

From Debbie Ralston, interviewed by John Swann and Robert Tucker, 21 October 2008:

JS: By the way, we didn't talk about this, but when you came on board in '72, that was still not too many years after the first female inspector came to FDA. I mean, was it still kind of a rarity, or did you see a larger group of female CSOs by the time you came on board in '72?

DR: We had a bunch that came in with me. When I think back on those that came in -- I'm very bad with numbers -- I would say that probably half "survived," as in they lasted more than a few years before they decided that there were other things they'd rather do with their lives.

I would say that the mentality was still very much male. My first supervisor, who I loved dearly, and I had discussions about the fact that he wouldn't send me to a certain part of New York because I was a woman traveling alone. Of course, I looked at that as career-limiting. I expected to do everything that everybody else did. Ultimately he told me, "You look too much like my daughter. I would never send you to places like that."

RT: Well, he was probably thinking they were dangerous areas.

DR: But, still, my thought process was that I should go everywhere the men went. I pushed to do all those things because I didn't think I should be treated any differently.

But I think when I started there were four or five women investigators in New York,

only two of whom came on as investigators. Two or three of them transferred, moved over from the laboratory into investigations, when Project Hire happened. There were a number of us who came in in Project Hire.

JS: Imogene Golinger started in New York, as I recall. I might be wrong.

DR: No. She wasn't around when I was there.

The most outspoken women in New York at the time I was there were our Consumer Affairs Officers [CAOs] because, back in those days, the field CAOs dealt actually with major media. If there was a public affairs office here at headquarters, it didn't play as large a role in that area as it has come to now, in today's environment.

JS: More decentralized at that time.

DR: Yes. The CAOs interviewed were personally interviewed by the seven o'clock news people. They were forces to be reckoned with." There weren't that many women around. I was head of the Federal Women's Program for a period of time. It was very small and poorly supported in those days.

JS: You mentioned earlier the Bon Vivant case. When you came in, I think we were on the tail end of that, but maybe in the follow-up of the investigation, prosecution, and so on. I wonder if you could say a little bit about that and the impact it had, from your standpoint, on the office, the agency, and sort of the way we deal with food regulation,

because it certainly attracted a great deal of attention in the media, newspapers and so on. You mentioned, in fact, that you accompanied the son . . .

DR: The son of the man who died.

JS: The son of the man who died, to the trial.

DR: I was his driver.

JS: That must have been an interesting experience.

DR: It was, but certainly it was an unfortunate experience to start out with because of how we got to that particular situation. I was not permitted to speak to him about any component of the investigation or the trial. All of us who drove witnesses were given strict and very stern lectures from Alvin Gottlieb, who was infamous in those days about what we could and couldn't say. It was the first time I was in a federal court on behalf of the agency, although I said nothing. We were instructed to sit separately, don't look at anybody who worked for FDA, look straight ahead. I was scared to death. I thought that judge was going to pick me out and kick me out of the courtroom.

It was a defining moment for me. I really wanted to be a Compliance Officer after that; to pull everything together to bring the bad guys to trial.

At the time of Bon Vivant, Brooklyn District was located in the nastiest bunch of

warehouse buildings that could ever be in existence. One entire floor was filled with cans of Bon Vivant vichyssoise soup that we had collected. That situation caused the agency to focus on the safety of canned foods. Subsequently, there were all of the recalls of canned mushrooms throughout the Pennsylvania region, samples of which were added to the stash of vichyssoise. Cans exploded. Many of them were underprocessed. It was a horrible mess. All we did for months was recall-effectiveness follow-ups. It changed the way the Agency did business dramatically from a food perspective.

I worked unbelievable numbers of overtime hours. Some weeks I worked as many as 80 hours doing that kind of work.

If you looked at the group that came in in comparison to the folks that we get now as new hires, almost all were recent college graduates. Most of us didn't have families and were single, so when it came to working 80-hour weeks, nobody thought twice about it. We just did it. And it was expected. They had spent quite a bit of time explaining to us when we were hired that we were a 24/7 operation. If there was a national emergency involving products we regulated, we were expected to be there, and we were.