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Lucille Sienia interview

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JP:   [It’s] March 12, 1996, and we are recording an interview with Lucille Sienia for the Living History Committee of Central Washington University, and recording this particular interview is Helen Smith, and I’m Jean Putnam, and I’m the interviewer. So we’d like to start this morning, Lucille, with having you tell us at least, what is your background? How did you end up here and being employed at the University?

LS:   I was born in Ellensburg and I’ve lived here all my life, and when my children – we lived on a farm and we moved to town to be closer to school for school activities for the children when they got in high school, and this chair that I’m sitting in was built in Ellensburg, and it was sold at Bench and Sons, and it’s rocked all my grandchildren.

JP:   Wonderful! Well now, what years did you work at the campus

LS:   I worked – I went to work in September of ’59, and retired in January, ’70.

JP:   All right. And can you tell us what were your responsibilities while you were at Central?

LS:   When I started to work, I worked for Miss Swanson, and she hired me to work in the dining room. At that time employees were – took care of the dining room, and I worked tables and took all kinds of things – the condiments and things in the dining room. And then I was more interested in working in the kitchen, and so when I had free time I helped in the kitchen, and the head cook, who was Mrs. Antenopolis, was impressed with my knowledge of the cooking, I guess, because we became very good friends, and she went to the – Miss Swanson and asked her if she wouldn’t transfer me into the kitchen. And so that’s where I started, in the kitchen, and I started on the dinner crew. They had breakfast, lunch and dinner crews, and the breakfast and lunch worked together, and the dinner crew come in about nine-thirty, ten o’clock, and then we helped with the lunch, but then we worked mainly on dinner, because we cooked everything. Everything was cooked. Potatoes were peeled, vegetables were peeled, and everything was really cooked from scratch.

JP:   You said the dinner people came in at 9:30. What time must you have had to come in?

LS:   About 9:30. Well, when I went into the kitchen.


LS:   Well when I – I didn’t work for the breakfast. I came in later and worked.

JP:   Okay, fine. When you say “the dining room,” now you know, now we have many dining rooms. Where was this dining room located? Where was the only dining room?

LS:   Commons.

JP:   It was the Commons. And where were the Commons? Are they still the Commons?

LS:   No, it isn’t called the Commons now, it’s the –

JP:   Is this the one behind Sue Lombard?
LS: Right.

JP: Or attached to Sue Lombard?

LS: Uh-huh. Now it’s attached. It wasn’t at that time attached.

JP: Oh it wasn’t?

LS: There was an alleyway between Commons and Sue Lombard.

JP: Oh.

LS: And the Health Department was on one side of the alley, too.

JP: So if – so if they were the only dining room, when did – do you recall when that dining room was first in service, or was this historically way back?

LS: Oh, that was quite a ways back.

JP: So it had always been there.

LS: No, I don’t remember when it was built, and at that time they were still serving meals over at Munson Hall. Food would be transported to Munson Hall for those at Munson Hall. And at Sue Lombard – they had a dining room in Sue Lombard. They sent food to Sue Lombard, too.

JP: So you did all the cooking.

LS: We did all the cooking in Commons.

JP: And then sent it all.

LS: Mm-hmm.

JP: Now what was your official title? Did people in the kitchen area or the dining services area have certain ranks or titles?

LS: Yes. I was just a cook at that time.

JP: Do you have – is there a Cook 1, 2, 3?

LS: Yes, there is now, but at that time it was not.

JP: There wasn’t anything of that sort.

LS: No.

JP: What about the people in the dining area that were not cooks? What were their titles, do you remember?

LS: No, I don’t.
JP: Or they didn’t have titles.

LS: I don’t think they even had a title. Because we just helped in the place that you were needed.

JP: So the majority of your time, then, was basically food preparation.

LS: Mm-hmm.

JP: You didn’t do anything with the purchasing?

LS: No.

JP: Or that sort of thing?

LS: No, no – no planning of meals. All we did was cook whatever we were told to cook.

JP: Do you remember any of – I know you mentioned your superior – were there any other people that you remember that you worked with?

LS: People that I worked with?

JP: With, or that were also superiors. Any other names?

LS: The supervisor was – after Miss Swanson retired there was a Miss Byers that came, and she was there for one year. And then Mr. Airs [phonetic] came, and things really changed when Mr. Airs came. He wanted the students to learn all different kinds of foods, and we started having lobster, we had butterflied shrimp, we had really exotic meals. And he thought that this should be – and they were – they really were interested in it. And he started the first boar dinner, and it was interesting to know that – I’d had to go home and get my meat saw to cut the legs off of the boars because we couldn’t get them in the oven! [Laughter]

JP: Do you remember when that first boar dinner took place?

LS: I’ve been trying to think. I don’t know if it was about ’63 or ’64 – somewhere along in there.


LS: But I don’t remember exactly.

JP: And it continues to this day.

LS: Yeah, they still have it. With lots of different things than we had at the time.

JP: All right, well that’s interesting. Did you have – were any of these people that you worked for that you enjoyed more than others – that you thought were more effective than others?

LS: Um, I liked Mr. Airs. He really was for the students, and he really tried to do everything that he could for the students at Central.
JP: Now, you already – let’s see if I can think of another one here. Did you feel that – in terms of salaries – I don’t know if you knew what other people were making. Did you think that they were fairly equitable with salaries, or did you –

LS: At the time.

JP: At the time.

LS: At the time they were, because I remember when I went to work we – in ’59, we had to pay for our one meal that we were allowed to eat. But we paid for it. That came out of our check before we ever got it.

JP: Did you feel that there was any discrepancy between your salaries as cooks and say, the grounds people or any of the other civil service exempt positions, or did you feel that that was fairly equitable.

LS: I think they were equitable at the time.

JP: Now did you – were you civil service exempt, or not?

LS: We were civil service. We went in the civil service.

JP: Yes, right. So – and did you have to take some kind of – you had to take an exam?

LS: No.

JP: Or anything of that sort to get into that?

LS: No.

JP: Okay. Did you – but you did feel that you were treated fairly, and – were there men cooks as well?

LS: At that time there wasn’t. It was all women. And some of the women had been there long before I was, of course, and they worked on a split shift. Mrs. Andonopolis, who was the head cook when I went in – head dinner cook – she used to work – come in and work for breakfast and go home, come back and work for lunch and go home, and come back and work for dinner.

JP: Oh, how wonderful.

LS: And they were very happy when that changed, because that was hard on everybody.

JP: So there wasn’t any – any knowledge of any inequities between the male employees and the female because they were all female at that time.

LS: They were all female. We had some men janitors, is all.

JP: Were you there when the first men in the dining area – well Mr. Airs, of course. Were there any others that you remember coming in near the end?

LS: Mr. Lord was there as Assistant Director, and then in ’70 it was Mr. Fenell. And of course Mr. Hill was around all the time, because he was our head of the Auxiliary Service, and he was always around. He was a very nice person to deal with.
JP: Did you have any remembrances of, say, Wendell Hill or any of those others – I mean, in terms of working for them? What they philosophically wanted to do? I know you’ve mentioned Mr. Airs was certainly in favor of the students.

LS: No, not really. I can’t think of anything to say. We did have – at the time, up until ’70 when I retired, it was more of a family. We were all treated more like a family, and they were very considerate of us, and – you know – things have gotten different. Of course, society’s changed, too.

JP: Right, right. Certainly has, hasn’t it? Did Central ever encourage you, or provide any workshops or any educational opportunities for you to increase your knowledge or your skills?

LS: Yes, I became Supervisor, and –

JP: And when did that – remember?

LS: I think it was around ’67, and we were – three of us were sent back to Michigan to a Supervisor’s workshop which was very interesting, and gave us lots of knowledge on how other schools worked with students. And that was very interesting.

JP: Good. Well I’m glad that you had that opportunity. Now what did you recall, in terms of your relationship with students? Did you ever have an opportunity to really – to get a feel for the students while you were there?

LS: Yes. That – in that length of time, that was when we had overflow of the Negro population from central Seattle, and they came with a 1.3 grade average and many of them could not read, and we had problems in the dining room because they couldn’t read the menus and they were very obstinate kind. But – I had one Negro student working, because I did have kind of charge of the student help – hiring of the student help and scheduling their work, as a supervisor, and this one Negro student – I don’t remember his name, but he came – and he had a job, when school let out for summer vacation, but he came and he was scheduled to go to work in the fall when he came. But when he came he demanded a supervisor’s position of students, and I said, “No, you’re already scheduled for this position.” And he says, “Well I’ll have you know I’m Black.” And I says, “Well thanks for telling me, because I didn’t know it.” But they had – he’d gone to Black Power, and he was really feeling –

JP: At a time when they needed to –

LS: Right. To put himself forward.

JP: Right. Did you take advantage of any of the campus activities? Did you ever attend anything on the campus, or –

LS: Yes, we always – whenever we could we always went to their plays or musicals, and ball games. My husband enjoyed it. He didn’t really particularly care about the musicals and things, but we always – some of us women always went to them because they were – we had a lot of students that were in them, and they were really, really nice to know.

JP: Did you ever take any classes or anything while you were there, or –

LS: I took a Tailoring class – night class, one quarter.

JP: Did you? Uh-huh. And did you know any of the faculty on the campus? Was there any occasion for you to ever meet any of them?
LS: Oh, just when they came in – but know them.

JP: And what about the Administrators? Do you have any recollections of Presidents, or Deans, or anyone? Would you have had any feeling about any of them?

LS: Oh yes. Dr. Brooks was always very outgoing and very appreciative of all the things that we’d do when they had Board meetings and things, and it was really nice to know that he did appreciate what we did do.

JP: Was there any other President during that time?

LS: No.

JP: So he would be – have been the one that you would have remembered.

LS: Right.

JP: Did you remember any of Deans, or any of the Vice Presidents?

LS: No.

JP: You would probably not have –

LS: No, I don’t remember.

JP: Did you ever remember any events that were of interest – that might have been of interest to us? Anything that may have happened when school closed down, or when the – I don’t know.

LS: Well, let’s see. I don’t know of any specific events except when we had the Board Dinner. We had Hawaiian Luau. I helped the Hawaiian students have their first Luau, and that was really a wonderful experience. And I still correspond with one of the Hawaiian students that’s Japanese that lives in Hawaii. He went back to teach. And we – in 1992 we went to Hawaii when my grandson – that was his graduation trip – and Cliff met us at the airport and gave us all leis, and gave us his van for the week that we were there, and then met us and took us to his home, and took us out. He is married to a Chinese girl, and took us to his home for a Chinese dinner, and then he – he’s Japanese and so he took us out to a Japanese restaurant for dinner one night.

JP: What was his last name?

LS: Cliff Honjo.

JP: Great. You mentioned the Hawaiian luau. Can you describe what that was?

LS: Um, the students sent to Hawaii and had everything – everything was brought over here from Hawaii. They had – all of the things that they used, they brought in – the fresh pineapple, and they cooked pork and had the pork, and then they made a pudding made out of coconut milk that was most delicious, and we sat around on the floor in the dining room for our luau, and – I didn’t care for poi. Let’s see, what else did we have? I can’t recall anything else that we had, but I do remember those things.

JP: Just in general as you remember back on your employment at Central, what, in general, can you say – what made it a – either a pleasant or otherwise not so pleasant place to work? Just the general impressions of Central as a University.
LS: I enjoyed my work up until about the last year, and then it got very stressful to me, so – and that’s why I retired, was because of the stress. Things change. Our – the administrative changed, you know, and we had one Assistant Director that was very insecure, and he would kind of push things off on the supervisors, and it just got to be too much stress, and life’s too short.

JP: Well do you have any sort of last minute impressions? Anything you want to leave us with, that might –

LS: I enjoyed working at the college. I really enjoyed it. I enjoyed the people. I made lots of friends, and it was very enjoyable. I did. I had lifetime friends made.

JP: Helen, did you?

HS: I’d like to find out – before Ray Airs came, could you give us some feeling about what kind of meals were you serving? Were they – can you –

LS: Well, just – regular meals. Nothing exotic or nothing different, just meat and potatoes and vegetables and salads.

HS: Down home American Cooking.

LS: Right.

HS: Do you remember, or did you have occasion to be involved with any student complaints? Because of course that’s always such a – students are supposed to hate dining room food, and yet they gobble it down.

LS: They do. We always had complaints, no matter what. You can’t please everyone. And we always had complaints.

HS: What were they complaining about?

LS: Most anything. They didn’t like it, or it wasn’t like Mom made, or something, you know.

HS: Nowadays it would be that there’s too much starch, too much fat, you know.

LS: Oh yes, that’s probably true now. But you have to realize that they don’t cook a lot from scratch now, either. It’s mostly prepared food that they either heat – you know, microwave, or – they do grill, and things like that.

JP: And that started when you left in ’70, or were you still cooking from scratch?

LS: We were still cooking from scratch, except the bakery. They had started about a year before buying prepared baked goods. Because they used to do all the baking.

HS: How many people were you making meals for?

LS: Well, I was in the process of – when Holmes Dining Hall was built and we moved from – we moved up Upper Campus, and I was one of the lucky ones that got to go Upper Campus. But when we moved up there, we were feeding about 6000 students. We fed around 4000 in Commons before [inaudible] moved.
And this was 6000 total, then.

Yes. Uh-huh.

Why did you say “lucky” – one of the lucky ones?

Well because we moved into Holmes Dining Hall – or Holmes Annex up there, and we had no steam kettles. We had only grills and the oven to cook in. All gravies were made at Commons and was transported up to Holmes Hall. Soups were transported up to Holmes, and we had to learn to do different kinds of cooking to compensate for what we had. And we done an awful lot of grilling.

You think you’d have more different types – ways of cooking in the new building.

Well we did, but they hadn’t got in. The facilities hadn’t arrived. Those 60 gallon steam kettles hadn’t arrived, and so we didn’t have them to work with.

Well how long did you have to work this way?

Well, it was at least – oh, about three months – three, four months. It was pretty hectic, it got to be, but it worked out fine. We had steamers. We had the steamers, and we had grills, and we had the oven.

Do you know – in that [inaudible] time can you remember any humorous events taking place?

Oh yes, many.

Will you share one with us?

Well there’s lots of humor in a kitchen. You had a lot of women working, and sometimes the meat would get upset on the floor, and you’d have to do something about that right away quick! And – oh, I don’t know. We used to have a lady that made donuts – that came in just to make donuts, and she made donuts and all kinds of rolls – sweet rolls, or continental breakfast – we had that after we moved to Holmes. And she used to have some kind of hectic times trying to get the donuts out in time for the mad rush that would come in for continental breakfast, because there aren’t many students that get up for breakfast.

Helen, did you have any other?

No, I think that’s it. It was a wonderful look into the cooking in the past.

You know, I was going to end with a discussion on where did this phrase “starting from scratch” come from? What does that – I know what it means. Where do you think they got this “starting from scratch?”

I don’t know where that came from, except maybe from the raw vegetables to prepare. Because we did have a potato peeler, and it was a round thing that you dumped the potatoes in and it knocked the – most of the peeling off, and then they were put – the potatoes were dumped into big tubs, and then we had to spot them all. So maybe that’s starting from scratch.

It probably is. Well thank you so much for your time this morning, Lucille, and we appreciate your contribution to the history of Central.