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Clarice Higgins

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Clarice Higgins Oral History

Interviewer: Meredith Johnston

Interview Date: January 21, 2006

Interview Location: Tallahassee, Florida

Clarice Higgins grew up in Waynesboro, Mississippi, and earned her bachelor's degree in Dietetics from the University of Alabama, studying with Dr. Neige Todhunter. She then interned at Columbia Presbyterian Hospital in New York and earned her master's from Columbia Teacher's College. Dr. Mary de Garmo Bryan was her major advisor. In 1964 she became the School Food Service Director in Gadsden County, Florida, and held this position until her retirement in 1993. Mrs. Higgins served as President of the American School Food Service Association in 1983.

MJ: We are here with Clarice Higgins and we are at her home in Tallahassee, Florida, and it is January 21, 2006. Mrs. Higgins, thank you for being with us today.

CH: Well, thank you for coming.

MJ: Could you tell us a little about yourself and where you grew up?

CH: I grew up in Waynesboro, Mississippi, so when I talk to you about the state of Mississippi, I am familiar with it. Waynesboro is not too far from Hattiesburg. And my first recollection of school feeding, I know that is one of my questions, was that I remember the smell of cabbage coming through the school in Waynesboro. I usually went home at mealtime because my mother cooked our main meal in the middle of the day, but if she were going to be out of town, she would give me money to eat in the cafeteria, and I always enjoyed it because I remember the ladies being so very nice. But I will never forget the smell of cooked cabbage.

MJ: Well, what time period would this have been?

CH: This was back in the early '30s.

MJ: During the depression, then.

CH: Right.

MJ: Do you have any more early recollections of Child Nutrition, of School Lunch, and what is your earliest recollection then of Child Nutrition Programs, of School Lunch Programs?

CH: Well, not until after I became an adult, because when I chose to go into dietetics in college, I had not any idea of Child Nutrition. Was not aware of the complexities of Child Nutrition even. I had wanted to become a hospital dietitian and my aunt, who lived with us for 18 years, is the one who steered me in that direction. I really wanted to be a nurse, but back in that time, in the 40s, my daddy said, "No way are you becoming a nurse," because that was back in the days when nurses did all the grunge work with patients and all. There was no sophisticated thing as nursing back then. And so my aunt steered me toward the dietetics field, and that is where I got my degree, in dietetics at the University of Alabama.

MJ: When did you graduate?

CH: In 1949, and I went to Presbyterian, Columbia Presbyterian Hospital in New York to do my internship, and the reason, my daddy wanted me to go to Charity in New Orleans, and I was accepted there for an internship and I was accepted at Cleveland at a hospital there, too, but Dr. Neige Todhunter was my major professor at the University of Alabama, a dynamic New Zealander. And she said, "Clarice, we've never had one of our graduates go to Columbia Presbyterian," so that's where I wanted to go. (laughs) And that's where I went, and while in New York doing my internship, we started taking classes at Columbia Teacher's College from the first year. And by the end of my year of internship, I was half-way toward a masters. So I said to my family, "Look, I need to stay up here and go on and get my masters." And Daddy supported me all the way, even though I didn't always do what he wanted me to do, and I did get my masters from Columbia Teacher's College in 1951. And then Dr. Todhunter invited me back to the university to teach, because her institutional management teacher Louise Frolich, you've probably heard of her because she was with ASFSA in Denver for years, had to return to the army. She was in the reserves and she was recalled to the army, and I took her position teaching institutional management classes at

University of Alabama. But my future husband had gotten his degree in economics the year before, and he still had some of his veteran's benefits, and he had done some work in a restaurant in Tuscaloosa, loved the food business, and so he enrolled in three of my classes and we met at registration. (laughs) That was our first meeting, and he was in three of my classes. And then, that was in September, and by Christmas we were engaged. So I had to turn in my resignation to Dr. Todhunter. My teaching career was exactly one year. But it did teach me one thing – I did not want to be a teacher. So I married and we moved to Sarasota, and I worked as a hospital dietitian, which was really what I had trained to do, until I got pregnant and had twins, and I became a stay-at-home mom for at least five or six years. By that time, we had moved up into this area. My husband had changed jobs and we were living in Chattahoochee. That is when I became familiar with the Child Nutrition Program, after I had my family. Thelma Flanagan was State Director of Child Nutrition, located, her office was here in Tallahassee, and I remember writing Thelma and asking for an application. I wanted to see if I could work with the Child Nutrition program. She never did respond because she didn't have any openings. Now Thelma Flanagan is the reason that Child Nutrition in Florida is as great as it is, Meredith. She was a dynamo. And then about that time some investors talked my husband into opening up a restaurant in Quincy, Florida, which we did. And I got to know the Child Nutrition Director, Allie Ferguson was her name, in the county, and when Allie went on to greater things with the state department of education, she recommended me to become the School Food Service Director in Gadsden County. That was in 1964, and that is what I became at that time. And I had been helping my husband in the restaurant, and I still helped him, because it was a 24-hour job, and was not the best for his health and eventually it did do some damage to his heart, the hard work with that restaurant. But I stayed as Food Service Director in Gadsden County until I retired in 1993. I loved every minute of it. I had three, worked under three superintendents who were very supportive, and when I first, when I proved to my first superintendent that I could manage that program and have it running in the black, because when I went to work the county was paying so much of our expenses, and it wasn't a year we were in the black. And it was one of the most gratifying experiences that I've ever had, in working with the people. Gadsden County is predominantly low income, so we were really dealing with pennies, but the majority of the principals were supportive of feeding all of their children. In fact, they were committed. We had two that were not that supportive, but the remainder of our principals were, and

they knew that my superintendent was behind everything I did, so they didn't buck me. If they did I would go to the superintendent. (laughs) But, principals, you know, have the hierarchy to really control their school. And I had two that drug their feet on everything that we did. But we started our breakfast program at a school where the principal wanted it; he said he felt that his children needed it, and then we gradually increased and these two principals would not start a breakfast program in their schools. They said that their children did not need it. But I just let them, let it go, and the success of our other programs finally made those two change. You know we had the lunch program in their schools, but the success of the other principals, talking up their program, made these two finally give in and so we had breakfast and lunch in all of our schools in short order. And then we started all these other programs. After school feeding. We started a program where we had young mothers who had dropped out of school, they tried to get them back into the high school program. We took care of the babies, I mean we had to feed their babies. They had a separate facility as a nursery. We fed the mothers lunch in the school where this program was, but I was running around like fury buying baby food, but because you never knew what kind of food the babies needed, I couldn't bid and warehouse the baby food, because, you know every baby that came to us had a different formula. That was the interesting thing. They had different doctors who would prescribe different formulas. But we met the needs, the nutritional needs of the mothers with breakfast and lunch, and breakfast and lunch for their babies.

MJ: Was that funded through... ?

CH: USDA. We took advantage of every program that USDA offered. And that after school program was a good program. Very successful I would say. But we did have a warehouse system. I proved to my first superintendent that if we had a warehouse, I took an old school cafeteria, the school had closed, and started buying in bulk, and then we would distribute that product, and so I proved to him that this was one way that we could save money. And he had been wanting a warehouse for the county for a long time. So we got a warehouse built, and with it, refrigeration, we had our own delivery trucks. We had our own distribution system, which was really a challenge and quite a satisfaction for me, too, because when Hurricane Kate came through, you know it got all of the refrigerators and freezers in the schools.

MJ: Now when was Hurricane Kate?

CH: 1975. And we had just accepted over \$100,000 worth of food into our freezers and the night before Kate was to hit, I called Mr. Walker, my superintendent, and I said, "Whatever you do, do everything in your power," – no, this was Mr. Bryant, my third superintendent – "do everything in your power to get power to those freezers, Mr. Bryant." And that was the end of our conversation. Well, that was on a Thursday night that Kate came through. Friday we could not get out. When my husband and I drove out of here on Saturday, we went to our warehouse, and National Guard people were there with their generators. We did not lose one thing in our central warehouse. And then on Monday morning, our truck was out delivering food so that our children did not miss a meal. We served lunch that Monday. So all of this was very gratifying. And we were serving people that were stranded in Gadsden County, too, serving them at whatever school they were staying at. It was a challenge, just like you know Marcia had quite a time when the hurricanes went through her area, and the schools came through, feeding an awful lot of people.

MJ: She was telling us about their plans, and emergency plans and all, and how they had a plan B, C, D, E that they had to use.

CH: That's right.

MJ: Was Hurricane Kate the only storm ... ?

CH: That has affected us. And see it came in through our coast, which is about 60 miles from here, and we just got the spin-off tornadoes that uprooted many, many trees. It was two weeks before we had any electricity at this house. Now Monroe Street got electricity sooner than that, and the businesses were back working normally. But it took the city, and the city has its own power system, two weeks to get to us. That was a miserable two weeks. (laughs)

MJ: No power.

CH: Cold baths are not very good. But we survived. I can't tell you how we did. We cooked outside a lot on the grills. My husband would heat water on the grill for me to have at least a dab of hot water, and then after it was all over, we

discovered one son who lived down on the south side and his wife had a gas water heater. We could have gone down there and gotten a shower. But that just never crossed our mind. My aunt was living here and we were just trying to make do, which we did. But the schools did not miss a beat.

MJ: Is there anything else that you would like to add about the positions that you have held here?

CH: Well, now those were my earning positions, because I was in Gadsden County for almost 30 years, so that is the bulk of my... I did work for about a year and a half as a welfare worker, state welfare worker, when Mrs. Flanagan did not respond to my request for an application, and I was ready to go back to work because my three boys were driving me up a wall, so I did go to work as a social worker in Marianna, which is west of Quincy, and we commuted every day there. And that was for a year and a half. And then after the year and a half, my husband opened up the restaurant in Quincy and Quincy is just west of here.

MJ: You mentioned something, in talking, you said that Thelma Flanagan was such a dynamo here in the Child Nutrition Programs in Florida. Could you elaborate on that a little bit more?

CH: Well, when she, when I finally did join the Child Nutrition Professionals as director in Gadsden County, and I started attending training classes under Thelma, she was so smart, I would come out of those meetings with the worst headache you've ever seen in your life, and I am not prone to have headaches. But she would throw so much information at you. She had converted my superintendent to Child Nutrition. Thelma never saw a cease sign. If she could not get her way going to the right, then she took a detour and went around and accomplished her goal anyway. She was that type of a leader. When she left the department, it never was as dynamic, because Thelma never admitted defeat and she didn't want any of us to admit defeat either. She was just that strong a leader. And it still rubs off on all of us. We don't have that type of leadership now.

MJ: Could you talk a little bit about how maybe Florida is unique from other states in regards to Child Nutrition Programs?

CH: Well, here we go back to Thelma. Thelma and Josephine Martin in Georgia can be compared, because Josephine was a prodigy of Thelma's, and Josephine as state director of Georgia was just as dynamic as Thelma, but she took lessons from Thelma. I can't elaborate much more on that than what I've said about Thelma, because she believed in making USDA accountable. You know she was the second president of ASFSA. Dr. Neige Todhunter, my major college professor was a good friend of Thelma's. They were strong advocates for Child Nutrition. They had an awful lot in common. And I guess the secret in Florida was just that we had such strong advocacy for Child Nutrition and it just rubbed off on all of us. Jane Wynn, Marcia, Marcia came in considerably later, but Helen Walker who was an ASFSA president who was in Lakeland prior to Marcia, and she was a strong believer in Thelma and did a lot in Polk County, their county down there. I guess you could just call it a commitment, all of us just had such a strong commitment to Child Nutrition.

MJ: Would you tell us about your time as president of ASFSA?

CH: Well, my year was 1983, and I followed Gertrude Applebaum from Corpus Christi, Texas. I hope you are going to talk to Gertrude.

MJ: We have.

CH: Well, good. Well, Gertrude, as Gertrude's president-elect, whenever we would go anywhere, Gertrude always wanted me to room with her; she didn't want to be by herself. Well, we had many, many good times together that year. And this was the beginning of Focus Five. I know you have heard of the 5-year long-range planning program. It was called Focus Five and Gertrude and her year had to begin the first phase, after we had had our long-range planning conference. And that was, that was an excellent way for ASFSA to stay together. We all had common goals. They were all written down in this Focus Five. So a president had a blueprint in which to operate during his or her year. It wasn't just something that a president thought up to do, it was down in black and white, so that we had continuity. And what we didn't establish during Gertrude's year, then I picked up and that became part of my year. The same, Betty Bender from Ohio followed me and she picked up. For instance, we started strengthening the certification program during my year, but we didn't get into it too much, but Betty picked it up during her year and came out with an excellent certification program

for the association. That was the value of our 5-year planning. We are still doing that, aren't we?

MJ: I am not sure.

CH: I don't read about it in the journal like I used to, but it was a good way to keep the continuity going. A president couldn't just come in and say this is what I want to do, that they had previously been doing. All of our planning was done by a group from across the country. Where do we want to be in five years, and how do we get there? And it was all written down in a format so that every president had a route, had a map in which to go. Now of course every president put his own little touch to it and there were strong things. I know when I was president-elect, I felt the need to get industry more involved. Now Thelma Flanagan did not want to move toward industry, but I disagreed with her in that respect. I felt that we needed to get industry involved because we had such a tremendous legislative program and the more people involved in meeting our senators and representatives in congress, the better off we would be. And I remember standing before the house of delegates when I was president-elect and saying that that was going to be one of my goals, that we involve industry more, and so there has been a change. And when I hear that participants at our legislative conference, 50-50, industry and 50 percent ASFSA members, I am very pleased.

MJ: How did you work with industry more?

CH: Just by encouraging them to join us in our lobbying efforts. Industry did, you know, they need to make money. That's their purpose in life. They became much more aware of our needs and so they developed products that were really good. During my course of 30 years, you know when I started, we were making every thing from scratch. We used to make our own pizza. I went around to every cafeteria and showed our people how to make pizza. But then industry started improving their products so, and on a competitive bid, you came out pretty good, as far as costs was concerned. But industry became much more aware of what we needed to serve our clientele, and so they, they all changed gears really, and they became so involved with Child Nutrition, which was good, and they would speak for us, advocacy groups, and Jim Miller, who was the CEO of Dallasware, did all of our plates. In fact, that first Focus Five meeting, that first five year planning meeting, Dallasware made all of the plates for the participants at that. They did

an awful lot of commercial work for us, and hopefully our Child Nutrition directors rewarded them by buying their products. I don't know about that, but evidently did because they were too supportive of us and they were always provided the plates for general conference, and now they have been bought out, and I know that first year, no one was sure that this new company would provide the plates, but I think, I think they did, because I went to a conference after then.

MJ: What changes have you seen in the Child Nutrition profession over the years?

CH: More professionalism. I think the certification program has built up professionalism. It was certainly fun in my county to, I really was doing adult education, because I wanted my people to become professionals and to be proud of what they did, so I spent hours training my managers, because they were the ones down back at the home front. I had them testing, tasting food every day. I said, "Don't you serve any thing before you taste it, because you want it to taste good, and if it doesn't, you don't feed the children that." So building high standards was one thing that I tried to do and I think it paid off because we had a great deal of cooperation in our district. Our people were proud of what they were doing, and we had that common goal that we were, in fact we established our goals every year before school started. We were going to serve every child in school, breakfast, lunch, whatever that child needed. And I will tell you one funny thing about the breakfast program. One day, one of my colleagues in the county office came up to me and said, "Clarice, you are about to get my cousin Hootie fired." I said, "What do you mean, fired?" Well, he was a bus driver, and the school, the elementary school that he drove to, he was not getting the children there in time enough to eat breakfast and the children got on him to get to school so that they could have breakfast, and you know, he changed his routine, and got those children at school to eat breakfast. So see they, we all had the same goal, to make Child Nutrition available to all of the children, and you can do it, Meredith; you can do it with a little cooperation, a little pride, and having good food. You've got to have good food. So I bought the best food that I possibly could. Of course, we bid everything. But I was determined that our children were going to know what broccoli was, because my children came from the turnip greens and the collard greens era. And so I brought broccoli spears the first time that I put it on the menu, and I wanted each child to see a broccoli spear. And I, you know, we paid premium price for that. But then I went around to one school

that day we were serving it, and the server was just chopping it up like everything, and I hit the ceiling. I said, "You don't chop up spears. You serve a spear." So, you know, those were fun things that I remember. Broccoli was never a favorite with our children.

MJ: Well, I wondered about that.

CH: No. But vegetables were not. They did like a few vegetables. Okra and tomatoes I found out they liked. They didn't like green beans. Okra, and tomatoes, and corn, and of course, French fries. It was pretty much the same nationwide.

MJ: I have a question. Do you think, or how have the children's tastes changed over the years?

CH: Well, fast food availability has really had a tremendous impact. Schools I think have kind of picked up on some of that. But, it is a known fact that a McDonald's cannot serve a thousand children in 20 minutes, and yet schools can do it and it is because the schools are so much more efficient and prepared to do that. We are using more fast food items just for speed, because these kids might have 20 minutes to get in a cafeteria and to eat. Well, it is going to take 75 percent of that time to serve them and only 25 percent of the time to eat. So, you have to look at all of those facets.

MJ: What about technology? What changes have you seen? Or changes in equipment, things like that?

CH: Well, food service equipment manufacturers have changed with the times, too. They have made more efficient equipment, like portable refrigerators that you can plug in and roll them around. We had several of those that the managers wanted to keep their refrigerated items closer to the serving counter, and we used those, that type of equipment. The tilting kettles were one of our biggest boons, very efficient. Vertical cutter mixers, VCMs, sped things up considerably in chopping or in mixing for baked goods. Convection ovens sped up the baking time. Those are just some of the equipment that I can think of that made things easier for our personnel. And that was one thing that you always wanted to do, make things easier for the personnel so they could work more efficiently. I always

bought five or six thousand dollars in small equipment every summer, replacement items, because I wanted them to have the equipment they needed. We probably equipped every home in Gadsden County with knives. (laughs) We'll probably delete that, but any way. My goal was to be sure that my personnel had the equipment that they needed to produce the meals.

MJ: What do you think has been your most significant contribution to the Child Nutrition field so far?

CH: Enthusiasm for the program. I was very proud of my managers, because I wanted them to know as much as I did. You know. There was no reason for me to have secrets from them. So I shared every bit of information that I received with them. And they did feel quite an integral part. I had one male manager. He was an assistant manager when I first started and he was working at Chattahoochee hospital in the afternoon, worked with us in the morning, went to adult education class nights when he could, eventually got his GED, divorced his wife and had 5 children because they were never together. But he became a manager, and he was like a sponge. He would go to meetings and he did not miss a thing because he wanted to learn as much as he possibly could. I asked him to attend some meetings as a representative for us, and he would come back with all the information. He, I think, I don't know whether I inspired him, I think he already had the inspiration because he met his obligation to his children that, when he divorced his wife. He was a man of integrity. But to see him come up the education scale, and to become the manager that he did, and he was an excellent manager. He has since retired. I told him he could not retire until I did, so I beat him to the punch. I retired first. But that was, I am very proud of that, seeing people develop into educated individuals. And I never had an adult education training in all my years. (laughs)

MJ: Anything else you would like to add to that.

CH: Well, (unfolds paper, references notes) at the national level I am proud of my little part in the certification program, because I do think that makes you more professional. And I am glad that it has, there is enough body in the total program to make people work for their certification. And, well, I think those are the main comments because I have already talked about developing leaders at local level to better serve, and the continuity of that Focus Five program. I am going to have to

ask if we are still doing that. Every five years we would have this meeting where we did establish priorities for the next five years.

MJ: Well, could you talk a little bit about that first meeting, there, when you began that?

CH: Well, I believe Josephine Martin was president, and Gene White was right behind her. And this was after Dr. Perryman had resigned. You know, he resigned during Josephine Martin's year as president. But we met together and I believe it was in Denver. And you broke out and we had representatives from all over the country. And you broke out into small group and you set your goals for, and then we all came together and put them all together. And there was a steering committee that would put it all totally together and then, Josephine was president in '77, Gene White in '78, Gertrude was '82; but we had, the Focus Five that Gertrude and I worked on must have been in '81. And then, we were trying to find a new executive director, and I was involved with that, too. We had meetings everywhere. I did travel a lot. Because Josephine was being so careful in hiring a new executive director. She didn't want to be criticized since Perryman resigned during her watch, so she had too large a committee, too large a search committee, and we met all over this country, and then came up and made a bad selection. That person did not work out at all, and I've often thought how ironic that was, all the money that we spent, that search committee spent, meeting and discussing and then the person we selected just did not work out at all.

MJ: Do you want to elaborate on how they didn't work out?

CH: I do believe it was just we had a poor pool to start with. And that we should have gone with a management company, a professional search company because they can do a lot of culling out for you before it ever gets to the search committee. And during my year, now I am trying to think, we hired, and Gertrude was on the committee, we still needed an executive director and we hired a Carl Norburg, and he was not working out during my year as president. And then when I got a report from one of our members in North Carolina that Carl had been let go from his previous association for stealing funds, I went to my executive committee: Jane Wynn, and what was that fellow's name, of course Betty Bender, and that fellow from Michigan (Howard Briggs), and I said I cannot recommend rehiring Carl. Well, they almost fell out of their seats, but when I told

them why, then they went along with me. But then that left Betty Bender having to start searching again. And I think that the reason that Carl did not work out was that we just, we should have had a professional management company weeding out the candidates for us. That's just personal opinion. But I think we've got a good one now. Barbara has been with us now for a number of years. And she's certainly dynamic. I think she is doing a good job.

MJ: Do any, any more memorable stories come to mind when you think about your years in the Child Nutrition Profession?

CH: Well, I didn't write down any more. I know I was real pleased with my years in Child Nutrition and I could retire at 65 and be very happy with what I had done in Gadsden County. As I said it was a small county, high percent low economic level, but we fed the children, and I am very proud of that. I have not looked back. The lady who took my place stayed for six years and did a real good job. She followed through with everything that I was doing, like a manager's training program, she followed through on that. And she was there for six years. She is now in Atlanta working in one of their suburbs up there. But I was very proud of my years so I can talk about them with a lot of satisfaction. And I am pleased with what I was able to do for the state and the national association, too. But here again it goes back to I had good superintendents who let me take time off because I was gone a lot my president-elect and president year.

MJ: Anything else you would like to add?

CH: Well, I think we have some of the best people in the world in Child Nutrition. That's a side benefit. You get to meet people from all over the country and it is just an extra dividend, because I liked the majority of the people that I met. There were a few that were kind of tough but the majority of the people are very, very fine committed people.

MJ: Are there any special opportunities or honors that you have received over the years that come to mind?

CH: No, not really.

MJ: Like, maybe opportunities to participate in things on the national level that you'd like to... ?

CH: Well, of course I was involved with everything that ASFSA was involved with, and I worked with Josephine for one year in Georgia so she was a close friend, and Josephine always thought of me first whenever she started working on a project. So I became very close to her.

MJ: Well, thank you very much for being with us today.

CH: Well, I've enjoyed it, Meredith. Thank you for coming.

MJ: Thank you for inviting us into your home.

[tape stops, resumes]

MJ: Could you talk a little bit about the state association here in Florida?

CH: Meredith, we were the first in the country to have an executive director. At that time she was the executive secretary, the position has now been upgraded to executive director. And we were the first to build our own building. Twenty years ago we raised \$80,000 and built our own building here in Tallahassee. That continuity for our association has been wonderful because it houses all of our records and the executive director provides continuity, too, so I am real proud of what Florida was able, has been able to do.

[end of interview]

Inserted at the request of the interviewee:

[One of my main goals in the 1983 year was to promote improved job performance of our members. This we integrated into improving the Certification program. In the waning hours of the '83 Phoenix Conference, John Draghn (Sp?) of Tony's asked me out for coffee. He announced Schwan Food Co. would give the Association \$50,000 annually for education scholarships for our members, their children and grandchildren. I remember telling John to remove the grandchildren because our greatest need would be our members. He agreed.]

The Tony's Scholarship program was implemented in Betty Bender's year and blended in with ASFSA existing scholarship committee for several years and am pleased to say the program was highly accepted. I do not have figures but we did award between 20 and 30 scholarships annually.]