce. We know that there are certain kinds of produce that are riskier than others, so how can we educate people in food service not only about how to buy it but also once they get it into their operation, what do they do in terms of handling that can either make it safe, or be some potential for concern?

JB: What would you say has been your biggest contribution to your field so far?

JS: Oh, that’s an interesting question. I think maybe there are a couple of things that I could site. The first one I think is being an educator and educating the next generation of employees – food service directors – that sort of thing.

JB: Spreading the word.

JS: That’s right. And then related to that, while I was at Iowa State we established a PhD program related to school nutrition, and we scheduled it, we developed it so that working professionals could participate, to take advantage of the opportunity. So we had classes in the summer. We had online classes. We worked
with students remotely. We started a class with eighteen students and I think probably all but three or four have completed their PhD.

JB: A good percentage.

JS: It’s a very good percentage. And then they’re out there in very highly visible positions like Janey Thornton, USDA Deputy Under Secretary for Food, Nutrition and Consumer Services.

JB: And she went through the program?

JS: She went through the program. Dr. Katie Wilson, who you know now is Executive Director of National Food Service Management Institute. Dr. Carol Longley is on the National Advisory Council now and she is a faculty member at Western Illinois University. Dr. Cindy Story is a chef with a PhD, and she’s out there doing very good things – working with the Institute, working with us on Produce Safety University. Just a very successful group of students and think that that has really elevated that stature of child nutrition – to get more people with PhDs. I think it gives more credibility to the profession.

JB: Certainly.

JS: I think that’s a good contribution. And then I served ten years as the editor for the *Journal of Child Nutrition Management*, and so hopefully I pushed the research agenda just a little bit, because I think it’s important that we make sure that things are science based and we make decisions based on data and not how we feel about something. So I guess I would put those as maybe two of the bigger contributions that I’ve made to the profession.
JB: And very important ones. What advice would you give someone who was considering child nutrition as a profession today?

JS: Oh, I think it could be a very exciting profession. For many Dietetics students they’re interested in education and helping people develop healthy eating skills and that sort of thing. The thing that’s nice about child nutrition is in the scheme of things it’s about good nutrition for well people and continuing that cycle of wellness, and so I think that’s exciting, working with children, seeing them develop. There are just so many opportunities related to school nutrition. It’s not always easy to find those opportunities, and I think as a profession we haven’t done as good a job as we need to do in letting people know where the jobs are and that sort of thing – probably also communicating with the people who hire school nutrition employees, directors particularly, to let them know what are the skill sets that they need, what are the credentials they need so that they’re hiring the right people to do those jobs. So, I think it’s an exciting profession with lots and lots of possibilities.

JB: Anything else you’d like to add?

JS: It’s just exciting to have been involved with the profession for the last twenty years and see the evolution of it and it’s fun for me to come back to Oxford, Mississippi and visit the Institute. I remember in the early days we were in a little, old antebellum house down the way, and as the Institute grew they kept bringing doublewide trailers, and now to see a wonderful building, to see how it’s developed, to see how it’s made an impact on the profession. So it’s exciting to watch those things develop and it’s fun to have been involved in the early years.

JB: Thank you so much for sharing your time with us today. It’s been a pleasure

JS: Thank you Jeff. I’ve enjoyed it.