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Recommended Citation

Hamilton, Rita and Institute of Child Nutrition, "Rita Hamilton" (2008). *Oral History Project (all interviews)*. 147.

https://egrove.olemiss.edu/icn_ohistories/147

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Rita Hamilton Oral History

Rita Hamilton comes from a family with a history in child nutrition.

Hamilton's mother worked at the food service manager at Hamilton's elementary school in rural Arkansas. After majoring in Home Economics at the University of Arkansas and working as an Arkansas Home Economics extension agent, Rita went on to serve as a state supervisor in the school nutrition programs at the Arkansas Department of Education.

Jeffrey Boyce: I am Jeffrey Boyce and it is July 22, 2008 and I am here in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania at the School Nutritional Association's Annual Conference and I am here today with Rita Stitt-Hamilton. Thank you, Rita, for taking time to share your story with us today.

Rita Hamilton: You're welcome, Jeff.

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

RH: Yes. I grew up on a farm in a community called Newport, Arkansas and the community was called Blackville. At that time back years ago, Blackville had one of the only black millionaires in the state of Arkansas.

JB: Oh how interesting. How did this person make their money?

RH: I do not know but they had a lot of farm land at that time.

JB: Yes, agriculture is big in Arkansas.

RH: Yes, absolutely. And back several...many, many years ago when I was a little girl, my mother became a manager out at the school that I attended. I attended the school and they hired my mother because she had a large family. There were nine children in my family so they figured that if she could prepare food for that many people that she would make a good cook.

JB: Where did you come in those nine?

RH: The last!

JB: You're the last. So you're the baby, ok! So your mom was the manager where you went to school?

RH: Yes.

JB: So what are some of your earliest recollections of those days when your mom started in child nutrition?

RH: My mother could not drive and my daddy had sort of helped me learn how to drive. And as soon as I was able to steer the wheel by myself, out in the county you can do things that you can't do in the city, I drove mother to school every morning and before she got assistance to help her prepare the food, I was her help.

JB: So that's how you got involved first in child nutrition. How old were you when you were driving your mom to school every morning?

RH: Probably about eight.

JB: Oh my [laughter], how did you see to steer?

RH: Well, like I said, you can do things out in the country that you can't do in the city. They put a pillow in my seat in the car and there was a gentleman by the name of Mr. King who used to pass me on the road, the dirt road of course, and he used to wonder who was driving that car. But that is how I drove mother to work every day.

JB: Other than when you helped your mom how did you decide to make child nutrition a career?

RH: Well, let me go back [because] I left something out.

JB: Ok, sure! Tell us whatever you want to.

RH: Ok. While I was driving my mother to work and she did not have any other assistance, she taught me how to put bacon on the grill because at that time we served bacon for breakfast.

JB: So you had a breakfast program?

RH: Yes we did. Newport was one of the first school districts that implemented breakfast after 1966. And we had those bad tasting, I think

they were Eskimo Bars or something like that, oh, they tasted so awful. But when you looked at them you thought that you were going to bite into something like a Hostess Twinkie because that's the appearance that it had. Chocolate something and then creamy on the inside. Well, anyway back to this, mother taught me how to prepare pancakes on the grill so I would leave my class in time to come down and help her serve. Our little elementary school went from kindergarten to eighth grade and there were approximately 150 students out there.

JB: A nice small size where every one knew every one.

RH: Yes. Now the reason I became involved in the program is because I attended the University of Arkansas, and one day, Ms. Ernestine Camp came and spoke to our class about community nutrition and Dr. Larry, who was the head at that time the Home Economics Department at the University of Arkansas, was over that section. And when Ms. Camp was looking for employees for area specialist or supervisor positions, I think that is what it was titled when I first came to the state, she contacted me. At that time I was a Home Economics extension agent from Mississippi County, Blytheville and Osceola.

JB: Oh, okay. Still in Arkansas.

RH: Yes. I lived in Blytheville and I worked in Osceola. So she contacted me and asked me if I would be interested in the job. And I told her "Well, sure." So, she met me with another supervisor and we went out to dinner at the Ramada Inn. I even remember where. And she told me about the program and everything. I applied and I was blessed to get the position.

JB: About when was this?

RH: May. I started May 29, 1979.

JB: Okay. So, Ms. Camp and the state hired you. What did you do in that job?

RH: Well, basically, the one thing that I was excited about was the traveling. I would be responsible for so many school districts of the northwest section of the state: Fayetteville, Rogers, Springdale, that area. And, I would be going in and working with them, monitoring, training and everything that would be needed in order to help the schools to operate their program in a manner that would meet regulations.

JB: What type of trainings were you doing at that time?

RH: Okay. I was hired May 29th. We did a workshop on June, probably, maybe June 5th.

JB: So you had to hit the ground running.

RH: Oh yes. Oh yes. And it was in the school district where Dorothy Caldwell was the foodservice director. Marianna, Arkansas. Dorothy had one of the most wonderful managers by the name of Mrs. Polly Perez. And, I tell you, she helped me get through that workshop because I didn't really like to cook, oaky? And here I was, training people how to prepare food. And Polly was so wonderful and if it had not been for her, I would not have made it through those two weeks of food preparation for workers. It was a workers' training program.

JB: Arkansas believes in training.

RH: Oh, yes sir. We do. That was something I came in on, and is something that I have been a part of ever since. The other thing that we did that year that was interesting was it was the last year that our manager certification program was going to be held on the University of Arkansas campus in Fayetteville. And, I was able to attend that program. I think it was a two-week program and I was able to attend that to get a feel for what the program was about.

JB: They were moving it somewhere else?

RH: Yes. Later, the next year, 1980, it was moved to the University of Central Arkansas in Conway where we are still implementing that training

for the managers from all over the State of Arkansas. And not only within our public schools, but it is also open to other programs like the special nutrition programs, Head Start programs, anyone who would like to send their people to be trained by our staff.

JB: Has there been anyone special...you have mentioned a couple of the powerhouse names in Arkansas. I know they have been mentors to you. Has there been anyone else who has been influential in directing your career or the decisions that you have made as you have pursued your career in child nutrition?

RH: Well, I told you about Ms. Camp. Others that have been very helpful...and you know about Dorothy Caldwell...I guess some others that I have admired and looked up to them...Shirley Watkins, of course, because she was right next door in Tennessee.

JB: In Memphis, right?

RH: Yes. Absolutely. Barbara Cole, who is one of my best friends... In fact, we are sorority sisters. Yes. And, Mary Hill, our present president of the Association.

JB: From the great state of Mississippi.

RH: Yes. Absolutely. I have always admired Mary because I have told her that she reminds me of one my aunts, who is deceased, but she was a favorite aunt. Those are some of the people. And, one of the individuals that I have worked with for many years, Barbara Smith, Mary Ganns, those are people in Arkansas who have helped me to become the person that I am...especially with food preparation. Remember I told you, I didn't like to cook. And, one summer, I had to go into the kitchen and actually show our managers how to prepare food. And it was like... I had not done that in a long time. And it was the things that Mary Ganns had taught me that came back to me to help me get through that workshop. In fact, it was just last summer.

JB: You have told us about your early career. Tell us about how your career has progressed.

RH: Well, basically, the only thing I have done is change areas within the state. I moved from the northwestern part of the state to north central and now it is called Northeast Arkansas. It reminds me of a pork chop because the corner part of Arkansas, Clay County, which is sort of on the Missouri line and then it comes down to Woodruff County, St. Francis County, Forrest City, Arkansas. And, now, I have gone back to Northwest Arkansas.

I am really pleased. It is sort of like going back home. If my health and everything continues to last, I would like to work at least another seven years.

JB: You go, girl!

RH: Yes.

JB: Is there anything unique about Arkansas regarding child nutrition? Anything special about the state?

RH: Our state is a very loving state. The child nutrition workers are just a big family. We may monitor the programs, but our schools know that if they need us, they can contact us and we will help them. We try to encourage them before they get into trouble or have problems, to call us, contact us before anything serious happens. And, so, with the program such as we have that is regulatory, a lot of people sometimes may feel intimidated by the state people. When we come in, they get all nervous. But, we try to encourage our people to look at us as their friends who are going to keep them out of trouble.

JB: It is much easier to take care of the small things than the large problems.

RH: Yes, it is. Absolutely. And, we have a lot of small districts. We have people; who have just become operators of a computer within the last three to four years...and some...within the last couple of years. So, we have seen much progress with technology in our state. And, I think that is a blessing. Because, my boss, Wanda Shockey, and she is another one that I failed to mention, has believed in making sure that their people have access to a computer so that we can communicate issues, recalls, whatever is necessary that they need to be aware of what is going on.

JB: What is a typical day like?

RH: Oh, Lord. Let's just say that you can have a list of things that you plan to do, but that list quickly changes when a school calls in and says "I need you to find a regulation for me on handling such, such, such." And then your job is to stop working on whatever project you are working on and help that school out. If you can give it to them at the time that they call, you give it to them. If not, you take their name and number and tell them you will contact them as soon as you can.

JB: So, it is constantly changing.

RH: Yes, it is. Yes it is. But that has been the wonderful thing about this job. My 29 years, I have never had a boring day, because there is always

something to do. And, like I say, I'll start out with a list. I'll mark the things I get done, the things I don't, they'll be on that list when I get a chance. And I try to tell my schools, we've had a lot of regulations that they have had to implement, with the reauthorization of 2004, and it stressed a lot of our schools out. And, I told them, "Get your priorities. Set it up." And that is what I try to do for myself. Set the priorities. Those things you can do today, you do today. The things that can wait for tomorrow, do them tomorrow. The things that you can put a little further off, you do those later. And that helps prevent stress.

JB: What are some of the major changes, the most significant changes you have seen over the years in child nutrition?

RH: Oh gracious. I guess from doing production records...from hand-written production records to doing production records on the computer.

JB: So, technology has been one of the biggest advances?

RH: Yes. Technology has been wonderful for our program because as all of these requirements come in and it takes the directors away from providing good food for the children, technology has at least allowed them do some things faster...so that they can get in their schools and continue to train their people so that they can keep doing quality, good quality products.

JB: Do any memorable stories come to mind as you think back over your career?

RH: Oh honey, I could tell you some, but I was trying to think of any type of story that...

JB: ...special child that you have come across?

RH: Oh yes, I do have a special story. The year that I started, 1979, I was going to a school visiting with Ms. Camp, and she was sort of doing some orientation on site at one of the schools in Decatur, Arkansas, and there was a little child. It was a community that was mostly Caucasian. There was a little child who came through the line, I think it was breakfast, and Ms. Camp and I were standing at the end of the serving counter. This little boy came through the line and he looked up at me, just as innocent as he could be, and he said, "Well, when did you turn black?" (Laughter).

JB: And what did you say?

RH: Well, I said "Darling, I've always been this way. I was born like this." And, that's it.

JB: Out of the mouths of babes...

RH: Absolutely. He was so innocent. And that has been one of the things in my job that I feel. I call myself the Ambassador of Love. Because, in so

many of the areas that I travel, they have not been used to black people or African Americans. And I felt like it was my opportunity to show them that we were not some of the characters or not some of the stigma that they had thought that we were. That we were human beings filled with love, compassion, and so I have tried to spread love and joy when I have gone to my schools to introduce them to me.

JB: You keep up the good work, girl.

RH: Thank you.

JB: Is there anything else you would like to add today?

RH: I just thank you for this opportunity, Jeff, for allowing me to tell my story.

JB: We are happy to have you.

RH: I hope it will do something to encourage someone else.

JB: What advice would you give someone going into the field today?

RH: Have an open mind. Have an open heart. Be ready to give. Be ready to receive. I have been very thankful to have had this job because it has allowed me to meet people from all over the world. I have been able to experience things that I would never have been able to experience without being in this profession. I have been to 40 of the 50 states. I would not

have been able to have gone there without this job. I have been blessed to work with a group of people who have taught me many things...Barbara Smith, Ms. Camp, Wanda Shockey, and Dorothy Caldwell. All of them have played an important role in making me who I am. And I thank God for the privilege of working with them. I will tell someone out there that there are so many different areas of foodservice that is available for people to go into now. The world is just open, because there is one thing someone told me many years ago, a superintendent in one of the school districts...people will always want good food. Machines and technology cannot make good food. You have to have human beings to make good food and to produce it.

That's it.

JB: Well, thank you, Rita, it has been a pleasure.

RH: Thank you, Jeffrey.