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Recommended Citation

Mouser, Patricia and Institute of Child Nutrition, "Patricia Mouser" (2019). *Oral History Project (all interviews)*. 86.

https://egrove.olemiss.edu/icn_ohistories/86

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Patricia Mouser Oral History

Patricia Mouser is a retired Child Nutrition Services Director with 36 years of school nutrition service. She began her career in child nutrition working in the Texas Tech University food service, followed by work in the San Antonio schools and then 27 years as the Director of Child Nutrition Services for the Midland Independent School District in west Texas. Patricia received her bachelor's degree in Foods and Nutrition from Texas Tech University and she continues to be active with the Academy for Nutrition and Dietetics as well as the School Nutrition Association, having served on local, state, and national boards and in offices over the course of her career. Patricia works as an independent consultant to provide training programs for school nutrition employees and she is a certified Master Trainer.

JB: I'm Jeffrey Boyce and it is February 19, 2019, and I'm here at the Institute of Child Nutrition with Tricia Mouser. Welcome Tricia and thanks for taking the time to talk with me today.

PM: Thank you for inviting me.

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

PM: I was born in Oklahoma City, Oklahoma, and my father was in oil and gas with Continental Oil, and so we moved eight times by the time I was eight.

JB: Wow!

PM: So I've lived from mid country, across to the West, quite a bit of places. We landed in Midland -

JB: Texas?

PM: Yes, west Texas, when I was in the third grade, and stayed there through high school, so I guess a majority of my time was spent in Midland schools.

JB: That's more than an army brat, eight times in eight years.

PM: It's about the same. [laughter]

JB: What's your earliest recollection of child nutrition programs? Were there breakfast or lunch programs when you were growing up?

PM: I don't remember breakfast. I know that my mother has told me that when I was very young, mainly in California before we moved to Midland, that I didn't eat very much. And when the teacher told her that half the lunch was wasted she started packing a sandwich. When I was in the third grade in Midland we were three children by then, and rather than afford purchasing three meals every day she gave us a choice. And so twice a week we could get a hot lunch at school. And I do remember favorite hot lunches.

JB: What were some of your favorite menu items?

PM: Always the homemade breads, the hot rolls. We had a lot of casserole-type dishes, not so much heat-and-serve, like we do now. But we had homemade macaroni and cheese, spaghetti and meatballs, meatloaf.

JB: Comfort foods.

PM: It was, Southern comfort food.

JB: After high school, tell me about your educational background. Where did you go and what did you study?

PM: Ok. I graduated from Midland Lee and went to Texas Tech University in Lubbock, and I majored in Foods and Nutrition, and got my bachelor's degree from Texas Tech.

JB: Ok. And then how did you get involved in the child nutrition profession?

PM: A roundabout way.

JB: I think everybody does.

PM: Well, I think that's interesting. I think it was meant to be. But in high school – this is laying the foundation – I worked at a family fried chicken takeout restaurant. So I was working, helping with food production and service in a family business. And so when I went to Texas Tech I needed to work to augment what it cost to go to school. And I applied for the kitchen in my dormitory. And it helped to have any little bit of experience at eighteen years old.

JB: So your dormitory had a kitchen?

PM: Yes. In fact, at Texas Tech at the time every dormitory had a kitchen.

JB: And everyone that lived in that dorm ate there?

PM: Yes. And so there were actually two dormitories that were paired with each kitchen that were connected, and the kitchen was the central point, and a large dining area. And so I signed up as a student employee and worked part-time, about twenty hours a week. And I worked in the kitchen dormitory for the four years of undergraduate. And then I was married and couldn't afford to go for an internship for dietetics when I graduated. So my preceptor was Florence Ball. Florence was the manager of the dormitory kitchen where I had worked those four years, and she was a registered dietitian and she was a mentor – didn't direct me toward school food service, but directed me toward dietetics, and encouraged me that even though you are married, you don't have to have an internship, you can have what's called a traineeship. And we wrote it based on an internship format; there were only a handful of places in the country where you could do a dietetic internship at the time. This was 1976. And so we went through designing that and she mentored me through the traineeship so I would qualify to take the board exam. And during that time I was a manager of a dormitory kitchen, also completing my training for dietetics. But she opened my eyes to a number of different ways you could apply a dietetics degree; instead of just in a hospital, it could be the WIC Program or some other programs. We just didn't know that school meals could be a part of that. But as it turned out, once my husband graduated he found a job in San Antonio. I was looking through the want ads, and the San Antonio School District was wanting registered dietitians as field supervisors. Half of their field supervisors were registered dietitians, half of them were MBAs. So I called and said, "I've got dormitory kitchen experience," and they said, "Come in for an interview." And the director at the time was Don Stinson. He had been the school meal director in Odessa, which is the sister city to Midland, and was probably my father's age. He hired me and kind of took me under his wing, and said, "You know, you really could have a future in school meals. If you're interested in moving up I can help you." And so he did. He mentored me and showed me different aspects that made me really want to make that a career. So between Florence Ball helping me with dietetics and Don Stinson with

San Antonio schools really lighting the fire for school meals, I think those were my two mentors.

JB: Sounds like you lucked out with those two people.

PM: I lucked out. That's why I said it was meant to be.

JB: So how long did you work in San Antonio?

PM: I was with San Antonio – let's see – I was with the Texas Tech food service for five years, and San Antonio four years, and then we moved back to Midland for my husband's work again for twenty-seven, so total thirty-six, if you count college and university food service, which I think kind of got my foot in the door.

JB: Did you stay in the same position the whole time you were in San Antonio?

PM: I did. In San Antonio I was a field supervisor the four years, and each year they would have us rotate different schools. So we would be assigned eighteen to twenty schools, and lose about fifty percent of them and gain about fifty percent. So it was wonderful experience seeing different production operations. Different schools gave me wonderful experience.

JB: Different good things and different bad things I'm sure.

PM: You see both. You see both and you learn from both.

JB: So then after that you went back to Midland you said?

PM: I went back to Midland and that's where I spent the bulk of my time. I was hired as the school nutrition director in 1982 and stayed there until I retired.

JB: So you said you were twenty-six years there?

PM: Twenty-seven years there. In fact, I think they hired me when I was twenty-seven.

JB: Do you feel like your educational background helped prepare you for the positions you held?

PM: Absolutely, absolutely. Not only the dietetics degree, but I was also interested in business, and so I was an administrative dietitian, so I took a number of business classes, which in essence school nutrition is a nutrition business.

JB: I've never heard of an administrative dietitian.

PM: Administrative dietetics.

JB: Ok. That's interesting. Is there anything unique about Texas with regard to the federal child nutrition programs?

PM: Yes, several things. But what comes to mind first, and I didn't realize this until I retired and did more training across the state, but of 1,100 districts in Texas, that's a large number of districts. Half of them have total enrollments of less than five hundred. So we have a huge number of very small districts. In fact, I was teaching financial management and a superintendent was there, and I asked if his director was coming. And he said, "I'm the director." And I said, "Why are you here?" And he said, "Because my enrollment of eighty-four." And I said, "How do you do that?" And he said, "Well, I drive the bus in the morning. I teach two classes of math. I oversee the kitchen." It was one building. And he wears the hat of probably a dozen people.

JB: Wow.

PM: Yea. We've got the largest number of very small districts of any state I believe.

JB: So what was a typical work day like for you when you were a director, or is there such a thing?

PM: I think everybody probably says this. There's really no typical day as a director, particularly in a medium-sized district, and Midland was considered mid-sized. We had – when I retired we had thirty-five campuses and 25,000 enrollment. And so we didn't have the luxury of some of the mega districts in Texas, where you have individual departments within the department. San Antonio had a team for personnel, and a team for procurement, and a team for warehouse operations. We had a person for personnel, or a person for special diets, and so you have a lot more hands-on. In my case, I guess a routine day was getting there early, going back in the warehouse. We developed a warehouse distribution system, and they were always up and going five-thirty, six, so I got in and went back to make sure everything was going smoothly in the warehouse, and then as the office staff started coming in, just saying "Good Morning" and checking with each of the positions to make sure things were going smoothly. And

then check emails. We didn't have computers when I started. And so when I looked back I was trying to take some notes. It was a difference of night and day what my typical day was when I first started. A lot more phone calls and manual reporting versus when I retired it was computerized. And so meal applications and meal payments and procurement and personnel and payroll, all of those were streamlined considerably. So the day at the end was lots of emails and responding to questions and situations that were coming up. You know, you can make a list, and I believe in lists to get organized; you may not mark two things off a twelve-item list, depending on what happens during the day of the operation.

JB: I was going to ask what changes you've seen in the profession, but I think you've just answered that. Any other big ones?

PM: For me, the big ones were computerization, changes in regulations and meal pattern, changes in demographics. When I first started we had a lot of stay-at-home moms, and they might want to be a two-hour cashier, and then be there when the children got home. When I retired we were having trouble finding staff, and we had staff that were working two or even three jobs. A lot of single mothers. And so there was a tremendous change over time. Always hard workers, but the kids were eating more heat-and-serve entrees. Mothers weren't cooking as much from scratch at home. But I think the biggest change I saw was probably computerization.

JB: I've heard that before.

PM: Um hum. You have to say that, especially when you started working when there weren't any.

JB: I remember the first one I ever sat down in front of. It was a challenge. What were some of the biggest challenges you faced during your career?

PM: I thought they were challenges at the time, and it was just changes to the program. One of the wonderful benefits of that position is that you grow, and it stretches you to do things that you never thought you would do, like designing a distribution warehouse. That was new. You never think you're going to help design a warehouse freezer or alarms for temps and security, new programs, the summer feeding program, breakfast in class, grab-and-go breakfast, so alternate program changes, operational changes, to try to increase participation. When I

first started, when I was with San Antonio School District, ninety-five percent of our enrollment was free or reduced. When I went to Midland it was less than twenty percent. So the budgeting difference was tremendous. Program changes all through the years, based on budgeting differences and the demographic differences, but between that and programs and lack of staff, the oil and gas economy is the foundation of the economy of west Texas. And anyone there knows there are cycles, like ten-year cycles that boom and bust. And when oil was real low we had a bust, we had plenty of staff. We were training them to use the computers and giving them some technical skills that oil field services can use. And so when there was a boom and they could pay double the salaries they would knock on the kitchen doors and hire staff.

JB: I would assume you would see large fluctuation in your free and reduced percentages.

PM: It did – not as much as I would have thought. However, over time, at the end of my twenty-seven years with Midland, fifty-five percent of our enrollment was free and reduced. So that was part of the demographic change of the area. But it did have an effect with boom and bust.

JB: I'm going to put you on the spot. What do you think has been your most significant contribution to the field?

PM: I'm proud of a lot of things. I looked at that as a question and thought long and hard. I think one of my biggest accomplishments was a certification program through the Association.

JB: For your staff?

PM: For the staff, the child nutrition staff. And that was my first leadership position with the Texas School Nutrition Association. And so early '80s I had a call from the director in Dallas, who was the president of our association at the time, and she said that they wanted to work on certification. There was a real loose certification that was only through junior colleges, and you had to take 240 hours, and it was really not realistic.

JB: Who was the director?

PM: Marjorie Craft. And I said, "I don't write curriculum. That's out of my bailiwick." And basically her comment was, "Isn't everything we do? Isn't everything something new?" And so I asked several questions, and she said, "You'll have a committee." And we got started, and were able to use some public domain materials from Texas Tech that had to do with culinary skills and kitchen basics that we could kind of break apart. And so that year I broke apart eight classes, just the foundations of school nutrition. And we had a committee. I guess after the first two years we had twelve classes, and we put some guidelines into place for a statewide certification program. It started with Level 1, sanitation and safety, very fundamental, then moving up, and eventually we got into technology. And Texas School Nutrition Association had a state certification program, and all of my management staff were required to be certified on a management level. The beauty of that was the number of employees that came back after qualifying that said, "You don't know how good I feel about myself." The morale just went sky high.

JB: That's wonderful. Do you have any memorable stories about special children you've served or people you've worked with over the years?

PM: A lot of the memories I have are just the fact that over that number of years you develop close relationships. And you see the good things and the bad things. You see the births of babies, and marriages, and the loss of loved ones. And I do remember a few, I can't remember the names though, neat experiences. We had an annual nutrition poster contest, and the children would be so thrilled because the mayor would come and do a proclamation and give them their awards, and just a feeling of community, and that this is something these children are going to remember. For our staff, we had a lot of single mothers, like I said, in need, and it came to my supervisory team that really we needed to help some of these folks at Thanksgiving and Christmas. So we were doing food baskets. Just voluntary contributions, anybody that wanted to help, and at Christmas we had names, and this was all very confidential, of specific families that needed food and clothes, a toy for the children. And our association coordinated that. A lot of this was done through the association, but it was like Santa's workshop in our conference room that week before Christmas break, with helpers coming out and putting things together, food baskets, and matching the gift with the age and gender of the child, and what they needed, because we got that from the parent. But helping

out staff – we hosted GED classes, English as a second language, just to fill needs. As we saw the human needs we tried to fill that. So it was really a sense of family and community.

JB: That's great. When you said the association, that's the Texas School Nutrition Association?

PM: In Midland, it was the local chapter.

JB: Oh, ok.

PM: And it was affiliated with the Texas Nutrition Association. But those were projects specific to the Midland chapter.

JB: So you had your own local chapter also.

PM: Exactly, exactly. And I know of local chapters that do Cans for Kids in backpacks on Fridays, and they do a number of things above and beyond just providing a nutritious meal.

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

PM: Number one, be flexible. It's a wonderful way to use your creativity, and as I said, to grow and expand beyond what you might have thought you would ever do. But also I think that your purpose in life needs to match your career, what you work on all your life, so that it is not so much work, but you're accomplishing your purpose. So if you have a desire to work with children, to help people, to lay the foundation for good nutrition, a healthy lifestyle, and you like people, that if you have the flexibility and the desire – if that's your purpose – then it's perfect.

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

PM: I said that it is very challenging, but it is also rewarding and a continual opportunity to use so many different talents you don't know you have or your colleagues may have. But it is a higher calling than just a paycheck. It's a pleasure and a privilege to give back and to serve.

JB: Well thank you so much for sharing with me today.

PM: Alright. Thank you Jeff. I've enjoyed it.

