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Ellen Leppa Oral History

Ellen Leppa, certified with the American Association of Family and Consumer Sciences and the School Nutrition Association, served as Education and Training Specialist and Coordinator of On-Site Services at the National Food Service Management Institute on the campus of the University of Mississippi until her retirement in 2009. As coordinator Ellen worked with both State Departments of Education and conference planners of School Nutrition Associations throughout the country to provide trainers for preconference classes, general sessions, educational sessions, workshops and seminars on a large variety of topics. Some of the topics include Developing a Food Safety Program, Emergency Readiness, Biosecurity Guidelines, Personnel Management, Financial Management, MyPyramid, Nutrition 101 and the Dietary Guidelines for Americans, 2005. She was the project coordinator for the Building Human Resource Management Skills training tool for food service managers, the Financial Management Course for School Food Service Directors and the development/publication of Mealtime Memo, a fact sheet for child care providers. Ellen has worked in Child Nutrition Programs for over 35 years both at school district and State levels.

JB: I'm Jeffrey Boyce and it's November 12, 2009. I'm here at the National Food Service Management Institute with Ellen Leppa. Thank you Ellen for sharing your time with us today.

EL: Well, thank you for inviting me to come and share some of my memories with you.

JB: Could we begin your oral history with you telling me a little bit about yourself?

EL: Sure. I was born in Yonkers, New York. Some may have heard of Yonkers as Hello Dolly! country. It's probably the fourth-largest city in the state at this point in time. And I'm a second-generation Italian-American. My grandparents came to this country around 1900. Actually, their names are on the American Immigrant Wall of Honor on Ellis Island.

JB: What were their names?

EL: The last name, my maiden name was Parlapiano, which has been interpreted as speak softly, speak slowly. Italian names are very expressive, as I'm sure you know. I was just born and raised in that area and pretty much stayed in that area until around 1970. And then when I was married my husband and I moved to the Gulf Coast of Mississippi. And that is not necessarily where my career with school food service continued, but it's kind of my departure from Yonkers, New York.

JB: What is your earliest recollection of child nutrition programs? Was there a school lunch or school breakfast at your school?

EL: I'm sorry to say there wasn't. I attended St. Mary's Elementary School and then into St. Barnabas High School, parochial education actually straight through college. But the early years, there was no lunch program, most especially in Catholic school. You just toted your little lunch box, or little paper bag, whatever. And there was a designated room, which was also the music room as well as the lunch room. Probably my earliest recollection that there was actually a formal cafeteria and dining area was at a place called Saunders High School. It was a trade school and it was located right across Broadway, which was where our school was more or less situated. And we were frequently invited to go, once we got of an age where they thought we could conduct ourselves. We were crossed by the crossing guard and went over to the cafeteria at Saunders and kind of palled around with all the older kids, and all the kids were young men, so we very excited to be there. And quite frankly as I've said I think on other occasions, I really don't remember the food. I kind of remember the young men that were there.

JB: Was that an all-girls school that you attended?

EL: No. They separated us at third grade. Up until that time it was co-ed, and then we went our separate ways.

JB: And you don't remember any of the menu items at this school?

EL: At the Saunders High School? Yea.....I think turkey was a big think. And it seems that maybe that may have been one of the days that we were invited to go and have lunch, because it was kind of a pre-Thanksgiving meal, and it was very good.

JB: Tell me about your post-high school education. Where did you go to school?

EL: I attended Marymount Manhattan College located at East 71st Street in New York City, and basically commuted, as most of the attendees did. It was very much a city college, so it drew from the five boroughs in the city as well as the folks from Westchester County, which is where I commuted from. So it was a haul every day going.

JB: How long was your commute?

EL: It started fairly early and there always seemed to be very early classes, so it wasn't uncommon for me to be headed out at six-thirty in the morning so I could get there for eight o'clock sessions. There were accommodations for those attendees who were from out of state or who had come in from other countries. There was provision there, but most of us were just day-trippers, and really the city was our campus, and it provided lots of cultural and educational opportunities. I was very happy to be there actually.

JB: What degree did you earn from there?

EL: I earned a BA in Home Economics and I had several minors; Philosophy, which didn't turn out to be one of the most useful minors, but never the less, as well as English.

And then I took extra courses once I got out of Marymount. I took courses at Hunter College and Queens College in Quantity Cookery and Quantity Food Purchasing, Institutional Management, and of course just ongoing educational courses. My Master's was earned at the University of Wyoming in Laramie, and that came a few years later.

JB: What was it in?

EL: That was in Adult Education actually. Prior to earning that degree I had also started my Master's in Texas. And it was the Texas Woman's University in Denton, Texas, and that was quite a commute too. From where we lived it was about forty-five miles. I did earn about eighteen credits, but then we moved. So because we moved I of course had to give that particular major up and when I got to Wyoming they did not offer that major. So I thought, well, the next best thing would be Adult Education, and it's proven to be a very good fit I think.

JB: So how did you get involved in child nutrition as a profession?

EL: Well, way back when, there was an ad in the classified section of the New York Times, and they were looking for school food managers; actually it's a misnomer because you're really like an area supervisor. Once getting the position you got a block of schools that you were responsible for. It was about ten schools and basically my stomping grounds were the South Bronx. The average school that I had served anywhere from twelve to fifteen hundred lunches every day. I think New York is still the biggest area, serving about a million lunches a day, so I think it's still up there. It may be supplanted by the Los Angeles Unified School District at this point in time, but it's either one or two as far as the number of lunches served. That doesn't cover the breakfast as well.

JB: What was a typical day like?

EL: Well you know, when I started to make notes Jeff for this interview I couldn't really just sum it up in one school or even one state, because I worked at different levels in different states, so I probably need to start with New York City first and foremost, because I worked there for ten years. You have to go back a little bit, and I'm sure you know this from taking other oral histories, but New York City was the pioneer in feeding children, and it went back to 1853, and they haven't stopped. But a typical day really would be trying to get out – I got out to visit each of these schools throughout the week, so I would conceivably make two schools a day, so I was always kind of on the road. But being on the road in New York City, you were very close to everything, so sometimes I could walk to the schools. Other times I would have to take public transportation, which would be the subways, to get to my next stop. I only did that for about a year and a half and then I got my own car. Parking was always a major problem anywhere in the five boroughs, and the North Bronx and the South Bronx were no exception, so I would have to take my car and pray that I would find a parking spot. There was always alternate side of the street parking to contend with in many of the areas that I was in, which meant that you could legally park between 8 and 11, then you better get out there and move your car to the other side of the street or else they would ticket you, or even better still tow you

away. They love to tow your car away in New York City, and I've had my car towed on more than one occasion. But I would certainly visit the schools, see what the managers were doing, most especially get out to the lunchrooms and visit with the children. Did they like the meal? What didn't they like? What did they find really good? What did they find less than good? This was something that I was bound and determined to do and it was part of my responsibilities, so I was doing it. I certainly made sure that food was ordered for each and every location. I did a lot of inventory control, sometimes on a weekly basis, always on a monthly basis.

JB: How was purchasing set up? Did you do your own purchasing?

EL: I ordered the produce for each one of the schools. The canned, the dried food items, the commodity products were done through a central office, but I would have to phone those orders in to that central office. But before I get out of New York City, before I totally bore everybody, it was wonderful in that the Head Start program was implemented in 1965, and I was part of that whole process, and it was wonderful to be able to serve these children. And they did not come into the lunchroom, because many of them were located in public schools. We basically packed the food in, it kind of looked like a 4-tiered canister type thing, that you placed each one of the components of the meal, with the exception of milk, into those little tiers, X number of portions per canister, and then they kind of snapped shut. And then you sent the canister, based on the count that we were given, plus the milk, to the classrooms. And then the children, they're usually three to five I think was the age group, and still is, they would then be taught manners, and how to eat with forks and spoons and so forth. So it was quite a learning curve for these children, because they were pulled from the inner city.

JB: Was this just lunch or breakfast-lunch?

EL: At that point in time we were doing just lunch and I know later on we also served them breakfast as well, because the Breakfast Program was piloted in 1966. And so therefore New York was heading the list of entities that did offer the school breakfast. And I think it was 1975 it was finally authorized.

Texas – I worked in Texas, Grand Prairie Independent School District, again on a district level. The title was for Food Service Supervisor. There were seventy-five schools in that district, and I was very much responsible for product testing. We never put new products out, never served new products to children unless we tested them. We never purchased them to serve until they were tested.

JB: How did you go about testing?

EL: Well, I had a little test kitchen and had set checklists, set guidelines, my thermometers; I had my little oven there. It was actually a commercial oven. I was set up to do actual testing at certainly the same level that the product would be heated and served in schools, and/or cooked in schools. Let me see – inventory management was a big part of my job because we had a huge warehouse, and so I was responsible for literally doing the physical count of everything in that warehouse on a monthly basis. So I

would frequently find myself up on those giant ladders that went up to the very top of the many-tiered storage racks, or find myself donning an insulated suit and going into the freezer and doing the same thing in freezers. I must say there was wonderful warehouse staff that helped with some of the physical lifting and so forth, but it wasn't uncommon for me to be lifting forty and fifty pound boxes of ground beef and so forth. I could move them so that I could get into the areas to do an actual count of this. You've got to learn real quickly about how the pallets of food like ground beef were "tied" as the expression goes; lots of wonderful memories in Texas, and I was there for approximately three years. Next was Wyoming; again I worked at the district level and I was a Food Service Director. Wyoming was a big challenge. Laramie is at 7,200 feet above sea level. So really winter kind of comes in September and sort of goes away by June, sort of. There have been times when we had snow in July. I had about seventeen to eighteen schools. We had a central kitchen in Laramie and that basically served almost all the schools in the city part. So that means that the meals were prepared and then they were packed and shipped to each one of the schools. The exceptions were the rural schools, and there were five of them, and they were thirty to fifty miles out of town, which meant that food had to be delivered to three of the five schools in bulk form, because those three schools had a single person who was a cook/manager. So that person would be responsible for doing both breakfast and lunch for anywhere from twenty-five to thirty-five children. These were small, rural schools. Sometimes they were on actual ranches. That's where the school was, so that's where the children went to school and that's where they were served their lunch. They were very nice little almost one-room schoolhouses, and they pretty much covered K-6, and then they would have to come into Laramie to go to the high schools. A fourth rural school was unique in that it was in the mountains, very much in the mountains, and I will never forget its name. It was Fox Park, and it served about thirty to thirty-five children. And there the meals were sent completely cooked in bulk and then the components of the meal that had to be were brought up to temp in a microwave oven or oven and then served to the children. The milk and the cold items, the fruit and so forth, were shipped separately. So that again was different. And the final school was about forty-five miles out of Laramie and they served about ninety children. They had a complete commercial kitchen. They did their own food ordering, and basically there were two people that were in charge of that particular school feeding. So I was on the road a lot visiting these schools to see how they were doing. Were all the various hoops being jumped through? Were all the cautions being taken not to have any incidences of food-borne illnesses and so forth? And of course I was responsible for all of the – at that time we were not into a computer system. This was very early '80s and so I was responsible for doing all of the free and reduced lunch applications, and that took a great deal of time to do, compiling the list and so forth - just anything and everything that a Food Service Director has to do in a smaller school district, but spread out over vast areas. Wyoming's population at that point in time was just about half a million, and huge area to cover. So I was a busy person needless to say in Albany County School District. And I was in Wyoming just about six years.

From there I went to Nevada, and there I went from the district level to the state agency level, and I was in Nevada about eleven years. I coordinated the National School, School Breakfast Programs for both the seventeen school districts and twenty-two residential childcare institutions. Again, I was never at a loss for work to do. I did all the reviews,

and it started with something called AIM, which was Assessment Improvement Monitoring System, and then went to Coordinated Review Effort, which became known as CREs. And then when the School Meals Initiative was added I think in 1996, I also became responsible for that. Nevada basically has two huge school districts. One is in Reno and the second one is in Las Vegas. Las Vegas at that point in time may have been 230-240 schools. All of the time I was in Nevada the high schools were not on the program. I think they had been taken off the program in 1981, and they were still in 1999, when I left there, they were not on the program. However, about a year or two later the high schools went back on the program. I was constantly encouraging them to put the high schools on the program. Of course I'm sure as you know from other interviews most high schools have open campus, so the kids just flow off the high school campuses. So many of them have their own cars, so they would just take off and kind of get away from their schools for a little bit of time. But one of the unique things I think about Clark County School District, which is Las Vegas, was that every single school served breakfast. Every new school, and they were opening up eight to ten a year when I left, would serve breakfast as well as lunch. Many of the schools had after-school snack programs as well. It was an enormous district. To do a review you would need to bring in a team of people, and the team would include USDA representation as well as state agency to get it done, and it would take about two weeks, because there would be so much that you would have to cover. Another unique thing about Clark County is they had many year-round schools, and for different blocks of time.

JB: Was that because there were so many students?

EL: Yes. And this is unique too. Many of the parents were employed in the casinos. So that was something that the parents too had to contend with, because sometimes obviously children would be off when they would be having to be at work and it worked out well if some of them were on the night shift. But if they weren't then of course care for those children would have to be forthcoming. And certainly what we encouraged Clark County to do would be to offer the summer food service program to those children who were not in school but then became eligible for being fed within the confines of the Summer Food Service Program.

JB: Was the summer program breakfast and lunch or just lunch?

EL: I wasn't supervising the summer program but it seems to me that they did both breakfast and lunch. I did go out and monitor lunch sometimes, but it wouldn't be for Clark County. At that time I was helping to monitor in the northern part of the state. Washoe County is basically Reno, and it was the second largest one, as I mentioned before. The other fifteen school districts, or fifteen counties, because they consolidated their school districts years ago, years before I came there, so again you'd be dealing with very small school districts as far as population, but huge land masses. So easily you would go out to do say Humboldt County, you would have to make provisions for getting there the night before so you could observe breakfast in so many of their schools, and then stay to do their lunch reviews, and then you might be even in some place like Humboldt County two or three days just getting it done, and then head on back to Carson

City, which is the state capital. When I wasn't reviewing I spent a lot of time on the phone just talking to School Food Service Directors and those who managed residential child care institutions, because they too participated in the National School Lunch Program both for breakfast and for lunch, and they are a different entity altogether. So frequently you would do a lot of correction of practices that they shouldn't have been doing – change in staff frequently at that level. And so you try to go out and do specific training at these different sites, certainly before you would want to go in and do any kind of a review, because of there was an outstanding finding it could mean taking back of dollars, and you don't want to ever do that with any school district or residential child care institution. Just kind of a funny little story – probably in the early 1990s Las Vegas hosted at that time the ASFSA Annual National Conference, and I was one of the individuals who was there to welcome participants to the great state of Nevada and the great city of Las Vegas, and do forth, but also it was my duty to introduce the Superintendent of Schools at that time, which I did do. And so he came out and welcomed the group and did the little thing he needed to do – a very personable man – and one of the things, and I'll never forget it, that he did say and it's true to this day, he referred to the revenue that was acquired from gaming in the state of Nevada as “Slots for Tots”, and seven or eight thousand people in the audience were just cackling away. As I say to this day it is true – it is Slots for Tots.

Moving on to Mississippi – here I'm at the national level with NFSMI, and prior to retiring last August and coming back forty-five days later in a part-time position I worked almost nine and a half years here at NFSMI, and it was really in many ways a culmination of a career as it were, because there were so many, many years that I spent in other states at other levels, and certainly responsible for training to a greater or lesser degree, and the resources were just not there. I mean if you needed something you maybe sent to the Beltsville Library in Maryland to try to get an old video, an 18mm video on Food Safety. And generally the material was not very current. In many cases the material was not very palatable as far as written form. So you would try to make it more readable and a more enjoyable experience for the people you were training. So to find a position open on the NFSMI web-site – and it was kind of a spur of the moment thing, I hadn't planned to do this – but it was a July day, maybe mid-July back in 1999 and I said, “Here's a position that sounds wonderful. I could do that.” And the position was Education/Training Specialist and I thought, “Well, let me just apply.” So I sent off all the required pieces that were asked for and a very short time later I got a call, came for the interview, pretty much got the position that day, scooted back to Nevada, went to a conference, in Denver I think that year, came to NFSMI in August 1999 as Education and Training Specialist, and basically was in that position for about six and a half years. Certainly I have done quite a bit of training in that position. I've also been able to work as a project coordinator on BLTs, which is Breakfast/Lunch Training Module, and specifically it was Food Service Assistant: You Are Important. I worked with Dr. [Josephine] Martin, who should certainly be a role model for anyone who is in child nutrition programs. She is just outstanding. Prior to that, when I first arrived there was a huge project out there. It was Building Human Resource Management Skills Module. And there are twenty-two of them, and that was my very first big project to coordinate, and it was quite a challenge. I thoroughly enjoyed doing it. It allowed me to go to other states where filming was done, and there were six video segment within the three

collections. Again, it was something I hadn't done before and it was quite a learning experience, and one that I thoroughly loved. Since then I've worked on a Financial Management course and helped to coordinate that – put that into place with Jeri Cater, as I've always referred to her as the guru of financial management, and justifiably so. In the early stages back in 2000 or 2001 there were pilots going on in Boise, Idaho, and I was able to there and help with that and learn from that; and worked with individuals like Shirley Watkins and Nina Cross, as well as Jeri Cater to do some Train the Trainer for Financial Management. We did have two pilots, one here at NFSMI and one at State College in Pennsylvania. And thereafter there were seven Train the Trainer Financial Management courses that were given in different parts of the country, and we tried to go regionally so that individuals in different regions of the country would have access to those training sessions. Along with that there was a four hour component for developing and equipping master trainers which I did too. And again, I think that was a great topic for me because I enjoy anything to do with human resource, personnel management, and I was able to deliver that content prior to Financial Management being done for a two-day period. And maybe that was a kind of an easy access when I returned as a part-time person, and I'm kind of getting off base here just a little bit, but I was able to work on Master Trainer Seminar, and pulling together materials that had been done, but trying to update them and put them in a user-friendly mode, and also to do a pilot here at NFSMI, as well as deliver a pre-conference, about a seven-hour session at ANC this past June in Las Vegas. But prior to my coming back as a retiree, about four and a half years ago, around 2005 I was given the opportunity to be the Coordinator of Onsite Services, and that was a challenge, and one that I really embraced, because I got to help program coordinators plan their educational sessions or their conferences, and this was throughout the country. And to find trainers – and we have a host of really wonderful consultants who are trainers for us who go out and do presentations. Some trainers love to do anything that you have there for them. Others are very specific about what they will and will not train and feel comfortable training. You spent *days* on the phone. Every day was the same as the day before because you would be talking to people; the phone would be constantly ringing to ask how could we help with Conference XYZ, and we were there to do it for them.

JB: What were some of the biggest challenges you faced?

EL: Biggest challenges. Maybe correctly comprehending USDA regulations I think was a really big challenge. I guess serving fifteen hundred children a day in so many schools that I was responsible for in New York City was a big, big challenge, making sure again that there was no situation that would lead to food-borne illness, and when I talk about that I think back to *old* schools, and there were many old schools in New York City at that time that had tiny kitchens when you think about the number of meals being prepared. And limited equipment – refrigeration – working freezers were unheard of. They had upright freezers and refrigerators to contend with. I have to fess-up. There were times where we used milk chests, we just cranked up the temp if we could, and used the milk chest, because we were so pressured for space. I'll get to my most memorable story a little bit later, but we received whole turkeys at that point in time; a processed turkey role was not available. Just the whole processing contract was not anything that we could deal

with at that point in time, so that certainly was a big challenge. Oven space was a big challenge. Some other challenges later on – training on nutrient analysis and in Nevada the entire seventeen school districts went with Nutrient Standard Menu Planning. And in many ways we were the pilot for Nutri-Kids. Nutri-Kids was in California and they asked would we be willing to use their software, and they gave us a tremendous break on the cost of it, and so Nutri-Kids was purchased and we accepted help from Nutri-Kids on individuals who came in and trained the state agency people. And we went out and did additional training with our Food Service Directors and Managers. That was a real big challenge. As far as I know they are still using Nutrient Standard Menu Planning today. Probably another big challenge is, and I think it's crossed over the decades, encouraging children to try new food and not feed the trashcan. I saw it forty-plus years ago, and I bet if I were to go out today I would still see it. The plus today is that choice is available, far more choice perhaps than was available forty-plus years ago. Choice very much became available. I mean we had side dishes with Nutrient Standard Menu Planning. We had choices on entrees and so forth, and you would see far less waste because of that. But sometimes the shortage of time to eat caused waste, and so working with principals to allow children a little more time to eat and not counting all of their time standing in line as part of their little 15-20 minute lunch break, and I think that continues today. I don't think that has been totally and completely resolved. Finally, just continuing to wage the war against negative PR against child nutrition programs, and you still see it today in one form or another; snide comments on local news programs still continue. However, I think SNA has good responses and fast responses to this, and I think on a local level, state level it needs to be really answered in a comprehensive, intelligent way. Frequently the comments made just come out of ignorance. They don't know what constitutes a school meal. They don't know what it entails to put that meal on a serving line to children.

JB: What would you say has been your most significant contribution to the field?

EL: You know, that's a very touchy subject with me, and I was really laboring over it yesterday when I was pulling together my thoughts for this little oral history as it were. I've never really thought of myself as anybody really special or outstanding in my field, and I can think of just so many people who I think are far more talented and have contributed far more than I have. I was a constant in child nutrition programs in every state that I worked in. I was reliable. I was principled. Hopefully I still am. I was a confidante to many people and I was a disciplinarian to several people. Some people may have regrets about the profession that they find themselves in. They feel that there was lack of opportunity or the financial compensation wasn't enough. All I can say is I never did. So that's my response to that question.

JB: What advice would you give someone who was contemplating child nutrition as a career today?

EL: Well, I think I would encourage them to read *Managing Child Nutrition Programs: Leadership for Excellence*. Again, Dr. Martin is one of the authors, and Dr. Charlotte Oakley is a second author, and I think that truly it's a wonderful resource guide. And I think it will reflect all the changes, maybe all the latest changes, because I think it was

revised in 2007-2008, changes in legislation and in school nutrition programs. I think it would be a good place for them to start.

JB: Any memorable stories as you think back over your career?

EL: I do have a memorable story and I have to share it. And I wish I could really tell you that observing children at lunch over the decades has yielded these wonderful, heart-warming stories that I will always remember. And I'm sure they did occur, but none really come to mind, easily to mind. However, the one memorable incident I can sum up at a moment's notice is this. Twenty-five whole turkeys were prepared for the Thanksgiving meal - and what an appropriate time of year to tell the story - at an elementary school in the South Bronx, and again you may remember, I was telling you about these big numbers, well we were dealing with big numbers here, somewhere between twelve and fifteen hundred children were going to come in for lunch. So I arrived at the school about 8am, and it was a Wednesday, right before Thanksgiving. And certainly the extra pair of hands was always appreciated, and I never just sat in the back, the back meaning a little office, or went off into the storeroom initially. I was always out and about in the kitchen. And so I loved pitching in and helping. So I washed my hands, and I put on gloves - we did have gloves in those days believe it or not - and I began to dice turkey that had obviously been cooked and was ready to be put into a form that would then be measured into an appropriate steam table pan. Certainly the kitchen smelled absolutely heavenly. And I noticed after a while that one of the staff was going over to one of the deck ovens. She was opening the door, peering in at what was in the deck oven and closing it very carefully. And I just assumed that maybe they're doing one extra turkey just in case; it's late, because I knew that lunch would go from about 10:45 to 1 o'clock. Maybe they had an extra section of turkey breast, legs, and so forth. Well, I found out after a short while that there wasn't any turkey breast in the oven, or any legs, or any thighs, or any wings. But what was on that large bun pan, I think eighteen by twenty-six, I'm stretching here now because it's been a while, but lined meticulously on this bun pan were twenty-five fatty appendages from the turkeys - the tails - and they were just like little soldiers lined up in little rows, and I had never, never seen anything like that before. Again, I said lunch was going to be served at 10:45, so at 10:30 the ladies sat down - and we had a gentleman helping us - sat down for lunch as a group and gave thanks, and they proceeded to devour the prominent turkey parts, and it was in evidence on every single plate. And some of you out there may remember, and I think they are still referred to as the Pope's nose. They've also been referred to as the Sultan's nose, or the Parson's nose. It may have started as a derogatory expression way back when, but I think it's one of those expressions that has stuck throughout the decades, and that is my most memorable story.

JB: Anything else you'd like to add?

EL: I truly don't think so. I think I have stayed within my one hour of time and caused some folks to just sort of doze off.

JB: Thank you so much for sharing your story with us today.

EL: Thank you. Thank you for asking me.