



Marguerite C. Burk

Charter Member
Newsletter Editor - 1953
President - 1961-62
Distinguished Fellow - 1978

Interview with Marguerite Burk (Norman Silber)
Washington, DC
July 14, 1983

Prof. Silber: This is an interview with Marguerite Burk. The interview is taking place on July 14, 1983 in Washington, DC. The interviewer is Norman Silber.

Ms. Burk, what were you saying about your recent activities?

Prof. Burk: I was interested and active in ACCI many years ago. Even then, I'd been much more concerned with research and not really with consumer education. My research interests have to do with economic analysis of phases in food consumption and some other aspects of family living and with variations.

Within the last seven or eight years, I've been mostly concerned with the relationships of such changes to economic development in developing countries and been concerned with the international side of it much more. Therefore, I haven't paid much attention to ACCI. I read rather casually, the material that comes out but I don't feel that I have much to contribute and so I just don't bother. I was kind of an unusual person, occupation-wise, in the very early years of ACCI because I was a researcher in the government and I believe I was the only government employee in the founding group. When one is a government employee, one doesn't go all out with propagandizing even in the least degree, particularly when I worked in a research agency.

NS: What was that agency?

MB: I was in the Bureau of Agricultural Economics at that point and I was there until 1961, when I did go into the education field at the University of Minnesota. I was there for eight years. I was there, professor of agriculture economics and home economics; at the time I was president. I forget which year that was exactly.

NS: 1961-1962.

MB: At that point, I was somewhat more active. Even then, I was primarily concerned with preparing people for research dealing with consumer problems, but in those days, much more at the macro level than at the micro level.

NS: How was it that you first became involved with what was then CCI?

MB: I was one of the founders. I had university friends who were in the group, so they invited me to participate. That's how I got involved.

NS: Do you remember who invited you?

MB: I knew Helen Canoyer, Persia Campbell, Margaret Reid, and so on. I knew a lot of those people in the early days.

NS: What did you all have in common at that time?

MB: We were all interested in consumer problems more or less, but I was much more at the macro level. Some of these people—for example, Helen Canoyer—I had known at the university. I think she was in ACCI. She taught consumer economics at Minnesota. I didn't take any courses with her but I was a friend of hers at that point when I was back there finishing my graduate degree.

NS: Here is a list of the charter members.

MB: Let's see who else. Of course I knew Willard. I knew him from ag economics and I got to know many of these other people when I was in the organization. I met most of them through participation in the organization, although I had known Hazel Kyrk through friends in the early years. That is pretty much my connection with the group.

As I said, I was unusual because I was in the government; I was a researcher. Then, after my stay at Minnesota, I came back into the government, but in a different part. I was then in what people used to call home economics, but it was the consumer part of what was the Agricultural Research Service. It's now something with a different name—Consumer Research Center, or something of that sort. I was concerned primarily with food and for 25 years at least at macro level, primarily. Even when I was heading up the food consumption research work there in that center, I was still primarily macro but some micro, mainly developing data that were necessary. That was always my concern.

What kinds of data do we need to have? Because I had something of an agricultural economics background, I was concerned with food. That's where my interest has been in more recent years, with food consumption and nutrition in relation to development.

Accomplishments of ACCI: I think our original objective which has been carried out very well, was having an organization force that would encourage communication. I think the organization has done a good job of that and it's been respected without becoming propagandistic. It has become respected as a source of information and as a place of exchange of information, so I think it has done well there.

NS: Is that what you felt it needed at the beginning?

MB: Absolutely. We lacked communication in those days. It was all word of mouth and knowing somebody. There was no good way of communicating. Our meetings were exciting because we all had news to tell each other. I think that was terribly important.

I can't tell you about when the organization was most exciting or less exciting. I know it was fun and exciting in those early years. I attended a good deal of the time. I went several times in the '50s and '60s, but I did not go in the '70s. I was much too preoccupied with my research and I had so little in common at that point. I was concerned with collecting data, planning the nationwide surveys and so on.

Professional grass roots: I think ACCI has been much more of a professional group and that's what we planned it for. We were all professionals that set it up. I don't know but what, in some places, there may have been some people who had interests in some local grass roots organization efforts. You've heard about them. I've never been that much interested in that kind of thing.

NS: When it was set up in your mind, was it going to be mainly devoted to attracting professionals in consumer economics?

MB: Yes, I think it was, in consumer economics and consumer education. That was the big gap and we felt that you couldn't go very far in meaningful grass roots efforts without a body of information, a body of research to use. We were pushing for that and practically all of us were either educators or economists, in the early years of it.

Impact on consumer education: I would think that it had significant impact, but I don't know because I'm not in the field now. ACCI has not sponsored research, as I recall, but a number of people were in research. The people who were active in it, like Persia Campbell and others, were pushing for research. They recognized the need for research. Certainly Hazel Kyrk did.

NS: Were they your closest friends in the organization?

MB: Persia, of course. Helen Canoyer was a close friend of mine. People came and went. Arch and I were friends. Some of the early executive secretaries I knew very well because in the early years, I was chairman of the publications committee and had a lot to do with the executive secretaries and with others in trying to get these small publications, of which I brought you copies, out to be used, and I think they were used. I didn't control the sales of them or anything like that but I think substantial numbers went out.

NS: This goes back to that question of grass roots and profession. Did you become concerned about publishing these pamphlets because they would educate ultimate consumers, or because they would help the professionals in the field?

MB: It was particularly to help the professionals and then to give them the materials to work with others. They are not really written very much for the layman; they are semi-professional. For the layman, you see, we were well aware of what the Federal Extension Service was doing and others so we didn't try to replicate the things that they were doing.

Organizations and resolutions consumer issues: I don't know about their resolutions. I know that in the years that I was active, we were particularly eager to get consumer representation in the federal government as close to the President and the White House as possible. Persia was the consumer counsel in New York and she helped sponsor the CCI and arouse consumer excitement in the early '60s when the first consumer advisor to the President was appointed. Those were exciting years.

NS: Do you remember what kinds of resolutions you might have been interested in having the organization take?

MB: No, I don't remember.

NS: Has any person really controlled the organization at any time?

MB: Not that I know of.

NS: Would you say that it was primarily academics from the beginning?

MB: Certainly in the early years there were primarily academics. There were a couple of times, I recall, when we were concerned lest the organization get into the control of business-oriented groups. We did some talking about it and there were some connections, like Eugene Beem was active in the stamp deal. I was chairman of publications and we really had a job of keeping that kind of trading stamp thing out. In no way could we sponsor that. It was a delicate issue at that time.

NS: I spoke to Mr. Beem and wondered if you could tell me what happened precisely, because I'm not clear about what transpired.

MB: I cannot tell you anything precisely at this point. He was executive secretary in the early years and then he got a job with Sperry & Hutchinson, the big stamp organization. We viewed this as a conflict of interest. We encouraged him to get out and certainly to step down from being executive secretary and he was making a lot more money in that job than he did as executive secretary and as a teacher. He prepared a publication that he wanted us to sponsor and we refused. I absolutely refused. There were others who felt as strongly as I, and I'm quite sure we never sponsored one.

NS: I don't have many papers that I have been able to find, but I found the *Proceedings* of the third conference that was at the Melbourne Hotel in St. Louis in April of 1957. At that conference, Eugene Beem published in the *Proceedings*, a summary of a pamphlet, "Consumers

Look at Trading Stamps." I think I'm fairly paraphrasing it when I say that the findings are that the prohibition of trading stamps would not lead to lower prices for consumers.

MB: That's a lot of baloney! He was always trying to do something like that. That would probably be the only time we let him get by, because we certainly refused, as I recall, to publish it. I was publications chairman for a number of years.

NS: Why was that threatening to the organization?

MB: Because we thought it was so biased and we did not want this bias. We had some discussion about whether we would have a pro and con publication. Maybe we did; I don't remember. We certainly discussed it—let him do the pro and let someone else do the con. I think we wound up not favoring that, but I'm not sure now.

NS: Did you fear that this would open the door to further efforts to promote business points of view within CCI?

MB: Yes, we were concerned about that. There had been some evidence of that according to some of the people who had been active in the consumer movement in the '30s. We all had concerns about it (I should say most of us), and we didn't want that to happen because then we would, in effect, be bought. We wanted to be as non-partisan as possible and pro-consumer. We felt that side needed support, whereas business could jolly well support their own, and they have. We didn't see any point to supporting them in any way.

NS: At that point, did you see a difference in interest and do you think the other members did, a clear cut difference between the consumer interest and the business interest?

MB: I don't think it was that clear-cut because many of us had backgrounds that were related in some way. For example, mine was with agriculture. We didn't see it as a clear-cut difference. In other words, we felt as economists that thriving American business was good for consumers, but we thought that there had to be some fair play and a presentation of the consumer point of view and the consumer perspective to counter balance the biases that often turn up in business and advertising and in business supporting documents.

NS: If a business consumer specialist had applied for membership in CCI at that time, would you have brought them in?

MB: I'm sure there were some who were in. I don't doubt that at all because there were some who came to the meetings but we didn't let them control. We said we were professionals. We weren't out to be antagonistic, because we recognized the role of business in consumer interest, but we weren't going to be taken over.

NS: Were many of those charter members from business schools?

MB: I don't think there were any from business schools. Ray Price came the closest, but he was in education. He taught business education, but no one else there came from a business school. Willard Cochrane came out of agricultural economics and so did I. He was Harvard, general economics, as I was. Gene Beem had been a student of Ray Price, as I recall, so he came out of education.

There were some who came in soon after this. I don't know how active they were because I don't remember them personally, but there were some who came in.

NS: You were saying that you really didn't think any of them were from business?

MB: Not the founding group. There were some who turned up soon after that in the

membership.

NS: Do you remember at those early meetings discussing the possible pitfalls that might confront the organization along those lines?

MB: Not at the major meetings but I do remember some discussion of it in the executive committee. I don't recall discussion in the general meetings.

NS: Mr. Troelstrup told me about that first meeting in Minnesota that went on hours and hours. Do you remember that meeting?

MB: Yes. I can't remember the details of it very much but it was exciting. We were concerned about what should be the role of CCI, what we should do about these relationships with business groups, and whether it was possible to maintain our professional integrity as we viewed it. We felt that if we were aware of the problem, we could do it without becoming antagonistic and terribly activist. There were some in the group who were the activist types, but they all had academic credentials, and properly so. I was one of the few who was really a full time researcher.

NS: Who were the activists?

MB: Gladys Bahr was certainly one.

NS: What would have made her an activist?

MB: She was consumer education and she was always pushing for education. It didn't bother us. I think Ed Reich was quite an activist. Among the others, Arch was, but in a mild way. Of course, Colston. Just as the Consumers Union has maintained their integrity, Colston saw this as a professional organization and it was possible. I forget the details of those early discussions but they were fun and I enjoyed them and I enjoyed the people very much. They were really greatly concerned about consumers and what was going to happen to consumers in the post war period and how the field of consumer education and consumer economics would develop.

NS: Did the political climate affect you at all? Those were the years of the Cold War and McCarthy and so forth.

MB: There was a little concern about it but I don't know of anybody in the group that got hung up on McCarthyism. As a government employee, my bosses warned me to be careful but I had no problems. When I came back from the meetings, I sat down with my bosses. They knew I was a researcher and not an activist.

NS: Was there some suspicion in the government at that time that some consumer groups were subversive?

MB: Of course, some people thought that all consumer groups were violently anti-business and socialistic and so on. We all had proper academic credentials so it was not a real problem at all.

NS: I have a program here from the first conference, and I think that you're listed on the next to the last page.

MB: I don't even remember what I would have discussed. I see, "Can Marketing Costs be Reduced." I was concerned in the USDA, kind of superficially, with marketing costs. I was primarily concerned with measuring trends and patterns in food consumption and estimating food prices, but we had separate people who were concerned with marketing margins and the like. I probably did present some of the material related to their work.

NS: It's a long time ago.

MB: That's right.

NS: It seems that very quickly you became one of the more important people in running the organization itself.

MB: Perhaps I was willing to take on the job of publications work from the very beginning because I thought that was something I knew about in those days. I was editor of the National Food Situation for the Department of Agriculture. I was with that job from '43 until '61—something like that--until I went to Minnesota. I had a lot to do with publications because we put out publications on "Trends in Food Consumption," and so on.

As an editor, I had a lot of exposure to what's necessary for preparing publications. I felt, and others felt—particularly Margaret Reid and some of the others—that this was an important job to be done to get publications out. We welcomed suggestions from people as to what they should be on, what should be given priority, and we had a little bit of money that we paid (I don't think it was very much) for some of them. We didn't pay anything for some of them, but I doubt that we paid more than a couple hundred dollars for anything.

NS: Do you remember whether you had a set of the most pressing consumer problems that you wanted covered or was it the other way around?

MB: No. I was not in a position to know the most pressing problems. I felt that other people like Arch and Leland Gordon and some of them who were more active with Consumers Union had much better perspective on that than I did. I read about them, and knew about them from that standpoint but we had so many things that we thought needed to be done that we didn't really have to go looking for things.

NS: You didn't decide or you didn't say, "Inflation is a big problem and I want to go find the best person and get a pamphlet done about inflation?"

MB: There were several things; I don't think I necessarily originated them. I may have, but I think I was considerably influenced by people in the group. We had lots of discussions in the executive committee and so on about what needs to be presented and what were the things that were urgent. I don't remember having a list of things operating that way.

NS: I went through Henry Harap's papers and in them I found lots of correspondence about the mechanics of this pamphlet series, and a lot of it was, "Will Mr. X please get this manuscript in by such and such a date?"

MB: I've forgotten all those details. I know I was concerned with them, but I'd forgotten all about them.

NS: You had a committee, I take it.

MB: Yes.

NS: Do you remember how often you met?

NS: I don't remember.

NS: Do you remember if the committee functioned on a day to day basis with details or whether it left those all to you?

MB: I think they left the details largely to me but they certainly were in the decision making on

what publications we needed and who might be the logical people to do them. I think I relied more on them for those decisions because they knew more about the people in the field than I did. When it came to the nitty-gritty of the details of getting the things typed and so forth, I think I handled a lot of that. Some of the committee members, as I recall, reviewed the manuscripts. Certainly I know when this to-do about trading stamps came up, we certainly had them reviewed by a lot of people. I think that's when we turned down Gene Beem's. That's the way I recall it, but that's a long time ago.

NS: In the initial period, the pamphlets were the only publications of the organization, isn't that right?

MB: No.

NS: Excuse me, the *Newsletter*.

MB: The *Newsletter*, yes. Who is it that still does it?

NS: Stewart Lee.

MB: Yes, Stewart Lee. He took that over and he did a swell job and I always thought that was one of the major achievements of the ACCI, getting that out. A lot of people read it and there's always quite a lot of stuff in it. Of course, he had his father helping him for many years; I don't know if he's still alive or not. Stewart was one of the activists too. I don't think he was on the original group; he came in very shortly.

NS: You're listed as the first editor of the *Newsletter*.

MB: I guess I was. I may have done it for a year or so until Stewart came in. I'd forgotten that. I guess I did put it together.

NS: I don't really know precisely what that first newsletter was about except that there was a combination of news and research notes, and also some effort to keep track of the political situation where consumers were concerned to some degree; discussing a little bit about the inflation or the problems of prices.

MB: Probably so, but I've forgotten.

NS: You have a few of those pamphlets in front of you. Could you talk about any of them?

MB: I don't remember any of the details on them except that I worked hard on them. I don't remember the sequence, even. I doubt that I even have a whole series anymore. Again, it was a matter of trying to get somebody who could put existing knowledge into a readable form so that people who were teaching and who may have had some consumer organization groups with them, could see the best available information. I do remember that some of the people were really quite good about it; Leland Gordon was a real expert on weights and measures—I think it was he. I forget who did the burial practices one, but that was a matter of consumer concern in those days. We had several different people operating.

NS: Do you remember which was the most popular?

MB: No, I don't remember those kinds of things. *The Farm Price Policies* was the first one. I got Walter Wilcox to do it because I knew him very well. He was a very level-headed kind of guy.

NS: You didn't really instruct them as to how readable they had to be?

MB: No, but when something wasn't readable, it went back again.

NS: Readable for a professional in the field?

MB: Yes, even for junior professionals or college students that could read it intelligently. The material was not slanted at the junior high school level average for the whole population at all.

NS: Do you remember getting any feedback about the pamphlets and either changing, somewhat or slightly, the focus or direction of any of them?

MB: I don't remember any specifically.

NS: Did you have any indications that they were actually being used and considered?

MB: Certainly. When we had our annual meetings, there would be comments from various people, some of whom would come up to me privately and talk about them and so on. I know that they turned up in people's collections of work. For example, there was a woman who taught at Minnesota and it turned out she had a whole pile of them. I didn't even know she had been active in it. So they were around.

NS: I know the *Journal of Consumer Affairs* ultimately was created.

MB: Yes, I remember some of the discussions on that and I guess I was on the board of that for a while. I finally got off because I just got too much stuff to review. Anyhow, I think I was going abroad or something and I just couldn't handle it anymore, so I got off the review stand.

NS: Were you one of those who felt that the *Journal* would be an important addition to the publications series?

MB: Absolutely. I was certainly wholeheartedly in favor of the development of the *Journal*. I think, even in the early days, we kind of saw three different kinds of publications: the *Newsletter*, the pamphlets for small things, and the *Journal* for the much more professional kinds of writing. I was on that review board for several years, but I've forgotten when. When did I get off of it?

NS: You were on the board between 1960 and 1963, and you were president between 1961 and 1962.

MB: I think I was on the board before that.

NS: The pamphlet series ended in 1968 (approximately) and the *Journal of Consumer Affairs* started the year before that, 1967.

MB: I just don't remember the discussion, but it may have been viewed as a replacement. Plus the fact, by that time, other organizations were putting out pamphlets. Even the Extension Service was doing some so it wasn't so important to do it because our idea had always been to spearhead things and the flow of information. That's why I recall that title of the organization that we fought over one afternoon, the Council on Consumer Information. We viewed the flow of information as being the whole key and I really think it has been. I think it has been a very important role.

NS: There were two years when the series was at its peak—one was 1963 when there close to 3600 pamphlets distributed—

MB: I didn't know that.

NS: And 1968 when there were approximately that number, and from others I've gathered that

much of it—as you say—was used in college classrooms. Do you think that information was useful to the students?

MB: Yes, I think so, because there wasn't a big information flow at that time. We were trying to fill a gap, and I think we did. We accomplished some of those objectives at that point. I don't know if the gap still exists now or not because my interests have gone back into more of the macro level.

NS: Do you remember a pamphlet Henry Aaron wrote about health care? Apparently there was some conflict because a similar article had appeared in *Consumer Reports*.

MB: I remember some kind of to-do but I certainly don't know any details of it at all. I do vaguely, when you mention it now, remember that there was some excitement about it.

NS: From what I've read in the board minutes and in Henry Harap's history, there was a concern that the pamphlet was not being taken seriously enough because so much of the material was directly taken from the magazine (*Consumer Reports*). Did you have a problem with the purposefulness with which people wrote the pamphlets?

MB: I don't recall any specifically. I do remember that episode just very, very vaguely. I remember the trading stamp one. I don't recall other problem areas. I know when we did the one on insurance (I think I did that with the editor, who was my editor for the National Food Situation), we had the review editors. They were the government kind of editors. He had been interested in life insurance and we'd been talking about having somebody do one. As I recall, the two of us did it together. I learned an awful lot about life insurance! Arch knew quite a lot about it and Leland Gordon and some of the other old hands at it. They contributed and we did some drafts and they had suggestions and so forth.

NS: We were talking about your learning from the life insurance pamphlet series. Was there a gap between consumer economists and economists in the height of the profession?

MB: Oh, yes. I think we were viewed as second class citizens, the ones who were primarily consumer economists, just as those who were in home economics were kind of looked down upon, but that never really bothered me.

NS: Did you go to both meetings, the professional economists meetings as well as the ACCI convention?

MB: Oh, yes. I was more likely to go to the ag economics meetings in those days.

I got bored with the economists because of their games with econometrics. I knew enough about econometrics to know how ridiculous some of the assumptions were—and are—that are built into those models.

The ag economists also got too econometric to suit me. I knew something about econometrics, but I also knew when I waded through some of those stupid models and the articles based on them, that the terrible significance of their assumptions and particularly when they dealt with food consumption, were not in line with the facts that I knew about. I was very bored with them.

NS: Was it important to you to bring the economists outside, or to increase their awareness about what the consumer economists were doing?

MB: I viewed myself not as a consumer economist, but as a consumption economist, which meant to me that I was more concerned with the macro side. It was related to my work in the field of agricultural economics and then later at the university. I didn't bother, because there's

no point to fighting the economics profession. In the ag economics group in the fifties and sixties, I frequently gave papers and so on, but I was viewed as a specialist in food consumption economics. I got completely bored with the ag economists when I came back to the U.S. Department of Agriculture.

When I left Minnesota, I dropped my membership. I have a life membership in AEA, or I wouldn't stay in it. There are other things to do.

NS: The reason I asked that is because, if you look at the pamphlet series as a whole compared to the *Journal*, there's a much more applied nature in the pamphlet series and a more theoretical kind of approach in the *Journal*.

MB: I think some of the people who were writing for the *Journal* now and even over the years have been trying to achieve respectability by building in some of the more esoteric economic theories. Well, OK [laughter]. It's up to them; I got other things to do so I didn't worry about it.

NS: Then it wasn't particularly a concern of yours in those years?

MB: I was trying, certainly, to get them to be more practical when I was on the board and certainly remember writing some reviews of some things and saying this is a lot of stuff! I was pretty critical of some of the theoretical work that was being done, because as I say, it was artificial and it was governed so heavily by assumptions which frequently did not jibe with the facts. That was always my point of view.

NS: Do you remember any of your roles as program chairman?

MB: I was program chairman for the meeting in Minneapolis, I think, but I don't remember the details.

NS: Do you remember having any kind of agenda for that program in Minneapolis?

MB: I don't remember any of the details at all.

NS: The year of that meeting was 1960. That was the Kennedy Inaugural and was the year of the election between Mr. Kennedy and Mr. Nixon. Do you remember any interest in making the political power of consumers felt?

MB: I know a good many other people had a lot of interest in it, and were active in it. I certainly was not. Remember, I was a government employee at that time. When one is a government employee, one does not go all out in politics because it's not the thing to do. I still view it that way.

NS: Do you remember that as a conscious concern of yours, to make sure you were being politically neutral?

MB: Sure. I was not personally neutral, but professionally. It was essential, in my opinion. I still think it is.

NS: After Kennedy's election, he did issue a consumer statement. Were you involved in that? You were on the board in those years.

MB: No, I wasn't. Willard (Cochrane) was working with Kennedy.

In fact, I went to Minnesota in the Fall of '60 when Willard was campaigning with Kennedy as his agricultural advisor. I took over Willard's courses, or several of them, at that point. After Kennedy was elected, Willard came in as the economic advisor to the secretary. I went on the

faculty in his place. I didn't teach his policy courses but I taught the consumption economics courses at Minnesota. That was the period when I was at Minnesota, those eight years.

NS: You were president of ACCI while you were at Minnesota teaching these courses?

MB: I was president because I had been around and so then they were passing the job on to anyone who hadn't been president yet.

NS: Did you remember having an agenda when you became president?

MB: I probably did, but I don't recall.

NS: Do you remember if you perceived various constituencies in the organization, or groups or subgroups in the organization?

MB: Yes, I think I was aware of the people who were primarily out of schools of education and home economics. There were some of us who came out of agricultural economics because of our interest in prices and in food consumption and the like. Then, there were some who were tied in, more or less, with retail organizations and so on, so we were aware of them. We tried, in our programs, to give people a chance to speak their pieces but not to take over.

There were people with different kinds of backgrounds. There were some who were, of course, general economists. I think we got along pretty well. I recall the problem with Eugene Beem, but he was the principal problem. I can't remember others.

NS: Was there a problem with endorsing particular resolutions?

MB: I don't recall.

NS: Persia Campbell, I gather, was recommended—or there was a motion to recommend her—to be a consumer advisor (to the Council of Economic Advisors).

MB: Yes, I think so.

NS: That came close to being an endorsement, I gather.

MB: We all respected Persia tremendously, both as a person and as an educator.

NS: Unfortunately, she passed away and I can't interview her. I wonder what she was like.

MB: I think if you use the phrase "gentle woman," that's Persia, but she could get fired up when it came to consumer problems, representing consumers. She was always aware of the problems of business interests trying to overwhelm consumer interests.

She had great respect. She was a good writer, a good researcher, and I thought, a lovely woman, really.

NS: As a group, do you think that these people were belligerently anti-business?

MB: Not at all as a group. I think we were professionals and not belligerent at all. There were some people in the group who were, I will say that, but that's to be expected. I think one of the reasons ACCI has had its long life is the fact that we were professionals and we viewed it accordingly.

NS: How important was Consumers Union in setting the tone for the organization?

MB: Consumers Union was always friendly and supportive and Colston was always friendly and supportive, but they did not try to run the organization at all. He was always aware of the fact that this was a professional organization, and was always supportive. They put money into it in the early days, but they certainly did not try to run it. Colston was a good friend of mine and I respected and honored him—a delightful person, I think.

You probably interviewed him. I hope you agree with my point of view that he's just delightful. He's always been so measured in his own approach, you see, that he wouldn't try to predominate.

NS: Up until the mid-sixties a larger portion of the budget of ACCI came from Consumers Union.

MB: That's right.

NS: Then it came from members. Was that a troublesome fact for you?

MB: It was not because of Colston and other people not attempting to run the CCI. There were no strings tied to it.

NS: Were you taking measures to try to make the organization self-sufficient?

MB: Oh, yes, we were always concerned with that, trying to increase our membership. I don't even remember who did it, but there were some efforts as I vaguely recall, to get grants from various organizations. I was not directly concerned about these efforts.

NS: Were you concerned with the financial aspects of the organization?

MB: I was aware of them, but I was never the treasurer or in any such role.

NS: Did the pamphlet series have difficulty because there wasn't enough money to support it?

MB: I don't recall that we had a problem. We were always aware of what we could do and what we couldn't do, but I don't think it bothered us. We put out as many as the traffic would bear and we did not have a real budget problem. I remember discussing, as publications chairman, I was usually in the executive committee, but I don't recall any great concerns or worry about it.

NS: Do you remember any proposals that you ever made which you hoped the organization would take action on but which were not?

MB: No. Remember, I was not an activist; I was a researcher, and I am to this day.

NS: Were you interested in setting up a more formal research institute, for example, for ACCI?

MB: No. I don't recall doing anything about that or being interested in doing it, because I viewed the research arm as being either in the government or in the universities. In the universities, we had Jim Morgan, who was doing a great job at Michigan, and there were several different groups operating in the government. I've never been very fond of duplication of effort. When I was in the university, I always got all the research money I needed, so it wasn't a problem.

NS: I guess ACCI was predominantly composed of, as you said, the economists and the ag economists and the home economists. What about people in other professions—professional walks of academia?

MB: From time to time, some advertising people turned up out of the business schools, but they

couldn't run the place. They were never permitted. I don't think they really tried very hard. I really don't think so.

NS: It's interesting to me that the word economist is not in ACCI or CCI, and presumably a psychologist or sociologist or a historian might just as well find a home in CCI as elsewhere.

MB: Sure, we don't see any reason why not.

NS: Nevertheless, it didn't develop that way.

MB: No. We had some people, for example, in the Bureau of Agricultural Economics, we had people interested in consumer preferences and who were trained as psychologists, but they didn't come. There were some sociologists in the Department of Agriculture, but they didn't come to ACCI. They were in their own professional groups, you see. This group had more education people and economists, and home economists.

NS: Did you, as a researcher, have some feelings about consumer policy at the national level...

MB: Of course I have.

NS: ...which you felt that, as a government employee you couldn't take, although you thought the organization ought to take?

MB: No. I never felt that the organization should take a propagandistic or activist role on some of these policy matters, like price policy. I never thought it was the role of the organization.

NS: What about a department of consumer affairs?

MB: Yes, we favored that. That's a different story. Then the department of consumer affairs could do it. I certainly was not about to write things like there should be a department of consumer affairs, again, because I was a government employee. I'm serious about this.

NS: In the mid-sixties, there was a groundswell of interest in both consumer safety issues and environmental issues. I'm thinking the touchstones would be *Silent Spring* by Rachel Carson and *Unsafe at Any Speed* by Ralph Nader. That doesn't seem to have led those groups to start joining up in CCI or ACCI.

MB: No. I think we were all very interested in them. At that time, in the sixties, I was teaching. I didn't have the problem of being a government employee. We were very sympathetic and very much interested, but we were still very professional about what we were doing. We could support this and use these materials in teaching, as many of us did, but that didn't mean that we were going to go out and carry placards around for environmental protection or some of these other things.

NS: Did the name change from CCI to ACCI, and of course, the dropping of the word "Information" and the addition of the word "Interest"...

MB: I was not so favorable to that, but it didn't really bother me that much. I liked the old name. I recognized that people wanted to become more identified with consumer interests and so that's the reason for it. I don't think I was at the meeting when that was adopted, but I remember the discussions about it before it was adopted. I was not particularly in favor of it. I didn't see much point in changing, but when other people wanted it, it didn't bother me.

NS: What was the difference between "Information" and "Interests"?

MB: One had more of an activist indication than the other, at least in my opinion.

NS: You were more in favor of preserving as much as possible, this more purely informational role.

MB: Purely professional rather than activist.

NS: Let me ask you another specific question. That is about the question of whether or not voting status should be given to business-affiliated members. I don't know if you were still around then, and I think not.

MB: I remember that there was some discussion, but I don't recall.

NS: At a later point, the question of whether or not the right to vote should be restricted to people without commercial ties, what would your opinion be about that?

MB: I don't think I would have been very bothered by it. I was one of the people who was always concerned that it not become a business controlled organization, but I didn't know enough of the inner workings to know what the problems really were at that point.

NS: This view of the organization as an objective, scholarly, research organization, do you think that ACCI came to encompass as wide or as strong a group of consumer researchers as it potentially could have?

MB: I can't judge that. I've not been active for a number of years.

NS: Maybe I could ask it in another way. Today, the membership is up. The membership is approximately 2000 people, most of them consumer professionals. The *Journal* says the organization has an explicitly professional role. Do you think that is in accord with the original objectives?

MB: I think so, because some of the people in the founding group had been active in the thirties—Harap and Persia Campbell and others—and they knew the traps that the organization could fall into. We were determined to avoid those traps and it did work out, with Nader and others coming in, that they filled those roles, but we felt that the professional one was so essential that that was our objective.

NS: Were there turning points in the organization while you were there?

MB: I don't recall any.

NS: I gather that the trading stamps situation seems to you to have been one.

MB: Yes, but I don't think it was a real turning point because we had a heavy preponderance in favor of not becoming a vehicle for a business group. It was just a matter of boxing Gene Beem's ears. That's most of what I can contribute, I think.

NS: Let me ask you in retrospect, what that membership in ACCI meant to you personally?

MB: It certainly broadened my perspective of consumer interests much more than I had. I didn't know what was going on in the field. I read some, but there wasn't that much available and I read some of these books because I taught consumer education now and then or something of that sort. There were really interesting people doing different kinds of things than I was doing and I was delighted to hear about them. It contributed to my own understanding and my own research to see the relationships between what I call the micro level and the macro level and the relationships between ways of living and the problems of living and the kinds of things that we as researchers, were trying to sort out.

We were called on to do research, as I was, for government decision-making and I became aware of some of the kinds of research that needed to be done and I moved into some of those areas for a period of years.

In more recent years (the last eight years) after I retired in '75, I started teaching at Howard and was head of International Studies in Human Ecology and I was moving much more into economic development and social development, particularly in the developing countries. Since then, I've been doing primarily consulting work in that field, introducing food and nutrition concerns into development planning and development evaluation, which is not that far from consumers' interests, but in a different perspective.

NS: Did the fact that you were a leader of ACCI mean something to others?

MB: It certainly didn't mean anything to me in the government. I don't think it ever had any bearing on my career pattern. I think it meant a little bit when I taught at Minnesota, but I don't think it meant anything to the people at Howard. It certainly didn't mean anything to the government. They put up with things as long as I didn't get my name in the paper. They didn't mind at all. They knew I wasn't the activist type so it wasn't a problem.

NS: How long did you continue to keep up after you stopped going to the meetings? Did you really stop talking to and communicating with the ACCI people?

MB: In large part, now and then, I send them a check. I've been a life member and send a check once in a while. They elected me fellow several years ago, and I went to that meeting, which I found kind of fun. I was not entranced with going back into it because my own interests are different. I'm a specialist along one line and most of those people are generalists. You've got to have differences in order to achieve different objectives that occur.

NS: Did your professional work and the professional work that you're doing now seem to you to be rewarding and in accord with the personal vision of what you wanted to do?

MB: I think so. I always wanted to be a researcher. I originally wanted to do research in international law until I discovered a woman couldn't get a job in that field. I got a job as a statistical clerk in the Department of Agriculture with a Master's degree behind me. Then I moved into economic analysis. That was in Farm Security which was very good training for work in economic development. Even then, I have a very different perspective than most economists do because I'm much more concerned with that bridge between the micro and the macro. I haven't had great achievements, but I think I've done a reasonable job.

NS: You mentioned discrimination in international law. Did you find that the consumer movement was more receptive to equality for women than most?

MB: I don't think that there's any doubt, whereas in economics and agricultural economics there has always been a lot of discrimination.

NS: Do you have any particular illustrations?

MB: In my own career, I could cite examples, but I don't care to. In the Department of Agriculture, there's always been discrimination against women.

NS: And in the consumer movement?

MB: I don't see any discrimination there.

NS: ACCI seems to be composed as best as I can tell, of a fairly representative blend of men and

women.

MB: Yes.

NS: Another issue that was of concern in the sixties was the issue of race and income. ACCI didn't have many black members.

MB: That's right.

NS: How do you account for that?

MB: I don't know, but we had a man who later became president of one of the black universities. I've forgotten his name. He is now in a private research foundation.

NS: Dr. Samuel Myers?

MB: Samuel Myers, that's right. He was a Harvard graduate and we respected him very much. He was active in the organization. I don't know why, I guess because there were very few blacks that were in consumer education in that period and I doubt if there are now.

I taught consumer education at Howard, of course, and back in the early fifties, I taught it one year till I discovered I couldn't teach nights and work days. Certainly there was no active discrimination in any way in that group. Most of the people, even though they might be conservative in their politics, were liberal in their social points of view. We were always comfortable with any blacks that turned up.

NS: Were you concerned, as president, with helping low-income consumers?

MB: Oh, yes. I always felt it was terribly important to get facts to base that. I did quite a bit of analysis of problems of low-income consumers and the food patterns of low-income consumers when I was in the government.

NS: As to why people who were really members of those groups weren't more interested in ACCI, that's still a bit of a puzzle.

MB: You mean, why low-income consumers...

NS: —or why people who were minority group members weren't moving into the field of consumer education and consumer affairs.

MB: I don't remember doing much thinking about that.

NS: In summary, I think we've covered most of the ground that I wanted to cover.

MB: Good. I'm going to have to move my car.

NS: Thank you very much.

MB: Glad to help.