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Susan McCranie Oral History

Susan McCranie is a retired child nutrition program director in Georgia. She came to child nutrition after working for the Georgia Extension Service, the Georgia Peanut Commission, and as a computer programmer, before joining the Georgia Department of Education as an area consultant, and finally becoming a food service director.

AH: I'm Annette Bomar Hopgood, and I was the state agency director in Georgia from 1979-2006, and we're here today in Savannah, Georgia, at the Georgia School Nutrition Association Conference, and we're going to be interviewing some of the people that had significant roles in the Georgia School Nutrition Program. I'm here today interviewing Susan McCranie. Susan has been a vital part of the school nutrition program in Georgia and so Susan thank you for coming today.

SM: Thank you.

AH: Tell me a little bit about yourself, where you grew up, and your first experiences with the child nutrition program.

SM: I was actually born in Rome, Georgia, Floyd County. Daddy moved to Crawford County when I was not quite a year old because he wanted to farm. So we moved to South Georgia and got a farm, and so I lived there my whole growing up years. I went to a little elementary school out in the county called Culbertson Elementary. We did have a school lunch program. We didn't have breakfast. But to pick up your tray you just walked by the little half-door that looked into the kitchen and they handed you your tray. And I guess lunch may have cost ten cents a day maybe, because this was in the '50s. My favorite thing about school lunch in elementary school was that we got to have chocolate milk at Thanksgiving and Christmas, and it was in the little glass bottles with the cardboard tab on the top. Oh, it was so good. Because we had a cow, so we didn't have chocolate milk.

AH: Not unless you had a chocolate cow!

SM: No, we didn't have a chocolate cow. Those are my memories of elementary school, school lunch.

AH: That's wonderful. Tell us a little bit about your education and how you got into school nutrition.

SM: I went to Abraham Baldwin (Tifton, GA) for two years; then I transferred to the University of Georgia, majored in Home Economics Education, because at that time, which was early-60s, some of the best jobs you could get were in the Home Economics field.

AH: Right.

SM: So I decided ok, if I have to work when I get married, or if I don't get married and have to work, at least I'll have a way to support myself.

AH: That was a good idea.

SM: Then I transferred to Georgia and graduated.

AH: Now were you at Georgia the same time that I was there? I was there from '68-'72.

SM: No. I had just left, because I graduated in '67.

AH: Ok.

SM: And then after I got into school nutrition was when I went back to Georgia and got my masters degree in Food Service and Supervision and then my 6-year in Food Service and Supervision

AH: Ok. So then you were bumped up on the salary scale with that 6-year.

SM: Right.

AH: So how did you get involved in school nutrition then? You went from teaching
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SM: No, I never taught.

AH: Oh, you never taught?

SM: My first job was with the Extension Service. Then I moved to Atlanta and worked as a computer programmer with Southern Railway. Well, I got tired of Atlanta.

AH: Now where'd you get your computer background to do that?

SM: I didn't. They taught me.

AH: Oh, how about that?

SM: This was like 1971.

AH: Yea. Right when everything was emerging I'm sure.

SM: And they had trainers and they taught me how to write – we wrote in COBALT – common business oriented language. So I did that for three years -

AH: I did not know that.

SM: - got tired of Atlanta, and the Georgia Peanut Commission had an opening for a home economist. So I moved back to Tifton and worked for the Peanut Commission.

AH: And that's where I met you.

SM: Ok. And that's when I found out about school food service, because we went to all the state conventions and all the national conventions. So I met Josephine Martin and I met all these people in school food service – loved them- Marie McGlaun, all those people. So when I got tired of the Peanut Commission I thought 'Well, I think I'll just go to the school food service' because I'd met all these wonderful people. And there was an opening for a school nutrition area consultant in southwest Georgia, because Eugenia (Seay/Bozeman) had left.

AH: And that was with the Georgia Department of Education.

SM: With the Georgia Department of Education.

AH: Eugenia Seay had left that position.

SM: Yes. And Dr. Martin hired me and I worked as an area consultant for four years in southwest Georgia, until my son was born.

AH: It seems like you were there longer than that.

SM: Four years.

AH: And you now have a new grandchild. I know that.

SM: Right.

AH: And a son.

SM: Right. And then after Matt got old enough to go to school I went back to work. And I knew that Mitchell County needed a food service director. So I went to see the superintendent and they ended up hiring me and I worked part-time three days a week, and then the last year I was there I worked four days a week. But they had never had a food service director, so you had to start from the ground up to get this program centralized and organized. And after three years there – I had always wanted to work in Thomasville City, because it was one of my favorite cities when I was area consultant -

AH: Explain a little bit about Thomasville City itself, about the rose business and a little bit about Thomasville itself, why it's such a unique city in Georgia.

SM: It is, it's a beautiful, beautiful little town, and they've done so much to preserve their downtown, and they've had an independent school system since 1899 I think it is, so they were just really proud of their city school system.

AH: And they have a Rose Festival.

SM: And they have a Rose Festival. It's the Rose City and I think the festival's coming up next week. It's just a unique little town, and then Thomas County has all those plantations south of town, and it's just an unusual community. So that was my favorite school system when I was area consultant. They needed a director.

AH: So you had scouted them out.

SM: Yes. So I buzzed Dr. Gorman for about a year I guess, and he finally called me one day and told me yes, they were going to go ahead and hire a director. So that's how I ended up in Thomasville, and again I was the first school nutrition director they had ever had, so I started over again.

AH: From the ground up one more time.

SM: Right.

AH: Well tell me what it was like working in Thomasville City as a director, because you were there for most of your career.

SM: Yes, I was there about fifteen years. When I first went to Thomasville it was very difficult because I had several older managers who had been there a long time and did not want to change. And I had two or three principals, who were not receptive to a director, but I had a fabulous superintendent who was so supportive of what I needed to do, and so I knew I could always count on him. It takes people a while to adjust, and over the years the managers were so glad they had me, and the principals were so glad they had me.

AH: They couldn't do without you!

SM: Right, they couldn't do without me. So it turned out to be a really good experience.

AH: But you had a program there that was sort of renowned for its quality and for innovation I think too. I remember one time visiting you and you had classical music playing I think in one of the cafeterias at lunchtime.

SM: We did.

AH: What were some of the fun things that you most recall working in the school district? I know you had to do all regulatory things but -

SM: Right. Probably the most fun thing I did was when we decorated all the cafeterias. Designing all that stuff – it was a lot of fun, a lot of fun. Of course we had to spread it out over two or three years to have enough money to do each school. But probably planning all of that was the most fun thing, and then it was always fun when we had cookouts. We had cookouts at the middle school – every spring we would have cookouts and the principal would come cook the burgers, and that was a lot of fun – those were the fun things.

AH: Now how many schools did you have?

SM: When I went to Thomasville I had eight, but when I left they had consolidated some of them and we had six.

AH: You saw a lot of changes over your full career.

SM: Oh yes.

AH: From your jobs in Mitchell County and the state and Thomasville – tell me about the jobs you found most challenging maybe, or the most significant that you saw.

SM: When I first went to work for the state department I had an area that went from Muscogee County across to I 75, just south of Macon, down to the Florida line and over to Alabama. It was like thirty-three schools systems I think, and I probably didn't have more than ten or twelve directors out of all those school systems. So you would go see somebody that they had not seen a food service state task person in years, and the woman had been there since the '50s, and you would start talking to her about these new requirements, and she would tell you, "Well, Ms. So and So came to see me and she told me this was how I'm supposed to do it." And she was not going to change; it might have been twenty years ago, but she was not going to change. So it was – it was an experience.

AH: You probably didn't feel as productive as you would have liked to have been.

SM: Absolutely. That's part of what I loved about going to a local school system, because as an area consultant you saw all of these things that needed to be done,

but you didn't have any power to get any of them changed, unless the local superintendent or the principal or whoever saw the need to do whatever it was. But when you're in your own local system then you can just do so much.

AH: How many superintendents did you work under in Thomasville?

SM: I had several. Dr. Dorminy hired me and he was there for five or six years at least, and then we had Dr. Shiver, and then we had Dr. Cable, and then Mrs. Everett.

AH: So that was in a fifteen year period of time, all of those people?

SM: Yes.

AH: Did you ever find that politics interfered in the way you could get your work done, or what was the political environment. Some of those were elected superintendents I'm assuming.

SM: No, they were all appointed. I think Thomasville had traditionally had an appointed superintendent, or at least for some time before I went. So Dr. Dorminy retired. Then we had Dr. Shiver. And when I first went there the board was not as political as it became later. It was just a very serious-minded board. It got a little more political over the years.

AH: Right. I think we have seen that everywhere.

SM: Yes.

AH: Who were some of the people that you worked with or some of your peers that you felt like really influenced your work, including your local managers?

SM: Well, you were one of them. Eugenia Seay would have been one of them; Marie McGlaun and, Louise Whitman.

AH: Now Marie McGlaun was in Columbus, in Muscogee County.

SM: Yes, and so I got to know her when I was an area consultant.

AH: And her strong points were really she was a bulldozer. She could move mountains.

SM: Absolutely.

AH: Politically – she was very well politically connected also in the state.

SM: Except she couldn't get those drink machines out of those high school cafeterias.

AH: That was her thorn?

SM: Was it Coca-Cola or Pepsi that had some big headquarters office there?

AH: RC Cola. RC Cola, and what was the snack food company (Tom's Snacks) that was also based in Columbus? I think it's still there. It was like a little cracker company. RC Cola I think had a plant there. I'm not sure about which of the others.

SM: Well then maybe it was RC Cola.

AH: They were based in Columbus.

SM: They had these soft drink machines at the end of the serving lines in the high school and she could not get them out.

AH: Even though she could move mountains politically.

SM: She could move mountains, but she could not get those soft drink boxes out of there.

AH: And you mentioned Louise Whitman in Albany (Dougherty County).

SM: Louise Whitman – she was amazing because she had done so much in the area of training and she would share whatever she had with whoever needed it. She was amazing.

AH: What I remember about Louise was that she was so renowned for her work simplification.

SM: Right.

AH: Do you remember all of the work that she did?

SM: Yes.

AH: And it seems like that sort of became a lost art – work simplification. We were talking earlier about the infiltration of pre-prepared foods, and I think a lot of that was attributed to the fact that we lost that skill and we didn't really encourage that work simplification skill, so work became too burdensome for people. They looked for alternatives, which were pre-prepared foods, and I think a lot of what you see now is because we didn't continue to emphasize the kinds of things that Louise did.

SM: Right. She would have the whole script for a workshop on work simplification, or nutrition, or whatever it was, and you could just call her and she would pull it out of a file and send you one.

AH: That goes back to what so many of you have said during the interviews about there was virtually no competition within school nutrition among the directors. It was a very collaborative kind of supportive relationship.

SM: And I hope it's still that way.

AH: I hope so too.

SM: Because to me that's one of the most amazing things, is that whoever needs it, we were willing to share it.

AH: Yes. Tell me about what you think was your most significant contribution to school nutrition program over your career.

SM: I think it would have to be when we decided to start the South Georgia Coop.

AH: Ok. Tell us about that.

SM: I think it would have to be that. Well, if you remember in 1994, GA Representative Newt Gingrich, then Speaker of the US House of Representatives had what I called 'The contract **on** America', but he called it 'The contract with America', but he was going to block grant the school food service money and send it to the states, and hopefully turn it over to the private vendors, and oh, I got so upset.

AH: Not with Newt?

SM: Oh, with that whole bunch. So I had an article that I had cut out of a magazine, a food service industry magazine, several years before that, and it was in a stack – I knew exactly where it was in a stack on the left end of my desk – and when they started talking about sending block grants to the states, and I knew from what I had read what their intention was, I pulled out that article and I thought 'We have got to do something to improve our programs so that those people can't get it', and what had always bugged me -

AH: And ultimately you were talking about the food service management companies that would probably end up running the programs under a block grant.

SM: Right. I did not want them to get us. And one of the things that had always bothered me was you'd send out your bid, the vendors would send it back in, but

you really wouldn't know what you were going to get until it came in the back door. That's when you found out whether or not you were getting what you thought you were getting. Plus, you would find a product that the kids really liked, and it might not be what you had the next semester. So, we needed some consistency and we needed to be able to get the best quality we could get for the money we had. So I called somebody in Mississippi, I called two or three women in North Carolina, who were doing a similar kind of thing. So I called them, talked to them, got all their input. Then I talked to Jimmy Griffin because he was so good with purchasing.

AH: Jimmy was in which system?

SM: He was in Valdosta.

AH: He was in Valdosta City (GA).

SM: - and he did all that big purchasing because he had that huge freezer and cooler. So I talked to Jimmy. We sat down and decided what we wanted to do. We called all of our vendors from our area. We invited them to a meeting. What I had done, I had taken a map and decided ok, we need at least 50 or 60,000 meals, so I had pulled out a map and I had decided which counties we were going to invite to be in the coop. So we invited all the vendors and all these food service directors, and we had a meeting in Valdosta. We explained to them what we wanted to do and got the vendors input of how we could work together to do this. The only way you could put a specific product on your bid was if you had had a formal evaluation of the products and selected whichever one met your requirements. So we started in the spring of '95. We must have sampled over 600 products that spring. They still do it. Every spring they evaluate new products. We put out our own bid but we had one section that had all the coop items on it. We would always select two or three for each bid item that met our requirements. So it wasn't just one item. There were always some choices within the -

AH: So if you had pizza on there you would have some -

SM: You might have three brands of pizza, yes. For what I did that benefitted school nutrition that would have to be the biggest thing.

AH: right, and over a large region of the state also, and there are continuing with that.

SM: Right.

AH: That's the most important thing.

SM: I willed it to, or I bequeathed it to Joyce Akins (Lowndes County) when I left.

AH: Oh good, good. Well I'm glad Joyce is in charge of it now. Do you have any memorable stories or things that you remember being especially dear to you during your career?

SM: The one that immediately comes to my mind – when I was working as an area consultant, when I went to Mitchell County, Vivian Smith was the manager at the elementary school. At that time her elementary school was the largest elementary school in the state. She had over 1,200 kids at her school, and she served about 1,200 lunches a day, and about 800 breakfasts a day. She was amazing. She had been a manager since she was about twenty years old. She finally retired a couple of years ago after 45 years I think it was.

AH: Tell me her name again.

SM: Vivian Smith. She was FABULOUS. And I remember going to see Vivian. I had just been with the state department a year or so and National School Lunch Week was coming up, so I was making some suggestions on things she could do to promote National School Lunch Week. And so I suggested decorations for the cafeteria and several things for this woman who's serving 1,200 lunches a day.

AH: Her mind was really not on decorating, right?

SM: But, I went back over there during National School Lunch Week. Not only had Vivian decorated, she had different classes coming in all during the lunch serving period doing these little musical performances!

AH: You're kidding me?

SM: I'm not kidding you. She was amazing.

AH: So she's still around as far as you know.

SM: Yes. I went to her retirement party a couple of years ago.

AH: She'd be a great person for us to talk to then.

SM: Yes.

AH: Wonderful, wonderful. Well you came in also about the same time as many of the other directors did who are now retiring. You've been retired how many years?

SM: It's actually been seven years.

AH: Has it been that long? That's amazing. There are a lot of them retiring now, and I think it's interesting that you spoke about Home Ec was a chosen profession for a lot of people because there were jobs for women. Nursing or teaching were the other two professions most of us would have chosen -

SM: Right.

AH: - so a lot of those people came through the same routes that you and I did through Home Ec Education, and they are about to retire now. If you were put in charge of recruiting new directors for the state what would you tell them about the program that would entice them to want to be a part of child nutrition – the profession?

SM: It's just a lot of fun. It's a challenge. You're always going to have something new and different to do. There's something for everybody, whether you like the business part or the nutrition part or this -

AH: The marketing part.

SM: There's always something you're going to love about it and you're going to meet some fabulous people. And all of the other directors are going to be willing to help you and share with you whatever you need. I'm sure there's some people

who love being in a classroom and hands-on with thirty kids, but if you want something that's bigger -

AH: I like that description.

SM: - it's really going to challenge you to excel in several different areas – I would say school nutrition is the job for you. It is amazing.

AH: And you never had any regrets about going from being the peanut person?

SM: Oh no. I loved school nutrition. I still love it.

AH: Well, we appreciate your being here and taking time for the interview. You keep being involved and supporting the people that are out there, because I know they appreciate your support – you're being here at the conference after having been retired for seven years.

SM: Oh it's been fun. There's still a good many of my old friends around.

AH: Enough to come back to a conference. Thank you Susan, we appreciate it.

SM: Thank you.