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Peggy H. Lee Oral History

A Virginia native and graduate of Virginia Tech, Peggy H. Lee began her career in restaurant management, but soon switched to school food service. She first worked as a supervisor of twenty-two schools in the Norfolk school system and then became the nutritionist for Virginia Beach Schools. From Virginia Beach she moved to Norfolk as a supervisor and then took the director's position in Chesapeake. After thirty years of service she retired and now works for the National Dairy Council.

JB: I'm Jeffrey Boyce and it is March 7, 2011. I'm in Washington, DC at the LAC conference with Peggy Lee. Good morning Peggy and thanks for taking the time to talk with me today.

PL: Thanks Jeffrey.

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

PL: I was born and raised In Suffolk, Virginia, and I went to high school there, and went on to college at Virginia Tech, and I majored in Home Economics it was called at the time, and I was in Clothing and Textiles, because I made most of my clothes growing up.

JB: What part of the state is Suffolk in?

PL: Suffolk is right next to Virginia Beach/Norfolk – it's directly west – it's tidewater Virginia, where my career has been all my life pretty much. I have an older brother, and my mother was a school nurse.

JB: What is your earliest recollection of child nutrition? Was there school breakfast or lunch when you were going to school?

PL: Well actually my first, second, and third grade we had a school where we walked home for lunch, a neighborhood school. We only had three levels of schools, because we were a small community, about 9,000 people. We had first, second, and third grade, and that was when we walked home for lunch, and came back to school. Then fourth on through high school we shared a cafeteria with the high school. I guess it was called the elementary school; it was fourth, fifth, sixth, and seventh grade. The cafeteria was not part of the buildings. It was separate so you just walked over from the outside. And then high school was next door to that so I had school lunch from fourth grade on. And with my mother being the school nurse in the city, in all three schools, she was always a strong proponent for having lunch at school. We didn't have a lot of choices. I remember we had the hamburger line. That was the new addition when I got into high school. We had the Type-A lunch of course. You didn't have any choices. It was like you put it up there and if you didn't want it or like it you took it anyway. As I got older in high school we had an old gym in the high school – it was a privilege for seniors to be able to go down to the vending machines to get a Coke and Nabs. One of my boyfriends in high school -his mother as the food service manager in the cafeteria – so yes, I remember. I didn't think the food was great, but it wasn't a bad experience. I remember having little tickets for buying lunch.

JB: Do you remember some of your favorite menu items?

PL: Ice cream. We could always get ice cream after we finished our meal. Somebody walked around to make sure you'd eaten all your lunch – I stuffed some of it in my milk carton.

JB: I think we all did.

PL: I think we all did too.

JB: Was it the little wooden spoon ice cream thing?

PL: Yes. Little cups and you had the wooden spoon. Strawberry was my favorite.

JB: Chocolate was mine. Tell me about your educational background after high school. Where did you go to school and what degrees did you earn?

PL: I went to Virginia Tech to major in Clothing and Textiles in the Home Economics Department. My father had a sweet tooth growing up, and I had to do a lot of baking. My mom wasn't a great cook. My dad actually taught her to cook. So, I'd bake for him. As part of Home Economics back then you had to take a little bit of each part of the Home Economics curriculum, which was the clothing side, the food side, and the community nutrition side. So I took a food course my freshman year, and I loved it, and so I decided that year I was going to move into the Hotel, Restaurant, Institution Management side, with Food and Nutrition. I was in that side because I'd gotten a job the next summer working in a restaurant down in the Outer Banks of North Carolina. So I thought that I wanted to go in the restaurant business. Nobody talked to me about child nutrition. I didn't know that was even an option. So I went down and worked summers in restaurants. I graduated with my degree – didn't want to do clinical, didn't really want to work in a hospital setting and sick people – I didn't want the other parts of it; in Clothing and Textile I could still sew, but, anyway I ended up in food, and so I got a job out of college in Richmond for a year working in restaurants. I was a manager trainee, and I didn't really particularly care for the Richmond area. I was a water girl and wanted to be near the ocean. I was moving back home to look for a job after my year of Richmond with a lease there. I had to wait for that to end, and basically on the way home, my mother, she had found this clipping in the newspaper for a supervisor position in Norfolk Schools in school nutrition. And I'm like, "I don't know anything about school nutrition." And she said, "But this looks like a good job, and it's a school that you don't have to work Thanksgiving and Christmas and weekends and holidays and things. And I said, "Ok." So I applied. I was twenty-three years old. At the time Norfolk had seventy schools. So there

were three supervisors and we each supervised about twenty-two schools apiece. I got the job. I didn't have any experience, but I guess they saw something in me that was good, and I think it was a time they were looking to bring in new blood. Remembering back, the director had sort of promoted managers, and hadn't really had degreed people, so he was trying to change some of that, because everybody behind that was degreed. It was a great learning for me. I was out working in schools – I had twenty-two – and the managers were like my moms. I went in and worked side-by-side with them and learned the business. I remember getting a phone call Labor Day Weekend my second year and the manager had gone into the hospital and she was going to be out for like six weeks, so I had to actually go in and run the school. So that was great experience. You kind of hit the floor running.

JB: Baptism of fire.

PL: Exactly. So I stayed there for a couple of years, and an opportunity came open in Virginia Beach Schools, so I got that position as a nutritionist. It was when the Nutrition Education and Training funds were coming up. I think we had something like \$40,000. It was a huge amount of money back then. So I went over there and worked for Virginia Beach, focusing mostly in the school nutrition side on menus and procurement. Also, working with the curriculum people about how to integrate nutrition education into the already existing curriculum. Even back then nobody had time to just teach nutrition, so I had to figure out how we could work that in to existing stuff. So then, I thought it was about time to be a director. I had been working about five years at that point. A position came open in Chesapeake, but I didn't get the job. They brought a principal in to be the director – not unusual in our area. Actually my boss in Norfolk was an ex-principal. They had business degree, which was good, along with a teaching degree. But the person they brought in realized he needed somebody with some experience, and so I was hired. My title was supervisor, but I was actually more like the assistant director. We had a central warehouse, and it was a new warehouse and the schools hadn't really utilized it well. There was decentralization of menus, so it was really like we all grew up together making this school operation the best it could be, and I really, really loved it. I stayed there nine years.

JB: And that was where?

PL: Chesapeake, which is if you look at the coast, you've got North Carolina, and you've got Virginia Beach, now Chesapeake, then Suffolk, so it's in that whole community. So I stayed there nine years, and the position came open in Norfolk as the director, so I went back to Norfolk after thirteen years and became the director, and I was there twelve years as the director. We had a central kitchen; just did actually great things. I just loved – once you get into school nutrition, you stay, because you love it. And I just love working with the staffs, and my big thing was training. I always love to get the folks motivated at the beginning of the school year, and then we had a manager training course throughout the school year – and mentored people to become managers, and even supervisors. And then I ended up going back to Chesapeake and finishing my last five years before I retired with thirty years.

JB: Wow. Speaking of mentors, have you had any along the way that sort of helped guide your career?

PL: I sure have. Right after I joined the Norfolk team when I was young, twenty-three, twenty-four, I met Beverly Lowe. And Beverly was the director in Hampton, which is just across the water. And our Tidewater area had a very tight little group of folks. We all helped each other, but Beverly was special. She was a firecracker. She was winning all kinds of awards and doing great things and just loved to share. She didn't mind helping you any way she could, and she mentored me not only in the operations side, but also in the association side. And when I joined it was just expected that I join the association. I remember when I first joined Norfolk in July that year the conference was in Hawaii. And I didn't get to go because I was the new kid on the block. The first one I went to was the next year, and it was in Houston, and I just remembered it was such a wonderful experience, and I tried to go every year after that. I wasn't able to go every year – once I became a director I did. And I hadn't missed a state conference until last year after thirty-four years. I was president of the state association when I was thirty.

I'd only been working seven years. I became involved in the state association. I was a regional director, and worked my way up to president. I served on the Executive Board of SNA as the Professional Development Chair, at the time, before it became the Education Committee. Then I served on the Education Committee. I was treasurer. I was CNIC Chair. I was ANC Chair. So I did a lot of things in the association, met some wonderful people. I can't say enough about the folks that I've met and the friendships that I'll have for life.

JB: This profession seems really like a family.

PL: It is like a family. And even the industry side, people that I've worked with over the years – it's funny, I was talking to a gentleman that I hadn't seen in maybe ten years, and he worked in the industry, and then he kind of got out of it. And he said, "I was trying to find a way to get back, and I'm back." And I said, "Yea, isn't it great?" And when I retired I wasn't going to retire, but this position came open with The Dairy Council, and I thought, "Oh my gosh, this is wonderful. I get to still work in the school arena. I was kind of tired after thirty years, even though I loved it dearly, and sometimes – I was just reading Barbara Belmont's article in the magazine when I was on the plane – and you want to go out when you're on top, when things are good, and at the time it was good – and I still get to work in the field, so that's even better.

JB: Do you feel like your educational background helped prepare you for your career in child nutrition?

PL: Oh yes. Actually, I didn't finish my educational background. After I got the position in Norfolk I started on my master's in Business Administration at Old Dominion, because I knew that I should get a higher degree. Well, it took me ten years to get the master's, but I finally got it. I got my MBA in 1989, and then actually did the PhD program – I didn't finish – I didn't do my dissertation because I retired, took a new job, my program advisor left the university – just a whole lot of things came about – that timing wasn't good. So, I learned so much - there were fifteen of us that started – Katie [Wilson] was one of them, and I met some

great people there too. It was a great experience – really made me appreciate research more, and my writing skills improved, so I figure I got something out of that. I started when I was like fifty-one years old, so it's a little late in life to do that, but –

JB: It's never too late.

PL: I know.

JB: Is there anything unique about Virginia in regard to child nutrition?

PL: I think we've always had some really great opportunities. I look at our commodity program, and we really were the leader of the pack. We piloted programs. Our commodity processing abilities were great early on so we were really able to capitalize on that. We've had some great state leaders. John Miller was the state director when I was coming along, early days, and then we had Jane Logan, who then went to the Institute, and then we have Catherine Digilio-Grimes, so we had great leadership at the state level. I think our issues are no different than anybody else's in the country, particularly when you're talking about budget problems and those kinds of things, but we've had lots of folks involved with the association level, and leaders – Beverly Lowe, again was national president, and Penny McConnell from Fairfax, so we've had a lot of leadership in our state. Our state association is pretty strong. I think everybody struggles at times, and voluntary organizations, whether it be professional or community, are all struggling to find people to help out and do things. Everybody's busy, got busy lives.

JB: What was a typical day like for you in your career?

PL: You know, the thing I loved about school nutrition is that no day was the same. When you went in you might have your whole day planned out, and the phone might ring, or somebody will come in, or something will happen. It was always very busy. The thing I disliked about my career as I got more into the administration side versus the operations of going out into the schools and working with the folks is that I missed that. I missed going out in the schools and talking to the managers and the staff in the schools, and my goal before I retired each year would be ok, I'm going to hit every school at least once. Now, when you've got a big district that's hard to do. And the cool thing was that if you had a bad year, you always could start over, because with school years you always had a new year. And I just loved watching people grow. I remember having a manager when I was in Chesapeake who was very involved in the state association. She didn't have a lot of education, but she had a lot of desire, and I mentored her and I said, "Betty, if you want to be president, I'll help you. You can be president." And she became president of our state association and she was just so proud. When you can give somebody that chance, that they don't think that they can do it, it's so rewarding to give back.

JB: What a great story. What were some of the biggest challenges you faced over your career?

PL: Probably it's always the financials, because we were running a business. I always looked at it like I was the CEO, and we had all these franchises out there, these school operations. I think we never had the money to do the things we wanted to do. And the other challenge that I always felt, and I still see it today, is there's an image issue. People remember school lunch the way they had it, and unfortunately it hasn't always been good, but the strides that we've made over the last twenty-five years have been phenomenal, and I always prided myself in wanting to try to kind of be the leader of the pack. I did delivered pizza back in 1990 before people thought about doing delivered pizza, and I did Subway-style sandwiches and deli lines. Sushi – I did sushi back in 2003. I found a vendor that had it in frozen. It wasn't the best, but it was [Ok]. In Chesapeake I had schools that had maybe 2,500 kids and maybe 10 low-income. So I had that type of school, and then I had some schools that were very high free-and-reduced, so you have a different audience. I think that we have an image issue in trying to

convince people that school meals are nutritious. We're the only meal that has portion control, and has some regulation and oversight as to what's being served to the children in school. And today this whole conference, we're still dealing with these regulations that I don't think are good for kids. We're serving them more grains, but we get them at six years old in schools. Their habits are formed greatly before they get to us. I just always felt like I was on the defensive, and I don't want to be on the defensive. And I want good information to be able to share – research-based, peer-reviewed that's factual, rather than emotional. But food's emotional, an emotional experience for everybody.

JB: What were some of the changes you saw in the profession over the years?

PL: Oh gracious. Oh, we went basically from not serving a lot of choices to having this proliferation, smorgasbord of things for kids to choose from, because the parents were giving kids choices and schools needed to do. And the type of employee I saw; before, when I first started everybody really, really loved what they did. And then I think our pool of people that we were pulling into the profession were good people, but they came for different reasons, and I felt that some people wanted to be paid and not work. And that work ethic was different. And I just saw that over thirty years, and I thought, "Gosh, I don't know what my parents did to make me want to give more than I'm paid for because that's the right thing to do." And I just felt like sometimes people took advantage. And the hardest thing to do was really to have to deal with the disciplinary actions of people when they didn't do the right thing. That's hard, because I always want to give people as many chances as I can, but you've got to not take things that aren't yours, and that happened.

JB: What do you consider your most significant contribution to the field?

PL: Oh gosh – well, I think that I was a role model for my staffs. I think that I contributed to the industry by being able to be one that would take a risk and try something new and different – and share. I definitely I think mentored a lot of people along the way. Helen Phillips is going to be our president. I hired her back

when she first started in school nutrition - and many others that are now either leading, or hoping to get a director position if they haven't already; most of them have moved up – and watching them grow, and just feeling like I've helped kids too by providing them with a nutritious meal – the best we could do with the dollars that we had.

JB: Any special stories about those kids?

PL: I'm six feet tall and I used to always wear heels, so I probably used to be about 6'1" or so. And going in the elementary schools, they'd all come up to me, because I used to go out and talk to the kids and say, "Why aren't you eating this?" or "What do you like?" or "What can we do to help you to eat better?" or "Why aren't you drinking your milk?", but they'd come up and they'd go, "You're so BIG", and I'd say, "Well, if you eat all your fruits and vegetables, and all your food on your plate, and drink your milk, you're going to be tall like me also." The thing that breaks my heart is trying to tell a little one that they can't have something on the line because maybe they have too many of the components, and I always said, "Let them have it. Don't make those babies cry. We want them to have a good experience." And my son, I was director in his district when he was in high school in Chesapeake, because we live in Chesapeake. When he was in elementary school I would go and have lunch with him because I wasn't in his district, I was in Norfolk. He used to call me the 'Head Hairnet'. He used to tell his friends, "Here's the Head Hairnet." And in middle school he really didn't want me at school, and when he'd see me behind the line he'd go the other way. In high school he was a little better, but the staffs all know him, knew who he was, and sometimes he wouldn't eat lunch because he didn't have any money, and I'd say, "They'll let you have lunch. They know I'm going to pay for it." And he'd say, "I don't want any special treatment Mom." And I'm like, "Hey, that comes along with it."

JB: And so not that you've retired tell me a little bit about what you're doing now.

PL: Well, I have this opportunity – actually one of the positive things I think I did for Chesapeake Schools was participated in the New Look of School Milk pilot back in 2001. When I came to the district that August the prior director had retired, and had agreed to participate in this pilot. So I continued on with that, and what it meant was we had some school that instead of milk being in paper cartons, which it's been for ever since I can remember, it was in plastic jugs. And we added strawberry, which we'd only had chocolate as a flavor. And I have to tell you – and this probably I would say would be one of my significant accomplishments – is that I found a way to pay for those plastic jugs, because it was more expensive. But, I saw kids, particularly middle and high school kids that may not be drinking milk pick milk up, and I had a high school that went from ordering 350 milk a day to over 700 milk a day, and that's good for kids. And not only were they taking one jug with their lunch, they would buy another jug to drink. It was more expensive, and a lot of school districts haven't found a way to pay for that, but I did because I saw that it was good for kids. And with the proliferation of beverage choices for kids and all of the advertisement and all of the things that are out there that kids hear about food and beverages, that this was an opportunity to try to gain them back, particularly at lunch, and breakfast of course. So I believe that my predecessor now had been gone almost five years, Joanne Kinsey followed me in the position, and I think she's still serving milk in plastic bottles. We saw in the study that milk participation went up as high as over thirty percent, particularly in the secondary schools. Elementary kids are still kind of milk drinkers, although we have a lot of the allergies and some of the other things that seem to be in the forefront, that we didn't used to have to deal with early on. And so the opportunity to provide a product that kids are used to seeing in a package they're used to seeing it in – it was a great opportunity. So, I started with nine schools in the pilot, and then the next year I offered it in all my middle and high schools, and then finally got it down to all the elementary schools. So all the forty-something schools had it.

JB: Wonderful.

PL: So, what happened was, because I was a strong supporter and believed in it, because I saw myself the difference it made with kids, a position came open with the National Dairy Council about the time I was eligible to retire. In Virginia you

can retire if you are fifty years of age and you have thirty years of service you can retire without any penalties, and so this position came open and I applied for it and I got it, and I've enjoyed working because I'm still in the school market. I'm working on school projects. Right now we have a program that's very well received in the schools called Fuel Up To Play Sixty. We're the Fuel part – food, milk, dairy products – Play Sixty is we're in partnership with the NFL. They're the Play Sixty program, the activity. So we have healthy eating, physical activity. And so we offer this program to schools with grants and other support to make it work. And it's really student-driven. It's about having a wellness champion in the building, whether it be the school nurse, or the PE teacher, or the principal, or the school nutrition manager, they can sign up to be the advisor and have a core group of students that help make decisions about what they can do to make the school a better environment.

JB: That sounds like a wonderful idea.

PL: It is. Michelle Obama's program Let's Move is – we're all working toward the same thing. We have a lot of partnerships, both on the health professional side, the school nutrition side, and the governmental side, along with the NFL of course. Star power helps.

JB: Always. What advice would you give someone who was considering child nutrition as a profession today?

PL: That you can't go wrong – it's the best career that you can have. If you want to work in food and you want to work with kids, it's just so rewarding. It just gives back and gives back. I heard Beverly Girard say yesterday in a focus group that we had that no one told her about child nutrition being a career opportunity, and I think all of us that are in school nutrition need to go back to our alma maters and let them know that this is a great career choice for people. And a lot of the directors are getting towards their retirement eligibility time, and if we don't mentor some of these people to come up through the ranks and come out of the universities wanting to make this a career, we're going to have a difficult time

down the road, because every school district across the country has somebody that's overseeing the school nutrition program, and we want them to be as qualified as possible. I went back to my alma mater, Virginia Tech, and I said, "You really need to promote this. It's an important program. It's a great career choice for people that may not want to go into dietetics." You are running a business, and I am not a dietitian, but I can hire a dietitian, and I can hire a nutrition educator, and I can hire people I need – if I need an accounting person, I can do that. But I think having a nutrition background and having the business master's for me, even though in my undergrad I did have a lot of business courses, I think that combination of skill level and education is certainly an attribute, and I'm glad to see that they're working with Georgetown University on some executive training for folks that may have not come through the business ranks, maybe were dietetics without the business. Nutrition's great, but if you can't manage it from the business side, then you have nothing to give them. So I think those two are so important to be together, not one or the other, although, if you have a business degree you can hire. But you still need to have a basic understanding of nutrition. So I just think that we need to talk about it more, and talk about what a great career it is, and mentor folks.

JB: Anything else you'd like to add today?

PL: I'm just glad that I've had the opportunity to have thirty-six years of working with school nutrition programs – and all the people – it's been a great ride.

JB: Thank you so much. It's been a pleasure.

PL: Thank you.