Marcia Copeland
Narrator

Linda Cameron
Interviewer

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Minnesota History Center
St. Paul, Minnesota

LC: My name is Linda Cameron. I’m here interviewing Marcia Copeland, former director of the Betty Crocker Kitchens at General Mills. Today is August 6, 2002, and we’re meeting at the Minnesota History Center in St. Paul.

Marcia, when did you work with the Betty Crocker Kitchens?

MC: I began in 1963, right after I had graduated from Mankato State University with a degree in home economics.

LC: I was just going to ask you what your educational background was. You have an undergraduate degree in home ec?

MC: Yes, an undergraduate degree in home economics and, then, minors in journalism and speech and art. Then, later on in my career, I took a number of classes at the University of Minnesota and I also went to what they call a mini-MBA program at Northwestern University in Evanston, Illinois in about 1978 or 1979.

LC: Was that also home economics?

MC: No, it was strictly business. I was the only woman; there were fifty-five men and me. It was very early in the time when you would see women in MBA programs at all. General Mills had just decided that that would be a good time to expand my education in terms of business. So, all of it was very much having to do with business. One of the big case studies we had was the Chrysler Corporation: should the country bail them out or not. That was a great marketing study. There were many others going on at the same time, but that was one of the biggest things we studied.

LC: Interesting. Would your educational background be common among the workers in the Betty Crocker Kitchens staff?

MC: Very much so. I always kidded, sort of facetiously, that I was the token non-Iowa State graduate. There was a period of time at the Betty Crocker Kitchens when the people who stood
the best chances of getting jobs there were Iowa State graduates because Iowa State offered a really remarkable food science program. Their graduates were well versed in theory as well as practical education and they tended to be the graduate of choice at that time. I think for the opening that I applied for they needed some journalism and so it was actually a minor that enabled me to get in. I would say that most of the graduates had more food courses than I did. The program at Mankato was more diversified and less food oriented.

**LC:** What positions did you hold at General Mills?

**MC:** I really began as a recipe editor for my first three months there. Then, I moved into recipe testing, which was a wonderfully broad exposure to all the products and to cookbook recipes. I did that for, I think, maybe two years. I think my first product assignment was Bisquick and Brownie mixes and the beginnings of what we call Bac-Os today. It was with isolated soy protein products. It was really an exciting time because India was starving and we were going to save the world. It didn’t matter that they didn’t care to eat soy products. We were determined we were going to prevent them from starving to death. We looked for a number of ways to sell that particular product. I did that for a number of years. Then, in 1969, I became a supervisor of a group of home economists who worked on product. I left the company in 1970 because that was the time when, if you had a baby, you didn’t get maternity leave. You were just gone. So, I was away from the company for a couple of years and, then, did a lot of freelance work during those years for General Mills and other companies. I came back to General Mills in 1976 as a manager and, then, was promoted in about 1980 and, then, in 1983 was made director of the kitchens until my retirement in 1999.

**LC:** Wow. Your responsibilities as director—can you kind of describe an average day?

**MC:** Oh, yes. There probably was no such thing as an average day. At the beginning, there were probably about sixty employees in the department and we were responsible for all of the product work. That meant new product work, trying to anticipate trends, what consumers would want, and what they would need in the next five to seven years. The longer I was there, that time shortened. We needed to be looking out to what people would need in one to two to three years. We would also develop very usable package directions because we knew that the illiteracy rate in the United States was climbing because of immigrants. We also knew that people had less and less time to cook, so we had to make things as easy as possible. Many of the terms that you and I, I especially, might have grown up with were foreign to many of the young people who were cooking today, like cream and whip. If you said, “Separate eggs,” they really thought it meant put them in two different places on the counter top rather than take the yolks and the whites separately. We had to constantly be aware of literacy factors and what comprehension abilities we had, both among immigrants and among native-born Americans. Then, to try and constantly keep tabs on the quality of our products.

Another facet was to do all of the food photography for the cookbooks, the ads, the commercials, the print-ads that were done. A lot of that was done in-house…or to send a home economist off-
site to do it with an advertising agency. Then, we developed all the cookbooks and magazines that were sold under the Betty Crocker name. Betty Crocker had the largest cookbook library and was the bestseller cookbook for years. The story always was that it was the bestseller, second only to the Bible in the United States.

LC: I’ve heard that.

MC: Right. Whether that’s just advertising hype—it was close. When I would go out on the road and talk to people and present a new cookbook, so many people would tell me it had been in their mother’s home, their grandmother’s home.

LC: I have my Mom’s.

MC: Yes. I did a lot of radio and television and PR work for the company as well. I was often the spokesperson for anything having to do with consumers and food. I was interviewed a number of times by the Wall Street Journal. I did Good Morning, America a number of times. I was on with Julia Child a couple of times. I did the CBS Morning Show, Regis and Kathie Lee.

LC: Holy cow!

MC: I think, over all, I calculated that I did about 100 radio and television shows during the last few years. Also, during that time, I would give speeches or presentations on behalf of the company about food trends or about food development or consumer trends in the United States or how we even develop a product. I think, at one time, I calculated that I had done well over 300 presentations around the United States. So, there was a variety of things that we did.

Then, just in general, managed a department that goes along with having that many employees in one place. There were a huge number of administrative details. You’d have $1 million worth of equipment that needed to be replaced on a regular basis and you had to represent what was in a consumer’s home. In other words, we could be in advance of, but we had to represent how many gas versus electric, microwave, all the different ranges and power levels of microwaves. We had to use the kinds of pans that a consumer would use. We had to constantly pay attention to how good the measuring equipment was. We did a number of measuring tests, just to determine, do people under or over measure? It turns out, anything free, like water, they measure pretty accurately. Anything that costs money, like butter or flour, they under measure.

LC: Really?

MC: On baked products versus cooked products, they tend to be very careful when they measure for a baked product like brownies or cakes or cookies, but when it comes to Hamburger Helper or potatoes, yes, much more guessing. We did a number of tests like that with consumers of all ages to determine how accurately people measure. It had a great influence on the tolerance of our products and their ability to work.
LC: No kidding!

MC: One of the reasons I think Hamburger Helper was so successful is that it was *enormously* tolerant. You could over measure and under measure liquid. You could overcook and undercook. The pasta wasn’t *al dente* anymore, perhaps even a little mushy. It was one of those very forgiving products; whereas, if you were to do that with an angel food cake or brownies, you might not have nearly the success. It didn’t have the tolerance that a Hamburger Helper did.

LC: That’s a good term, isn’t it?

MC: Yes, and it’s one we really paid a great deal of attention to. We did a lot of what we called tolerance testing. We would literally abuse a product. We would over measure, under measure, over beat, under beat, over bake, under bake, wrong size pans, wrong place in the oven. We would do everything wrong that we could envision a consumer doing. If the product is not tolerant— We know a consumer could do the wrong thing.

LC: Then, they won’t buy it again.

MC: Right. And it’s not really their fault. They’ve got three kids. They’ve got a dog. The phone is ringing. They’ve only got so much time to prepare a meal. So, they’re investing with us two of their most precious gifts: time and money. So, when they buy us in the store, buy Betty Crocker, or Pillsbury now, if it doesn’t work, they’ve wasted two things and they’re really angry and they have every right to be. We really worked very hard to make our product as tolerant as possible.

LC: How much time did you spend testing? Can you give me an idea?

MC: It would depend upon the product. If it were the twenty-seventh variety or flavor of layer cake, for example, we knew what the critical factors would be. If it were a new product, like popcorn, for example, when popcorn first came out, we would actually measure how many unpopped kernels there were at the various microwave levels. I can remember a test, for example, we were doing with Bac~Os. We wanted to make a claim against real bacon. I had to fry pounds and pounds of bacon and, then, weigh how much fat there was and how much bacon there was so that we could make a comparable claim about Bac~Os. It varied depending the product.

When we changed a product, like Bisquick for example, or we reformulated a whole line of cake mixes, we did months of testing. I’ve heard stories about the amount of testing that went on with Wondra Flour, because Wondra was a breakthrough at the time it was introduced—the instantized flour. There were several years of testing on that product before it was introduced. It was introduced just as I came to General Mills in 1963, but they had worked on it for several years. It turned out to have some wonderful characteristics but, also, some characteristics that we hadn’t foreseen that led to its not being as successful as we had hoped.

LC: What would those be?
MC: It tended to dry out during winter months because each particle of the flour was the same size; whereas, regular flour has some large particles and some small particles all within a certain screen or tolerance. Wondra was instantized. It was the same size, so it dried out uniformly, so you could get very, very dry flour. We found out that consumers tended to store their flour near their ovens, so in winter months especially, it would dry out much faster and more uniformly. The first year that Wondra was out over the holiday season, we got a lot of complaints about cookie dough not behaving as it should. The other thing was it had such a different feel that consumers thought there was something wrong even though it may have been just perfect. It felt more granular like salt, so they thought there was something wrong.

LC: Interesting. How long was it on the market?

MC: Oh, it’s still on the market.

LC: Oh, it is.

MC: Yes. It’s wonderful for sauces and gravies and popovers. It’s been on the market since 1963. Pillsbury had an instantized product, too. Robin Hood may have. I don’t know for sure about that, but I know Pillsbury did and I’m not so sure about the Pillsbury product still being on the market.

LC: Was that Sno Sheen?

MC: No, it would have been called Pillsbury Instantized Flour or something like that, some generic term like that.

LC: You mentioned you had sixty staff members?

MC: In the beginning, yes. Through the years, the number would go up a little bit, down a little bit and when I left, I think we were pretty close to forty-seven or forty-eight, as we had continued to downsize as all companies were at that time. Also, we discovered more efficient ways to do things.

LC: I suppose it varies, too, on how many products you’ve got in the works?

MC: Absolutely, and what kind of involvement they need from home economists and from the test kitchens. If you’re selling something like a Fruit Rollup, there’s very little that a home economist works with the product. The same is true when you think about a can of soup, there’s very little involvement unless you develop recipes like for Cream of Mushroom, if you happen to be Campbell’s [Campbell Soup Company]. A box frosting, for example, as opposed to a canned frosting—once you’ve done the initial testing, you don’t do much recipe development with a can of frosting as you do with a box. That would influence it. As General Mills began to go more
toward heat and eat or less consumer involvement, they needed less home economics support, too.

**LC:** That makes a lot of sense. Were men employed on the kitchen staff?

**MC:** Yes. We had, I think, as least three; there may have been more.

**LC:** Was your tenure the first time that men were included?

**MC:** No. Actually when I returned to General Mills in 1976, there was a young man on staff. My first or second year there, we hired a young man named Steve McIntyre, who was a graduate of Stout at Menomonie [Wisconsin]. He had taught there. Steve left us; he went back to school to get an MBA. There was another one in between who was a staff assistant and would wash dishes and do that kind of thing. Then, right before I left, we hired a young man named Lance Sanders who was a graduate of the University of Minnesota. Lance began to work on his law degree at night at William Mitchell [College of Law] and when he completed his law degree and passed the bar, General Mills hired him as an intellectual properties attorney, I think.

**LC:** Interesting.

**MC:** If you look at C.J’s column from Sunday [in the Star Tribune], he just got married and his picture is in there. [Chuckles]

**LC:** Fun.

**MC:** We have interviewed through the years though a number of young men. I remember one young football player from Tuskegee [Alabama] who came up to interview. We interviewed one from the University of Oregon. I remember him; I can’t remember his name. When I interviewed him, he was telling me how opposed he was to packaged foods. About midway through the interview, I wanted to stop him and say, “Do you know where you’re interviewing?” But, it was just a case of someone not doing their homework. He was convinced he was going to change the world from within the company. He didn’t think packaged foods were a very good idea. I wanted to say, “You know, I think you need to do your homework.” It was interesting how often applicants wouldn’t know whether we were General Foods or General Mills.

**LC:** Oh, my gosh.

**MC:** They would think that we made JELL-O and they wouldn’t know that we made Cheerios. All most graduates had to do was to get an annual report.

**LC:** No kidding!

**MC:** Or do a little bit of homework.
LC: How about minorities? Were there minorities working in your kitchens?

MC: Absolutely. A number of times, we were among the departments at General Mills that had probably the largest percentage of minorities. There were any number of them and I can name many of them. We never were able to find a Native American. At one point, I did a study of all the schools of home economics in the United States and there were eighty-three schools. I asked the schools to help us identify potential candidates who might want to come and work at the kitchens. Obviously, we were looking for people with degrees in food science or food chemistry or food engineering. At that point, I was able to determine that, first of all, not all schools offered food classes at all and, then, if they did, many of the young people were not interested in moving to the Midwest. For example, we could find Hispanic home economists in California, but they really didn’t want to leave California. That year, we were not able to identify a single Native American student in foods in the United States. But, we did locate those schools where there were strong populations of African Americans, Hispanics, Asian Americans, and Native Americans as well and, then, did some active recruiting at those schools.

We did another program that was really quite unique. We worked the other way around. There were about five or six years in a row when we would invite professors from the traditionally black schools to come to Minnesota. We would pay their expenses. We would usually invite three to five, like Alabama A & M, Howard University, Tuskegee, Hampton Institute, Lincoln University at Jefferson City, Missouri. We’d bring them into the Twin Cities. They would be with us for a week. We would introduce them to other African Americans in the Twin Cities. We would invite Land O’ Lakes and Pillsbury and [International] Multifoods to all come and meet them. We wanted to show them that Minneapolis was a good place to live so that then they could go back to their schools and influence their young people who really wanted to stay in the Southeast. That was always a hassle, getting people to think geographically. We did get a number of students to interview, to come. We did hire from North Carolina Central several home economists. We hired one from Hampton, several from Stout. Stout attracted a number of African American students. But, it was always an effort. Many of the students of color went into dietetics and dietetic students don’t necessarily cook. They know all about food from a nutritional point of view, but they don’t do the hands-on work that home economists do.

LC: They’d be more inclined to work with institutions.

MC: Yes. They really have a sense of wanting to return to their community to give back. In some ways—I heard it from several African American students—working as a home economist seemed more like being a cook, so it was a little too close to what their moms might have done or their grandmothers might have done.

LC: That stigma.

MC: In later years, that changed. In fact, you may see the Reynolds [Wrap Aluminum Foil]—

LC: Yes, the home economist?
MC: —home economist, Betty Thompson [Morton], started in the Betty Crocker Kitchens.

LC: We thought she’d be a fun guest in the gallery.

MC: Yes, she would be. She started her career at General Mills—as did a number of others… You may know Barbara Jo Davis.

LC: Yes, I’m hoping to get an interview with her as well.

MC: She also began her career at General Mills.

LC: Great.

MC: We still have a number of really fine—

LC: Were you involved in Recipes from the Soul or is that fairly new?

MC: No. That’s fairly new. I think it was begun, but I was gone by the time it came out. I’m probably giving you far too long an answer.

LC: No, this is wonderful. This is absolutely wonderful.

Other positions available to workers in the kitchens— What was kind of the hierarchy in the kitchens?

MC: Well, you really began as a home economist. When I started in 1963, it was sort of viewed as a training position and you could be there anywhere from three to five years. By the time I left, we expected most of our young people to hit the ground running. An idea of a three- to five-year break-in period was ridiculous. That was a luxury that no longer existed. At one time, too, the department had what we called a floater, who would go wherever the workload was heavy. Well, as corporate belt tightening continued, the idea of a floater was, again, a luxury if someone were to do that.

Usually, you would work as a beginning home economist for three to five years. You’d be promoted to the senior home economist, which meant you had more freedom to do things. You could rotate into the cookbook area. You could rotate into photography. To enhance your skills, you could move from product to product so that you’d go from a baking product like Gold Medal Flour to Hamburger Helper. So, you’d get a different look. Or you’d work on Yoplait or Big G. Then, you might be promoted to be the manager of a group of home economists. Then, ultimately, there was the spot as the director.

When I first joined the company, it was much more languid, if you will, and there were more layers and you waited forever for a promotion. People tended to come to the kitchens and stay.
Longevity was really our hallmark and even the human resource people who worked with us were always so surprised because people wanted to stay.

**LC:** That’s a real credit to the company, to their [unclear], isn’t it?

**MC:** Yes. I think they liked the atmosphere and the environment and it was prestigious. We were one of the best known in the nation. Again, it was the General Mills’ policy toward not letting people go. We very rarely had layoffs. When I arrived at General Mills, they had just laid off, I think, maybe 300 or 400 mill workers. They had closed some mills. You could tell it was wrenching for the whole corporation.

**LC:** Was that right about the time they closed the one in Minneapolis, the big mill in Minneapolis?

**MC:** Well, I’m not sure it was that one.

**LC:** In 1965?

**MC:** Right. It was 1963 when I came. You could tell there were shockwaves in the General Mills community because that just wasn’t done. There was a long history of not letting people go. It meant you might run lean for a long time, but that was always the philosophy. They were family in lots of ways.

**LC:** You’ll be interested, I think, in the Flour Tower interviews that we have that will be media pieces in the museum because there are some interviews with mill workers.

**MC:** Oh, great.

**LC:** It’s from that time period.

**MC:** In 1965, I began to travel for the company and I did some focus groups and some marketing research in the South. It was before women traveled much alone. There were some wonderful and frightening experiences all along that. I can remember a woman in the South telling me how interesting she thought it was that I was traveling alone. She said, “I’d never let my daughter do that.” In the South, especially, I was seen almost with a scarlet letter because they thought it was so strange that a young woman would travel. I was married and they’d say, “What does your husband think about all of this?” They couldn’t imagine that a young woman could travel alone in the South.

**LC:** Especially if you told them you were a home economist.

**MC:** Right.

**LC:** I bet they thought—
MC: Exactly.

I do recall being in Arkansas for a sales meeting and I met a General Mills’ salesman who had been with the company for over fifty years and he remembered selling flour by the barrel. These were wonderful opportunities going across the country talking to General Mills’ salesmen because they were so loyal. They cared so much. Here they were out in Arkansas and they worked for this place in Minneapolis, but they just had this enormous sense of loyalty. At the time, I was twenty-three and it just blew me away that these people were so committed to this place and this ideal and the company.

Later on, I found that it was not so surprising. It’s a company of great integrity. I’m sure you’ve interviewed people who have talked about the Riveton toy experience but, for me, that was a turning point in terms of seeing corporate integrity and ethics at the highest level.

LC: No. What was that about?

MC: Well, General Mills acquired a number of toy companies and began their expansion. You probably have all of those dates. They owned Eddie Bauer, Talbots, Parker Bros., Kenner Bros., Play Dough, and some others. I think it would have been in the late 1960s, they had a toy called the Riveton. It was one that children could put together with a little wrench and nuts and bolts. Again, I’m not exactly sure of the year; you’d have to look it up.

The big season was between, of course, Thanksgiving and Christmas, and this toy was due to be in the stores the week before Thanksgiving. It was really for children between the ages of three and twelve, if I remember correctly. Lots of plastic pieces, but very clearly on the package it said, “Do not put the pieces in your mouth.” Over the Thanksgiving holiday, a number of these toys were sold and a three-year-old who had a very bad cold inhaled a nut or bolt and died. That was the first one. Then, a couple of days later, a nine-year-old did the very same thing.

Immediately, General Mills convened the highest level—I think they met Thanksgiving night, as a matter of fact. Again, this is folklore, you know, but I was there at the time at the company. I wasn’t involved in any of this. They met and they decided to pull the product completely out of the stores, even though the Consumer Product Safety Commission said, “General Mills, it’s not your fault.” I think the figure I heard was an $8 million loss by pulling that toy off the market so that no more children would die.

When I think about the kind of message that sent to all of us who were General Mills’ employees—instead of saying, “It wasn’t our fault. The kids abused it.” There were parents who wrote us letters who would not give the toy back because their kids loved it so. Later on, I think after they had done autopsies and done some examination of it, it was the unique combination of a cold and a cough and the child putting it in his mouth.

LC: Just flukes.
MC: Yes. I think both of them happened to be little boys. That was always a sign to me of the kind of integrity of the company I worked for.

LC: In the research I’ve done, that integrity dates all the back to C.C. Washburn and his reaction to the mill explosion and the families.

MC: You knew that coming in and you knew that being there and you knew that, therefore, when there was ever a questionable call about a commercial or about a legal claim, that wasn’t the General Mills’ way. It was just so much a part of the atmosphere and the climate that when there began to be a lot of talk, oh, I suppose right after the Tylenol problems, about corporate ethics and about a belief statement, we did it at General Mills, but it was already there. It was interesting to watch other companies go through that. We did write ours and we went through the process, but it was so integral at that time that it probably wasn’t even necessary.

LC: When you think of all the ethics problems today, it’s nice to know there’s a company that [unclear].

MC: Right, and I would be very surprised if General Mills were involved, but, you know—

LC: Things change, too.

MC: They do. Circumstances change. I do know that the pressure on delivering quarterly results are immense and I felt it all the thirty-five years I was there. It’s clear that you need to do that. The stockholders expect more. It really prevents companies from looking—I’m always envious when Swiss companies and German companies and Japanese companies can look five years down the road and have a five-year business plan, but we had one. Today’s stockholders in America expect quarterly results that are always up, always up, always up.

[Laughter]

LC: Right. Who did you answer to as director of the kitchens?

MC: Usually, it was the vice-president for marketing services. I worked for four really fine men in that capacity. I never did work for a woman who was in that position. The kinds of services—for example, someone would be in charge of consumer research. Someone was in charge of the art services and design of the packages. Then, someone else would be in charge of the nutrition department. So, there were all the services to marketing. From my perspective, there were some similarities in the jobs we did. My best bosses always said that he had experts in each of the fields and he let them run their own businesses. We were most successful that way.

LC: So, you had quite a bit of autonomy?

MC: Yes.
LC: That’s nice.

MC: Yet, we could always go and ask for help. It made it a little hard for cross-cultural and cross-functional activities because doing recipe work is a little different than designing packages. Then, the promotional literature is another one. It’s different than developing the promotions you see in newspapers or print ads. There was some commonality; we were all working for the same clients. Hopefully, we could coordinate our efforts, but the activities were very different.

LC: Interesting. There were specific kitchens for different product lines? Is that correct?

MC: The reason that there were different kitchens— My predecessor, Mercedes Bates, came to General Mills in 1964 and Mercedes had an idea. We had had public tours, but she wanted to make this the most visited attraction in the Twin Cities and she did. She persuaded Charles Bell, who was chairman of the board at the time, that we should build new kitchens and that we would invite all of Minnesota and the Upper Midwest to come and tour and they did. So, to make it more interesting, they gave a theme to each of the kitchens. The originals were—I probably don’t have these all right because 1965 is when we finished the kitchens—a Mediterranean, a Cape Cod, a Japanese, Latin American.

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LC: Was there a California kitchen?

MC: Yes. We did it so that when tour guests came, they would see something different in each kitchen, but the kitchen itself had nothing to do with the products that were prepared in it.

LC: But, they did reflect interest in international cuisine, which was really growing in the 1960s.

MC: Right, they did. I think that was very farsighted on Mercedes part. She was the most creative person I ever worked with.

MC: Right, they did. I think that was very farsighted on Mercedes part. She was the most creative person I ever worked with.

LC: Really?

MC: Oh, she was a phenomenal visionary and she had great ideas and she was able to sell them. We did, indeed, have thousands of people. They said prior to the Mall of America, Betty Crocker Kitchens were the most visited attraction in the Twin Cities. We would have barbershop quartets coming through and we would have the Shriners coming through.

LC: My mother came through. [Laughter]

MC: The big thing, they said, was for mothers coming to visit their daughters or daughter-in-laws who just had babies, they all came to the kitchens. We had several people who just about gave birth at the kitchens. It was really a big deal in the beginning, the first ten years. The buses would drop them off at the door. They’d see a wonderful film. They’d be given cookies or coffee cake or something and, then, they took home a gift bag and, then, they’d tour these seven
kitchens. Most of them came during June, July, and August, and we’d have a lot of people through. It was like living in a zoo.

**LC:** I was going to ask, how did the staff like the tours coming through?

**MC:** They didn’t.

**LC:** I bet it was terribly disruptive.

**MC:** It was very hard, very disruptive, very noisy. My favorite story is that I was working in the kitchen one day—You tended to ignore them because if you stopped all the time—They came through five times a day and there were tour after tour, every hour on the hour, so constantly, you were sharing your space with the public. One day, I was busily working in the kitchen doing something ignoring whoever was out there. This lady was waving her arms at me, and trying to get my attention. Finally, the woman who was working in the kitchen with me said, “Did you see that lady?” I said, “No.” So, I went to the next kitchen. It was my aunt; she was there on tour, but I didn’t know it.

[Chuckles]

**LC:** Did people expect to see Betty Crocker when they came?

**MC:** Yes.

**LC:** And did they think you were Betty Crocker?

**MC:** No. No. During the presentation of the slides, I think they would talk pretty much about the fact that Betty Crocker was all of us. They wouldn’t say she wasn’t real, but they would say, “All these sixty women represent Betty Crocker.” or they’d give some rather vague answer. However, when I would do radio and television, it was almost always the way I was introduced. Regis Philbin introduced me that way. Just about every show I was on, that was their hook, “Meet Betty Crocker.”

**LC:** And who’s more famous?

**MC:** I think there was a study done—General Mills would have it—sometime in the 1980s that asked unbidden consumers, “Who do you trust?” Walter Cronkite came first and Betty Crocker was second.

**LC:** Isn’t that something?

**MC:** Still—that was in the 1980s, to think that there was that kind of—

**LC:** Recognition factor and trust factor.
MC: I would say that’s probably not true today and probably won’t be in ten years from now, unless something changes.

LC: Because of the way consumers are moving and…?

MC: And they’re much more skeptical, much more questioning. Today we have much more quality food available in other outlets. Oh, we’ve changed so. I always talk about the seven food groups: frozen, home-delivered…[Laughter] It’s very different than the way I grew up.

LC: Yes, and even my generation, too. Do you think the visitors really enjoyed the tours?

MC: Oh, absolutely. Yes, I think they had a good time. We discontinued them for a couple of reasons. Our primary audience was consumers and as more women went into the workforce, we needed a new slide presentation. We needed to remodel the kitchens to make it interesting. We looked at the dollars and we also looked at the fact that [Freeway] 394 was being built, so access to General Mills was a big hassle, no place to park. The other thing that had begun to happen is we were doing much more confidential work. We had to close off the kitchens. The people came expecting to see seven kitchens and maybe three would be open. If you have a showing of things you don’t want the public to see—it was very disruptive—you had to put everything away and, then, start all over again.

LC: You never knew when those Pillsbury spies were coming through.

[Laughter]

MC: It was a very hard decision. Also, a couple of things had happened. The composition of the tours had changed dramatically. We were seeing more retarded citizens, more nursery schools. We were more a place to take people to kill an hour or two than we were reaching our audience. It was a real hard decision.

LC: What year were they discontinued? Do you remember?

MC: [Pause] It may have been 1991; I can’t tell you for sure. They might be able to tell you at the main office. It was a hard choice. The employees were the most critical because they were so accustomed to bringing their families and friends through.

LC: Oooh. Do they still do any special tours?

MC: Occasionally. The agreement when we closed the tours was that we do— Oh, for example, when we had special guests, like say that we were courting a company in Europe, we would make arrangements to have a special tour or if we were doing something with SuperValu [Inc.] or that kind of thing.
LC: That’s [unclear]?

MC: Yes, but no regularly scheduled public tours.

LC: Most people thought Betty Crocker was pretty much a real person and that’s pretty common from the very beginning. I know we have the Ruth G. Anderson papers in our library here. Literally, in her radio format, she says, “I am Betty Crocker.”

MC: For years, the letters that our consumer response department wrote to consumers were all signed, “Betty Crocker.” It wasn’t until maybe the late 1970s that we began to not do that.

LC: How many letters did Betty Crocker receive in a week? Do you have any idea?

MC: Well, I know that we got in excess of 250,000 a year.

LC: Oh, man!

MC: Now, e-mail and telephone, 800 numbers, began to change that.

LC: How many people actually were correspondents then?

MC: It varied all over the map. When I first came with the company, I think there were maybe six or seven. I think when I retired in that department because it was no longer a part of the kitchens, there may have been upwards of fifty.

LC: Wow! Did they have to learn to sign the name?

MC: No. There was one person who did most of the signing because she was particularly good at it, I guess. Everybody chose to answer it like, “I would prefer to do this…” “I would suggest…” It was very much first person.

LC: That’s nice though, isn’t it?

MC: When I talk about that phenomenon, I think about my grandmothers. Betty was created in 1921. My grandmothers in the 1930s were on farms in Southwestern Minnesota. They were only two miles apart, but not everybody had a phone. Towns were seven, eight miles away. You didn’t go to town unless there was a real reason…the mower broke down or the tractor needed a part. You didn’t go because gasoline was expensive, not everybody had a car. So, I think about the fact that Betty Crocker was on radio from 1921 until 1955, those thirty years, and that voice came into the home everyday for five days a week. It was a neighbor. It was a friend. It was a way to reach all of those people in all those rural communities.

LC: Exactly.
MC: It was someone from the outside. It was such a trusted friend. When you read the scripts or listen to the voice and she’s talking about—I can remember one script in which she helped a young bride. She bought her recipe for three dollars so the bride could have a new dress for her first anniversary. Or you listen to the stories about someone who wrote in with this recipe and Betty is so gracious and the voice is just so warm, it’s no wonder people thought she was real. We really, as a company, encouraged that for thirty years. My predecessors, for the most part, introduced themselves as Betty Crocker. I didn’t, but that was just because I could see the times were changing and I didn’t look like the picture.

LC: I suppose that’s true. Did people ever ask you, “Well, you don’t look like…”

MC: Yes. [Laughter]

LC: That was another question I had… Betty’s gone through several incarnations since she was established.

MC: Many.

LC: I wondered if the consumers ever wrote in and complained that she had changed.

MC: Oh, yes.

[Laughter]

LC: That’s another thing, you know, you don’t want that change. The same kind of people that are going to trust and believe in her are going to be the ones that are going to say, “She should stay the same.”

MC: We learned a lesson, I think, in this last one. Some of the previous ones were done as a surprise. There was no buildup. We missed all the marketing opportunities to sell the story. But, this last one, they really made it a campaign for her seventy-fifth anniversary and women all across the United States were invited to participate. The response was really good. I was one of the judges. I read thousands of essays; I mean I really sat there and read what a lot of people thought about Betty and why they wanted to represent Betty. So, there were lots of wonderful relationships built up. But, this time, we let people know in advance it was going to happen. We got wonderful placement on all the big morning shows. We got wonderful placement in U.S.A. Today and other places. When we’d spring it as a surprise, which we had done a couple times—once with the introduction of a new cookbook and, once, in 1986; I can’t remember what it was tied to—that’s when people get surprised and they don’t necessarily like it. We got a little safe in the 1980s. We didn’t make major changes and people hardly noticed, so it was hardly worth the trouble. But, they do complain and you’ve heard the story, I’m sure, that in the early years especially, she would get marriage proposals.

LC: No. Oh, my gosh.
MC: There are real copies of marriage proposals in the archives.

The other thing I always thought was interesting is every baby that ever ate a Cheerio had it’s picture taken and it was sent to Betty Crocker, all these beautiful babies eating Cheerios off their highchair trays.

LC: That’s cute.

How was Betty Crocker perceived by your friends and neighbors? Did they tease you about being Betty Crocker?

MC: I’ll tell you one funny story and, then, I’ll go into the others. I was a newlywed. We lived in Bloomington in an apartment building. In the building, there was an older woman and she found out I was working in the Betty Crocker Kitchens. She came up to me one day when I was hanging up clothes or doing something and she said, “I just had lunch with Betty Crocker. She’s just a wonderful person.” I’m twenty-one years old. I’m trying to think, what do I say to this very nice woman who can’t possibly have had lunch with Betty Crocker? There’s just no way. I cannot remember my response. It’s too long ago. But, I’ll never forget that feeling of I don’t want to crush her expectations.

Yes, I get a lot of kidding from my family and my friends. They’re all proud. My grandmother, my Danish grandmother, who was a wonderful cook, was just enormously proud that I worked there.

LC: I’ll bet.

MC: But, when the flour changed a little bit, she called me immediately. I don’t know how she could have perceived any change, but she told me.

LC: That was my question: how did she know that?

MC: She read something different on the package.

LC: My gosh, she even noticed that! Wow!

MC: She did a lot of baking and she was so loyal to Betty Crocker after I started to work there.

No, I took a lot of kidding. When I retired, our son, who at that time would have been twenty-eight or twenty-nine, was one of the speakers. He talked about the fact that, in our household, there were some dirty words that you just didn’t speak and they were Pillsbury, Duncan Hines, and Kellogg’s.

[Laughter]
MC: Everybody teases me. It was just part of the—

LC: How about the employees’ perception of Betty Crocker? Was she respected or did they think she was kind of goofy?

MC: Oh, it certainly changed. In the beginning years, there was a great reverence, in 1963 and on. Then, when the tours happened, we had all these people coming through the company, there was great reverence and respect for it as a marketing brand. Some abuses were made and the use of the name was put on some products that it should never have gone on because we felt the quality wasn’t that great, but it was a way to help move the product. It was used in some ways, so then they had to rein it back in. I would say toward the end, everybody recognized it as a valuable asset. It was hard to assess how many millions it is worth. The changing times—we talked early about skepticism, about other ways—Boston Market, about other places. There was, I think, a great sense of employee pride, of those who recognized, that there was a whole generation, there was Martha Logan and there was Ann Pillsbury. There was Betty Crocker. There was…

LC: Virginia, what’s her name from Occident.

MC: Meade, or something. There were a whole series of them. Betty was really the only one who survived. There was Aunt Jemima, Uncle Ben’s.

LC: Spokes-models.

MC: Right. She was the only one who survived into the 1990s and the year 2000 with some recognition. I think there was pride in that, but it was also a recognition that what new brands should we be developing? There was always an eye to the future of how can we keep her relevant and not a joke.

LC: I think the company’s done a really good job of that, personally.

MC: Yes, I think they have for the most part.

LC: You mentioned that Betty Crocker made personal appearances through you as a spokesperson for the company on radio and TV shows and that you have been introduced, more or less, as Betty Crocker.

MC: Yes.

LC: The test kitchens not only tested recipes but also developed new products?

MC: Right.
LC: Who came up with the ideas for the new products?

MC: Oh, they came from any number of places. They could come from consumers when we did focus groups. They may have come about in ideation sessions at General Mills where we worked with our advertising agencies. We’d list a whole series of needs. For example, consumers hate cooking fish. Why? Consumers hate cooking rice. Why? Consumers don’t cook beans from scratch. Why? So, you’d look at why these things happened or you’d look at where was the food going? Was it going more toward vegan? Was it going more toward meatless? Was it going toward more chicken? Even an example of why Hamburger Helper came in… I think you’ve heard the story on Hamburger Helper, the fact that beef prices got so high.

LC: No.

MC: Well, it was during the beef boycott of the early, early 1970s, I think.

LC: I remember that.

MC: Beef prices went through the roof and consumers had to stretch a pound of ground beef—

[Tape interruption]

MC: Consumers may tell you that they have a need and you fix it and it’s not the real need after all. We talked about eggless cakes versus egg cakes. That was part of it. We thought they wanted convenience. They told us they did but, then, when we got it too convenient… It’s really hard because everybody is an expert on food. We all eat and we all know what we like. So, your mother’s meatloaf may be very different than my mother’s meatloaf and, therefore, I will never fix a meatloaf you will like… ever! [Laughter]

There are a few foods like that: meatloaf, and scalloped potatoes are another one. People have their preferences. Mashed potatoes.

LC: Comfort food.

MC: Yes! Or pancakes or waffles even, very different. We’d try to meet those needs.

Then, we would look at where our expertise lies as a company. We know a lot about baking. We know a lot about fruit snacks. We know an awful about cereals. We know a lot about yogurt. We know a lot about popcorn. What extensions are there that make sense? Where does the Betty Crocker or the General Mills name go that makes sense? Sometimes, we chose not to put our name on things or not to do things because there was no fit and it was asking the consumer to go too far in making that reach.

LC: Interesting.
Did employees have an opportunity in the kitchens to make recommendations for new products?

**MC:** Absolutely.

**LC:** Did they ever come up with things kind of surprisingly, sort of by mistake?

**MC:** One of my favorite stories about my own experience is that very early on in my career, a young marketer and I were looking for new brownie ideas. That was before there were 10,000 kinds of brownies. He and I developed the idea of German Chocolate Brownies and it was on the market for fifteen years and did really well. Then, it went away, as many products do. But, I was always proud of the fact that somehow, as a twenty-three-year-old, I came up with an idea.

**LC:** That’s pretty neat.

**MC:** It was! We all had pieces of products. Very rarely do you have a single person who had the idea for a product. Somebody gets an idea and they present it to somebody else. It gets embellished. It gets built upon, a new name. They’d help work on names. I helped work on names for all kinds of products.

**LC:** What’s your favorite product that you worked on?

**MC:** I still think Bisquick.

**LC:** That was a reformulation?

**MC:** I worked on the reformulation in 1964 and 1965 and a whole new advertising campaign where we went to the South and weighed biscuits against the best scratch biscuits in the nation. Then, I went out to Oregon, which is pancake country, and did the same thing with pancakes. I was all of twenty-five, a remarkable experience for a young woman to do that. I learned so much and met a lot of great people and just was exposed to a breadth of opportunities. I did radio and television in support of that product. It was very early on in my career. I think Bisquick just because it meant so much. The story of how it was created was interesting. Here it is today still being sold in the stores. We’ve tried reduced fat. We’ve tried buttermilk. We tried all kinds of things, so the product is very durable. Now, whether it will still be popular in ten years, I don’t know if people will even mix pancakes anymore.

**LC:** Right. One of the things in my research, too, that I found terribly interesting was that there was a flour company that was actually making buttered flour back in the 1880s. I was just shocked because I thought General Mills was the first to do this, coming up with these mixes. [Laughter]

**MC:** We’ve been eating far too long. When somebody always tell me, “Oh, I have this brand new idea that nobody has ever thought of,” I listen politely, but, you know, if you look at the annals of food, something like that existed somewhere.
LC: That’s probably true, isn’t it?

How did the kitchen staff generally feel about their contributions to the company?

MC: Oh, that varied all over the map. [Laughter]

I think there were years when we just felt we made a huge contribution and, again, it had to do with the kinds of products. I think we were the best and the most engaged when we were right in as a member of the team with the marketers. When we were only used as an adjunct, everybody kind of felt like we didn’t count for much. So much depended upon the kind of relationship that you built with your marketers. I have some marketing colleagues that I met when I was twenty-one that I still communicate with. They’re at other companies. They’ve gone to be presidents, all kinds of things. The relationship was so good and we worked together so much, traveled a lot, did so many things, and they would call me and say, “Marcia, what do you think? What do you think about this?” I think as a home economist makes him or herself valuable to the team and contributes rather than just sits and waits to be asked—our profession tends to be pretty quiet and we don’t sell ourselves real well. I think those home economists who insert themselves into a team do far better.

LC: How many people generally would work on a product development team?

MC: Oh, it may be as few as three, as many as six or eight, depending upon the complexity and the problems to be solved.

LC: Did employees in the kitchens move onto other positions outside of the kitchen staff?

MC: They did, some of them did, not all. For example, that’s all I ever wanted to do when I was a little girl growing up on the farm in Southwestern Minnesota was to be a home economist working in the Betty Crocker Kitchens. So, when you get to do your life’s dream at twenty-one you’re very lucky.

LC: No kidding. Where do you go from there?

[Laughter]

MC: Exactly. There were some who went on to promotions. There were some who went on to marketing, who went back for their MBAs. There were some who moved into research. There were some who went into marketing research. I told you about the young man who went to get a law degree. Another one went on to get his MBA.

LC: There were real opportunities for people who worked there?
MC: Not huge, no. You had to have a sponsor on either end. Cross-cultural moves or cross-functional moves were— They talk about them a lot but it’s hard to do. It’s a manager on this end and the manager on this end who have a great deal of trust because the manager who’s sending an employee says, “I’m sending you one of my best and brightest. It means my department is going to suffer, but you’re not getting my dregs. You’re getting the best.” The manager on the receiving team is absorbing somebody with usually a little higher salary because they’re a top performer and they’re willing to say, “I’m going to take this top performer at a relatively high salary and I’m going to train him or her till they’re good in this job, but I don’t know whether they’re going to stay here or they’re going to want to go back to the kitchens.” So, there’s a risk on either end. You sort of have to have trust in each other, that I’m not sending you my worst employee or sending you a troublemaker.

LC: Did you notice from the time you started with General Mills to the time you left an improvement in terms of the ease with which women could move into other types of positions?

MC: Women, yes. Oh, absolutely. When I first came with the company, there were no women in marketing. Now, over half of the marketing classes are women. Mercedes Bates, when she came in 1964, was the first woman vice-president. She came from McCall’s. Then, after that, there were several others. Of course then, eventually, there were women on the board of directors and now we have women presidents in a number of the businesses. Certainly, the ease has improved. I do think it’s still hard in any American corporation for women.

LC: I think so, too.

MC: Well, all of us like to hire like ourselves. We’re more comfortable with people who look like us, act like us.

LC: That’s true, isn’t it?

MC: Yes.

LC: What would you consider the most successful product development to come out of the kitchens while you worked there?

MC: Hmmmm. For a franchise, I would say Hamburger Helper. It met a real need. For twenty some years, it was a mainstay for college campuses, for young families, for men who didn’t know how to cook that had to cook the evening meal. I think the variety and as a franchise overall, it was met all the criteria.

Was it haute cuisine? No, but it never intended to be. I think for setting an objective and meeting it and meeting a need that consumers had, it just filled all the criteria all the way down and consumers perceived it as such. I think that’s what contributed to the success of the product. I think its time may have passed. I don’t know what the sales are today, so I couldn’t begin to tell you if they’re experiencing any slowdown or not.
LC: Of course, they’re coming up with some new varieties, too.

MC: Old El Paso and they’re doing some other things, so they may be rejuvenating it very nicely. It does have a lot of lives. It just has legs that go on and on.

LC: It’s amazing.

MC: Yes, exactly.

LC: Now the products that proved disappointing on the market—you mentioned angel food cakes.

MC: Well, we had one called Mug O’ Lunch.

LC: Oh, yes, I remember that.

MC: I thought, you know, the flavor was not good. I was embarrassed to have our name on it. It filled a need but I just didn’t think the quality ever got where it should have been.

LC: It wasn’t on the market very long, was it?

MC: Oh, a couple years. We did stay with it for a few years. We also had a product called Phyto-Farm. We grew hydroponic lettuce and greens for a number of years—spinach and bibb lettuce. I just thought the concept and the idea was so good, but we were never able to quite make it profitable. So, I was always disappointed that Phyto-Farm just didn’t—I think it was called Fresh Harvest when we actually marketed it in the stores. I was just really sad that that one never made it because I just thought it had such potential and it was right in today’s—it would have been positioned so well.

LC: Yes, it would have. When was that? Do you remember?

MC: Maybe the early 1990s, maybe late 1980s.

LC: So, it was a little bit too soon to fit the organic movement.

MC: Yes, which is often the case. I’m just astounded how many times we were a couple of years early—right idea. Sometimes, it’s very hard to get an idea reintroduced because so many people remember that it failed.

LC: Right.

What about flour products? You mentioned the angel food cakes, but were there other cake mixes or cake mix types or flavors that just didn’t sell?
MC: Ummm. We did bundt cakes for a while, but Pillsbury did them far better and they were first. When I first joined the company, we had a big refrigerated division. We sold a refrigerated pizza crust that was very good. We sold tubes of refrigerated biscuits along with like a chicken à la-king that you served over the top of the biscuit.

LC: I remember that, too, yes.

MC: And, we had a refrigerated nut bread and a refrigerated banana bread in chubs that you just poured into the little baking pan and baked. I was always sorry that they didn’t make it. Part of it was Pillsbury out-marketed us. They were on a par but Pillsbury signed up with Kraft [Foods]. They had an alliance with Kraft and did far better because Kraft had wonderful distribution. So, I was disappointed that those didn’t take off. Through the years, we’ve had wonderful dessert mixes, but they either had too many steps or cost too much. You could sort of see the failure coming. It’s really hard for me to identify any that I just am really disappointed in, other than what we’ve already talked about. We looked at a line of luncheon meats for a while that had an isolated soy protein and they didn’t go anywhere—before their time.

LC: Again. Right, soy is such a big thing right now.

MC: We looked at smoothies before their time.

LC: Oh, man!

MC: Yes. The history is littered with good ideas that just either we didn’t execute correctly or with enough quality or consumers weren’t ready.

LC: Interesting. What kinds of factors have influenced product development during your years at General Mills?

MC: Certainly speed and convenience and ease of preparation. The way I always describe it is that our recipes and our products need to be unique without being bizarre, because I think people are always looking for a new eating experience. They want to repeat the one they’ve had, but they’re willing to try it with a little salsa or instead of Swiss cheese, maybe the Gruyere on top. It’s always how fast you can lead the American population. When you think about prior to World War II, pizza wasn’t in the United States and the only Italian food most of us were familiar with was spaghetti, if you could even call that Italian. Then, the world just opened up after World War II when the G.I.s had been all around the world eating things and being exposed to new things and refrigeration. Every home had a refrigerator. Every home had a range. You could start to grill. So, I think availability—when you could see “kiwi” on the front of Better Homes and Gardens Magazine, you know, all the time, or you could go to your market and you could see tamarind and you could see mango and you could see sun dried tomatoes. Distribution changed so much what we were able to do with the kinds of food people could prepare. A cake mix still
takes thirty minutes or twenty-five to bake. Even if we tried it in the microwave, people weren’t happy with it. We’re still bound by some physical…

**LC:** And expectations.

**MC:** Right. Oh! I just laugh so much about the introduction of the microwave because when I think back to when that was introduced, they always showed turkeys, always.

**LC:** Yes! I know.

**MC:** The worst food you could do in a microwave at that time would have been a turkey. What woman was going to risk her reputation at Thanksgiving or Christmas on doing a turkey in the microwave? Yet, they had to get everybody’s attention, but I never would have put a crown roast or a beef roast or a turkey in the microwave. I often wonder if the product would have been more successful if they had taken a different tack in advertising—but they all did it. They all thought they had to show the turkeys and everybody was so disappointed. It was a statement of over promise all the time.

**LC:** What about the influence of women in the workforce? In the 1970s and 1980s in particular, women were really beginning to flood the market. Did that have a huge influence on the types of products that were developed?

**MC:** I think very much so. You began to see more heat and eat products and recipes, what I call assembling of food. You’d stop at the grocery store and maybe you’d buy meat that was already cut up for stir-fry and you’d stop at the salad bar and, then, you’d pick up a Betty Crocker Brownie Mix. You’d assemble a meal from a variety of sources rather than everything had to be scratch.

The other thing that happened I think is people began to have soup and salad or they began to have a main dish and a vegetable. You and I probably grew up with meat, potatoes, vegetable, bread, and a salad and then dessert. I just don’t think that happens anymore because of the working women. It may happen on the weekend.

I think the other thing that came about is what I call signature food. Everybody who wanted to cook or wanted to entertain had one cadre of recipes like the lamb chops that always worked or the bread that they always could make or the dessert that was a show stopper and they would use that or a similar recipe over and over again and they’d build a meal around that. It enabled them to entertain with a fair amount of flourish and confidence, which I think was really important. And, I think more kids were involved in both shopping and in cooking. I think men got more involved. My son is a better baker than my daughter-in-law.

**LC:** Wow.
MC: She’s the better cook, but he’s a far better baker. He would call me from college saying, “Mom, that tomato sauce that you made... It had oregano and basil in it. What else did it have?” I’d think, my goodness, for kid who’s nineteen to even know about basil and oregano...

LC: It’s in his blood.

MC: Well, yes, it is. [Laughter]

I think men are far less afraid to cook than most women. I think this was true maybe seven or eight years ago. I think today women don’t take pride in being good homemakers. I think they take pride in lots of other things: being good parents, being good wives, being good employees. Whereas, my generation used to measure by how clean your floors were and how wonderful your meals were and how quickly you got your laundry done. So, I think today’s women have far better goals than being the perfect housekeeper.

LC: One of the cookbooks I have is the Working Woman’s Cookbook and also the microwaving and these different trend cookbooks. As director of the kitchens, did you have a direct impact on the cookbooks themselves?

MC: Yes.

LC: What role did you play in those?

MC: I would help set the title, the topic, the strategic plan for the cookbook. What was the element that we were going to make most important? Was this the right time for Mexican? Was this the right time for Indian? One of my jobs was to look forward always and to present trends to the rest of the company. We would do that in a big presentation in the auditorium and I would work with marketing researchers and say, “Okay, here’s what we’re watching for.” I talked about Schwan’s home delivery before Simon Delivers was on the market and said, “Think about what this means for General Mills.” We talked about smoothies, all those things that were coming on the market, just to make all our young marketers who didn’t cook, who ate out most of their meals, aware of what was in the supermarket. We’d talk about the fact that children as young as five use the microwave on a regular basis. Now what kinds of foods can we fix for kids that are safe, that mom will feel good about? As trend researcher, combining what was happening with what consumers were likely to do, then I could present this to the company and help people think forward.

LC: So you were really a soothsayer.

MC: Oh, I would never be a Faith Popcorn. [Laughter] I’m not nearly as good as she is.

LC: Is there an average timeframe for new product development from idea to...?
MC: When I first joined the company, as I said, it may have been up to as long as seven years. But, I would say if you get six to twelve months today, you’re really lucky because there are so many more… The first to the market has a great advantage. Although the competition is a little less from traditional food markets, it’s much broader because of Boston Market, because of home delivery, because of Schwan’s, because of all the other places you can get good food. So, you’re competing with eat-out, take-out, home delivery…

LC: And the pressure cooker.

MC: Yes, you really are. It’s just a far different marketing environment.

LC: How many products might be developed at one time? I suppose that varies, too.

MC: Right. It could be anywhere from eighty to a hundred.

LC: Wow! That many?

MC: Oh, and some will fall by the wayside. If you’re looking just at line extensions, new Hamburger Helper, there may be two or three underway all the time.

LC: Do your kitchen staff then play guinea pigs when those first products come out?

MC: Yes. We have to sort of do directions for everything before they can even be tested for consumers because the consumers have to make it to even try it in their own home. Our home economists will be in the focus groups when the consumers talk about the food, when they taste it. “Oh, okay, this is not very clear. We need to change this.” So, we constantly listen and observe how people are responding to the food that we’ve got out there.

LC: Something else that I found that I thought was terribly interesting… I got a copy of a two-volume set of Braille directions for the Betty Crocker products. I thought it was a fabulous idea.

MC: We’ve done that for years and, then, we discontinued it for a while.

LC: You don’t think about that, do you, when you’re sighted?

MC: No.

LC: You don’t think about people who can’t read the directions.

MC: That’s right. We do have large type cookbooks as well.

LC: That’s marvelous.
MC: Really, the new set of Braille came about only because a young woman in the kitchens, Sharon Murphy, was really willing to champion that and make it happen.

LC: That was cool.

MC: Yes.

LC: One thing though that I’ve learned since I got these cookbooks—the Braille Institute was thrilled that we wanted them for the museum—was that not many of the blind use Braille anymore.

MC: Right.

LC: It’s kind of discontinuing.

MC: The other thing is for us, it’s almost impossible to keep them current.

LC: I suppose that’s true.

MC: As the products change or something is dropped off the market... That’s one of the reasons why, ultimately, we stopped doing it, just because we couldn’t guarantee that the Hamburger Helper that the consumer was going to buy was the one that they had the directions for.

LC: It was still an awfully nice idea, I thought.

MC: It was a good idea. Now, voice-generated... We’ve looking for other ways—they are. I’ve been away now three and a half years and I don’t go back.

LC: Good for you. [Laughter]

MC: My predecessor did that for me. When she quit, she quit and left.

LC: It makes a difference, I think.

MC: Well, I just don’t think it’s good to have anybody looking over your shoulder and my style was entirely different than Mary’s. I supported Mary and mentored, but uh-uh, I’m gone.

LC: Oh, you made your contribution by the sounds of things.

How did the work environment change? You talked a little bit about this, but how did the work environment change during your years at General Mills: expansion, modernization?

MC: Sure. Just to give you an example... Another home economist and I were one of the first shared jobs at General Mills. We were both home economists; we both had young children, so
we shared a job. Each of us worked two and a half days a week. We were the very first ones in the company. We could outwork a full time employee by about fifty percent.

**LC:** Wow!

**MC:** First of all, our styles were very much alike. When we were there, we didn’t waste time making lunch appointments, dental appointments; we just worked. Then, we had two heads. So, we’d call each other and say, “What about this? Would this work?” It really was a wonderful… We called Catalyst in New York to get ideas on job sharing and we did some research before we presented it to the company. In the beginning, neither of us took benefits because we wanted this to work. So, we were willing to make sacrifices. Today, of course, that wouldn’t even be the case.

That’s another thing: maternity leave. I mean, with a staff of sixty, mostly female, you can imagine, we always had a maternity leave, always had someone out for a hysterectomy or for major surgery, someone with a child who wasn’t thriving. Those would be changes that we saw.

We talked about the paternalism really of the 1960s. I think the company was much more open the latter ten years, much more demanding. The pace picked up dramatically. It was very languid the first few years I was there. I would say about the 1970s, it started to change dramatically.

**LC:** Did you feel respected by the men in the company?

**MC:** Yes. Not everybody does, but I had— There were a couple, of course, and there were sexual harassment issues but, at that time, you had to save your bullets for the important things.

**LC:** That’s true, I think, of just about any job.

**MC:** It just wasn’t worth hassling over every single one. If it was overt and terrible, then you did something; otherwise, you just learned to listen to a lot and walk away.

What else can I tell you? I think it became a much more family-friendly awareness—the maternity leaves. We had senior vice-presidents who were out and would take long maternity leaves, six months, for example. That would have never been heard of early on. There’s now a day care onsite. Counseling, you could really see that change. The attitude toward gays, the attitude toward people who might have had addiction problems, chemical dependency problems, the fact that there’s a workout center, fitness center on campus, so many changes that are positive.

**LC:** You were there at an interesting time to see those changes.

**MC:** Most of the women my age didn’t work, didn’t stay in the workforce. They may have taught for a few years, most of my colleagues. Then, they stopped, so to have stayed in all those
years, it was a different time and there were not many of us. I was born in 1942 and that was one of the lowest birthrate years in the United States right before World War II.

LC: Right before the baby boom.

MC: Right. There just aren’t a lot of women my age who worked in a corporate setting for that long and there were no day cares to speak of. Our son entered one when he was five, but before that, they were pretty rare.

LC: On to the Pillsbury/General Mills rivalry.

MC: Yes!

LC: There’s been a fierce competition and this goes way back to the 1880s.

MC: Yes.

LC: How did the competition affect the work in the kitchens?

MC: Not all that much. We didn’t recruit each other’s people. Once in a while, they would come to us, but we never went out and recruited. There was kind of an unwritten rule. Karen Johnson and I were good friends, as were the other directors at Pillsbury, Linda Smithson, Helen Horton. So, I knew all of them and we professionally worked together in our organizations very well. We just didn’t talk business or specific business. I was recruited at one point to interview. Pillsbury had had some problems with their kitchens and I had just come back to General Mills in 1976 and I was recruited by a headhunter to see if I’d be interested in the Pillsbury top job. At that time, I was not director of the kitchens at General Mills. I was torn, but Pillsbury had not a very good history of keeping their heads of the department.

LC: Oh. [Laughter]

MC: I stayed at General Mills, which turned out to be a good thing. I think we all admired when Pillsbury did something right or when they beat us to the punch. We were always glad they were in some categories we weren’t and we were glad we were in categories where they weren’t. But, in general, I think our professional pride was always enhanced when they did something. We tried to learn from them and I assume they tried to learn from us.

LC: Oh, I think so, yes. It’s been fun to study the advertising as there has been dueling ads.

MC: Oh, for years. “Eventually.” “Why not now?”

LC: Exactly.
MC: I think having both the companies in town made both of us stronger. I just had nothing but respect for what they did. If their cookbooks were successful—They didn’t have that many cookbooks. Their magazines, for example, were always very successful, their little grocery store cookbooks. We always admired the Bake-Off. We were always glad we didn’t have it—we just admired it—because it just looked like a huge amount of work.

LC: No kidding.

MC: It just looked like a nightmare waiting to happen. But, the publicity, the hoopla built around it, the money spent on it, we all said, “Oh! If we had that...” So, I think there was great admiration for it but also great relief that it wasn’t us doing it.

LC: How has the recent merger affected the kitchens?

MC: Well, I don’t really know.

LC: I suppose not. Yes, that’s after your time, isn’t it?

MC: It’s happened since I left. My personal philosophy: I’m sorry to see Pillsbury disappear as a corporate entity. Yet, I think under Diageo, that was going to happen. I think the company had lost interest in the food business and were more interested in liquor and in other things. I think Pillsbury would have continued to decline in a lot of ways. What this does, I think, is it enables General Mills to be stronger. It enables a lot of people who otherwise might not have been in jobs—It retains the best business of Pillsbury and moves that to General Mills and it will have a stronger company. I think it gets some really fine Pillsbury people into the General Mills’ fold. When I look at Multifoods, who was, with Robin Hood, a big miller and I think about the big companies that were here and how they’ve changed and the test kitchens, I’m glad it’s Betty Crocker that’s surviving, but I’m still sad to see the others go. I think the decline of Pillsbury was inevitable unless they had found a buyer, so I’m just glad it was General Mills.

LC: Did the Doughboy have an influence on your sales at all, Poppy and the Doughboy?

MC: Well, he was often on brands like the refrigerated products where we didn’t compete.

LC: That’s true, isn’t it?

MC: Piecrust, he was on. I’m trying to think of any others where we competed head-to-head and there wasn’t that much direct competition. I don’t think the Doughboy was used on cake mixes or frosting mixes. No, it was mostly the refrigerated case. Had we been there, I’m sure—He’s such a well-known institution. The same is true of the Green Giant. Again, we were not in that market, that sector.

LC: The Betty Crocker Test Kitchens were located in Golden Valley?
MC: Yes.

LC: Did you ever have testing facilities in other areas of the country?

MC: We looked at them and we had a mobile kitchen for a while that went around the country.

LC: Interesting.

MC: It would have been the late 1970s and it only was there for a year or two, but we did look at it. In the very early years, in the 1920s, we did have kitchens in Kansas City and we had cooking schools in about four or five other cities across the United States.

LC: Really, cooking schools?

MC: Yes.

LC: How did those operate?

MC: I wrote a little bit about it:

These women, pioneers in their own right, traveled across the country to present home maker cooking schools to demonstrate the use of Gold Medal flour.

I do know that they were across the country and hundreds of women would come and learn to use Gold Medal flour.

LC: Was it based on the radio programming?

MC: No, prior to it. It was before 1921. The woman who headed that was Ruth Haines Carpenter. She hired twenty-five home economists for the Washburn Crosby Company. We have pictures of that in the archives that you might want to see.

LC: Oh, fun. Yes, I hope to do that.

MC: [Reading]:

One of these home economists, Blanche Ingersol, was later charged with developing the first Betty Crocker radio program, which began in October 1924 on WCCO.

We never did have a specific kitchen. We did talk about it. It was a point of conversation a number of times.

LC: Interesting.
I guess then to wrap up is there anything else you’d like to share about your work with General Mills?

**MC:** We were talking about angel food cakes.

**LC:** Yes.

**MC:** I’ve been meaning to get back to that. When General Mills introduced angel food cake mix, and Pillsbury did at the same time, too, in the beginning, we had what we called the two-step process where you would beat it up, beat the egg whites, and then you would fold in the flour so you’d get a lighter, fluffier cake. But, then, through technology, we were able to do a one-step, where you just dumped it all in the bowl and beat it up. It was really interesting to me that consumers would prefer the two-step versus the one and the little bit of difference in labor that it involved. We also, at one point, looked at doing an angel food cake in an aerosol can that people could just spritz into the baking pan. Great idea. It was just too easy for consumers; they didn’t like it. They wanted to beat it on the mixer, just as we’ve talked about having eggs or no eggs added to a cake. There were certain steps that consumers were not ready to take. Now, today, that step may be just fine, using an aerosol. Again, it was a case of our being in advance of what consumers were ready for.

**LC:** Yes. Today, you’d have a problem with “is the aerosol good for the environment?”

**MC:** Right, exactly. But, it didn’t at that time. People didn’t ask those kinds of questions.

**LC:** Interesting.

**MC:** That’s another thing—we talked a little bit about corporate integrity. When I think about the kinds of steps the company took recycling its containers. For example, in a plant, they would have no metal closures for bags so no metal closure could get into the mix ever. So many steps had been thought about for the protection of the consumer. I always said if you could take a consumer on a film tour of the steps that General Mills or any food company took to protect the consumer, they’d be blown away by how careful the companies were.

**LC:** There’s so much lawsuit liability now.

**MC:** But, this was even before all of that had begun to happen. They were just thinking about things. We can’t use that because the closures might come off. We might have them loose in the plant. Or we can’t do this because of this. I can recall one product—I can’t even remember what it was—where all the people who had to sign off saying, “I know of no potential health hazard or safety hazard.” They really had to put their name on the line every time that came through. I read in the paper this morning that Steve Sanger and I don’t know who else are going to sign the annual report that will be due out soon and they will have no problems with the testing, that the figures are accurate and correct and there will be no Enron kind of thing. I thought people have been doing that at General Mills for years, just as I’m sure they were at Pillsbury, as I’m sure
they were at Land O’ Lakes, as I’m sure they are at Hormel, as I’m sure they are at General Foods. I think the people who make food always had an extra burden or care or concern. I can’t speak for pharmaceutical companies, but I know those of us in the food industry, my compatriots across the country, because we were preparing things that people put in their mouths and ate and ingested and their health depended upon it, all carried a little extra responsibility and thought about it pretty seriously.

LC: That’s a nice thing to end with or do you have anything else you’d like to say?

MC: Oh, no, except that it was, for a farm girl who was a 4-Her, grew up cooking and loving to bake, the most remarkable career one could have ever hoped for and it was a wonderful marriage of my interests and abilities and talents and a company that enabled me to do those things.

LC: Thank you so much for taking the time today.

MC: Oh, my pleasure.

LC: This has been such fun.