



Marjorie M. Merchant

President - 1976-77
Distinguished Fellow - 1984

Interview with Marjorie M. Merchant (Norman Silber)
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Prof. Silber: This is an interview with Professor Marjorie M. Merchant at Miss Merchant's home in Hadley, Massachusetts on August 11, 1984. The interviewer is Norman Silber.

Marjorie, could you tell me please, how it was that you first became involved with the consumer movement, and then how you became involved with ACCI specifically?

Prof. Merchant: My first involvement with the consumer movement really began when I came to the University of Massachusetts to be on the faculty in the area of consumer marketing for home economics and cooperative extension. When I arrived, there was a strong interest in Boston to form a Massachusetts Consumer Association. Fr. McEwen was the leader in trying to get an association off the ground. One of the people whom I worked for, Winifred Eastwood, had been asked by Fr. McEwen to come to a charter planning meeting to establish such an association and I, as a young faculty member, got assigned to go.

I arrived at Boston College—I believe this was close to 1957-58—and the next thing I knew I became a charter member of the Massachusetts Consumer Association. Concurrently with my arrival at Massachusetts was the fact that Frances Warne, Colston Warne's wife, had been on the faculty at the University of Massachusetts in the School of Home Economics and was teaching in the area of financial planning and personal money management. Frances Warne was very concerned that I would know how to proceed and have the right information, so she presented me with all of her notes and many of her resources and encouraged me to become scholarly in the financial area.

Both of these events were happening at the same time. Linked to that was Colston Warne, of course, being in Amherst. I asked Colston Warne to participate in the very first conference that I planned for consumers, designed more from the marketing aspect than from consumer education or consumer advocacy or anything else. After that, I could always know that, if any speech I was giving in the area had any publicity, I could expect Colston to be arriving. So, really it's kind of a combination of the atmosphere of Colston Warne, the Amherst setting, and Fr. McEwen in Boston.

From there, I went on to become a part of the Massachusetts Consumer Association, become a board member, become an officer and to plan programs. About this time, Ed McCormick in Massachusetts—then as governor—established the first Massachusetts Consumer Council in the executive branch of the government. I became interested in the Massachusetts Consumer Council.

As we moved beyond those late '50s and began to go into the '60s, I found myself always at the command of Colston Warne or Fr. McEwen, or someone in Boston all determined that I was going to become a consumer economist and advocate for the consumer. I was involved in hearings, for example in Boston with Sen. Paul Douglas and Truth-in-Lending—the early stages—and in the concern and push here in Massachusetts to get some very good solid consumer Truth-in-Lending.

NS: Can I go back a little bit? Tell me about your background.

MM: My background? How far back?

NS: You came from Maine?

MM: I'm a Maine native. I'm the only child of a former head of the Agricultural Economics Department at the University of Maine, and a strong-willed one at that. I started at Cornell

University.

I left Cornell after two years and decided I wanted to plan my own education, that no one else was going to plan it for me. I spent a year and a half planning my own curriculum.

I was very blessed. I had a father who was more concerned with my receiving an education than he was particularly in how I might go about getting it. He was very patient through this whole process. I had a marvelous year and a half. At the end of the year and a half, I realized my friends were all graduating because they had played the system.

I enrolled in the Department of Home Economics and Food and Nutrition at the University of Maine, and finished at the University of Maine with emphases in food and nutrition and agricultural economics.

I went from there into the school lunch program in Brewster, New York, because I felt that the world was not adequately preparing food for young people and encouraging nutrition education.

I left there to go to Penn State for a Master's in foods and biochemistry. Upon graduation, I went to Boston and became a senior nutritionist with the New England Dairy and Food Council.

Later, I moved to a federal extension project that was concerned with the six New England states, and became the consumer marketing specialist for the six New England states.

Leaving Boston, I accepted the position at the University of Massachusetts for one year's additional extension experience. I stayed here; I'm still here. Now I'm a full professor in consumer economics.

I went to Boston College and studied for several years in the Department of Economics with Fr. McEwen and his faculty.

NS: When was that?

MM: That was from 1964-68. I had a sabbatical and then I took some time off and I commuted the rest of the time.

NS: When did you start to teach at the University of Massachusetts?

MM: I came in 1957.

NS: What was the consumer movement like in 1957? Do you remember? Was there a movement?

MM: This was a period of revitalization in the interest of the consumer. It was when the Massachusetts Consumer Association was chartered and when the leading voices you would hear included those of Consumers Union, and the start of Ralph Nader.

We began to see individual cities with their own consumer groups, for example, the city of Boston. We had the Massachusetts Consumer Council developed under a governor, a surge in community action groups as a result of the War on Poverty.

The end of the '60s brought the White House Conference on Food, Nutrition and Health. I was involved, being appointed to two task forces—one to serve in the marketing sector and one in the consumer area. Needless to say, with Fr. McEwen and others, it was expected that I would certainly be on the consumer task force.

It was an exciting period. It was my first contact with Sidney Margolius and with Persia

Campbell. It was an electric time to be involved. This was the period in which we were talking about labeling, packaging and the concern with poverty and the feeling that the consumer movement was not addressing some of the philosophical issues in poverty.

At this time, I got my first research grant to work on concerns of the poor. It was directed toward trying to measure the cost of poverty in the food market—trying to measure if low income or economically-constrained families were suffering more within the marketplace because their opportunities for choice, or their opportunities for comparison and their educational understanding were limited.

NS: So this would have been during the Kennedy administration? You're saying, really, '60-'63?

MM: Yes, and beyond. The White House Conference was in 1969.

NS: Then it was later.

MM: One event I am reminded of were the hearings with Sen. Paul Douglas in Boston, Massachusetts on truth-in-lending. During the debate, we learned of Kennedy's assassination.

I've always felt I was very privileged to be part of the sixties. It was alive. I look back on how much we accomplished as well as how little we accomplished. Partly because we often did not approach things with reason, with well-defined direction, oftentimes emotions were the first line of defense or debate.

NS: What was the Massachusetts Consumer Association? Was that founded to be a grass roots consumer group?

MM: Philosophically, it was to be a lay organization directed toward the interest of the consumer in Massachusetts, and to take a strong stand in legislation and education. What has happened over time with the association I think is characteristic of organizations, and particularly in Massachusetts; you see, there are two Massachusetts. There is the one that's east of Worcester and the other that's west of Worcester.

I can remember finally getting the Massachusetts Consumer Association board to come as far as Auburn, Mass. for a meeting, and they never got over the fact that they had come to western Massachusetts. They weren't even in western Massachusetts; they were in central Massachusetts.

Thus, it became very much inbred. They constantly reelected the same directors, and when you do this in any organization, you don't grow. You stay with the limitations of that particular group of people. It needed to go beyond the Boston center, beyond the same people. It needed to branch out and get some new blood.

NS: You were new blood when you came, weren't you? You were one of the founders. Is that right?

MM: I was a charter member, yes.

NS: Did you think of yourself as a militant consumer advocate at that time?

MM: No, I did not, and I have publicly heard Fr. McEwen say, "Marjorie is not enough of an activist," and I am not. I am, hopefully, a scholar and an educator in the consumers' interest.

NS: What led you more toward the scholarly end of it rather than the activist end?

MM: I would probably say my whole personality.

NS: You said that nutrition was one of your specialties and, I suppose, you were concerned about poor people. Did you think that the consumer movement had a lot to offer to poor people?

MM: In retrospect, probably less than at the time. The consumer movement had two major functions as far as the economically restrained were concerned, and its primary one was to provide the mechanism that would protect them in the marketplace, which means we're talking legislation. But, secondly, hand in hand with it was the ability to help people use that which had been developed to protect them. For example, in our truth-in-lending legislation right here in Massachusetts, I can relate historically sitting in a Roxbury, Mass. low income community action group and listening to a panel of people involved in the development of truth-in-lending and getting it passed and pushed in Massachusetts.

During the entire presentation, no one mentioned what the legislation contained. It was almost like patting each other on the back, "We've made this," and I remember several community action leaders saying, "Well, this is great, now what is it they gave us?"

I think these are two things the consumer movement had to give to economically-restrained people. First, the legal rights, and secondly, an interpretation of how to use them. I feel that many times we did not do as good a job with the second part as we perhaps might have done.

NS: Was it concern for that which led you towards the cooperative extension approach to consumer education?

MM: No. I came from a federal extension project. I came here for one year's experience. The concept of educating the public was very appealing to me.

NS: I would like to know about the other people who started the Massachusetts Consumer Association because I think that our history hasn't had quite enough on just what these local groups were doing. Were the other members on the Massachusetts Consumer Association also—like you—coming from educated, professorial ranks? Or were there people who were from all walks of life?

MM: The board of directors, as I remember during my active phase with it, consisted of representation from the Massachusetts Consumer Council, which had been developed in the executive branch, cooperatives, an attorney very active in utility regulations. Also, several other attorneys whose link to it came through various forms of legislation, utilities and labor; teachers' union representative—one or two teachers that had been active in the Boston area.

It was primarily a Boston-based board of directors. I commuted. It became that, whatever Colston or Father thought I fitted into—it was almost a matter of, you had better do. They would be in touch with me.

NS: You were a soldier in their army?

MM: Well, I think I was in their army—I'm not sure how—but I was there.

NS: How did Colston and Father exert this enormous influence? What was it about them?

MM: With Colston, it was a tremendous respect for his accomplishments and scholarly approach to issues. With Fr. McEwen, I'm really not quite sure. I've ended up with him as one of my great loves and he always will be.

NS: I guess that they were looking for bodies, that's a part of it. They saw that you had the qualifications for leadership: you had the scholarly qualifications, and you had a strong interest in certain issues.

One of the things that people said about the consumer movement is that there are always chiefs; that the problem is finding enough Indians. Was that especially the case back then?

MM: I think so. As I've indicated, the same people, the same leaders continued to be involved, developing policy. I think, oftentimes, the consumer movement could address things in a legislative arena or in writings, but never really solved the problem of pulling together that body called "the consumer."

NS: How did you get people interested in organized consumer representation? I mean, how did you convince people, when you got students, how did you get people to identify with the need to champion the consumer?

MM: I think, probably, you had a period in the '60s and the early '70s in which, with students it was very easy, because they were rebelling against every system, and therefore they could be concerned about the consumer because they could say, "Alright, the consumer is put down by this system, that system."

In that period it was very easy. You went through a period after that which was not so easy. We're seeing a revival of consumer interest, but the revival is probably very much linked to career opportunities. We have a different student body today, a body that's looking at the marketplace for their own creativity.

I think we have an adult population interested in consumer issues. If you're looking now, I think we have it; for a while we lost it. When we got into a more prosperous time, people were not that concerned. Now, we can do a great deal in terms of workshops that are concerned with consumer issues.

NS: To go back a bit. You were converted from just merely being in marketing and nutrition to becoming a consumer leader by Fr. McEwen and Colston?

MM: I probably wouldn't classify myself as a consumer leader.

NS: Well then, what *would* you say about somebody who's been in all these positions and held all these roles?

MM: Just happened to be in the wrong place at the right time. [laughter]

NS: Well, let's go back to ACCI, then. When did you first start going to ACCI meetings?

MM: I really hate to have this in the history, but I had only heard of an organization called American Council on Consumer Information at that time. I had sent for one or two publications, but it was never really very significant in my mind.

Dr. Tom Brooks, who was the head of the department of family and consumer economics at the University of Connecticut, had contacted me and asked if I would be interested in a position. I went down to see about the position, at which time it came out that I was in the middle of a research project. He offered me the position. I turned the position down. He was program chairman in 1969, for the American Council on Consumer Information and asked if I would give a paper. The meeting was to be in Greeley, Colorado, and I and I agreed to go. I was not a member.

In those days, there were no concurrent sessions, every speaker met the entire group. I went with Jean Judge, who was my counterpart at Rutgers and was a member. I flew with her.

This was the longest air flight I had ever had, and I was petrified, and I remember that more

vividly than I remember anything else. I arrived on the campus. Now I can't remember whether it was Colorado State or Colorado University.

NS: University of Northern Colorado.

MM: Our host was Ray Heimerl. A man dressed in the most modern of outfits possible.

The next morning at breakfast, Jean introduced me to a white-haired man whom I recognized as the author of books I had read—Arch Troelstrup—and he asked us to join him for breakfast. I remember saying to him, "I'm not going to give my speech if you see who's in that room."

Many of them were people that I admired. There was Gwen Bymers from Cornell, Dick Morse, people whose names I knew. Fr. McEwen was there. I said, "I'm not going to do it." This kind gentleman kept saying to me, "Remember, you know more than they do." I gave the speech, and apparently was successful

NS: What was it about?

MM: It was "The Price of Poverty in the Marketplace for Low Income," and it was a discussion of the various markets that were available to them and the role of economic bondage for many people in that situation.

I remember looking up Fr. McEwen and asking him what he thought of it, and Fr. McEwen very nicely informed me that he hadn't heard it because he wanted to hear some news that was on the TV, so he had gone back to his room.

Later, I received a letter from Arch Troelstrup written in his own hand complimenting me on the speech, and saying, "I look forward to you becoming a member and a leader and, someday I'll vote for you for president." When I did become president, I wrote and reminded him that I knew I had one vote.

NS: What a lovely story. So the very first meeting led Arch to think very highly of you. What did you think of the group?

MM: I probably was quite moved by the fact that the people like Gwen Bymers thought my research was good and the right words were said. I did not join ACCI right away. I then discovered—and this I think was around 1972—I was elected to the board of directors. Now, bear in mind I am still not a member. When I got to the first board meeting and said, "Shouldn't I be a member?" I quickly paid my dues and became a member.

That first board meeting was in Dallas, Texas, and the president was Lillian Mohr. That's when I met Lillian and Carole Vickers and I remember at the board meeting there was great discussion because Fred Waddell had just accepted a position that had a business association. The discussion was that one could not have on the board of directors of the American Council on Consumer Interests, anyone with a business association, and therefore Fred Waddell resigned.

NS: Do you remember what you thought of all this?

MM: I know I was very impressed with the stand for purity, the ability of an organization to say, "Alright, what we say we are, we will be, and our actions will support this." To me, at that time, this was a rare circumstance so it did impress me.

NS: How did the consumer movement and business groups interact in those days?

MM: My recollections would be that, for a period of years, there was little business representation and the representation was that of people who were committed equally to the rights of consumers and to what consumer information should be. It was after that, and really tied in some ways to actions within the American Home Economics Association and the Home Economics in Business groups.

There were great discussions in AHEA and in the HEIB group because of the influence of business on the HEIB group—in other words, corporations, etc., that could take their top home economist and either openly or subtly suggest an alliance. This concern in AHEA at that point began to make ACCI begin to look at this issue. To protect their integrity and the respect of what they supported, they could not be viewed as being influenced by business interests either indirectly or directly.

At the same time, there was a growth in the membership among representatives from various industries, i.e. insurance companies. I think that some of the people who probably had the greatest fear at that time were Ray Price, Dick Morse, Arch—some of the "old- " who could not be bought by anyone or anything.

They feared ACCI would lose its integrity and its ability to stand up and really speak out on something if they should, for example, have a predominance of business coming in. Now during this period, business could vote. There was no such thing as a business membership, non-voting membership vs. a regular membership with voting privileges.

NS: Did ACCI speak out on things in those days?

MM: It did, through resolutions, statements of support of legislation, but it tried—and it still does today—to have its statements based on truth. Its reputation for integrity would demand that it be heard, and this is when we came to the real issue of business members voting.

NS: Before your presidency, did you go through the step-succession that many of the ACCI presidents went through—of being program chair, vice president, then president?

MM: I went from being a director to program chairman, from program chairman to vice president. The year I was vice president, Ed Metzen resigned as executive director. Arch Troelstrup and Gordon Bivens and a third person were the nominating committee that year. They felt that in tribute to Ed and his service, he should be nominated to serve as president. This meant that the sequence of my being nominated to serve as president would need to change.

Gordon and Arch knew that I would support Ed's nomination. They asked if I would be willing to be nominated as vice president for a second year. Ed and I were elected respectively; thus I served two years as vice president.

As we go along later in history, you will realize I served three years as past president!

NS: Does the president do anything? I mean, other than sit on the board?

MM: The vice president traditionally was to be the program chairman. In earlier years, this is how it worked. Then, a member became program chairman who was not the vice president, so the sequence ceased to be. The vice presidency during that period was not very meaningful in and of itself. The vice president was a director and served on the board. It had the responsibility with the president and past president to select the Colston Warne lecturer. I served as vice president with Tom Garman; I served with Ed Metzen as vice president.

NS: Did Ed's resignation make a difference in the way the board of directors functioned?

MM: I would say no.

NS: You said you were on the board for several years. In 1972, you were elected to the board and so there were about three or four years there where you were just a board member. What was that like?

MM: I went off one year.

NS: You did?

MM: Yes, and was reelected back on.

NS: You said you had been off for a year and then you came back and there were some good people on the board.

MM: Board members were fine professionals to work with, and I would say a good cross section in relationship to the consumer field, both philosophically and in reference to contributions toward the field.

NS: This was in the early '70s. This was probably the heyday of the excitement in the consumer movement in terms of legislation and political activity. Ralph Nader was terribly popular in those days. Was ACCI sort of caught up in this excitement?

MM: I think so, particularly many of us as individuals.

The federal administration seemed to be more willing to listen, and there seemed to be more strength in the consumer movement during that period. There was an excitement, there's no question about it. Now, whether that excitement was part of being younger than I am now and being with people whom I admired and being accepted by them—such as Dick Morse, Stewart Lee and Ray Price. I view the excitement partly from that standpoint, as well as from our accomplishments in providing young professionals in the country— especially through conferences—with an opportunity to make a contribution as well as to learn.

NS: Two questions. Was your department at the University of Massachusetts growing during that period? Was this a period of expansion in the college consumer departments?

MM: I'm trying to think, and I may be a little bit wrong on the date. It was during the deanship of Bruce Morris, who was an economist and had been the head of the economics department at the University of Massachusetts, that he and I established a curriculum in consumer economics. I believe that this was early '70s. Up to that point, consumer economics had not been a specific option or department. In this period, the School of Home Economics at the University of Massachusetts became a division with no departments, rather with specific program options of study.

NS: So you created a consumer economics option.

MM: Yes. Dr. Aurelia Toyer Miller, who was an ACCI member and who had been assistant to Persia Campbell when she was Gov. Harriman's consumer person in New York, was hired to teach in the consumer economics option. I continued to teach also as part of my position.

NS: So, in some ways, there are some parallel threads going on here. Your being on the board of ACCI—was that perceived as a very scholarly organization by the other people in your department, or did they see it as one of these consumer groups that was out to change the world or something like that?

MM: My reaction to that question is that they didn't see it in any perspective. You need to

realize that during this whole period where the School of Home Economics became a division, there was concern for survival among individuals and people in various fields. For a long period of time, I was the only consumer person until Dr. Miller came. She has since retired. There is no body of consumer economists and consumer educators with whom to relate.

NS: Is it pretty much that way around the country, though? I mean, with the exception of a few major programs?

MM: The major institutions have your large consumer departments like Ohio State, Missouri, Minnesota, Wisconsin, Cornell, California and other places, but in small home economics departments—other than linkages with economics, business, political science—you may be very much alone.

NS: Then ACCI must have filled for you a function throughout this period as your link with other consumer professionals.

MM: Definitely. There is no question about it.

NS: Were there home economists who were anti-consumer, would you say?

MM: No, you mean in terms of Massachusetts?

NS: Well, you hear sometimes about what you would call resistance to consumer economics.

MM: The only time you might see it would be if you were with a very active home economics professional in business whose whole orientation was business, especially if that business has as its own philosophy, an anti-consumer attitude.

I can recall, for example—this was not in ACCI, it was in the American Home Economics Association as a participant in their metric study. I did a survey of home economists in various leading businesses in the country. One of them is a close personal friend, and I got back pages of what it would cost her industry if I was going to support the country going metric. I realized then, that I was hearing from the industry as well as the individual.

NS: So, to take this all back to ACCI. In this period you're talking about, where there was concern about that business viewpoint taking over in ACCI, you say these people were joining in large numbers?

MM: There was the fear of having business/industry take over and be able to control some of the organization's activities and stands as the home economists in business had been able to do with AHEA.

NS: So all this came to a head when you were president?

MM: It came to a head in 1976. We did two things on the program. We had a panel of those who were for business members having a voting membership and those who were not. I can remember Carole Vickers, Scott Maynes representing different views. It was decided, during this period, that I would chair every one of these discussions. I was vice president and I was going to come in as president by the end of the conference.

We had meetings that went on at length. Even the business meeting went beyond the hour and reconvened in another room, because we had lost the right to keep the room we were in. Great turmoil. Gwen Bymers was especially upset. Jean Judge was upset and other people that had been long-term members of ACCI.

Gwen Bymers and I flew from Colorado to Chicago in the same plane, side by side. During that

flight, Gwen Bymers wrote a letter to the board of directors condemning what had passed, which was, business would become nonvoting members. Jean Judge sent me a letter within ten days, resigning from ACCI with reference to how could I have supported or permitted this to happen. I supported the fact that business should not be a voting member, based on the need to protect and assure the integrity and the historical respect for the purity of ACCI, which was one of its greatest strengths.

NS: What were the others saying? What was Gwen saying?

MM: Gwen and Jean felt that to do this was damaging because business should be part of it; that our opportunity to educate business would be far greater with business among us, and that the business members we had were committed professionals in relation to consumer interests.

NS: Gwen was not a business person herself?

MM: No.

NS: Was Jean Judge?

MM: Jean Judge had gone into business as a consultant with her own firm. Gwen is very active with business contacts professionally.

NS: How did the business people feel about this?

MM: The majority of them—for example, Dave Schoenfield—felt that it was, in the long run, a wise move and that in no way did they feel left out because they did not have a vote. I am confident that some of the insurance representatives and some of the credit organizations and so forth, did not feel as positively toward the decision.

NS: They saw it as an anti-business move?

MM: Right. It's interesting, though. There's a shift now in the last few years of accepting monies from foundations that are linked to business.

NS: I gather Colston was probably very happy that the step had been taken?

MM: Right. Ray Price, Arch Troelstrup, Dick Morse, Stewart Lee, Fr. McEwen, and many other long time ACCI leaders were.

NS: But the organization was still a non-profit organization. It was still unable to take political positions. Did some people think that ACCI should be taking more political positions than it was taking?

MM: Yes, there has always been that feeling. There is a group that feels that they definitely should be taking more political stands.

MM: Were you one of those people?

MM: No. I would have hoped—and still hope—that our voice in Washington would be more powerful, but then how can you become more powerful with your voice if you're not willing to take stronger political stands? I haven't been able to find the right balance.

NS: The fact that they were no longer going to take business votes didn't really signal—in your view—a change, I gather. They weren't at the same time saying they were going to be more aggressive in furthering political consumer issues or something of that sort?

MM: No. In all honesty, it was precipitated by what had happened at AHEA and the potential growth in business-oriented members. That brought it to a head.

NS: What else did you do while you were president?

MM: What did I do while I was president?

NS: Yes.

MM: I probably did more before I was president than I ever did when I was president because we had begun to settle. We had settled all of this business issue, you see, as I assumed office. I would say probably it was almost like a lull before our next storm, which was relocation.

NS: Did Helen Goetz follow you? How did Helen get chosen to be vice president?

MM: She was elected.

NS: By the membership?

MM: Yes.

NS: Had there been a change to a membership ballot by then?

MM: No. She was elected without a membership ballot. She was elected from the floor, nominated at the conference.

NS: She wasn't nominated in advance by the board, she was nominated from the floor?

MM: She was presented to membership by the nominating committee.

NS: So the nominating committee had chosen her?

MM: Yes.

NS: And that was a committee that the board appointed?

MM: Right.

NS: Were you on the nominating committee?

MM: No. I was president; she was my vice president. Then, when she became president, I became past president.

NS: I see. So you don't have any insight to offer as to how she was nominated in the first place?

MM: No, I have no idea. That would be totally divorced from the board. The nominating committee made the evaluation.

NS: What were the usual criteria for choosing somebody?

MM: The usual criteria were a known leader in the consumer field, and an active professional not only in ACCI but in other consumer organizations.

NS: Did she fit those requirements?

MM: To be perfectly honest, I never had known Helen Goetz until she came on the board of directors. I had heard the name and believe I met her at some conferences, but had never really known her.

NS: The year in which you were president and she was vice president, you thought she was serving as vice presidents usually serve, I gather.

MM: I was aware she wanted me to initiate changes.

NS: While you were president—the year you were president—how did the day-to-day function of the organization go on? Were you in touch with Ed every day, or every week?

MM: Karen Stein would have been the executive director when I was president.

NS: Karen Stein, excuse me.

MM: When I first was on the board, it was an executive secretary, and the board discussed and looked at the role of that particular person believing they should be given enough latitude to permit them to do what an executive director should do. Therefore, the title was changed to executive director.

Karen Stein and I were very much in touch by telephone. We had a board meeting in the middle of the year before the conference. This permitted the board to come together and provided an opportunity to have issues and concerns discussed. We would meet three days. At that time, we were doing it in Chicago at one of the airport motels.

NS: So the year that you were president, you were on the phone with Karen quite a bit?

MM: Yes, and by letter. One thing I did while I was president—because I felt that sometimes board members did not know—I tried to do every so often an "update memorandum" to the board reporting what Karen and I might have done. That year, we wrote every presidential candidate and asked for their stand in relationship to consumers, and got back, of course, what their top aides or their underlings were writing anyway. Any shift in funding or anything that looked like it was a major situation was reported to the board through these "updates."

NS: Did your visibility change when you became president? Were you invited down to Washington a lot more now as president of ACCI?

MM: No.

NS: Wasn't it that kind of a post? Wasn't it something that brought you into public view?

MM: No. It didn't at all, really.

NS: Just among the people in the profession.

MM: Professionally, yes. Oh, you would often get a letter asking, can ACCI, does ACCI want to support this issue, and that type of thing.

I never saw it as doing anything special for me relative to being more in the limelight. My association with the organization did more for me as an individual consumer economist with other professionals because I didn't have that in my own setting in Massachusetts.

ACCI leaders became the mentors, the sounding boards, the discussants on an issue, because I did not have it in my position. However, by the time I was ACCI president, I was a recognized professional in the field. I already was a full professor; I'd been involved in state and national

consumer affairs. Being president was like having the opportunity to culminate the years of involvement with the organization.

NS: I would guess that's true pretty much of everybody who's been president. Nobody has run for senator or anything like that, or for Congress or anything of that sort. It's not that sort of a post. Did you feel that the executive secretary's office was over-burdened or overworked, or needed to be changed? Were there problems of that sort?

MM: I didn't have any of those feelings. I was very much aware that there was a feeling among some groups within the organization that other leaders had too much power. It's like any other organization—it depends on which group you feel you belong to as to what you think the other ones are doing. If you are among the leaders, you feel a sense of security; you do know what's going on. If you're not among the leaders and you're ambitious to be among the leaders, then you oftentimes can find reasons real or unreal that the leaders are too powerful, too narrow, too bigoted, etc. I think that has been true with ACCI.

NS: While you were president, what groups did you see inside the organization; what kinds of competing elements who were all looking to become leaders?

MM: I think I could see some young, new professionals who saw this as a career advancement, and you can't hold that against anyone.

NS: I've asked this question to many people and I get different answers: What constituencies has ACCI traditionally had, and did it have while you were president? What kinds of groups did you think needed to be balanced and represented? If you were having a panel where you had to have somebody from this group or that group on it, was there some sort of representation that you had to have on the board or anything like that?

MM: I think, in the early years there was the concern that there were not enough women, and I'm sure that I was part of that concern.

NS: You were one of those concerned about this?

MM: Yes. I felt that we needed to develop more consumer leadership among women. It's interesting; if you look back on the history of the consumer movement there are some key women in it, but the majority have been men. Now whether that is because of the type of training, whereas many of the men involved would be coming from the law, from business, education fields, and economics, we did not have that many women in those fields, especially in earlier years. We're just beginning to see more women going into the field of economics and we still are a minority among economists. That bothered me at the beginning of ACCI.

Also, in the last few years, I have thought there were too many women in relationship to men on the board, so I've really done a full circle on that. I have felt, sometimes, that the membership, traditionally from higher education—ACCI was founded by those from universities and colleges—attracted the university prototype.

I had hoped and tried very hard to encourage more involvement from extension, as extension teaching is directed toward the public. I think that in early years, I have looked at a board and seen all of the heads of departments and full professors sitting on the board and sometimes wondered if they could make contact with that "real world."

NS: I can understand that that would be a problem. Have you thought about ways of handling it?

MM: I think it has shifted by nature into a more diversified membership, the high school teacher being represented and being active. I think we have seen extension members increase. I

think one of the tributes to cooperative extension in this country is that ACCI has had two presidents out of extension, and has not had that many female presidents in total. I probably should add for the record, two of its leading presidents. [laughter]

NS: This is a broader question: Do you think that the women's movement and the consumer movement have gone hand-in-hand in some ways in the 1970s?

MM: The whole field of civil rights and equal opportunity, I think, is more closely allied to the consumer movement than just the women's movement. That's my feeling. I think there's no question but there are common issues.

NS: Did you ever try and build an alliance between the consumer movement and some of these other movements, or do you know if anybody made efforts to do that?

MM: There has been more interest recently, and one of the themes of one of the more recent conferences was the "Consumer Movement in Relationship to Other Social Movements." There is an attempt now to address this and to see where the roads are parallel, where the issues are common, and what is unique to each movement.

NS: Back in the mid-'70s, it wasn't; you were going in your own direction.

MM: And coming off the momentum, I think, of the '60s and early '70s of the consumer movement.

NS: You were going to discuss the relocation controversy. What happened there?

MM: Comments regarding the Missouri facility as being not appropriate for ACCI were brought to the board. President and several board members felt we needed to be looking at other parts of the country; other facilities that might be more appropriate, more professionally designed and looking; and where there might be more monies that could be utilized. Under the presidency of Helen Goetz, a site location group was named. They presented all the documents prepared by those institutions interested in having ACCI and site descriptions to the board.

It was a well-prepared and convincing argument to move ACCI headquarters. When the relocation plans came before the membership of the 1977 conference, it became clear that such a move was not appropriate, nor wanted by a large majority. The proposal to move was defeated by the membership.

Helen Goetz resigned from the board, declining to serve in the directorship assigned to the immediate past president. The board asked me to return and serve again as past president. I spent the next year as a peacemaker, trying hard to help heal wounds. It was a very bitter and emotional experience for those directly involved.

The following year, Jean Bowers was reelected for another term as president, at which point the board voted again and requested I come back as past president. Thus, in the history of ACCI, I was the first three-year past president.

NS: What lessons are there from this relocation controversy? What does it tell you about ACCI?

MM: It tells me clearly that the board of directors needs to be certain that bylaws do not place authority and power in the hands of a few, without attention to the rights of total membership. You see, the bylaws as they stood during the issue of relocation, permitted the president to relocate headquarters with majority vote of the board.

The following year, I was asked to rewrite the bylaws. Now there is no way such an action or decision can take place without total membership having a vote on such action.

NS: This raises a really interesting question about careerism. Do you think there is a big difference between the original founding group and the younger people who entered ACCI in the '70s in terms of this careerism?

MM: If you would make the comparison between the end of the '70s and the first of the '80s and the original founders, yes; significant.

NS: Could you explain that?

MM: The original founders lived in a period in which there was a sense of purity in the academic community and they were all academicians. There was the belief that the attributes of truth, knowledge, commitment, and concern could accomplish change for the betterment of man. There was not the competitiveness within our economy environment, within university communities, and within the community as a whole. Today, the academic community has become one of the most competitive marketplaces in this country. This tremendous push to survive and succeed has put a very different philosophy into play. You can see a change in the direction of the membership and emphasis on research. Now that's just my feeling. I don't know if you're picking that up with anybody else or not.

NS: Do you think the *Journal* had anything to do with that? The development of the *Journal of Consumer Affairs*?

MM: I think the development of the *Journal* gave considerably more prestige to the organization. No question. Putting out a refereed journal.

NS: Do you think, though, that that congeniality and the collegiality is something that was given up as the organization had to become more professional and more like every other organization in the academic community?

MM: You're bound to have lost some. This period in history would affect such a shift.

NS: This leads back to the question of how the goals have changed. You've talked about how the feelings changed, but do you think that the real objectives of the organization changed along with that feeling?

MM: I would say, no. I think they have been bent, twisted, enlarged; they're more realistic in many ways. Taking Shell Foundation monies is far more realistic for 1984 than if we stuck with the philosophy that we don't take monies from any group linked to business/industry.

NS: How did the Shell grant happen?

MM: I think with the contacts of the executive director. We've been approached before.

NS: Mel Zelenak?

MM: Yes. We've been approached before in the past, and at one point, we co-sponsored with J.C. Penney the Penney Forum Conference. Well! That almost broke the membership in half.

NS: Why was it that this grant was accepted when there was so much concern about earlier grants?

MM: I believe it's a change in leadership and a change toward a more realistic philosophy—that in this day and age, one has to accept outside monies. The big question is, can you divorce the educational foundation from the business and accept the monetary support and not have any strings attached to it? I think ACCI is still looking at it this way. What's happening is, they're

beginning to realize one can't do without money. There are no strings attached to this Shell Foundation money.

NS: Was that the case with the J.C. Penney Forum?

MM: It was, but that took place earlier in ACCI's history. Not everyone was fully aware that we were going to co-sponsor with J.C. Penney, and this did disturb some people. If you look at the members who are disturbed, you are beginning then to draw the line between the founding members, the early group, the purists and the next coming and then the third wave, so to speak, where economic realism has to be part of operating the organization.

I believe this is what we're seeing because the only comments I really have heard against the Shell Foundation monies have come from long-time members who felt that we must never be associated with funding from profit-making industries.

NS: What do you think the motives were of Shell giving this money?

MM: Their tax situation. The first reason in most instances is a write-off. It was given to ACCI to do with what they wished. They made the decision to use the bulk of it for the oral history.

NS: I've heard some of the people who were critics say, "Well, this is a foot in the door. They can get their foot in the door here, and the next thing you know, they'll be giving money for something but there will be a condition or there will be a warning. You know, you'll have to do it for this or that condition. Or maybe they're just doing it for good relations, or for something like that."

MM: Granted, it looks good on your list of contributions that you've listed the American Council of Consumer Interests, you've listed the American Cancer Society, etc. Your tax write-off looks pure.

I don't think it's a foot in the door as long as the board and the organization keeps the philosophy that monies must come from foundations that have not been linked to controversial products and unfair market practices, and that they are lump sums to be used at the discretion of the board. When ACCI loses that discretion, then you stand this chance of the foot in the door.

NS: Does it affect the kind of people who joined the group, knowing that this is a group that takes grants?

MM: I don't know. I think it's too early to say, Shell Foundation monies are the first monies, I believe.

NS: Would Ralph Nader join a group that takes money from the Shell Foundation?

MM: Probably not, but then Ralph Nader also has his own network that secures funds.

NS: Is the kind of young person who's entering ACCI today different from the person you were when you went to ACCI in 1969?

MM: Yes. When I entered ACCI, there was not the competitive push for survival. Your tenure wasn't based on issues of capping number, receiving tenure in a department, and how many refereed journals you had. It was based on your total academic program.

NS: You said that the goals of this organization are more realistic today, in some sense. Does that mean that, in some ways, the people who joined the group don't think of themselves as changing the world, or going out and really radically altering the way things get done today in

the business world or in the consumer world?

MM: I think they're more realistic in the knowledge that they may be able to put a few drops on a stone, but they will not be able to turn the stone over by themselves.

NS: I'd like to ask you now about some people whom you've come to know in the movement and on the board of the organization. I wonder if you could tell me some of the most memorable times that you remember about some of the people whom you've worked with, particularly those on the board of directors that you served with.

Jean Bowers—

MM: Jean Bowers has become a very good friend. I remember when she came on the board and it was my first real knowledge of her. I knew some of her students and some of the work they had done. She has a most delightful sense of humor. She is very able to pull issues all together and come out with solutions in a way that is unabrasive.

NS: Carole Makela—

MM: A reserved person. I don't know Carole as well. She is well known in the home economics field and has been active in AHEA.

NS: Herbert Jelley—

MM: An excellent person and a tireless worker. He's very interested in media and doing things for consumer education through the media.

NS: Carl Hall—

MM: Carl Hall was on the site committee for relocation of ACCI. He now has a consumer education center and Bill Johnson is with him.

NS: Robert Herrmann—

MM: Robert Herrmann is a favorite. It's unwise to have favorites, isn't it? He leans somewhat towards the purist in the organization.

NS: This is fun. Bill Fasse—

MM: Bill Fasse. We tried very hard to get him at Massachusetts; didn't have the right thing for him. Bill Fasse is an idealist. He is a person who is for the rights of human beings, especially young people and students. He did more for the students involved with ACCI before he ever came on the board. And when he came on the board, he was a great spokesman for students to have a real part in the organization.

NS: Tom Brooks—

MM: Tom Brooks, I guess when he was president, the board had many a good time!

NS: Carole Vickers—

MM: The best of peacemakers I have ever seen in any organization. A very loveable, warm and extremely articulate woman, and her role has often been that of a peacemaker.

NS: Scott Maynes—

MM: Scott Maynes is pro-business in many ways, self assured and smart. If he was in a room with three ideas and agreed with one, he would not understand how there could possibly be two others.

with three ideas and agreed with one, he would not understand how there could possibly be two others.

NS: Mel Zelenak—

MM: Mel Zelenak was an excellent executive director. Articulate and poised, he really was ideal for the organization. He grew with the organization himself professionally.

NS: Louise Young—

MM: Louise Young, one of my mentors. She started by involving me in all sorts of activities in the American Home Economics Association. She's one professional that I truly love. She is a tremendous person, outstanding extension professional and a smart woman.

NS: Dick Morse—

MM: Dick Morse is one of the most committed people in the consumer field, particularly in the areas of credit, savings and banking; and one of the most knowledgeable. A man who has spent his entire life concerned with truth-in-lending and now, for the last few years, truth-in-savings. A scholarly person, leans toward the early founders in philosophy. Of course, he is one really, in many ways, but every so often he will surprise you by voting the other side.

NS: Stewart Lee—

MM: A committed consumer person, committed to the American Council on Consumer Interests. A purist and a delightful, warm person.

NS: Gordon Bivens—

MM: If Gordon ever had a job and it wasn't in Iowa, I would have loved to have worked under him. He, again, is a person I've known not only through ACCI but other organizations. He is gentle, brilliant and a warm, true person. He is a person for whom truth and integrity are very much a part of his life.

NS: Tom Garman—

MM: Tom Garman. He's one of a kind. You never knew which side he was on and when I served with him, he wrote me a letter which read, "Thank you for your contributions; most of the time you did very well." It was a letter I could never put in my personnel file because everybody would want to know what did I do the rest of the time!

NS: Suzanne Matsen—

MM: She was just there, I believe, for one year, and I don't know Sue.

NS: Was Florence Rice anybody you got to know?

MM: I know Florence Rice as a member and having a chance to visit with her, etc.

NS: We have talked about many of the others. As you look back on this group of people, what has ACCI meant to you personally and what have these people meant to you?

MM: The organization has been for me an opportunity to be with outstanding professionals in the consumer field. I learned and have always learned a great deal from a number of them. Many of them—starting from 1969 on—I call mentors, and a number I call special friends.

NS: Thank you very much for the opportunity to conduct this interview and the entire series for
ACCI.

MM: Thank you.