

University of Mississippi

eGrove

Oral History Project (all interviews)

Oral Histories

1-19-2006

Marcia Smith

Marcia Smith

Institute of Child Nutrition. Child Nutrition Archives.

Follow this and additional works at: https://egrove.olemiss.edu/icn_ohistories



Part of the [Food Science Commons](#), [Other Education Commons](#), and the [Teacher Education and Professional Development Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Smith, Marcia and Institute of Child Nutrition. Child Nutrition Archives., "Marcia Smith" (2006). *Oral History Project (all interviews)*. 137.

https://egrove.olemiss.edu/icn_ohistories/137

This Book is brought to you for free and open access by the Oral Histories at eGrove. It has been accepted for inclusion in Oral History Project (all interviews) by an authorized administrator of eGrove. For more information, please contact egrove@olemiss.edu.

Marcia Smith Oral History

Interviewer: Meredith Johnston

Interview Date: January 19, 2006

Marcia Smith was born in Pennsylvania and moved to Florida when she was two years old. Ms. Smith graduated from Florida State University with a degree in food nutrition specializing in school lunch administration. She later earned masters and Ph.D. degrees from Webber College and Kennedy Western University. She started her career in school foodservice in Polk County, Florida, working with Helen Walker, School Food Service Director and President of the American School Foodservice Association (ASFSA) at that time. "Within the first two weeks of being on the job, I was going to Chicago to the national conference where she was national president," Ms. Smith said. Ms. Smith became the School Food Service Director for Polk County, Florida, when Helen Walker retired, and has served in that position for over 21 years for a total of over 31 years in the profession. She served as president of ASFSA in 2001.

MJ: Hi, I'm Meredith Johnston and I am here with Marcia Smith in Bartow, Florida. And thank you very much for talking with us today.

MS: You're welcome.

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

MS: Yes, I was born in Pennsylvania but I moved to Winter Haven, Florida, when I was 2, so I have grown up in Polk County my whole life. I have no plans for going back to Pennsylvania. I love Florida and this area and this is where I have raised my family, and I plan to stay in this area.

MJ: What is your earliest recollection of Child Nutrition Programs?

MS: My earliest recollection goes back to elementary school; and I attended Brigham Elementary, which is still around in Polk County; my son actually went to school there. And I can remember specifically certain meals that we would have but I think it is ironic that I also remember some of the commodities that were used back then, one being sweet potatoes. And I was one of those children that they would make the sweet potato soufflé and that was one of my favorite dishes

and I was so excited when they would have that. And the other being non-fat dried milk. All of a sudden mid-morning, we would be called to the cafeteria because they made chocolate milk with that non-fat dried milk, and that was the best chocolate milk I have ever had in my whole life. And I still to this day would not be able to make it like they did, but it was just a wonderful treat and wonderful meals at that school, and I have such fond memories of elementary school.

MJ: What time period would this have been?

MS: This would have been back in the 1950s, late 1950s, because I started kindergarten there and went through 6th grade at Brigham. So late 1950s.

MJ: How did you become involved in the Child Nutrition profession?

MS: I became in the Child Nutrition profession because I was, first I wanted to be a nurse, and I actually went to nursing school for about a year. And then I decided that I really wanted to be around children, but not sick children. And decided to make a change. My mother was a nurse and I thought that was what I always wanted to do, and when I decided to make a change, she said, "Well, you know you have always loved food; you love to cook and you love children. Can't you find something where you can combine the two?" And so, Florida State University had a program, which, it was a degree in food nutrition, but it was specializing in school lunch administration. So that's when I became involved in the Child Nutrition Program, it's because I was one of two people that actually attended the specific program called "school lunch administration" at Florida State University in Tallahassee.

MJ: Was there someone, a mentor, who was influential in directing you in the field? I know you mentioned your mother.

MS: My mother was instrumental, because, again, she was the one who said, "why don't you try to combine your two loves of children and food." And then, once I got the job in Polk County, then Helen Walker, who was also a past president of this organization, was the director at the time, so she certainly was a mentor to me and within the first two weeks of being on the job, I was going to Chicago to the national conference where she was national president and I was

hooked. I knew this was what I wanted to do the rest of my life. So actually, two different people were mentors to me.

MJ: Would you tell us a little bit more about your educational background and how that prepared you for your profession?

MS: Sure. Like I said, I went to Florida State University and got my degree in food nutrition specializing in school lunch administration. I realized then once I knew that Helen Walker would be retiring and the fact that I wanted to be the director, I really needed more education. I also realized that once you become the director it is usually your staff people that work with nutrition more than you do because you are running a business as a director. So I decided to go back and get my masters in business administration, which I did. And then I decided, not that I really needed it, but it was a goal of mine professionally and personally; I come from a family that really, education was not that important to them. My mother got a degree but my father never finished high school, and my two brothers never finished high school. And it was important to me, because as far as I'm concerned, and I tell my food service employees this all the time, an education is something they can't take away from you. So I knew I wanted to go back and get my Ph.D., so I also got my Ph.D., but in business administration because once again as the director, you know, I have people on staff that teach nutrition, but I was running a business and I felt like that degree would prepare me for the position of director.

MJ: Did you also get that at Florida State?

MS: No, I went to Weber College, which is located in Polk County, had the masters degree program where I could go at night and on the weekends. So I got my masters degree from Weber College, and then Kennedy Western University had a program a Ph.D. program where again I could go through and not have to actually leave Polk County to get the degree. So I worked for a couple of years and wrote my dissertation on the privatization of school food service.

MJ: Okay. Would you tell us about, more about your career and the positions that you have held?

MS: Well, I really have not held that many positions, as far as my career is concerned. One thing I can share with you, though, is that when I was getting ready to graduate from Florida State University, there were not any positions available as supervisor, and Helen Walker called me as the director and said, "You know, I don't have a vacancy in my office," because I had already been to Polk County to talk to her to tell her that this was what I wanted to do, but she said, "I do have a manager's position available in a small community. It's an elementary school. Would you be interested?" And I said, "Absolutely," because you know, how can I supervise these people if I haven't actually done the job myself? So for the first six months of my employment I was in a small community, called Fort Meade, which is a very, very small community, and I was the manager of a small elementary school, so during that time I tried to share with the employees that I was capable of doing all the jobs. I'd been trained. I could wash the pots and pans. I knew how to run the dishwasher. I wasn't afraid of doing the type work that they have to do everyday. And then a supervisor's position opened up at the district office in the school food service department. I did get that job and I was in that position for approximately ten years until the director retired, and I have now been the director for 21 years. So, during the time that since the 1940s when we actually started a program in Polk County there have only been two school food service directors, and that has been Helen Walker and myself. So I have 31 years now in the profession.

MJ: How is Florida unique from other states with regards to Child Nutrition Programs?

MS: I think Florida is unique because Thelma Flanagan, of course, lived here and was the state director and really made sure that Florida was on the cutting edge, so when I began my career and started traveling around to the different conferences, you know, Florida was already on the map. We were already doing lots of nutrition education. We took an active role in legislation, so I think you know, having her here, and then the fact that Helen Walker was also a national president, and then there have been others in the state of Florida after Helen Walker who were also national presidents; Florida has always been a leader. We have always been on the cutting edge trying new and different things. We were one of the first states that implemented the breakfast program to be mandatory in all of the elementary schools. So I am really proud of the job that we've done

in Florida and how active we've been at the legislative level, state and national level, too.

MJ: I'm going to follow-up with that. We know that Florida has had its fair share of hurricanes, and I know you are a little more centrally located, but could you talk a little bit about how you deal with that as a food service professional?

MS: Well, yes, we are centrally located, but we were hit by three hurricanes last year. We had direct hits. It was the first time since the 1960s with Hurricane Donna, which I was here for Hurricane Donna, that we've had a hurricane actually hit our area. But it was boom, boom, boom, three in a row. So we missed a total of over 19 days of school during that time, different amounts of time depending on which hurricane. But I cannot even begin to tell you exactly what took place during that time. You know, schools were closed yet we were needing to provide meals in the communities, so we would actually open up shelters and we would be responsible for the meals, and we were literally cleaning out our coolers/freezers because there was no electricity anywhere, and trying to feed as many people as possible. So even though we are right in the center of the state, it was the first time that we actually had losses ourselves, that we were having to deal with our own employees and their losses and trying to determine what we needed to do for them. So we were not only taking care of those people that were coming in, but we were also taking care of our own. It was, it was very emotional time for many of us, because many of my employees were without homes. Fortunately no one was hurt and of course that was of utmost concern and we were thankful that no one was hurt; but I still have employees that are not back in their homes, that still have the blue tarps on their roofs, that have nothing. Some did not have insurance. We found that it was very important that we collect money to try to help those people. So that was our next step, after they went through, and school reopened, that we needed to take care of our own people. We did several money-making projects so that we could help these people recoup some of their losses. But you know, some losses, especially, you know, family pictures and everything. They will never get those back, but just anything we could do to help them. And then this year, when the hurricane came through, we did have to open a couple of shelters. We only missed one day of school but fortunately it was not a direct hit for us, but normally that is what people say, is that because we are in the center of the state everybody comes to us. Well, we've now said that's no longer true because you know those three

hurricanes decided to go a different direction and headed up the center of the state and caused a major amount of damage here.

MJ: Were many of your schools damaged?

MS: Yes, we had schools that were damaged. We had several that lost roofs, that lost gyms, that lost classrooms. There was flooding. We did not have total devastation where a whole school was lost like what has happened this year in Louisiana and some of the other states, but there was quite a bit of damage, and that is why it took so long to re-open, because we did not have electricity or we had problems with flooding.

MJ: So you have, I guess, a system because you're assisting in feeding folks during this time?

MS: We do. We have a plan, and we not only have a plan A, but we have B, C, D, E, and F. I mean, it got to that point where we had to have numerous plans just because it is a little bit different when the hurricane actually hits your area or when it is people coming in from the outside but you are okay, the weather is okay in your area, of course you are going to have a different plan. But we finally got to the point that we were coming up with, like I said, Plan D, E, and F, because anything that we thought might work we were having to rethink again. Because at one point with one storm, I think it was the third one, our warehouse went down, too, our cooler/freezer so we could not even go in there and take anything out and transport it to the schools because we could not afford to open the doors, so then you go to another plan when you can't get into your warehouse. But I would say, you know, with the team that I have, we have done extremely well. I think that we have come across any type of situation imaginable. We all went out and worked the shelters. We saw people literally coming up with no shoes on their feet, because they'd lost their shoes; they'd left them out on the porch and the next day after the hurricane went through the shoes were gone. They literally had nothing but the clothes on their back, you know, and coming, and you know, just begging for something to eat. And we were so thankful that we were there, and even once the shelters closed, Red Cross, Salvation Army, they were all coming to us and saying, "you did such a good job while the shelters were open. You know, we now have these people out of the schools so that you can open up again, but we still need to feed them. Will you do it because you

know how to do it? Your team showed us that they can do it, but we still need to feed people.” So we were still feeding people even after the school shelters closed, just because there were so many people who had no place to go. But, yes, we do have a plan in place, and several different options that we can follow depending on what happens in the area.

MJ: Okay. Let’s switch gears a little bit. Would you tell us about your time as president of ASFSA?

MS: Yes, I can tell you about the time that I was president. Of course, that was the most wonderful experience that I have ever had. It was absolutely wonderful, but it was also ... 9/11 occurred during my term as president. So that was the first part of my year. So, anytime anybody talks to me, they always remind me because they remember that I was president. And it just so happened, back then you selected your theme in the spring. And of course, now, they are doing something a little bit differently, but that is what happened. And my theme at the time was caring for communities you serve, and I had the heart, and I had the hand, I had the schoolhouse and the people. And this quilt (gestures to quilt hanging on wall behind her) says around here, “caring for communities you serve,” and if you look closely you will see a handprint, you will see a heart, and it was just ironic that 9/11 occurred in September and you know like I said my theme was caring for communities we serve, so we actually decided that we needed to do something to collect food. We needed to do something as a nation. We needed to do something so that everybody could feel a part of this. So we did sharing with communities we serve, and we actually collected food during that time so that we could help with hurricane relief and also we knew for a fact that during the summer months a lot of the shelves are bare and like the Salvation Army and Goodwill and these different places, there is no food. So it all fit together, but it was just, people say all the time, “How did you come up with that theme and then this happened?” It didn’t, the theme came first and then 9/11. So it was a difficult time because of course people did not want to travel, so financially it was difficult for us because we knew that it would hurt attendance at our major conferences, which it did. We still came out financially okay, but our numbers in Minneapolis of course were quite low in comparison to the previous year and the year after and that was just because people were afraid to travel. We even thought we might have to cancel some meetings, just because some of the travel, and the people not wanting to leave and also people being told that

they couldn't leave. But again, it was a wonderful experience, and the best part was that I did get to travel all over the United States and you know school food service professionals, I say this all the time, are the salt of the earth. And just the people that I met during that time, I just came back from an industry conference and there were some of the same people that I met during the time that I was president and I am still really good friends with them. So Child Nutrition Professionals are just, they are a wonderful group of people. So that was the best part of the job. The worst part was the fact that we had to deal with the repercussions of 9/11; but we got through it. We survived and many people said it was like it was meant to be that I was president during that time with that theme and everything.

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

MS: I think one of the biggest changes probably has to do with choices for the students. You know, when I went to school and when I first started, it was the Type A lunch. Everything was put on the tray and that is what you got. Now, what we are doing with the students as far as the number of choices, with offer versus serve, with trying to provide more nutritious foods to the students, I think that is one of the biggest changes. I think the fact that we've started a breakfast program; of course it has been going on quite a while now, but when I first started there was no breakfast program. You know, and now we have something available to students in every school. We now have after school snack program which was non-existent when I first started and that's a huge program for us. That is in over 50 schools in the afternoons. And then summer feeding program. Who would have ever thought that we would be doing summer feeding because many years ago, there was another organization in our school district that was handling the summer feeding program, and then they determined that they no longer wanted to do it, so we took over that program. If you would have asked me that 30 years ago, would we be having choices for the students, would we have a breakfast program, after school snack, summer feeding? I would have said, "no." I think the child nutrition professional has changed. I see that it used to be that when someone started in child nutrition that they were there for life. They came in because they normally wanted to work in school where their children went to school. Usually it was that two household members that were working so the money was not as important as it is now, because now quite a few of our

employees are single moms with one salary and they are trying to provide for their children, so they have some real concerns about benefits, about the money, and always trying to see what they can do because it is very difficult for them to get by on the salaries that we pay the employees. So I have seen that change where now it is a necessity for them to have those benefits and to have a good salary. But at the same time I am proud of the fact that we have increased the salaries for the professionals, and that is one thing that I tell the people when they come in, is, “never refer to yourself as a worker. You are a child nutrition professional. You have a profession. You have a title. You are not just a worker. You are actually influencing children’s lives every day. You do make a difference, and sometimes it is you that that student counts on during the day because it may be that you are the only one that smiles at that child that day, or gives that child a hug, so you play a very important part.” So that is what I am trying to do now, because a lot of them will come in, “show me the money. I want to see what I am going to make.” And so I am constantly trying to remind them of what a difference they can make in the lives of the children. So those are some of the changes that I’ve seen, the choices, students, what they want, and the child nutrition professional and the changes that have occurred. And of course I guess, too, even the equipment that we now use in comparison to when I first started. We are trying to make sure that the meals are more nutritious so we have eliminated all deep-fat fryers and we used to have those when I first started. We have done away with ranges now; we don’t have ranges anymore, because they took up a lot of space and they used a lot of heat so we are trying to replace with steamers and things that are more efficient. I have seen numerous changes in my 31 years in the profession.

MJ: Could you give us some examples of menu changes or maybe how you have seen the tastes of the children change over the years?

MS: Taste has definitely changed, because I can remember even 20 years ago we would try to provide some Mexican food as alternatives to some of our menus, and we would go through taste testing with the students and it was like, “No, we are not interested. We don’t want this.” So very seldom did you see tacos, burritos, or anything like that on the menus. Now you see it as a choice almost everyday, some type of ethnic foods. So that is a huge change is that we see more ethnic foods. I think another big change is that so many of them want some type of salad, so we have what we call grab-and-go salads as choices every day for

the students. I also know that students nowadays, they are constantly on the run. Their lunch time, mealtime, they want to spend it with their friends. So we are having to find more and more items that are like what we call "grab-and-go;" we do a "grab-and-go" sandwich combination where the students don't have to sit down at the table and eat. They can be outside, because living in Florida the majority of our time can be spent outside. So we have a lot of patios for our students and a lot of them choose to sit outside with their friends. And they want food where they don't have to use a fork or a knife or anything and it doesn't take them very long to eat it so that they can spend time with their friends. Another big change, I just, I still can't believe it, is that water is one of the most popular beverages now. The students absolutely love water and want water available everyday as something that they can buy ala carte. Another big change is milk; milk has changed over the years where we now have so many flavors; we have gone to a fat-free milk. You know, it used to be when I first started that it was whole milk, white, and then we finally went with some chocolate; but you know now we've got fat-free, and we've got chocolate, we've got strawberry, and we've got vanilla along with the white milk. So that is another change is just in the beverages that we are seeing the students consume each day.

MJ: One more followup to that. How about changes in technology? How has that influenced your program?

MS: Changes in technology. (chuckles) Oh, yes, major change, because we were always on tickets. We used tickets for our point of service, so you know, all of the students had tickets and that was a nightmare, just all of the tickets that we had to store in our warehouse, and then also the fact that the students would lose their tickets and we would have to replace them. And then we went to rosters, where we had our roster system where we checked the students off, and of course that was very time consuming, because you had all of these lists by classroom, and then we finally went with computers for point of service so now through out the whole school district we do have terminals at each location where we do point of service. We do a combination of card readers, keypads, and scanners that we are using just depending on the school and whether or not they use ID cards that the students need to have with them at all times. So technology in that respect as far as point of service, huge change from when I first started with tickets. Also the equipment. I've mentioned to you some of the equipment that we've now eliminated. Now you will see more steamers, you will see more

tilt-skillets out in the schools. When we built a new school with offer versus serve you won't see wells anymore. We are letting the students choose so it is mainly flat countertops where we put out the choices to let them select from because we are cooking to the line, and we are concerned about the temperature of the food, and want to make sure that it is top quality. It used to be you had your serving line with your wells for each item and you fixed the student's plate and you handed it to him. You know, those days are gone and I am thankful for that because I feel like we are doing a much better job now. And like I said so much more fresh fruit and vegetables that are being served to the students; and again all that has to do with technology in the way that we can store our food, too.

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

MS: That was a hard question, because I was thinking about that and, I guess, thinking about long term and I have been around 31 years, is the integrity of the program. I don't think that's wavered. I think when I started that Polk County was seen by many as a top-notch program. Helen Walker received numerous awards. People would come here to look at the program. You never had to worry about articles in the newspaper about us not doing things correctly. And I've seen that continue through my 31 years. Our integrity has not wavered. We have not been, excuse the term, we've not been sucked into some of these things that school districts have had to do to increase sales or anything, like selling carbonated beverages, like selling food that really is not nutritious for the students. We were respected by the community; we were respected by the school board members. They know that if we say that this will work or this won't work, or no, this does not meet our criteria of what we want to do, we know that they will respect us for that, that we are not going to waver because we want what is best for the students. We want to make sure that they have nutritious meals every day in an environment that is friendly, an environment that is safe, and an environment that is clean. And so that is very important to us.

MJ: Do any memorable stories come to mind when you think about your years in the profession?

MS: I guess, as far as memorable stories, because that is a long period of time, I think it goes back to something I think I have already said, and it is just the fact

that the people that I have had the opportunity to meet during my career, because again, child nutrition professionals, school food service employees, whatever you want to call them, they really do love children, and it doesn't matter if I go to another school district in Florida, if I am traveling across the United States, we are like a family. So I have so many fond memories of the trips that I have made, the people that I have met, my own staff, you know, most of my staff, they have been with me throughout my career, some 20 years, some 15 years, and so we have so many stories and they are not just professional, they are personal, because again we are like a family. We love doing things together, so we make trips. We go places together. We have meals together. And then I guess the other would be globally. Things have changed over the years, and I had so many opportunities to travel to the UK, to travel to Hong Kong during my term in office as president of the association and then as president of the foundation, and I have so many fond memories of those trips and the people that I have met. And it all comes back to the child nutrition professionals. That is what I remember, is my experiences with them. And I have funny stories, things that have happened throughout my career with students or with free and reduced meal applications, but, you know, honestly and truthfully it is the people, and there's too many, you know, just the people that work for the School Nutrition Association. It is just a wonderful organization and the people, it is just a wonderful group of people there, so I have many fond memories of places that I've been with them, things that I have done with them. You know, being there in Alexandria working on things with them. They are all fond memories.

MJ: Could you talk a little bit about any special trips or any opportunities, special opportunities, that you've had, in your time?

MS: Yes. Of course, there's been numerous, and it really started when I was state president just being able to travel around the state, but then before I became president, I became Southeast Regional Director, and when you are Southeast Regional Director then you get to visit each state in the Southeast which there are nine states in the Southeast, so I was on the board for two years in that position so I was able to travel to all nine states in the Southeast. I attended their state conferences, which was just absolutely an exciting time in my life, because I thought after I was Southeast Regional Director that that would be it. I never thought that I would be president of our national organization. But then as president of the national organization, they have a schedule so the national

president visits approximately 15 states during his or her term in office so during that time I had an opportunity to visit many of the states in our nation. There were a couple that stand out, just because, for example, I went to Alaska. But I had an opportunity to take my son with me. He was in high school at the time, and that was just a wonderful trip for us. And then another trip was like to Wyoming where I could include my family, so you know, the organization not only gave me the opportunity to meet child nutrition professionals, but it also gave me an opportunity to at times when possible for my family to go with me so that we could experience some of the great things that happen in the United States, some of the beautiful places that we had never been. And then of course my trip to the United Kingdom, you know, will always stand out as one of my favorites, just because this was an opportunity for Barbara Belmont, the executive director of the association, and myself to actually travel to the UK and attend their conference. They have a conference similar to what we have once a year. And we spoke at their conference. So we got to see first hand what actually happens during their conference, listen to their speakers, have an opportunity to visit schools to see what meals are being provided to the students, what type of equipment they are using, some of the food products that they are using, which was just so interesting to see what they are doing, and also sanitation and safety, and what they are doing to provide the meals, you know, as safe as possible. And then while I was president of the foundation, which you automatically become president of the foundation after you are national president, Eric Bost who's the undersecretary of agriculture, invited me to go with him to Hong Kong, and this was a visit to Hong Kong where we were trying to share with them the importance of using fresh fruits and vegetables in their program. And we actually visited a couple of schools; we met with industry. We had numerous meetings and several sessions where we presented information. You know, that trip will always stand out as one of my favorites, because I thought I don't know if I really am interested in going to Hong Kong, I am thinking, you know, what am I going to see there that will be different from what we're doing. Is it worth getting on a plane and having to fly that many hours, you know. But I am just, am ready to go back; and I've told the undersecretary that many times. That was the most amazing experience; those children were just absolutely beautiful. And to see some of the things that they are doing with nutrition and their concerns about obesity now are similar to ours. The fact that they are concerned about what we call competitive foods, because they have what they call "tech shops" where the students can buy some of the items that we are concerned about in the United

States. And some of the schools that we visited and how they have to prepare their food and how fortunate that we are to have some of the equipment that we do in comparison to what they have. Of course, they have some central kitchens, too, and they also have people from the outside that prepare some of the meals for the sites. But it was just an absolutely amazing experience. And the list could go on and on because I have traveled to so many states, all over the country and to so many different conferences.

MJ: Anything else that you would like to add?

MS: I would just like to encourage more people to get into the profession. I just think that this profession is something that a lot of people don't know about and that is something that I've worked very hard to try to share with people that, you know, child nutrition professional, you have an opportunity to work with children, you have an opportunity to work with adults, but the fact that you can make a difference in the lives of those children, and I just feel so fortunate now because I am close to retirement and several of my supervisors just recently retired, and I've had some young people apply for the positions that were interested in starting a career in child nutrition, and I am hoping that they will spread the word to other people who are seeking their degrees in food and nutrition, that they will consider a career in child nutrition because it is one of those fields that so many people who come in for an interview, because I interview every single person before they are appointed out in the cafeterias, they will say to me, "I wish I had known about this 20 years ago. I had no idea that I could apply for a position working in a school cafeteria to prepare meals." So we've got some work to do. We've got to change the mindset, we've got to get the word out to let people know about the profession. So that is something that I would want to share, how wonderful it is to work in this field and how rewarding it really is.

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

MS: Thank you.