

University of Mississippi

eGrove

Oral History Project (all interviews)

Oral Histories

6-24-2004

Shirley Watkins Bowden

Shirley Watkins Bowden

Institute of Child Nutrition

Follow this and additional works at: https://egrove.olemiss.edu/icn_ohistories



Part of the [Food Science Commons](#), [Other Education Commons](#), and the [Teacher Education and Professional Development Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Bowden, Shirley Watkins and Institute of Child Nutrition, "Shirley Watkins Bowden" (2004). *Oral History Project (all interviews)*. 138.

https://egrove.olemiss.edu/icn_ohistories/138

This Book is brought to you for free and open access by the Oral Histories at eGrove. It has been accepted for inclusion in Oral History Project (all interviews) by an authorized administrator of eGrove. For more information, please contact egrove@olemiss.edu.

Shirley Watkins Bowden Oral History

Interviewer: Meredith Johnston

Date: June 24, 2004

Location: National Food Service Management Institute

Description: Shirley Watkins served as Under Secretary for Food, Nutrition, and Consumer Services at the U.S. Department of Agriculture from 1997 – 2001, the first African-American woman to hold that position. Prior to that she was Director of Child Nutrition Programs for Memphis City Schools for seventeen years. She served as president of ASFSA from 1988 – 1989. She now works with Southern Educational Services, a consulting business concerned primarily with environment friendly school food service cafeteria operations.⁷⁶

Shirley Watkins Bowden sat for an update to her oral history interview with Jeffrey Boyce on May 22, 2014, at the National Food Service Management Institute while she was participating in a seminar covering the first twenty-five years of the Institute's operations. This update is included at the end of the interview.

Meredith Johnston: We're here at the National Food Service Management Institute and we're interviewing Ms. Shirley Watkins. Ms. Watkins, we thank you very much for taking the time to talk with us today, and we just want to ask you a few questions.

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

Shirley Watkins: I guess my earliest recollection would be as a child in Hope, Arkansas, and having a relative, I started to say an aunt; we called her an aunt even though she really wasn't. It was a relative of my father's and she worked in the cafeteria, and in junior high school we were able to go to the cafeteria. And while I went home every day for lunch to eat with my mother and father – we were in walking distance so I could walk home – I loved to eat, when my mother would give me money, when they had the beef stew and the blackberry cobbler. I loved that; that was just wonderful. And she was such an excellent cook, and everybody enjoyed going in that cafeteria eating. And I guess the other part was

as a first grader, and in elementary school, since most of the kids went home for lunch every day, you had milk, and they brought the milk in to give to the children. And it was in a little bottle, a little bottle of milk. And we had that little bottle of milk every day, and I don't remember if I ever paid anything for it, but I know Ms. Georgia, my first grade teacher, would always make sure that we had that milk. So that's my first recollection of what a school lunch program was. And then, the school lunch program at Hope was operated by the Home Economics teacher, so she actually managed that food service program.

MJ: Great. How did you become involved with child nutrition programs?

SW: Well it's very interesting. I played bridge with a group of girls, and one of them's mother was an area manager in Memphis City Schools. And I was teaching Home Economics and my friend said, she said, "You know with the annexation of Whitehaven, they're going to need a new supervisor and you should apply." And I thought, 'No way, they're not going to hire a Home Economics teacher are they?' And she said, "I bet they will." And she said, "The director is retiring and they're going to have a new director so you should go in and talk to him." So I said okay, I'd give it a try and I did. I went in and talked with Ted McLeod, who was going to be the incoming Director of Food Service in Memphis, and Ted said, "You're the perfect candidate. You're just who I'm looking for." And I was very young and very creative and energetic and ready to get out of the classroom, because I was teaching Home Economics at a junior high school, which was exciting, at least. You could call it exciting.

MJ: Now what time period are we talking about here?

SW: This was in 1969 when I started as a director with Memphis City Schools.

MJ: Would you tell us a little about your educational background and how that prepared you for the profession?

SW: I had a major at the University of Arkansas at Pine Bluff in Home Economics, and I thought that that background was a good beginning for whatever you were going to pursue, if it were food or clothing. And I actually started out majoring in Tailoring, because I was more interested in becoming a fashion designer and this wonderful, creative designer in New York for fashions; that's how it started. And they eliminated the Tailoring program at the end of my sophomore year, so I

approached my junior year having to change my major, so the best option for me was to go into Home Economics. So I think that degree in Home Economics prepared me for what I was ultimately going to pursue in food service because, as I think about that, I not only got the food service background, but I got some other experiences that helped me in what I'm currently doing in designing and working with school kitchen equipment and design.

MJ: Was there someone, a mentor who was influential in directing you in the child nutrition field?

SW: I think Marie Austin, who was a good friend of mine and was an area manager in school food service in Memphis, was a solid mentor for me. Had it not been for her, I never would have considered going into school food service. And after getting into the program and realizing how much fun it was, and how exciting it was, and that you could be as creative and as innovative as you wanted to be in the program, and that you were still working with children, and all the fun things that you could do in working with meal programs, was very exciting and very fascinating. And had it not been for her, I never would have thought about going into school food service. As a matter of fact, I'm not sure that I thought that was a real job. And I don't know, at that point, if it was even marketed as a job opportunity, because back at that point, people who got in those jobs were just like Home Economics. They died before there was a vacancy. People stayed in the jobs forever, so there was not the turnover that we currently experience in child nutrition programs, or in the job market period.

MJ: Well, would you tell us about your experience working in the Memphis City Schools?

SW: That was real exciting. When I started out, I started as a supervisor and I had twenty-five schools. And I was actually working with cafeteria managers and training them and helping them to understand how they could really run a business. And at that point, you really were not talking about operating a school cafeteria as a business, but Ted McLeod and I saw that as a real business. He had a business background and, of course, I could see it from his perspective, and helping those managers to understand why they needed to do an inventory, why they needed to keep their production records. And we created a production record back then, and we were just beginning to offer free and reduced-price meals for children in Memphis. They didn't offer free meals for children because

they didn't have the funding, and the Fund for Needy School Children, as they were called, a group of Jewish women, decided that they were going to work to be sure that all children in that city had access to a meal at school. And this was a wonderful opportunity for us to work with them, and we did school breakfast programs. And they wanted nutrition education, so we were able to start a nutrition education program for the children. And we went to Tallahassee, Florida, for the first five-state nutrition education program, and that was back in the early '70s, and it was the first time that the Southeast was going to start looking at how you could offer nutrition education. So I got an opportunity to go and learn as much as I could about integrating nutrition education into the school nutrition program. So when I became director in Memphis, we hired a nutrition education teacher, we hired training instructors. And those programs are still in place. We developed a solid strategic plan for that program that we revised every five years, and annually we would update those goals and objectives. And when we developed that strategic plan that meant we knew exactly what we were going to be working on throughout the year. Working in Memphis with the superintendent, who is currently the mayor in Memphis, Dr. Willie Herenton, gave us a lot of freedom to be creative in our programs, and we had lots of wonderful support. I had support from the business officials, the Assistant Superintendent for Business Affairs, as well as the Director for Finance. We had such a wonderful working relationship, and as long as I could present to them strategic information, feasibility studies, and research data to prove why I wanted to do anything for those programs, we were able to do it and the sky was the limit. And that was unlike opportunities, perhaps, that some other school districts were going through at that same period of time, because we also saw a dramatic growth in participation. When I started, the participation was about 25,000, and as the enrollment grew, and we were serving more children free and reduced-price meals, and serving more a-la-carte meals, then we saw that participation go up to 90,000. And we were serving 15,000 children for breakfast, and then we had a very, very large summer program. We started out a catering operation. And we had some difficulties in the early '80s with funding and we tried to figure out how we could increase the funding, because I wanted to keep, as a value, training and nutrition education, and the only way I could keep those two was to provide some extra funding. So, we used the funding from the Summer Feeding Program and the catering program to help us with our nutrition education resources. And we also had concession stands for football games, we had a responsibility for all that,

and that funding went to the child nutrition program, so that was a pretty incredible operation.

MJ: That's what I was wondering, if Memphis, then, was unique, maybe, in the Southeast?

SW: It was unique for a child nutrition program to have a large catering program. It was unique to have the responsibility for the concession stands, that was unique in Memphis, and to have a full training component. We have as many as four training instructors and four nutrition education teachers, and those were strong values for us, because we wanted the children to have the nutrition information. If we were going to prepare the food, then that training needed to go through the classroom. We set up training programs for principals, so every principal went through the training program, which let them feel like they were a part of that program. And we eventually changed the structure. At first when I started, the cafeteria managers and all the workers reported to me. Well, thirteen hundred people plus a staff is like, no way. I don't even see them, so there's no way they can report to me. So we changed that structure and the organization, and the principals, the managers and the workers were then reporting to the principal. That built a lot of support for us, and people didn't like that at first but I thought, you know, we don't see them. We can't pat them on the back every day, we can't say good morning every day, because there are not enough of us to go around to a hundred and fifty schools. And I think that did an awful lot for all of us, because some of those principals never went to the cafeteria. But once those managers started reporting to them, and they knew what their budgets were, then they could help to monitor that as well as the manager, so that accountability then was as much a part for the principal as it was for the manager. And not necessarily a Shirley Watkins thing, this was a program for children that was being administered by the leaders in that school and the leaders in that school community.

MJ: That sort of had me thinking of how the parents or the families of these children, did you see any sort of participation in any way by them? I mean, I guess in that period from the lunchroom then to the home?

SW: A lot of caring and participation, because we set up marketing strategies for the schools and some competition for the schools. We had Grandparents Day that we started in the early eighties that all of the grandparents would come to the

school; then we would recognize the school that had the largest number of grandparents who came to eat with their children. We had any number of marketing strategies that would encourage participation and would get everybody involved. And, of course, we included all of our vendors who could help us to encourage and increase participation, because we wanted them to understand that they had a big role to play in this as well. The community had a big role, and we wanted the parents to know with the PTA. When we had our strategic planning and we wanted to introduce a new item, as an example, avocados. The children in Memphis had no clue what avocados were because they were not offered in supermarkets. They didn't know what kiwis were because those items were a star fruit. Anything that I thought was a new item, we introduced it to the parents first, and we would do that during the summer. Memphis's student population was largely poor in the urban area and in the inner city area, and we had a lot of children who would have had no idea what some of those food items were. And we wanted the parents to know first, so we chose to work with the Chapter 1 parents, and they had a strong Chapter 1 leadership program, and we would have a training program as with the avocados. And we brought them in to show them how they could grow avocados, what you could use avocados for. I knew it was high in cholesterol, but I also wanted them to know what it was. We wanted them to know what the kiwis were, and we know it's a little furry-looking fruit but what is it, and gosh, I don't think I could eat that. But cut it open and let's see it and let's show the parents what it is. And we know it's expensive, but we wanted to introduce them, but we knew the best way to get that was through parents first. And then when the children would come home and bring the avocado seed and the bag and the avocado and say, look here's what we're going to grow. That made a big difference. And then we have the parents saying, "Well, what else can you do with that avocado? What can you do with that squash? What can you do with this kiwi? What can you do with this star fruit? What do you do with peaches other than peach cobbler that you make that's full of butter and sugar? Are there other things that you can do with it?" So that was kind of the way our nutrition people brought the parents into play and how we marketed. It was an exciting time for us; we had a lot of fun.

MJ: Would you tell us about your experience as Under Secretary of Agriculture?

SW: That was a lot of fun. I attribute my getting to Washington to the American School Food Service Association and the 65,000 members who lobbied everybody to be sure that they had a representative at the Department of Agriculture. When

I was President of ASFSA, we started talking about, gee, it's a shame we've never had anybody to help us and really understand the child nutrition programs when they're writing legislation. It seems as if they're working against us and not with us, because what they are writing is something that you can't even implement. And it's very, very difficult, and it's not cost effective, and kids don't like it, it's too complicated. Well, we started talking about this, and when it looked like there was going to be a change or the possibility that there may be a change in administration, Marshall Matz starts saying to me, "Would you, would you just answer yes if the President called you and said, 'Would you come to work with the Department of Agriculture?'" I laughed, that was so funny; we knew that wasn't possible. And he continued to ask and I continued to laugh about it, because I just thought it was hilarious. And I had a teenage daughter who was, at that time, a junior in high school when we started talking about it and I thought, you know, that will never happen, so we didn't think too much about it. Well her senior year, and we had our annual conference, ASFSA's annual conference, ANC, in Minnesota, in Minneapolis. And Marshall said to me at that meeting, "You need to get serious and let's start talking about how to get our strategy together so if Clinton wins, then, and if you're asked, then we need to have a strategy so we can make this happen." So I laughed and I said, "I'll talk to you about it later." And I talked to my family on the way back from Minneapolis and they said, "Why not?" Well, I got back to my office and I asked my staff and they said, "Why not?" So, I called Marshall and I said, "Let's start talking about this and let's get serious." So, sure enough, when President Clinton was elected and he had chosen Vice President Gore as his running mate, then we started getting real serious about it. And the members of ASFSA wrote letters and we worked really hard, and before long we had a call. And of course I couldn't go right then, I had to get that daughter off to college. But once I got her settled in Tallahassee we were able to say, "Yes, I'm ready to come." And I did go to Washington November 1 of '93, and I was there for eight years. I worked as the Assistant Secretary Deputy at, eventually became Deputy Under Secretary for Food, Nutrition, and Consumer Services, and stayed in that position two and a half years. And then I moved over to Marketing and Regulatory Programs, which gave me an opportunity to find out what the leadership was like on the Ag side, and particularly with Ag Marketing Services: APHIS, Animal Plant Health Inspection Services, and GIPSA, which is Grain Inspection Packers and Stockyard, so I really got a wonderful experience. And what I was able to do is I told people once I got over there, they were a little hesitant about a person with a nutrition background coming over to work with

animals. And I said, "Well, you know, what's the difference between animal nutrition and human nutrition? I'll just transfer that knowledge and see how we can work together." So we had some very interesting discussions and policies on, from Mad Cow Disease to (inaudible), which was very, very fascinating, to how commodities are purchased and helping AMS to rewrite specifications for commodities that had not been rewritten since the Commodity Distribution Program was founded. So, that was very fascinating because we were looking at the nutritional qualities of the food items that were being purchased by USDA, so that was very, very fascinating. And also to get Ag Marketing Service interested in being more involved in child nutrition programs since they were actually buying all of the commodity items; I wanted them to get more involved in child nutrition programs, and that really, really worked for them. They thought that there was this clear line between FNS, Food Nutrition, Food and Nutrition Services, and AMS, Ag Marketing Service in that you really didn't cross over into the other's territory. And I'm saying, "That's not anybody's territory. You are purchasing food for child nutrition directors and you need to be out there interfacing with them, networking with them to find out what it is that they like and they dislike so you know how to rewrite these specifications." That has proved to be an invaluable, an invaluable strategy for AMS, as they are now working very closely with school districts around this country. And they expanded their program for fresh fruits and vegetables and working with the Department of Defense. And prior to that they were trying to deliver fresh fruits and vegetables which were horrible once they got to school districts, but networking with Defense has improved the quality of produce that schools are getting and it's still a commodity. So that was a fascinating side, and then when I went back over to Food, Nutrition, and Consumer Services as the Under Secretary in '97, then it was really a lot of fun. That gave me an opportunity of a lifetime to help to rewrite and change the structure of child nutrition programs that's still being carried out. And we were also able to increase the funding for the National Food Service Management Institute for the first time since the inception of the program, so working with Senator Cochran and going in saying, "Do I have a deal for you Senator Cochran. If you'll just do this, this, and this, then I'll do this and this for the National Food Service Management Institute", and that really worked. So I think we had some really exciting times, and I think the highlight of that experience was to be able to rewrite the first child nutrition reauthorization legislation in twenty years so that a President could send that legislation to Congress. That was very exciting, and that had to be done by January of 1998, and I was approved by Congress in

August of '97, so I didn't have a lot of time. But we got busy in September of '97 and I was all over the country talking to people to find out what they wanted to see as changes to those programs. And one of the things that we were able to do, which disturbed me in Memphis, is that those children who ate school lunch at ten thirty in the morning and didn't get out of school until three – they were starving in the afternoon, including my own children. We wanted to figure out what is it that we can do to bridge that gap for children, and we were able to work with Congress and introduce an after school snack program for those children. And school districts could use that however they saw fit. If it was at the end of the school day and they wanted to do an after school snack, then they could do that for those children. And they were just beginning to expand after school activities across the country, so that piece fit in extremely well with Department of Justice that we worked with, as well as the Department of Education. And the collaborative that we had with them was just incredible. We were very, very pleased to be able to network with HHS, Health and Human Services, the Department of Education, the Department of Justice, and talk about how we could improve the lives of children in this country, and that was very, very exciting. Not to mention all of the work that we did with the Food Stamp Program, WIC Program, and I guess the other thing that was kind of exciting. When I talked to Senator Cochran I said, "You know, we were kind of selfish when we started out with the National Food Service Management Institute because we wanted to focus on something similar to McDonald's University, so that people had some place that they could go for training to be the best that they could be in child nutrition, but we never focused on child care." I said, "Now that I have the responsibility for child care as well as school food service and food stamps, we don't have any training for child care providers." So he said, "Well what would you like to do?" I said, "We'd like to have some training for child care providers, and if the Institute could begin that process, that we could put some funding in there for that as well." So, now to see the kind of materials that are being developed for child care and child care sponsors, day care sponsors, family day care homes, having real research-based training material is really a dream come true. So, to see some of these things happen really is quite fascinating when you step back and say, "Gee, I had a hand in some of that."

MJ: You've talked just a little bit about this, but could you tell us a little more about your involvement in the establishment of the National Food Service Management Institute?

SW: I was Vice-President of the American School Food Service Association when we started talking about whether or not we could make it a reality. And Jane Wynn was President-Elect and Thelma Becker was the President of ASFSA. The three of us had lots of conversations over that year, and the following year, during Jane's presidency, we were given \$50,000 to do a feasibility study on the Institute, and developing that idea and pulling that idea together. I served on that initial steering committee to do the feasibility along with Josephine Martin, and we looked at the kinds of things that could happen, and what the feasibility study would be comprised of, and how that would work. Then during my year as President, we were moving a little bit closer to reality for the Institute, and we continued to push and we were successful in getting the funding during my year as President of ASFSA. And Jo Martin was named the Executive Director. When Dr. Martin was named Executive Director, then we had two different committees, and I worked on both of those committees to insure that we had the strategic plan in place to implement the early stages. So from the time we were in a trailer, Dr. Martin and Dr. Phillips were in that trailer working very, very hard to see things move forward. I worked very closely with them on all of the strategic planning initiatives for the Institute. Recently we came back, well, let me back up. When we first started, we would come in and work on various packages, training packets, and Dr. Laverne Hellums and I worked up an idea. Everybody was working in groups, and Laverne and I worked together on what we thought might be something interesting for a training packet. And we came up, Laverne and Shirley, with a BLT. And when we got back in the big group they said, "BLT?" Oh they laughed at us; they just thought that was hilarious. That was the beginning for our Breakfast Lunch Training packets, and those were video packets with accompanying training materials that could be used around the country to train school food service workers. So if it was something on the Breakfast Program, then they had a packet they could use. If it was marketing, and I think that idea still exists as they do various BLTs for a variety of training programs. That was very fascinating, and I guess I remember one point we were working with the staff, and someone threw out an idea. Well the very first research that we need to do is on warehousing. Well I sat there as long as I could stand it, and I thought, 'What are we doing research on warehousing for when there are only three school districts in the country that have warehouses?' So they said, "Well gee, I don't guess warehouses are so important after all; maybe we need to do some other kind of research." That was, we laugh about that to this day. It was like, how do you help people establish the training and the research needs that are structured to help

school food service people throughout the country, regardless of where they are, because there was a great deal of concern. I'll never forget, at one of our legislative action conferences for ASFSA and the membership was adamantly opposed to the Institute being in Mississippi, not able to get to Mississippi, and of course they were just very upset. And we said, "What you need to understand is this is the opportunity of a lifetime; we can't pass that up. Politically it's the best place for the Institute to be." And they finally settled down when we said, "It's just that one location, but our vision is that that's the physical location; the training can take place all over this country in a variety of ways, and the research can take place in a variety of places, all over the country at the best universities where they're doing research for child nutrition programs." People finally bought into that and settled down to it's a reality and we are going to get the Institute, so, you know, the early memories of how it got started, to see where we are today just is so heartwarming. You just, you just can't imagine, to think of something and then, vision, here you have a vision, but then to see the implementation and the full-blown Institute that works on training child nutrition people is just fabulous.

MJ: Well, would you talk about your involvement with ASFSA and your experience as President of the organization? You talked, you know, about that a little bit.

SW: That was a lot of fun. When I became President, I had worked with wonderful people like Gene White and Josephine Martin, and Thelma Becker, and Jane Wynn, and just had a wonderful three-year experience with Jane and Thelma – and Gene White, working on the legislative committee and chairing the legislative committee and working on the strategic plans, and helping to shape what we thought was the best strategy for the organization. We had 65,000 members when I was President of ASFSA, and we worked night and day trying to figure out how we could make that organization the spokesperson for child nutrition across the country. And we think we targeted a lot of areas, and I worked very hard to bring the industry into the fold, to help to create a networking, a solid networking possibility for the industry, as well as the anti-poverty community, bringing FRAC in, and they were not a popular group with school food service people at that time. And we wanted FRAC as a leading spokesperson for hunger and for children in this country and for families to be a part of that organization, and we were successful in doing that. We looked at marketing trends, now we talk about the tweens. There was a great deal of concern as to whether or not we were meeting the needs of children, and whether or not we were marketing to the kids, if we

even had a strong marketing strategy. And that was one of the reasons we wanted to focus on the industry, to help them help us understand, because they had the money for marketing and we did not. So how do you help us show that we really have excellent quality of food – and we did. By the same token, it was just at the beginning of an organization that wanted to lash out at child nutrition programs to say that they were killing the children in the nation with fat. So we had a lot of interesting conversations about killing children all over the country. We got a lot of negative publicity very early in my administration that year from a consumer advocacy group that was headed by Ellen Haas, whom I eventually worked with as her deputy during the first term in the Clinton administration at USDA. But Ellen and I did not agree that child nutrition directors and employees were killing children in the country with fat. We agreed that the program needed to be changed, but that we were not the culprit, we were not the fat culprits as she portrayed child nutrition; we're not killing children in this country. In fact, the meals that those children got, many of them across this country, that was the only meal that they received during the day, and to try to tear that down, we thought, was the worst thing that anybody could have done to children in this country, so we fought that. So we had a lot of battles as we started out, which was kind of interesting. We were on Geraldo's shows, on the Today show, we were raising the visibility of child nutrition programs, which was good, because we had to let parents know that we were doing the very best that we could do as school nutrition people, and they took it to heart. Every worker on a line, every cafeteria worker who worked those six hours, seven hours, eight hours every day in those kitchens sweating, no air conditioning, working in the South primarily, with 125 degree kitchens. That was, you know, to say that these people were killing children, we thought no way are we going to let anybody get away with that, and these people are working as hard as they are and as committed as they are to children. They were like mothers at lunchtime to children, and that's what we wanted to portray. So, being President of ASFSA was really exciting. We culminated that year with our conference in Orlando, and that was, at that time, the largest conference that we had had, and that was very, very exciting. Next to Hawaii, which was held in the late '70s, that Orlando conference was one of the largest, though. It was real exciting to see people coming together in supporting children. I think we took off with a new vision. And one of the other things we did, I saw my role as President of the Association, but I couldn't be President of the Foundation as well, so I wanted them to restructure the way the Foundation for ASFSA was developed. And as a result we had someone who worked as, who was

my Vice-President, Beverly Lowe, to work with the Foundation rather than for me try to do both of them. So that was the beginning of our refocusing the emphasis on what the Foundation was and its role, and the President's role as ASFSA's leader. So I thought that was kind of interesting that we now see where the Foundation is and has grown dramatically since those beginnings in 1989.

MJ: What changes have you seen in the child nutrition profession over the years?

SW: Well that's an interesting question because, when I started we had, in the late '60s, we had primarily people who had either been teachers or coaches, or former principals, or business managers, who may have been directors of programs. We've seen certification changes that would mandate professionals who had either dietetic or some kind of food service experience becoming the directors of child nutrition programs. We've seen, not only at local levels but state, the state level particularly, where they have made changes in competencies needed for those positions. We've seen some training issues, one of the biggest things you don't have full-time, where those jobs used to be full-time jobs for parents who were working in the schools because they wanted to be off when their children were out of school, and these were parents in the community. That has changed dramatically because people need more income now; the cost of living has changed dramatically since I first started in child nutrition programs, so people are looking for full-time jobs and they are looking for more money. So the labor market is dramatically changed, and school districts around the country are struggling with how they provide a labor force that has some knowledge of food preparation or food service, so that has changed dramatically since I first started in the program. And you think sometimes, well what does that do? So that changes how meals are prepared, so we are seeing trends towards more convenience foods and fewer school districts that are cooking from scratch. They're using quick kinds of food items largely patterned after the fast food market. Children are different now, and they're asking for different things, and maybe they're not eating green peas and green beans, and not eating the fruits and vegetables. The menu structure has changed dramatically since I started in the child nutrition program. But I don't know if that's good or bad, with the rise in obesity and what we're struggling with now with children across this country, with one in five children in this country being obese. So that's major, and I think we're sitting on the brink of a real crisis and how we might have to rethink what we do with children. And it's not only the food that they eat but also the physical activity and the energy balance, so I think there are some major things that have

happened over the years with child nutrition programs. Where some schools did not have kitchens, you do see some schools thinking, maybe I should have a kitchen, maybe we should have some other options for children. But I think one of the biggest things might be funding for child nutrition programs. That's a costly program – the federal regulations and hue and cry from the public wanting to be sure that their money, their tax, hard tax money is being spent appropriately. The legislation and regulations have changed, which require an enormous amount of accountability in record keeping that was not required when the program started early on, so you see a lot of new technology being implemented. The paperwork has increased dramatically over the years. People think when you are feeding children, 'Well gee, that's just feeding children', but they are amazed when they find out the daunting task that cafeteria managers and food service directors have to contend with and all the paperwork and the accountability for every meal that is served. So, there have been some dramatic changes over the years since I started in 1969.

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

SW: I wish I could say one thing. I guess I've given my commitment to making a difference and changing whatever that I could envision needed to be changed in the program. I guess I, you know, I could think about the fact that we didn't have money to market the programs at USDA. And I could think how we worked with the General Council and the Office of the General Council of the USDA who would tell me, "Shirley, you can't do that." And I would say to them, "Can't we find a way? We must be able to find a way. We must be able to market some kind of way. If HHS can market, why can't we market?" I guess that undying commitment to, not to accept no as an answer on behalf of the children in this country. Whether it was a policy that I was going to write or training materials that we were going to develop, to be able to get to USDA and make that kind of difference, and establish a strategic plan in 2000 that is still in place today is probably the most dramatic contribution that I could have made. And reading yesterday's paper and seeing that the electronic benefit transfer, which is like a credit card for food stamp households is in every state in the nation, says an awful lot about our early commitments in the early '90s. So to think that we started doing this in '93 and '94, and that is now fully implemented across the country. And when I wanted to change the name of the Food Stamp Program to a nutrition assistance program, some people start thinking 'Not food, it's not food that we're

giving people'. But if we don't do nutrition for all of the families in all of those programs, then I think we've missed the mark on what we're all about. So to be able to have that kind of opportunity, I think is probably the biggest contribution I could have made. To take some of those creative ideas and say in Washington, "Here are the things that we can do." And to convince federal bureaucrats that it's possible that you can do creative things and still make a difference as you write policy; I think that was a good contribution.

MJ: What keeps you involved in the profession?

SW: I love it; I love the people, I love children, and I think this is really what keeps me going. When you get started in this profession it gets in your blood and you can't give that up. That keeps me going and I'll forever be committed to the programs. When I left USDA I thought, 'I don't ever want to see another policy. If I don't ever see another policy it might be too soon.' I needed to get away from that. And I thought, 'You know, they are going to be building schools like crazy around this country; millions of dollars are going to be spent. If it holds true to form they won't talk to school food service directors. How can I insert myself in the process so that we can get some really environmentally friendly to children and to staff cafeterias in this country?' So I inserted myself in that process and I hope I can make a difference in what kids are going to see and school food service workers are going to see in the quality of cafeterias that they will have around the country. That's the wave of the future.

MJ: Thank you for the opportunity to interview you and for taking the time to talk with us.

SW: Meredith, thank you very much. I just think you guys are doing an outstanding job and I am so proud of the Institute and what you're doing.

MJ: Thank you for your help.

Shirley Watkins Bowden Oral History Update

Jeffrey Boyce: I'm Jeffrey Boyce and it is May 22, 2014. I'm here at the National Food Service Management Institute with Shirley Watkins Bowden. It's been

almost ten years since we spoke with Shirley on June 24, 2004. Time flies doesn't it?

Shirley Watkins Bowden: It does when you're having fun.

Jeffrey Boyce: What we'd like for you to do today, if you don't mind, is just share with us what you've been up to this last decade since we last taped your oral history.

Shirley Watkins Bowden: Well Jeffrey, I am so delighted that you asked me to come and do this. It's not often that you have an opportunity to look back on what you've done in your career. And this is very exciting, particularly when you shared with me what I said the last time, ten years ago. So it's amazing that you can look back, reflect on what you've done in the past, and specifically in the child nutrition program. I think when I talked with the Institute the last time, ten years ago, I was still Shirley Watkins, but in those ten years I changed my name, and I'm now Shirley Watkins Bowden and delighted to have an opportunity to let you know that my name has changed. When we last talked, and as I reflected on the kinds of opportunities we had to look back, I noticed that I didn't say anything ten years ago about the – during my time as the Under Secretary of USDA – I did not mention that we had a lot of seminars and opportunities for school food service people, the industry, people who were not in the school nutrition business, but had an impact on children's health and wellbeing. We started those seminars back in 1998 and '99, along with our nutrition research division, policy and research division. And Dr. Raj Anand was chair and the director of that program. And I said to Raj, "I want to bring people together so we can talk, number one, about what I think is a real serious crisis in this country, and that's childhood obesity." And he said, "How do you want to do that." I said, "I don't want the usual suspects at that session. I want people who would not normally work with us." And at that time Dorothy Caldwell and I had been working with the Institute of Medicine, all of the medical associations, and particularly Hispanic and African-American medical associations. Those were the people who would really know what was going on with children's health. They would know about the rise of obesity in the country with black and brown children. And we got busy, got permission from the Secretary to do this. And he mentioned at the White House we were going to do this. And on the day of that seminar we got a call before we got to the auditorium, that the place was packed and we could not get anyone else in the auditorium, that there were television crews from all of the

broadcasting industry in this country. And we were shocked. We called the Secretary to let him know, and he said, "Is the Surgeon General still coming?" And I said, "Yes." I said, "The Surgeon General and I have worked together on this." In fact the staff had said to me when I first raised this, that I really should not raise this issue of childhood obesity at the Department of Agriculture. This is something that HHS should do, and not USDA, because we would be severely criticized for the foods that are served to children. And I said, "That's good. We need to be criticized if we're not doing the right thing by children in this country. It's OK." Then we would know what to do to improve.

Jeffrey Boyce: Who was the Surgeon General at the time?

Shirley Watkins Bowden: The Surgeon General then was David Satcher. And I went to the Surgeon General's office, because one of the things that was wonderful about working in the administration at that point was the fact that they kind of required departments and agencies work together if you had similar interests and you were working with similar constituents. And we did work with similar constituents. And health and nutrition was discussed not only at the Department of Agriculture, but it was also discussed at HHS, Health and Human Services, and we also worked with the Department of Justice. And that was really, really a wonderful, wonderful collaborative effort. We had Department of Justice, Health and Human Services, Department of Education, and Department of Agriculture working collaboratively on various issues. So it was just a phone call away to say to David Satcher, "I need to come over and talk with you. I'm thinking that we need to do something, but my agencies are telling me that this is something that we should not broach, but that Health and Human Services should." He said, "Come on. Let's talk." And I did, and I told him why I thought the Department of Agriculture needed to talk about childhood obesity, that we were feeding children at least two meals a day, and getting ready to talk about supper on a pilot basis. And when we started to talk I said, "David, if I raise the issue, will you pick it up from there?" He said, "By all means. It's our issue after that. You start it. You get the conversation going, and then let's see what happens." I said, "Will you come and speak?" And he said, "I'll be there for you and I will kick it off." And I said, "Well the Secretary of Agriculture will kick it off if you will be the keynote speaker." "I'll be the keynote speaker," and he was. We called the Secretary – going back – we called him and said, "You're not going to believe this. The auditorium is packed. News media is everywhere." And he said, "Is the Surgeon General still coming?" He said, "It'll be the first time that the auditorium

is packed with all that news media, packed, packed with all the unexpected usual suspects.” And I said, “That’s it, and the Surgeon General is here.” Well, this went across the country, that there was a crisis in this country, and we were having a conversation about how do we deal with it. There were doctors, nurses, primary care physicians, pediatricians, just an unbelievable audience to raise the issue about childhood obesity. We were so satisfied with the number of people who came, and the people who came, that the Secretary had shared this with everybody in government, and the president, President Clinton, said to the Secretary, “If she got that kind of an audience, then what are you all doing about the false advertisement and all of these various books that are being written on obesity and nutrition and health and diet books, and it’s just a flood of those books coming out? Are you talking with any of those people?” And the Secretary said, “I don’t think she is.” And he said, “I think you ought to have another conversation, a conversation with all of these people who have written these diet books.” Well, we thought ‘OK’. We never say no and we’ll strike at it. And we invited Dr. Atkins and five of the leading diet book authors to the Department of Agriculture. And again the auditorium was packed, and the questions were asked, the hard questions. What is the science behind your diet book? How much research has been done? Are we misleading the public about the diets that you have? Are you misleading families? Are you misleading those families to start feeding children differently? That was an awesome day, to get the information out about the negative pieces in their books, the false information in those books. And people were beginning then to question ‘What does this diet really mean to my long-term health and wellbeing?’ which was an interesting way for the Department of Agriculture to be asking questions about diet, health, and nutrition, and if this was misleading or not – very, very interesting. And from that we started having conversations with people, as we talked yesterday about me having listening sessions, and I wanted to find out what people were thinking, and then what we needed to do as an organization. We had one interesting session on the time of day children were eating school lunch – as early as 9:30 and 10 o’clock for children. Because as I quite well knew, when my children got home from school they were starving because they had eaten so early. And we wanted to see if that was something we could talk to Congress about, the meal time and the periods that they had for lunch. And we did get an opportunity to put something in the reauthorization bill that talked about – nothing about a mandate – but it talked about the time period that children were eating. Were we feeding children too early? And it did encourage more school districts to have

breakfast and start breakfast programs, so that kids were not eating at 9:30 and 10 o'clock in the morning. And what were we feeding children at that time of day, which generally would be thought of as breakfast? So that conversation went on, and it gave us an opportunity of some kinds of issues that we could discuss with Congressional members, not only in Education, but also in House Ed and Labor. And that created some discussion, but obviously Congress was concerned that this could be some kind of mandate, and they did not want to mandate that in school districts because of the financial implication. But it was discussed. And we had another listening session that involved architects and school food service directors and their role in school construction for kitchens. A lot of the kitchens, particularly in the South, were not air conditioned. And people were working in temperatures in those kitchens, particularly in the South, 125 degrees, 130 degrees, when you were there in April and May, and sometimes schools were still in session in June, and September, schools started opening early, in August, mid-August, well, that's just unbearable. And we had always heard that you didn't want to put air conditioning in kitchens because it would be too expensive, and they did not have that as a spec in a school kitchen. And just general design and layout of kitchens was a real issue. So to have architects to come in and sit down and listen to that conversation – principals, and in a lot of instances we had some teachers who came in to talk about that. That was a fascinating listening session. When we used to have non-food equipment assistance money, and that money was widely available, at that time there was no money for kitchens and equipment, so we thought if we could lay the groundwork and establish a foundation for that discussion, that would be very meaningful. And it wasn't that we wanted to do anything legislatively, but we needed to know what some of the concerns were as we continued to work with school districts. And we were also looking at childcare and what you might be able to do for large daycare facilities, and how this could also be helpful for those operations as well, because we were responsible for those during our work at USDA.

Jeffrey Boyce: What else have you been up to since then?

Shirley Watkins Bowden: After I left the USDA I did some work with my former boss in Memphis. He had a consulting team and wanted me to come in and work on his consulting team in food service. His was primarily a business operation, and it went from school buses to how to manage school districts, finances, and particularly in small school districts, and they did some large school districts as well. So I did the food service consulting arm of that operation; very, very

interesting to see what was going on in some school districts in Tennessee. So I did a lot of work in the large, urban school districts, and a little work with an architect friend of mine in some kitchen consulting. And while I worked with my former boss, Ray Holt, who was just the joy of my life, and made my work so easy at Memphis City Schools, we knew that they were talking about designing and planning for a central kitchen. When I left Memphis that was on the drawing board, and by the time I had finished my term at USDA they had found the money and had found a site to build a central kitchen in Memphis. So I went back and served as project manager, working with Ray Holt and his team, and worked with the building of that central kitchen from the ground up. We did all of the preliminary design work with the staff, and working with the architect, and we just thought 'Oh my goodness, if we're going to do this we'll build the best and the nicest, most efficient, energy efficient, efficient for workflow, and we'll look at how green can we make this building,' and we were off and running hardly before I could get my breath. And the central kitchen design included if we could provide food for some small school district, or any other operations in the Shelby County area we would do that as well. We had a chef, and we wanted to make sure we had a catering operation as part of the central kitchen. We wanted the training and nutrition education in that center, where the employees could be trained on site and have use of all of the equipment in that central kitchen. Well, it took us about a year and a half to get that built and up and running. And I helped them to staff the central kitchen, to train the staff in how to use the equipment, and we developed recipes for all of the food items to be served and used out of that kitchen. And I guess that took me about four years to complete that. Well, when I completed that project and they were up and running, it was very, very successful. It was probably one of the best designed central kitchens in the country. And we designed it to serve and feed 150,000 kids.

Jeffrey Boyce: Wow.

Shirley Watkins Bowden: So that was a wonderful opportunity. I learned as I taught them. I learned as much as I could as I visited other kinds of central kitchens and processing operations. That was projected to save and pay for that central kitchen in three years. So they were able to get that completed, up and running and then I decided I would do my own consulting business after that. And I worked with LA School District, worked with the Dallas School District, and a little while with the Houston School District, where they were interested in building a central kitchen. And we provided a lot of opportunities for training for

other small school districts. I worked with Philadelphia; was the last school district that I did a large consulting operation. That ended a couple of years ago. And when I finished that one I thought 'It's time to close your business.' So I'm in the process now of closing down that consulting business. It's been a wonderful experience. I've had an opportunity to see large, small, medium-sized school districts, and not only look at training, but look at gardens and what they could do, open the minds and eyes of people with gardens and greening of school kitchens and how you could have nutrition education as a part of your central kitchen or garden or whatever you're doing, that you could make it work. The newest thing that I've been doing in my – not a consulting role – but volunteering. I am volunteering now and serving on the board with Captain Planet Foundation. It's a Ted Turner foundation and I've been on that board now five years. And I don't know if I could do anything else in my career that would help me to understand more about ecology and what we need to do to preserve and protect our world that we live in. How can we do anything better than help children to understand their role as Captain Planets – and the children know who Captain Planet is. He saved the world. We have been offering grants to school districts around the country and the world where they are creating gardens, all kinds of gardens, butterfly gardens, gardens for worms, and just amazing, amazing water quality projects, ecological projects. You name them and we've provided funding for that. Last year we spent \$250,000 on grants for schools around the country. And it's amazing at the school gardens that are coming up. And we are very, very excited about that. I do a lot of volunteer work with childhood obesity programs, mentoring programs for young girls. And the latest project that we've received funding for in an organization that I belong to is robotic training for STEM [Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics], and we've been working with NASA on the project. Very fascinating that we can have an opportunity to expose third, fourth, fifth, and sixth grade children, elementary children, on STEM and childhood obesity. So I find myself doing more volunteer work, and working just as many hours today as I did on a real job, but I love every bit of it and think this is a way that I can give back to the community and continue to make a difference in the lives of children.

Jeffrey Boyce: Well when you said you were closing the consulting business I knew there had to be other projects. You weren't going to sit still.

Shirley Watkins Bowden: You know I'm not going to sit still so I've just created this wonderful opportunity for people to work in the community, so I am raising

money like a crazy person, and we just had a big fundraiser so we could do more in the community with mentoring and STEM.

Jeffrey Boyce: Sounds fascinating. Thanks so much for updating us on what you've been up to Shirley.

Shirley Watkins Bowden: Thank you. This has been a wonderful opportunity. And what an awesome job you guys are doing here at NFSMI!

Jeffrey Boyce: Well thank you. We appreciate it.

Shirley Watkins Bowden: We appreciate you.