

100

Years

of Public Health
in Arkansas



Old State House, original site of the Arkansas Department of Health

Service Highlight

Vanetta Vestal-Williams

One of Arkansas's First Female Sanitarians

Donaldson Native County Sanitarian

Hot Spring County Judge Carl Fowler and Jimmy Wallace, Director of the Arkansas Department of Health's Division of Sanitarian Services, announce the recent appointment of Mrs. Van Etta Vestal as Hot Spring County sanitarian.

Mrs. Vestal is a native of

Donaldson. She received her B.S.E. degree in Consumer and Homemaking Education from Henderson State University in 1970. Her past employment includes teaching Home Economics in Portland Public School.

Mrs. Vestal's duties will include inspection of food service establishments, food stores and markets, and food processing establishments. She will be responsible for investigation of food poisoning incidents as well.

Septic tank installation and inspections of swimming pools and private water supplies are also within her jurisdiction.

In addition, Mrs. Vestal will answer complaint calls from the public concerning possible health hazards. She will be involved in the control of rabies incidents, rodents and insects.

Inquiries may be directed to Mrs. Vestal at the Hot Spring County Health Department, which is located at 1415 Smith St.

MALVERN **DAILY RECORD**

"Serving This Area As A Daily Newspaper Since 1916"

Monday Afternoon, July 26, 1978 Malvern, Arkansas 72104

62nd Year—Number 183

16 Pages 15¢ Copy



Ms. Vestal Checks Septic Tank Lines

Surprised Looks Greet County's Sanitarian

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By HELEN SHEFFIELD
News Editor

"There were some surprised people when they walked into this office and saw a woman behind this desk," Van Etta Vestal said.

But the surprised looks are fewer these days since the word has gotten around that Hot Spring County's sanitarian is a woman and that she knows what she's doing.

Ms. Vestal said she didn't get negative reactions to her entering a predominately male field, just surprised looks from people expecting her to be a man.

"People who walk into this office or call for the sanitarian to come inspect a septic tank or something like that just expect to see a man. No one has ever been rude to me or really given me a hard time because I'm a woman, but some of them have looked surprised," Ms. Vestal said.

She has been serving as Hot Spring County sanitarian since September and finds the job rewarding.

"In this job you're not confined in one room every day. Probably three days a week, I go 100 miles a day," Ms. Vestal said.

Getting out in the field and working with people is part of the job she particularly enjoys, Ms. Vestal said.

"I could never handle a boring job, sitting in an office all day long," she said.

Although women employees in the Health Department, under whose leadership county sanitarians work, are not rarities, women "in the field" are.

The first woman was hired to work in the field in 1974 and presently about 15 females are employed in that capacity, Ms. Vestal said. Until 1974, she explained, women hired by the Health Department worked out of the Little Rock office.

Ms. Vestal was required to pass a merit system test, as are all Health Department employees, and spent a seven-week intensive training period working with the Pulaski County Health Department before being assigned to Hot Spring Co.

"It was a cram course with plenty of field experience. We went with Pulaski County sanitarians on inspections, getting a taste of almost everything we would encounter in the field," Ms. Vestal said.

Before applying for the sanitarian's job, Ms. Vestal spent seven years as a home

economics teacher.

Everything a sanitarian could encounter in the field covers a broad range. Included in the possibilities are septic tank inspections, restaurant and grocery store inspections, inspecting and issuing permits to swimming pools, rabies control and handling sanitation complaints.

Also when a fire in a grocery store occurs or a truck loaded with foodstuff is involved in a highway accident, it is the job of the sanitarian to see that any food damaged in the accident is removed from the market or clearly marked and sold as "less than top quality" merchandise.

The sanitarian also has the authority to quarantine anything or anyplace thought to be spreading disease (like canned goods containing botulism germs or a restaurant serving contaminated food.)

The Arkansas Food Drug and Cosmetic Act puts legal thrust behind the sanitarians work, but going to court and forcing sanitation compliance is a last resort, Ms. Vestal said.

"Most everyone I work with is as concerned with meeting sanitary standards as I am. When I find a violation, I talk to people about it. We talk about the problem and what can be done about it," Ms. Vestal said.

A sanitarian is a health adviser, Ms. Vestal said. She is more concerned with helping identify health hazards and working on eliminating them than closing down businesses, she pointed out.

Juggling home responsibilities with a career makes for a demanding routine for Ms. Vestal as with other working mothers. Finding energy to cope with the needs of her preschool daughter after a rough day on the job can prove a challenge, Ms. Vestal said.

"I just go till the energy runs out, then I slack off for a day or two or spend a weekend resting," she said.

Since her parents live in Malvern, there's usually willing babysitting help should she get called out for an accident or fire in the night, Ms. Vestal said.

Parenting a child and handling a demanding job may not be easy, but Ms. Vestal doesn't appear to want to get out of either situation.

"Being a mother is so rewarding," she said. And so, she added, is being a sanitarian.

Restaurant starts jump; revitalization credited

By Karen Rafinski
GAZETTE HOT SPRINGS BUREAU

HOT SPRINGS — New restaurant owners are putting their money where their customers' mouths are in record numbers.

In 1988 start-ups of brand new restaurants and food services jumped to 22 from an average of four or five a year in the past, according to Van Etta Williams, sanitarian for the Garland County Health Department.

There were 17 other food service openings in 1988 that replaced failed businesses, Williams said. In 1989 there have already been three new openings.

Dennis Magee opened Magee's

Cafe Hot Springs on Central Avenue across from Bath House Row last year after deciding that there weren't enough convenient places for national park tourists to eat. "When the Fordyce opens the people on that sidewalk will be elbow to elbow," Magee said.

Five of the new restaurants are located downtown and all attribute their success to the downtown revitalization efforts of the Main Street program. All downtown business in general has grown since the inception of the program in 1986 and \$3.2 million in private money has been invested in new businesses there, according to program director Sharon Noble.

Hairnets in place? Inspector knows

By Phoebe Wall
GAZETTE STAFF

Mike Loy wasn't biting his fingernails, but his forehead was wrinkled with worry.

The health inspector was about to visit his restaurant.

Loy, the Shoney's executive manager stayed step-for-step with Vanetta Williams, the Garland County sanitarian, and continuously peeked over her shoulder as she wrote notes on a clipboard.

He wanted a perfect health score for his Hot Springs restaurant. Something that is tough to attain.

Unannounced inspections are conducted throughout Clark, Garland and Hot Spring counties each day. Stops are made at all places that serve food including restaurants, school cafeterias, ice cream shops, meat and produce departments at grocery stores and movie theaters.

Health scores range from zero to 100, but anything below 80 is in the danger zone and calls for re-inspection, according



— Staff Photo by Spencer Tirrey

Garland County health inspector Williams peers into refrigerator.

to Conway Meacham, Hot Spring County sanitarian.

Up to five demerits can be given for

things like cooks not wearing hairnets (-1), people handling money and also preparing food (-5), having too many flies

(-4), sewage and resulting fly problems (-4), and having no soap in the bathroom (-2).

Businesses are supposed to receive a visit every six months by health inspectors who are armed with a 44-category checklist.

Inspections take about one hour.

Williams said two hours would make the inspection more thorough, but the Garland County Health Department doesn't have the manpower. She said inspectors there are expected to do about 20 inspections weekly.

Many chain restaurants have in-house inspections, which makes the health department's job a little easier.

But to say all fast food restaurants are cleaner than family-owned restaurants is untrue, said Jim Jones, Clark County sanitarian.

Family-owned places can present their own difficulties.

Jones and other inspectors said there

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Inspect

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was a challenge in working with Oriental restaurants and non-English speaking people who often don't understand why cited violations pose a health problem.

Other restaurants aren't bothered by violations — like having no lid on the trash bin, which is only allowed during rush hour periods.

"I have had people tell me they'd rather have 2 points deducted than pay workman's compensation when an employee trips over the lid sitting beside a canister," Williams said.

Patrons often have a casual attitude about restaurant inspections too and do not give published reports a lot of credence.

Richard Chappell of Plainview, who had lunch at the Sawmill Depot Restaurant in Hot Springs, said he judges a restaurant by the quality of food and word of mouth — not inspection scores.

"Their doors are open, so apparently they meet the health standard," Dan Cochran of Tulsa, Okla., said, shrugging his shoulders. "If they have sticky floors, they've got a problem. Otherwise ..."

He and his wife, Mary, just finished breakfast at Shoney's, which received a 90 in an inspection taken with an *Arkansas Gazette* reporter present.

Loy wasn't happy because his business usually scores higher.

"The crackers, sunflower seeds and all are packaged and I'll be darned if I haven't walked by the open sack of grated cheese three times," Loy said with disgust. (That cost him two points.)

Both restaurateurs and the state Health Department consider inspections a high priority. Williams said she doesn't think making the scores public is necessary because it involves primarily the health department and restaurants.

Paul Pinkston, manager of the Wyatt's Cafeteria in Hot Springs, said, "Not only do I eat in my own cafeteria, but I eat in other places too. [Inspections] make me feel more secure," he said.

A table could be wiped clean and be loaded with bacteria. There's a big difference between clean and sanitary. Inspectors protect the public."



Role Of Sanitarian Defined

Believe it or not, your local sanitarian is not responsible for picking up your garbage twice a week. To most people, the words "sanitarian" and "sanitation" denote the same meaning.

Stop and think for a moment of some of the everyday aspects of life that you take for granted.

For example, the meal you ate last week in your favorite restaurant ... not only did it taste good, but naturally it was prepared in a safe, clean manner .. or was it?

And how about that bag of groceries you bought last night? Of course each product is free from contamination during storage ... isn't it?

Behind the scenes, the Division of Sanitarian Services of the Arkansas Department of Health plays a significant part in protecting the health of every Arkansan.

With its formation in 1975, Sanitarian Services was charged with the maintenance of a safe level of sanitation in four major areas: food, milk and dairy products, individual sewage disposal (septic systems) and general sanitation.

Over 150 sanitarians are employed by the Division of Sanitarian Services. These sanitarians are stationed throughout the state on a population density basis. At present, 82 percent of the counties in the state have a resident sanitarian. The remaining 18 percent are served on a part-time basis by sanitarians from adjacent counties.

What does a sanitarian do?

Initially each sanitarian must have a bachelor of science degree with at least 30 hours of science, biology, math, chemistry or physics. Once employed, each sanitarian is responsible for enforcing the 25 laws and 80 sets of accompanying rules and regulations involved in the four major sanitation areas mentioned previously.

Food products control involves a large array of inspectional services. It includes all restaurants, supermarkets and temporary food services, such as the hot dog stands at the State Fair. It also includes bakeries, food warehouses, bottling and canning plants, airline catering services and even bars.

Also, in the event of wrecks or disasters involving food products, the local sanitarian must supervise the disposal of all food products involved. In these cases, the food products are either released as safe for human consumption or are quarantined until they are either denatured for animal feed or destroyed.

The individual sewage

disposal program was designed to protect the home-owning consumer who does not have access to a public sewer system. Since the passage of Act 402 of 1977, each installation of an individual septic system must be permitted and inspected by a sanitarian. This program was developed to limit the possibilities of a homeowner investing a large amount of money in a sewage disposal system that will never function properly.

The third major area of concern, milk and dairy products, control, involves the inspection of all grade A milk production and bulk hauling facilities and production of milk products such as cheese, sour cream, and yogurt.

General sanitation control involves the inspection of all public swimming pools, as well as investigation of complaints received from the public con-

cerning environmental health hazards.

The local sanitarian also works in cooperation with other programs in the department of health. One of these programs is Vector Control, responsible for control of rats, mosquitoes, harmful bird populations and camps.

The sanitarian also works with the Communicable Disease program in the event of incidents of food poisonings, typhoid fever, hepatitis or dysentery.

Many sanitarians work with the Veterinary Public Health Division and local veterinarians in establishing rabies vaccination clinics as well as coordinating follow-up activities in the event of animal bite cases.

For more information contact Van Etta Vestal at the Hot Spring County Health Department, phone: 332-6974