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Sharon Gibson Barksdale Oral History

Interviewer: Meredith Johnston

Interview Date: 6 October 2004

Sharon Gibson Barksdale grew up on a working farm in Calloway County, Missouri. She attended the University of Missouri at Columbia where she earned a bachelor's degree in Home Economics. After teaching briefly she went on to serve for twenty-seven years as Director of School Food Services for Columbia, Missouri. She has been active in the Missouri School Food Service Association and also in the American School Food Service Association, serving as President from 1985 – 1986.

MJ: We're here with Sharon Barksdale. We thank you very much for being with us. Ms. Barksdale, would you tell us a little about yourself and where you grew up?

SB: Well, I grew up on a working farm in central Missouri, and there is a county there called Callaway County, and during the Civil War it seceded from both the North and the South, so they call that the Kingdom of Calloway. So I always say I grew up in the kingdom down there in central Missouri. We had a large farm and there were six children in kind of an old fashioned family cause my grandmother lived with us. So we did all the things on a farm. We drove tractors and we raised American Saddle Horses and we showed horses and one of the jobs that I had was to do the evening meal once I got old enough to do that because my mother worked and she operated a tea room at William Woods College at Fulton. Fulton is where the Iron Curtain, Churchill made the Iron Curtain speech there. My father was not only a farmer, but he was also a police officer. So all of us youngsters had to do quite a bit of work on the farm, and we did that. We all went to school in a one-room schoolhouse. Then we went into town, which was only fifteen minutes from our farm, but then it was a long trip to go to town. And went to town to go to high school and then on to college from there. So we had I guess a very normal type of upbringing, although we worked hard and drove tractors and things like that. We had snowshoes and we did sledding and things like that as kids. And then all of us, I guess probably, all of us went on to school. I went to William Woods for two years and then I went on to the university [University of Missouri at Columbia] from there and got my degree from the university.

MJ: What is your earliest recollection of Child Nutrition Programs?

SB: Well, this is really an early one because in that one-room grade school, of course we always took our lunches, and when the Milk Program, which was the very beginning, the birth of the Lunch Program, we had chocolate and white milk delivered to the school in glass bottles. And we thought that was just wonderful. And we paid two cents for milk at that time.

MJ: Oh, my goodness.

SB: You wouldn't think that it would be that big a deal for farm kids to have that milk but it was store-bought milk in a glass jug and so it was really special. And then when I went to high school, we did have the Lunch Program there and so we had our meals, but the whole time I was in elementary school we took our lunches and only had the Milk Program at that time.

MJ: How was the store-bought milk, then, different from that on the farm?

SB: I think it was just because it came in the little glass bottle, maybe. I don't think there's probably any difference. Now some people say they can tell the difference between pasteurized and raw milk, but I don't know that you could. But I think it was just the little glass bottles, and we even saved the little paper caps. That was really something special, you know, because you didn't have the paper caps and things like that. We really were country kids, you know. [laughs]

MJ: How did you become involved with the Child Nutrition profession?

SB: Well, when I went to the university, the home economics program there was real heavy in science and business and nutrition as well as the education side of it. And I had always worked part time jobs in food service. I started as a waitress at a bus station there in Kingdom City, and William Woods College had summer programs, summer conferences and I was the dining room hostess there. And then I went on to Colorado and worked three years on a dude ranch and I was a waitress, and I spent a lot of time back in the kitchen because we had professional chefs and we had a professional baker and I just kind of enjoyed that part of it. So when I started to teach home economics and I did that for three years and I really

wasn't sure that I could stay confined in a classroom for a long period of time, even though the kids were great. It never had any thing to do with the children; the kids were great. So my husband was transferred and so I went back to the university to do some graduate work. And one of the professors said, "You know there is a job opening up in Food Service in Columbia. Would you be interested?" I said, "Oh, why not?" So I interviewed and got the job. And that's how I got started. But it was just an interesting; it's an interesting career. A fun thing.

MJ: And what time would that have been that you went to Columbia?

SB: Well, it was in 1967 that I started in Columbia. I taught four years, and the last year I taught I was pregnant with my daughter; and she was born in July and I started that job in September. So, you didn't take many days off those days. That was before child care leave. [laughs]

MJ: Was there someone, a mentor, who was influential in directing you into the Child Nutrition field?

SB: Well, I would say that my mother probably had a big influence on it because she worked in the dietetic field and the food service field. And then Thelma Cheavens who was the director at that time, and she had started that Lunch Program there in Columbia and I was the second director that they'd ever had in that program. She'd been there, I am sure, at least 30 years. And then of course she retired. And then Mrs. Tuthill who was the professor who recommended me for that job and I had worked for her. So that probably was as much as any thing probably. And it was just one, an opportunity and I took it. I had taught for four years and I thought, "why not?" thought I would try something different. So I just kind of meandered into that.

MJ: Would you tell us a little about your educational background and how that prepared you for your career in the Child Nutrition Program?

SB: Well, I was in high school, I took a lot of science and math and all the home economics had to offer there. Then when I went on to college, the home ec. curriculum at that time was real heavy in science and math, chemistry, business – we did quite a few business courses, and I think that probably helped. And then when I graduated from the university, I, I just moved on, I guess. I don't know. But

that was the only education I had. I was not the least bit prepared, probably, for being the director of a school system that size. And especially as it grew.

MJ: How large was it?

SB: Well, when we finished, when I retired we were feeding about 17,000 kids and when I started we were feeding about 12,000. It's a growing district and we built a number of schools while I was there. But we also had, I opened a big warehouse and warehousing is a whole other field in itself. Then we were building buildings and we had to plan kitchens and that's another area of that job. Personnel. A big, in our district I handled all the Food Service personnel. Personnel office didn't do any of that. And I also was responsible for the substitute teaching department. So we had that. So there was just a lot of facets there that you just had to learn that a home economics education or a dietetics education probably doesn't give you a wide enough platform to build on.

MJ: Would you tell us maybe a little bit more about your career and the positions that you held?

SB: Well. I was in Columbia for 27 years and during that time I also did a lot of training programs for other districts and for the state department. I was active in our state association. I served as President, Legislative Chairman, and Nutrition Chairman. Then I went on to the ASFSA and served on a number of committees, then Midwest Regional Director and then finally President. Then I also worked with a lot of the other associations: the Principals Association, the Superintendents Association, the School Nurses Association, I did some things for them. When I retired then I came to Kansas City, Kansas City, Missouri, and their director had just resigned so I filled in for a semester there and helped consult with them for while after they hired their new director. Then I had the opportunity to go on to the Los Angeles school district. And I worked with a team here from Deloitte and Touche and we were computerizing their lunch program. So we commuted back and forth to L.A., and that was about six months, which was kind of fun.

MJ: How did, how did you compare out there with the school district, the one that you were at? Kansas City, Missouri.

SB: Oh, dramatically different. Well, first of all they've got over 800 schools. They are located in a large area. They, their menus, they had to, whereas we might have a set menu for all of our high schools and junior highs and elementary, but out there they had to stagger those because they couldn't get enough product for the whole district to have corn dogs, or the whole district to have a certain item. So they staggered their menus. It was very difficult for them to have employee meetings because they had so many employees. They were also just getting into charter schools and that was a whole other different concept. And their board meetings were interesting, their board of education meetings were interesting. We attended those. And I attended all the board meetings in Columbia, too, and the ones in Kansas City. But it is just a huge school system. Their school district is more like a city. They have their own police force. They have their warehouses. I mean it is just a huge, big school system.

MJ: How is Missouri, then, unique from other states with regard to the Child Nutrition Programs?

SB: Well, I thought that was kind of an interesting question. Because I would say probably our Midwest states are probably relatively similar. I do think that we've had very conscientious directors that worked very well with the schools. I think Missouri has handled their commodities a lot better than a lot of other states. We've always gotten our commodities in a timely manner. We've never had to pay delivery costs on commodities. We were probably late in processing. A lot of the east coast states had started processing commodities before we had. But we had a very positive state department and a very positive commodity program here. I remember when I first came, as a new food service director, very new, and I decided we were having choices. That we were going to offer all these choices in our high schools and in our elementary schools. And our state department about had a heart attack. "Oh, you cannot do that. You cannot do that." Well, eventually they let me. They didn't close us down or any thing. They let us do it. And eventually the whole district, the whole state went in that direction early on, so they were kind of an open-minded state department. So. I think we have an excellent School Food Service Program in Missouri. But I've been in a lot of states and I would not say, I mean all of them are somewhat unique, but I think that most of them that I have been in have been very positive programs.

MJ: Would you tell us about your time as President of ASFSA?

SB: Well, it was a very exciting time. It was a very hectic time. It was a very busy time. Betty Bender was the President at the time that I was President-elect, and Nancye Perry was the President. [Betty Bender was President 1983-84, Nancye Perry 1984-85, and Sharon Gibson Barksdale 1985-86] And ASFSA was kind of going through some changes there as far as office, home office staff and budget wise and so we kind of worked through all of that. But that was one of the challenges we had was the cash flow at that time. The Institute [The National Food Service Management Institute] was born during my term and came to be. The idea was there and we kind of built on that. Probably the most satisfying part of being president was going out into the states and meeting the other members and doing the presentations and seeing what was going on in the other states. The worst part about it was it seemed like I lost my luggage on every trip.

MJ: I have heard of that before.

SB: I flew out of a small airport and many times I was without luggage for three or four days. You know. But, the one thing that I think probably I would notice and talk about over and over again was I think the Food Service employees that are in the schools are the most professional caring people in the world and I have seen that across this whole country. You know, they keep their kitchens clean. They care about children. They're professional. They're, now we are getting more men in it, but I would say for many of the times that our employees really are ladies in the kitchen. They are really nice. And I saw that everywhere I went. That was probably one of the most pleasant experiences of being president.

MJ: What changes have you seen in the Child Nutrition Profession over the years?

SB: Well, I think there has been some good ones and some bad ones. I think giving youngsters choices has been a very positive thing that we have allowed youngsters to have choices within the school lunch menu. I think we've, well, when I first came in one of the first things I did was create a nutrition newsletter for all of our elementary teachers and my supervisors taught nutrition education in the classrooms in the afternoon. And that was so unique. We had no nutrition education even in the textbooks at the time. And I think we've really moved through that. I think we are teaching more nutrition education and teaching

children, teaching children why and how to eat, rather than just feeding children. I think directors are more educated. We have moved in that direction, and I think our directors are probably more educated and a little better trained than they were at the very beginning. But that's another positive thing about Missouri, though. Missouri has always had a lot of training programs for their employees. They've had week-long training sessions in the summer and that started many, many, many years ago before I ever started. That was part of, one of the positive things that Missouri has done. I've seen management companies come into the schools and I don't think that is a positive. I think that is more of a negative. I don't know if every one would agree with me on that. [increased, loud background noise blurs speech] It is my opinion. I think it is more of a negative. Of course, disposables. We used to wash all of the dishes and now we don't. I think we're, the other thing is we've redefined what protein is. We've redefined that. We've, it used to be we had all whole milk in the schools and now we have, children have a choice. We're giving more low-fat choices. One of the things that we did in Columbia that I think is going across the country, instead of a long table [makes hand motions] and more of an institutional type dining room, we are adding round tables and those dining rooms are used for many things, multi-purpose type things and I think that is a very positive thing. So there's been a lot of change. We have more professional kitchens. We have wonderful equipment to work with. The other thing I think has happened in School Lunch, it used to be that School Food Service was kind of a little entity right out here [separate motion] and I think the administrators, the principals, the teachers, the school nurses, have all decided this is not a good thing. This is all integrated. We need to get breakfast programs so the children can learn. We need to have choices so the children are happy. We need to do some things where we are not just feeding children, we are creating a happy child, a healthy child. And I think that is a good change that's come about.

MJ: What do you think has been your most significant contribution to the field?

SB: Well, probably two things. One is nutrition education. I think that's been probably my... and that I think probably came from being in a home economics background, teaching nutrition education. Probably the best thing is the fact that we have fed a millions and millions of meals to children. And I think I have been very active in getting the cafeteria atmosphere changed from dull green and tables to an exciting kind of a place for people, for kids to come to. And then

training. I've always believed in training, cross training of employees and educating employees. We did a GED, we always had GED programs running all the time for our employees so that the ones who didn't finish their education could finish their high school education. That's probably the most significant.

MJ: Do you have any memorable stories? Any more that come to mind as you think back over your years in the profession?

SB: Well, a couple of, a funny one, was when I was President, Nancye Perry was President and I was President-elect, and I used hot rollers every day. You wouldn't know that now, but at that time I used hot rollers every day. And Nancye Perry, I don't know if you've met her or not, but she's a delightful lady. She's kind of a tiny, little short lady, but she always wears really high heels. And we had been traveling together, and we had come from Chicago and now we are in Denver for the board meeting. And she had left her alarm on Chicago time so I woke to Nancye screeching with her foam curlers in, with her high heels in her hand, "Get up, get up quick and screw up your hair. We've got to go. We are an hour late." [laughs] And I told that story all across the country. And she's prancing around telling me to get up and screw up my hair with the curlers, right. As far as children go, oh, my goodness, there's so many wonderful stories about children but just a couple. One little boy, I was out in the schools, and we had breakfast programs and I walked down to the table and I said to this little boy, I said, "Do you like chocolate milk on your cereal?" "Yes," he said, "I do." A lot of the children had chocolate milk on their cereal. And said, "well, do you like it on that cereal?" "Well," he said, "if that lady..." and he didn't have any idea that he was talking to "that lady," he said, "... would order those Cocoa Krispies, they are really better with chocolate milk on them." He said, "So I wish that lady would order some more of those Cocoa Krispies." So when I got back to my office, "that lady" performed and ordered Cocoa Krispies. And another story, we had children that were transferred because of where boundary lines. This one little boy I was standing there behind him. I visited the schools quite a bit and was out in the kitchens and things. A black child came up to me and he said, "Lady?" And I said, "yes?" He'd seen me in the kitchen from where he came. He said, "Lady, would you tell that lady that I am supposed to get the biggest cookie? Miss Myrtle always gave me the biggest cookie, so would you tell that lady that I am supposed to always get the biggest cookie." So I told her that. But Miss Myrtle over at his school made every child think they got the biggest cookie. And that's the kind of

ladies that are out in these kitchens. So he was sure that since I knew Miss Myrtle that I could straighten this other lady out to give him the biggest cookie. So we, you have a lot of those wonderful experiences with the children. They have a lot of those stories. They have a good time.

MJ: Any thing else you would like to add?

SB: Well, I was going to look. There was one thing. I thought maybe if I had it. [looks at papers in file folder in front of her.] Oh. Now there is a funny story. When my boss, he retired and a new boss came in. I had the deputy superintendent, worked with him many years, and a new one came in. And so unbeknownst to me, Dr. Fisher told the new boss, he said, "Whenever Sharon comes up here and wants something, just let her have it 'cause she isn't going to hush up until she gets it. And she will say, 'it is for the children. Now.'" And he said, "You can argue and argue," but he said, "when it is all done she will get exactly what she wanted, because she'll say, 'it's for the children.'" So we, the other, and I've had really wonderful superintendents over the years and I think the superintendents can play a big part in making School Food Service Programs really successful. If the whole Board of Education, administration, every body works together, they can make those lunch programs a lot more successful. So I don't know if I have any thing else. Do you have any thing else you want to ask?

MJ: No, that's fine.

SB: I will give you these notes in case I've forgotten something.

MJ: Well, thank you very much for being with us today.

SB: Well you are welcome.

[end of tape]