Ralcie Ceass  
Narrator

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Interviewer

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LC: This is Linda Cameron. I’m interviewing Ralcie Ceass in Delano, Minnesota. It is September 19, 2002.

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


LC: What was your responsibility as a guide?

RC: When it started out, the tours were very small and there would be just a few people coming in at a time. We would take them through the kitchens and, then, each kitchen had a little spiel about the decorating and the products that were tested. Well, the tours grew tremendously. We would have set times for tours, like ten in the morning and two in the afternoon. They came in on the second level. We took them to the auditorium, served them coffee and muffins, and showed them a film. After the film was shown, the tour guide talked about the beginning of General Mills and what they could expect to see in the kitchens. Then we’d divide them up into groups and take them down through the kitchens.

LC: Did you have to wear a uniform for this?

RC: We did. To start out with, we didn’t, but as the groups got larger, we did have uniforms.

LC: Were the groups educational in nature or were they just general public?

RC: Just general. There were a lot of classes, you know, students that would come through, but also people from out of town that had heard about the Betty Crocker Kitchens.

LC: Yes, they were quite a tourist attraction, weren’t they?

RC: Yes.

LC: Where did you go from there then? You moved up the ladder?
RC: Yes, because I have a home economics degree. I did get a little bored with my job as a tour guide because I was saying the same things over and over again, although, the experience of being a tour guide was tremendous. I had to get up and talk in front of 150 people at a time and I had to talk to small groups, so it was really good training for me. And, I learned about the kitchens, too. Then, there were some home economists who were leaving the kitchens and I thought, you know, I’ve got a home economics degree and I’d like to work in the kitchens themselves.

LC: What was the next position then that you got?

RC: I went into training. Then I worked with frostings, cakes, desserts, brownies, those kinds of products. I was there for about two years; then I moved to Bisquick and I also had desserts. I was there for about two and a half years. They do rotate people a lot in the kitchens or they used to. They don’t so much now, but we used to, every couple of years, move people around to different areas.

LC: What was the purpose of that?

RC: To give the person more experience and also give the product a fresh look. I think they did find out that it was valuable to have the experience of having people stay longer on their products. They also developed a relationship with marketing that was helpful.

LC: Your boss reported to marketing? Is that correct?

RC: My boss was Mercedes Bates [Director of the Betty Crocker Kitchens], at one time, and Marcia Copeland had that position later. They reported to the Director of Marketing.

LC: What kind of work did you do on the products? Was it mainly recipe testing?

RC: We did recipe development, tolerance testing. Tolerance testing is a big thing and also recipe development because we had recipe booklets coming out, recipes for the packages and so on, and for publicity, so there was always a need for recipes. Then marketing would have special requests for products.

LC: Where did you go from there?

RC: I went into what we call the Camera Kitchen.

LC: How long were you there?

RC: I went in the Camera Kitchen in 1973 and in 1974, I was asked to be the supervisor. We had a change of supervisors, so from 1974 on until I retired in March of 1996, I was the supervisor.

LC: What would a typical day be like for you in the Camera Kitchen?
RC: Oh, mercy!

[Laughter]

RC: Oh! As a supervisor?

LC: Yes.

RC: Oh, dear. You know, every day is so different. It’s really hard to explain. A lot of phone calls. A lot of people requesting photography. We now have or have had like three kitchens and three studios and also studios for overflow. So, there were a lot of balls in the air to juggle and then you’d get everything all set and, then, somebody calls and changes something, so that changes everything else. I also worked as a food stylist and prepared food for photography. I did a lot of packaging photography. We worked, of course, very closely with the photographers. Even though we were part of the Betty Crocker Kitchens, we worked with photography.

LC: General Mills had it’s own set of photographers?

RC: Yes.

LC: What was it like to set up the shots? Did you have any special tricks of the trade that you used to prepare the foods?

RC: As a matter of fact, they aren’t tricks. They’re just ways that we prepare food. I have this big black notebook that contains methods for working with the different products that we have. They aren’t really tricks because we truthfully represent our products. We have a set of guidelines that we adhere to. It’s just a matter of how you handle the food and, usually, if it’s a new product, the first person that works with it does a write-up on how you handle this food. But, it’s not really tricks. It’s just knowing the food, learning about the food.

LC: What kind of preparation would the kitchens do then in terms of getting ready for a camera shoot?

RC: The kitchens may come down and look at the food when we have it under camera to be sure we get their approval on it and it looks like it’s supposed to.

LC: Did you prepare the food yourself?

RC: Oh, yes. We prepare our food, yes. That’s what the procedure book that we have is based on. It’s really important to do your own baking and preparation.

LC: It sounds very ethical. It’s nice to hear as a consumer, isn’t it?

RC: Yes.
LC: How many staff members worked in the Camera Kitchen then?

RC: We usually had four. Then we had a kitchen assistant as well, who did dishes and cleaned up. That’s very helpful because you’re usually on pretty much of a schedule when you’re getting food ready for camera, because a photographer is getting set up with the lighting and the background and working with the art director and you’ve got to get this food ready on time. Depending upon the type of food it is or the type of project it is, you may have four or five shots a day or you may have just one shot a day.

LC: Did you work on commercials as well as still shots?

RC: Yes, I did a lot of commercial work.

LC: What would be the difference there?

RC: The amount of food that you prepare. [Laughter]

LC: I imagine the time it takes, too. You have to have more things to have ready as well.

RC: Yes. Like for a cake mix commercial or a cake and frosting commercial, we would probably prepare seven or eight cases of cake mix.

LC: Cases!?

RC: Yes.

LC: How many boxes would that be?

RC: Well, there are twelve in a box—eighty-four to ninety-six cake mixes.

[Laughter]

LC: Oh, my gosh! And there were how many of you?

RC: For a cake mix commercial, there are two or three people.

LC: Wow.

RC: I did a lot of under camera work also, and I did a little bit of hand modeling so that was kind of fun.

LC: Yes.

RC: I did so much commercial work that I got to know a lot of the photographers and the agency people very well.
LC: Were there any men involved in your kitchen at all? Were the photographers men?

RC: Yes, some of the photographers were men. We have one woman photographer now and she’s been there for a little while but, mostly, they’ve been men. Actually, we have two women photographers now. We did have one man who was a home economist in the kitchens, but not in the Camera Kitchen.

LC: Were there any particular products that you preferred to work with for the camera?

RC: Mmm, cake and frosting are my specialty.

LC: Oh, that’s interesting. Were they easier to work with than some of the other products were?

RC: No, I don’t think so. It just requires a special technique, working with the frosting particularly.

LC: What kind of technique? You had to put it on at the last minute?

RC: Yes, and it’s kind of an artistic job.

LC: Oh, I suppose that’s true, isn’t it?

RC: Yes.

LC: To get the right swirls.

[Chuckles]

LC: Well, I’m going to go on a little bit here about some of the general questions about the kitchens. There were specific kitchens. You had the Camera Kitchen. Then there were specific kitchens for different product lines.

RC: Right.

LC: What product kitchens did you work in? You said that you worked on brownies. You worked on desserts for a while.

RC: Yes.

LC: Were those separate kitchens?

RC: Yes. I started out in the Scandinavian Kitchen, which was the frosting and dessert kitchen. Then Bisquick was the Japanese Kitchen. The name was changed later, but at that time, it was the Japanese Kitchen. The first camera kitchen was the New England Kitchen and we were there
for a little while and, then, we moved down to the Mediterranean Kitchen because that was closer to the hall. At that time, there was only one studio and it was down the hall, so we had to carry or cart our food from the kitchen down to this studio that had just a very limited space for a kitchen, for last-minute touchups. The studio, at that time, was called “The Pit”, because you had to go downstairs and it was like a large pit down there. They could have maybe three or four camera setups, and that was used for many years.

LC: When did they build the new studio then?

RC: They decided to build a studio across the hall from the kitchens and that was one studio. We could have two setups in there with one kitchen, and my office was there as well.

LC: Handy.

RC: That was very convenient. We also shot down in “The Pit”.

LC: Oh.

RC: So we used both studios, yes, because, at one time, we had so much work going on. We did many recipe cards. There were two setups going on: one in The Pit and one in the camera studio.

LC: When the tours would go through, did they ever come through the Camera Kitchen?

RC: They went past the Camera Kitchen, but never through any kitchens. After we moved, we were completely separate from the tour route. We did have to cart our food down the hall to “The Pit” where the tours came through.

[Laughter]

RC: That was often a little difficult.

LC: I can imagine. I picture people sticking their fingers in the frosting as it goes by.

RC: Then, the camera kitchens as they exist now were built in 1985.

LC: Oh! That’s fairly recent, isn’t it?

RC: Yes. That was a huge improvement because now we have our own area with three kitchens and three studios, and I had an office there, and worked closely with the manager of photographers who had his office there, as well.

LC: Interesting.

Now, I want to think back to your tour guide years again.
RC: Okay.

LC: What was it like for the home economists when the tours would come through? Was it frustrating for them to have people traipsing through their kitchens all the time?

RC: They didn’t go through the kitchens; they went past the kitchens. I think probably at first it was something you had to get used to. You couldn’t really plan your work around the tours. You had a job to do and you had to get it done so you had to kind of ignore them as much as you could.

LC: Yes. Barbara Davis mentioned that it was almost as though the visitors didn’t think they were real home economists that they were actors in the kitchens.

RC: Yes, right.

LC: I thought that was pretty funny. What was the typical tour experience like for the visitor? You mentioned that they saw a film about Betty Crocker and they had a chance to tour the kitchens. Did they get a chance to sample any of the goodies?

RC: Well, in the morning, we’d have a muffin for them up in the auditorium. They never sampled any food down in the kitchens because that’s strictly for testing.

LC: Did they ask?

RC: No, I don’t think they really expected to. I think they realized—at least they should from the film and from the tour guide’s explanation of what went on in the kitchens. I don’t think they really expected to eat down there.

LC: They knew it was a working environment?

RC: Right. Then, in the afternoon, we’d serve them brownies and coffee, so they got treated pretty well. They also got a little goodie bag when they left, with a product and recipes included.

LC: Nice. Did they expect to meet Betty Crocker?

RC: Mmm, I don’t think so.

[Laughter]

RC: I think sometimes there were people that didn’t even know where they were.

LC: I suppose that’s true. Did some of the visitors think Betty Crocker was real, that she was a real person?

RC: Yes, I think a lot of them did, maybe still do.
LC: I think so. I know that Betty Crocker receives a lot of correspondence and you can just imagine the deluge now with e-mail and so on.

RC: Yes.

LC: Do you have any idea how many letters the company received for Betty Crocker in a week or a day?

RC: I don’t. You know, we had people that were on the telephones and answered letters and so on. I never worked in that area, so I couldn’t even wager a guess at that.

[Chuckles]

RC: Sorry.

LC: How was Betty Crocker perceived by your friends and neighbors? Did they think it was neat that you were working at General Mills?

RC: They did, yes. I think I had all my friends and relatives buying Betty Crocker products.

[Laughter]

RC: They seemed to be very loyal to Betty Crocker and I think they were impressed that I worked for Betty Crocker.

LC: How about your coworkers? Did they think Betty Crocker was a good sort of icon for the company, the image?

RC: Yes, yes, absolutely.

LC: She underwent a lot of different makeovers.

RC: Yes.

LC: Did you personally hear any complaints from visitors about the changes that were made to her?

RC: No, not really. She seemed to get younger. Everybody would say, “She got younger through the years,” which was kind of nice. That’s pretty much the only comment I heard.

LC: Did Betty Crocker ever make any personal appearances? Did the head of the department ever go out and actually take on the role of Betty Crocker?

RC: Marcia Copeland?
LC: Yes.

RC: Yes, she did a lot of that and she was excellent at public speaking.

[Tape interruption]

LC: You mentioned that Marcia Copeland went out as Betty Crocker and did a number of…

RC: Yes, and she was an excellent representative of the department and of Betty Crocker. You’ve spoken to her so you know how eloquently she speaks and handles herself.

LC: She’s very articulate, yes. Did any of the other employees have to do that, ever represent the company on camera or in news articles?

RC: Yes. Mary Bartz, who is head of the department now—I think she did some and, of course, still is doing a lot of that. Of course, they were always speaking—From my standpoint as supervisor of food styling, I did a lot of speaking at different marketing orientations. We all had to speak to the new marketing people that came in every year. They’d have an orientation where we all would get up and talk about our area. Then I spoke to a photographers association one time and I went over to our research department and gave a talk over there. So, there were a lot of talks. I was quoted in the *Wall Street Journal* one time, in a local city business paper, and in two different General Mills’ publications.

LC: A lot of opportunities to speak up.

RC: Right.

LC: Interesting.

I’m going to go on to product development a little bit. It’s been fun to find out from various women who worked over in the kitchens at Pillsbury and General Mills what they’re favorite products were that they worked on. What was yours?

RC: I enjoyed the desserts that I worked on a lot, like brownies and some of the other desserts. Of course, I enjoyed working with cake and frosting, but I also enjoyed working with Bisquick. Bisquick, you know, has so many options, so many opportunities for recipes. There was a lot of recipe development done with Bisquick, so I enjoyed working with it.

LC: Were you working on it at the time of the reformulation? I know Marcia mentioned that there was a time when they—That was probably before you started.

RC: That was before, yes. In fact, Marcia was on it.
LC: Yes. She mentioned that it was a wonderful experience for her to go out and speak to groups about that.

RC: Yes, yes.

LC: It’s a mainstay in my cupboard, I’ll tell you.

[Laughter]

LC: Did the kitchen staff have any input in terms of new product development? Did you ever come up with any ideas for new things, new flavors?

RC: I think the product representatives would probably offer to the James Ford Bell Research Center and to marketing, but usually they were developed by the research center and they worked closely with marketing, of course. But the home economists, the product representatives, did have some input into that.

LC: So, were the folks in the lab or the marketing people responsible for monitoring the trends to help determine what might be the next trend?

RC: Marketing, yes. That would be marketing.

LC: Interesting.

How did the kitchen staff feel about their work with the company? Did you all feel really good about your contributions?

RC: Yes. I think everyone there felt that it’s a really good company to work for. I think everybody just felt very pleased to be a part of the Betty Crocker Kitchens and General Mills.

LC: And they felt valued by the company?

RC: Yes.

LC: That’s good. How about employment opportunities other than the kitchens? Were home economists encouraged to go back to school and get MBAs and that sort of thing?

RC: Yes. In fact, we were encouraged to take a lot of classes. There were a lot of opportunities to take classes. They liked to see us do that.

LC: What kind of classes?

RC: There’d be seminars on leadership maybe, seminars on… Oh, gosh, I could get out my list.

[Laughter]
RC: Public speaking, things that maybe that particular person needed.

LC: To develop skills.

RC: To develop skills, yes.

LC: Did you see other women moving into positions outside the Betty Crocker Kitchens area? Did some move into marketing or into other areas of the business?

RC: [Pause] Some of them went over to research. Of course, we had some development within the kitchens. I mean, you’d start out as a product representative and then you’d move up another step. At one time, we had a position called a coordinator. That was before you get to a supervisor. They tried that for a couple of years, having a coordinator, just so that the home economists had another level to go to, but it didn’t work out really well.

LC: Would there have been a coordinator in each kitchen then?

RC: For each area.

LC: Each product area?

RC: Yes.

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

RC: Hamburger Helper. [laughter]

LC: That’s what Barbara said too, “Hamburger Helper.” What product proved disappointing on the market to you, that you thought might have been a real success?

RC: That I thought would have been a success?

LC: Yes.

RC: Some of the desserts, the products that were smaller and didn’t have enough money to advertise, like Date Bar Mix for example, and we had a Vienna Bar. I think Vienna Bars have been gone for a while. Date Bar Mix, you can’t find on the market anymore and it’s a really good product, but it’s so small that they don’t have money enough to advertise it.

LC: Interesting. So they allocate according to how much they think it’s going to sell or they place priorities on their product line?

RC: Yes.
LC: What kind of factors influenced product development while you were there? Did you notice any societal influences, like I know, for instance, in the 1960s with Julia Child and her French cooking show on public television, that suddenly there was an interest in foreign cuisine and different things like that. Can you think of any influences that might have impacted General Mills’ product development?

RC: I guess that’s more of a question for the people on product.

LC: I suppose, yes.

RC: In the time I was on product, which was like five and a half years, I don’t remember…

LC: This was about the time when women were heading back to work and I suppose convenience products were important?

RC: Oh, yes, like with Hamburger Helper. The convenience products have always been influential.

LC: What about kitchen technology, like the microwave?

RC: Well, yes. When microwaves came out, that was a really big thing. In fact, one of the home economists was an expert in microwaves and she was hired for that reason.

LC: Wow.

RC: Of course, then every kitchen had at least one microwave. Some of them had more than that.

LC: Did that impact the photography kitchen at all?

RC: Well, we had some products that were just microwave. We had a cake called Micro-Rave.

LC: I remember that!

RC: Yes. That, of course, was done in the microwave. We did print ads with that and commercials. You know, it was a good product.

LC: How many people might be on a single product development team? Do you have any idea, any notion?

RC: On a single product?

LC: Yes. Did it vary from kitchen to kitchen, from product line to product line?
RC: A little bit. Usually, it’s one home economist and a technician.

LC: How many products might be developed at one time?

RC: I don’t know. There we go back to the product people.

LC: Yes. How many products might you photograph in one day?

RC: Well, three probably. Now, Cookbook has been a very busy area for photography. They do those supermarket books constantly. They have to do five shots a day for a cookbook, so that moves very quickly. They usually have—I don’t know what they’re doing now on that—at least two people, maybe three people preparing food.

LC: Interesting. And how many cookbooks might they put out in one year? Tons?

[Laughter]

RC: With the supermarket books, there’s one every month.

LC: Wow!

RC: Then, of course, they do the big book and specialty books. “Big Red,” of course, is the “bible” in many kitchens and is updated every few years. There are a lot of cookbooks. It’s a very active area.

LC: Can you tell me anything about the Recipes from the Soul competition? Were you there when they had that contest, the African American cooking contest?

RC: No, I wasn’t there at the time.

LC: What about the General Mills/Pillsbury rivalry?

[Laughter]

RC: That’s not there anymore.

LC: No, it’s not, now that Betty’s gobbled up the Doughboy. It’s been fun to go through vintage ads and read… There’s really a competitive factor. They kind of answer each other. It’s like dueling ads.

RC: Sure.

LC: Did that affect your work in the kitchens at all? Did you see the rivalry evident in terms of products that were developed or the types of ads that were done?
RC: We were always interested in their ads and in their commercials and what they were doing. I don’t think it influenced us one way or the other. We always felt that we had the better products and photography.

[Laughter]

LC: What do you think of the merger?

RC: Well, I think it’s great. I think it’s great for General Mills, because I think they’re really in a win/win situation.

LC: I think they are too.

My understanding is that there are going to be new kitchens opening this fall. Do you know anything about those…next fall?

RC: The new test kitchens will be in a new building. The camera kitchens are going to expand somehow, but I’m not sure where they’re going to expand or how that’s going to look.

LC: Interesting.

How would you say General Mills changed during your tenure there? You were there for twenty-nine years.

RC: Yes.

LC: What changes did you see in the company?

RC: [Pause] I think there are a lot more women in marketing. In fact, it used to be mostly men that we would work with in marketing and, as the years went on, more and more women got into marketing. I think it’s almost fifty/fifty now. Also, this was true of the agency. We worked closely with the advertising agencies and they also have a lot of women art directors and so on. So, there’s been a big change in that respect, having women in the field.

LC: Is there anything else you’d like to share about your work with General Mills?

RC: Well, it was an outstanding career that I had over those years. I traveled from Canada to Arizona and from Rome to Australia, all over the United States. I mean, it was amazing.

LC: Wow!

RC: The opportunities that were put before me were just amazing. So, it taught me a lot as well as my being able to contribute to General Mills.
LC: Great! Thank you so much for taking the time to let me interview you. This has been a real treat.

[Break in the interview]

LC: We are now looking at a tool kit. What can you tell me about this?

RC: All the food stylists at General Mills have these tool kits and we all have our own tools, because in order to do the job right, you have to have the right tool. So, we all have our names on all of our tools so we can keep track of them. This particular tool kit was originally a telephone lineman’s case, and it was given to me by one of the producers at a studio that I used to work at a lot. Every tool has its own job to do and having a specific tool for a job is so very important. So, this kit works out very well. These are all my knives in here. My husband made some specialty tools for me also which are in here. This is a very important part of the job: to have the right tools.

LC: I see a lot of paintbrushes in there.

RC: Yes.

LC: What would those have been used for?

RC: That’s for freshening food. You know, the lights dry food out, whether it’s fruit or whatever. We’d just get a little water and freshen it. As it sits there, it dries out.

LC: And I see pallet knives? Are these pallet knives?

RC: Yes. You can use it with frosting if you have a very small area or you can use it for loosening muffins in the pan…

LC: Oh, sure.

RC: …lots of different things. The Exacto knives are really important. I use those a lot with my cake jobs, and the tweezers, of course, are important and measuring is extremely important.

LC: Yes, I would think so.

[Laughter]

LC: How about Q-tips? I see some Q-tips in there.

RC: Yes. Q-tips are a big part of the job as you’re going through cleaning up a little bit.

LC: Oh, I suppose that’s true, with the plates and things.
RC: Yes. Then, these are my famous spatulas.

LC: Yes.

RC: My frosting spatulas that I use to do all my frosting work.

LC: And this is a thermometer?

RC: Yes, you need that. More spatulas, of course, and little spoons, and scissors. Then these [referring to levels], I use working with cakes. Then, this is for leveling the ovens when we go into studio. We have to order all of our equipment that we’re going to be working on. So, we order, usually, like four ovens if we’re doing cakes. When you’re baking that many, you need a lot of ovens. Sometimes, we’ll order five [ovens] just because usually one won’t work.

[Chuckles]

LC: You need to level them to get the cakes just so.

RC: Yes.

Then, all my knives. [holding up a straight-edge] This is for cutting straight.

LC: That’s a wooden block that serves as a guide.

RC: Yes. I have a metal one too.

LC: Why do you have a big magnifying glass?

RC: Because when I’m working on cakes, I like to bring the image up very large. When the picture is printed, like in a magazine, it’s going to be a lot larger than what you see, and it gives me a lot of detail. So, I work with a magnifying glass a lot. It really gives me the detail that I need. Scissors, more spatulas, little spritzers for freshening food.

LC: Interesting.

RC: So, tools are very important. Every food stylist has them and we’re very fortunate to have these nice cases. They work really well for traveling because when you’re going out of town, you need something that ships well. It also keeps the tools well organized. This has been a lot of places.

LC: It looks like it. Thank you so much.