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Virginia Bedford Memoir

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Interview and memoir

1 tape, 30 min., 12 pp.

Bedford, an employee of the Pleasant Plains school lunch program, discusses the operation of the school cafeteria, ordering food, menu planning, and working conditions for employees.

Interview by Virginia Bomke, 1972

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Tape also contains Alice Powers interview

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Virginia Bedford Memoir

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Preface

This manuscript is the product of a tape recorded interview conducted by Virginia Bomke for the Oral History Office on October 31, 1972. Linda Jett transcribed the tapes and Susan Jones edited the transcript.

Virginia Bedford works for the Pleasant Plains school lunch program. In this memoir she discusses ordering the food for the cafeteria, planning the menu and maintaining the sanitary conditions of the cafeteria.

Readers of the oral history memoir should bear in mind that it is a transcript of the spoken word, and that the interviewer, narrator and editor sought to preserve the informal, conversational style that is inherent in such historical sources. Sangamon State University is not responsible for the factual accuracy of the memoir, nor for views expressed therein; these are for the reader to judge.

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Table of Contents

Pleasant Plains School 1
School Lunch Program 1
Manager of School Lunch Program. 2
Supplies 2
School Lunch Program Employees 5
Purchase of Food10

Virginia Bedford, October 31, 1972, Pleasant Plains, Illinois.

Virginia Bomke.

Q: . . . the history of school lunch program. The present method of serving lunches to high school students and grade school, this is high school, was not generally undertaken until about 1909. No reference to school lunches is found in the Reader's Guide previous to 1905. The school lunch service has been practiced in Europe for more than 125 years. The custom has long been established in France, Switzerland, Holland, England, Denmark, and Germany. School lunches have also been provided for elementary school children for many years in the United States. What is the history of the school lunch program in the Pleasant Plains grade school--as I understand that's where you work?

A: Well, that is something that I really don't know about.

Q: Do you know when it started?

A: No, I don't know when it started. I know that Mrs. Candle, you know, worked, oh, twenty years ago.

Q: Well, I mean in Pleasant Plains grade school.

A: Yes, but I don't know.

Q: Down there. But you worked in the Pleasant Plains village. She works in Farmingdale.

A: Yes, I don't know how long it's been there.

Q: What number of students or pupils patronize the program?

A: Well, it's . . . you mean percentage-wise or about how many we fed?

Q: About how many you fed.

A: Oh, about a hundred and ninety a day.

Q: What building provisions are required to house the grade school lunchroom?

A: Well, there's a cafeteria, of course, where . . .

Q: Is that what it is?

A: Yes.

Q: It's in cafeteria form.

A: It's a cafeteria form, yes.

Q: What equipment, furniture and fixtures are provided for the dining space, serving room, and kitchen?

A: Well, in the cafeteria, why there's these folded tables and benches that are by them and that's really about all there is in the cafeteria, just the tables to eat. And we serve out of the kitchen. Of course, we have regular kitchen things. We have refrigerator, stove, and a place to store our food.

Q: Who is the manager of the school lunch program at Pleasant Plains grade school?

A: Bill Kenner really is our business manager there. He oversees the lunch program.

Q: Bill Kenner, is he a teacher?

A: Well, he's the business manager.

Q: Oh, he's the business manager.

A: Yes, he's the business manager.

Q: Is this, this is Bill Kenner . . .

A: The young, young man.

Q: Who does the accounting work for the program?

A: I believe that Mr. Kenner does that.

Q: Do you know how it's done?

A: No, I really don't except that, of course, I have all my bills. Now, I send all of my bills over to Mr. Kenner from our suppliers.

Q: Where do you purchase your supplies?

A: Where?

Q: Yes.

A: Oh, you mean like where do we get our food?

Q: Yes.

A: From the Bunn Capital Grocery Company, Springfield Produce, and Pegwell Packing Company.

Q: Do you have purchase orders? That was something, expression used in his old, it's an old book, administration of . . .

A: Well, we don't really. We don't. I mean they just come and I order and they just make out a ticket just like they make out for you, really, and nobody gives me an order.

Q: This isn't as large an operation as that is.

A: No, probably not.

Q: What educational uses are made of the lunchroom?

A: In the cafeteria they sometimes will give tests in there or they might show pictures or they could use it for--well, I don't know if they've done any other study work. They might use it for some extra study work that they were doing. I've seen the youngsters sitting in there studying. I don't think that's every day, but there's just sometimes that it might be.

Q: What are your relations with the home economics teacher? Do they have a grade school home economics teacher?

A: No.

Q: Does the number of students eating in the lunchroom vary much from day to day?

A: Oh, I would say about twenty. Sometimes in the winter we have lots of colds so there'd be quite a few out or in good weather they'll bring their lunch. And it can vary as much as twenty from day to day.

Q: Are all pupils or students required--in this case they usually speak of grade school pupils--required to partake of this school provided lunches?

A: No, they are not required to do so.

Q: What percentage do partake, approximately?

A: Oh, I'd say about 80 percent. Maybe 85.

Q: What is the average cost of a meal for boys and girls, approximately?

A: You mean what does it cost us?

Q: No. Well, I think I mean here what they pay for it.

A: Oh, they pay thirty-five, forty cents. Forty cents. See, their money doesn't come to me so I don't . . .

Q: I was going to ask you about that. How is the health of pupil or student patrons protected and fostered by the school lunch program and its directors?

A: Well, we're supposed to serve the proper foods to keep a person healthy.

Q: Does the state make any requirements or standards?

A: Yes, they do. You're suppose to serve milk and meat or an alternate and vegetables and fruit, enriched or whole grain breads and you're suppose to serve butter or fortified margarine.

Q: The school lunch program is organized for maximum service and not for profit, is it not?

A: That's right.

Q: That sounds as though, according to the prices. (laughter) How does the school lunch program buy and conserve food supplies? Now, you've partially answered that.

A: I've partially answered that. Well, of course we do have to buy some extra and we have rooms to store it in. Have enough on hand, probably, for as much as a couple of weeks at a time.

Q: And you answered this part of it was what about storage facilities?

A: Well, of course . . .

Q: Do you have any estimate?

A: We'd just, of course, have a refrigerator. We have two freezers and a room where we can store our canned goods and flour, dry cereals and things like that.

Q: Do you have any estimate of daily or weekly costs and receipts?

A: No, I'm not required to do that. I just keep my bills and turn them in and so I'd never have any idea how much that is.

Q: How many employees are there in the school lunch program of which you are a part?

A: Well, there's just two there at the grade school.

Q: Are records kept of supplies?

A: Not completely but when you--well, we do keep a sort of a . . .

Q: Simple inventory?

A: Yes. And then in the freezer we've got everything inventoried that's in our freezer more than we do right there at school where everything's in sight. At the freezer, that's at the high school.

Q: Yes. Are you satisfied with your salaries and working conditions, as employees of the school lunch program of which you are a part?

A: Well, yes. Sometimes I feel like I could have a little more money. (laughter) But as far as our working conditions I think they're quite satisfactory.

Q: What are some of the requirements made of employees?

A: Well, I don't know that they really say too much to you about that, but you're suppose to be on time every day and you're suppose to keep things clean and serve good food. Do your best and satisfy your youngsters.

Q: Yes. What qualifications are there?

A: You'd have to be a healthy person, of course. We have to have health tests.

Q: Yes, I assumed that.

A: It doesn't say that you're suppose to be tall but, you know, it helps to be tall . . .

Q: I imagine it does. (laughs)

A: . . . working in the kitchen. It really does because reaching over the counter, up at the stove a little short person, it's a little bit hard.

Q: I wouldn't do very well at it. (laughter)

A: Well, there are some short ones working.

Q: What about student help? How many are involved?

A: We have five youngsters every day. There's two who come down for what we call our first shift or they work about thirty minutes and then there are three that come down and work for about thirty minutes and they help us serve the food. And they will do things like carrying out plates and drying some dishes and putting silverware out but they mostly serve the food. But when I say five, there are different ones who come every week. We utilize just quite a good many youngsters that way.

Q: What is their remuneration?

A: They get their lunch free.

Q: Do you know how expenditures are divided for say, food, cooks--that's their salaries--and storing facilities?

A: No.

Q: Cashier. Do you have a cashier?

A: No, we don't. No, we don't do that.

Q: You don't do that.

A: No.

Q: Do you have a separate tray checker?

A: No, really, you see, we check our own trays.

Q: Oh, then how do they pay?

A: Well, they pay . . .

Q: You don't have a cash register?

A: No, we don't have one. They pay before they come down. They pay the secretary of the school.

Q: And what kind of quantity do you buy?

A: Oh, I buy my canned goods by the case. I may buy as many as four cases of one thing at a time. And of course sugar I buy fifty pounds at a time. Powdered sugar, twenty-four pounds at a time. Cheese, get a case of cheese. Sometimes it's thirty pounds, sometimes it's forty depending upon the kind of cheese. But it seems like a lot.

Q: It sounds like it.

A: Yes.

Q: How many pupils were eating did you say again?

A: About a hundred and ninety I would say.

Q: That's all the time?

A: Sometimes there's less and sometimes it's more.

Q: Do you have a monthly profit and loss summary and you said you don't, didn't you?

A: I don't have anything to do with that.

Q: How is sanitation provided?

A: Well, just what we do there.

Q: Elbow grease. (laughter)

A: Yes, I guess so. Well, of course, our dishwashing, though, is done by machines so that it would be sterilized. But the pots and pans you do that by elbow grease. You mop the floors and scour the counters.

Q: Methods of controlling food selection. Control the menu. You get together on that I presume.

A: We get together on that.

Q: Do you have any pupils who have to have special diets?

A: No, we don't have that.

Q: Do you have supervision over the student trays?

A: No, no, not really. They're to take something of everything that we offer.

Q: And balanced plate offering.

A: Well, I would think that that probably means a balanced meal, don't you?

Q: Yes. Do you encourage them? You probably encourage them to eat a balanced meal.

A: Yes, yes, we do.

Q: Is there any publicity to this lunch?

A: Well, if the menu is printed in the Pleasant Plains press . . .

Q: That's right. I noticed that when we got our school bulletin. What do you call that, school circular?

A: Yes. And that way it's went out in the circular so that I imagine everybody in the community gets it. And usually the teachers will have a copy of the menu in their room so that the youngsters can see what's being served.

Q: Do you know if they ever have made use of promotional exhibits such as white rats fed on different diets? We had that when I was in school.

A: Well, I don't know that they've done that but they do have posters and things like that. And they encourage us to do things and to do a bit of decorating in different seasons of the year and call to the youngsters' attention the food that they should be eating. Like oranges . . .

Q: Who's they?

A: The state. The state. The state does that.

Q: Well, now, how does the state, who is the agent of the state that does that?

A: Well, I don't even know his name now . . .

Q: Oh, there are state representatives.

A: There are state people in Springfield that really are over this program. And generally they even come out and visit us at least once a

year. And then, of course, we get pamphlets and things like that to tell us.

Q: Do you know whether they make use of class instruction, suggested menus, and that sort of thing?

A: Well, I can't say that they have done that here that I know of. Now, they do sometimes, the teachers will have and they'll even tell the children, you know, different things that they should be eating.

Q: Does the grade school have a school paper?

A: No, they don't. But now they sometimes have news in that little newsletter that goes out . . .

Q: Goes out to all the families.

A: Yes, and there'll be news in there from the grade school. They'll talk about things they've done.

Q: Are you aware of any food selection problems?

A: Well now, what do you mean?

Q: It suggests that there be a follow-up on the food selection as indicated by the record of food sales that would indicate whether they were eating properly.

A: Well, you know, like some of the big schools the youngsters can select what they take to eat. Here we have a certain menu, we put it on their tray and give it to them.

Q: That's right. They don't have . . .

A: They don't really have any choice.

Q: . . . a preference, the choice.

A: No, that's right.

Q: Well, they have that quite a bit in Springfield and they announce it on the radio and once in a while they may have an either/or, but it's mostly . . .

A: Yes, I think they even have as many as three selections, I believe.

Q: That material reference from which the material was taken was quite an old copyright date but I thought it had some good materials. Working conditions. What are your hours of work?

A: We work from seven in the morning until about two in the afternoon.

Q: Are your lunches included as part of your salary?

A: Yes.

Q: Are you paid once a month?

A: Yes, we're paid once a month.

Q: Are you granted any sick leave with pay?

A: Yes, we're allowed ten days a year with pay. You accumulate up to seventy days.

Q: Did you have a period of on the job training?

A: Well, not really but I was substitute cook for about three or four years.

Q: Were you furnished with job instructions in writing or orally?

A: Well, orally, I guess you'd say. But now, that was given to me only when I was a substitute. I mean, when you just started you don't really get anything.

Q: Do you wear uniforms?

A: Yes, we wear uniforms.

Q: How are the pupils or students supervised during the lunch period?

A: Oh, usually their teacher stays in there with them. I think every class has their teacher. They don't eat with them, they stand close to where they can see what they're doing.

Q: Did you say they had two shifts?

A: Well, yes. Of course, they can't all eat at once. They come down, you know, about maybe three rooms and then maybe about ten minutes there'd be some more. Of course, while you're serving the second room . . .

Q: It isn't exactly two separate shifts.

A: No, not exactly.

Q: It just rotates a little bit.

A: Well, while the first ones get served they go right in and start eating, see, just right away. And then you're serving others and they're going in and as the ones are finishing they get up and they leave. We serve over a period of about an hour.

Q: Do you have a school lunch director?

A: No, we don't. I don't feel like we really do, not what I feel like it means here.

Q: Who hires the school lunch personnel?

A: The superintendent recommends certain people and they are really hired by the school board.

Q: Now, do you have any recollections that might be of interest. In eight minutes that . . .

A: Well, I could say that I really enjoy this job. It's a lot of fun to cook for these little youngsters. They're always rushing down to ask you what they're going to have to eat today and they'll say, "Oh, I don't like that," or "Yum, yum, that's what I do like." And they tell us their troubles, and show us their cut fingers, and things like that. But I just enjoy it, I can't say that I have any recollections in particular about it. Is there anything you want to ask?

Q: You said that they had observed holidays more.

A: Yes. They like for you to--the state recommends or asks you or encourages you to put some decorations up or decorate cookies that are suitable for the season or make a salad like a red or green salad for Christmas, or something like that. They like for you to perk your meals up, make them as interesting and as good for the youngsters that you can. They want them to eat. They want them to have good food.

Q: How large are the tables would you say?

A: Well, I think there must be about eight to ten youngsters who eat on a side.

Q: I had visions of small folding tables. I'm not use to this.

A: No, you see, they come down out of the wall.

Q: Oh, like that.

A: Yes, they come down out of the wall. When I say eight to ten youngsters, some youngsters are bigger and take up a little more room. These benches then fold up too and come right down.

Q: That's why it's possible to use the room for . . .

A: Yes. Well, even if they're studying in there, of course, they have to have the tables down. Sometimes they take tests in there. Or they might have music in there--that's another thing that they have done--they've used it for music. And then, of course, they can use it for something after they push those tables up and they're not in the way.

Q: Is the food bought once a week or every . . . or just as often as it appears that you need it?

A: No, there's a salesman [that] call on you regularly.

Q: Oh, a salesman calls on you.

A: Yes, a salesman calls on you regularly. Of course, we get . . .

Q: Now, what do you mean regularly?

A: Like every Monday or every Wednesday. There's the Springfield produce man who comes every Monday and Pegwell who sells the meat. But the Bunn Capital comes once every two weeks. Comes on Wednesday every two weeks. So then our food is delivered once a week that way.

Q: What kind of liquids and refreshments do they serve?

A: Milk. Yes, that's all that we serve is milk. We don't even have glasses of water. You just have . . .

Q: When they have a festive occasion, do you have hot chocolate or anything?

A: No, in fact . . .

Q: I guess they don't recommend that.

A: They don't even recommend it unless it's made with whole milk. They don't even like for the youngsters to drink chocolate milk because they say it spoils their appetite. Like they have milk breaks, see. Like in the middle of the morning they'll come down--well, now, I said milk was the only thing. We do have orange juice once in a while. We get orange juice as a commodity from the government and we'll serve that. But maybe it might only be once a month or something.

Q: Well, you spoke of that as a commodity of the government. Are there any other such commodities?

A: Oh, we get quite a bit. We get flour, butter, fried chicken, rooster turkeys, rice, rolled oats, rolled wheat, and in season we may get fresh apples and fresh pears. We get canned things like canned tomatoes, tomato paste, purple plums, prunes, and pineapple. We get a lot of things.

Q: Now, how is this provided through the government?

A: Well, the government buys this as a surplus . . .

Q: What's the name of the agency . . .

A: That does that?

Q: That does that, yes.

A: Well, I don't know. But it is, it's government food . . .

Q: It's probably under the agriculture.

A: Yes, I would imagine. I would imagine. Because they buy this as surplus and then they furnish it to state institutions and schools. Now we have to pay, I believe, it's transportation on that. But it actually is given to us really. Not to be sold or exchanged.

Q: Well, that is something that was interesting. I did know that from here in the news and reading that there was a connection between the Department of Agriculture and the school lunch program.

A: Yes, that is probably right. I just don't think too much about it, but I think it even says something about the Department of Agriculture on some of those sacks of rice and bread. That's another [thing] we do. We bake our bread--I mean our rolls, not bread, but rolls and corn bread and biscuits. We've made rolls and made rolls. (laughs)

Q: That's bread rolls?

A: Yes, that's bread rolls. From scratch.

Q: Well, I thank you very much.

A: Well, you're entirely welcome.

Q: I appreciate you taking the time out.

A: Yes.

End of Tape