

Women in California's Environmental Health Profession

By

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At the time the California Association of Sanitarians was formed in 1930, the sanitarian profession was composed predominately of males. Early articles appearing in *The Sanitarian*, the journal of the profession, commonly spoke of sanitarians in the masculine gender. The 1925 picture [Figure 1] of the Los Angeles City Health Department's Bureau of Housing and Sanitation shows Elma Fisher as a member. In 1943 a woman named Blanche Walsh of San Francisco was documented as working as a sanitarian.¹ She authored an invitation "To The Sanitarians' Ladies" that would be attending the 1943 Annual Convention of the National Association of Sanitarians in San Francisco outlining events she had planned for them. She stated in the invitation that she was a sanitarian.² Neither of these women's names appeared in the records as being registered as a sanitarian when the California Registration Act went into effect in 1946.

Figure 1



Elma Fisher, left side of top row, shown in 1925 picture of the Los Angeles City Housing and Sanitation staff

A review was conducted of the archived records of the Registered Environmental Health Specialist Program (formerly known as the Registered Sanitarian Program) within the California Department of Health Services (DHS) to gain an historical insight into the first women documented as practicing in the field of environmental health in the state. This review found that 12 women were registered when the initial registration took place during 1946. Table 1 lists the initial 50 women environmental health specialists registered in California according to DHS records. Marguerite Davidson was issued

registration number 179 thus becoming the first woman registered as a sanitarian in the country. She, and eight of the other original dozen women registered, worked for the Los Angeles City Health Department conducting inspection services at institutions for structural, environmental, ventilation, maintenance and food sanitation. They inspected hospitals, sanitariums, maternity homes, boarding schools and day schools.

All of these women were registered nurses, and several were also certified as public health nurses. This group included May Phyllis Gibson who had conducted institutional inspections as early as 1922 according to her application for registration. In addition, the registration records indicate that Genevieve E. Dyer was a registered nurse conducting both housing and industrial inspections for the Department of Public Health in San Francisco. She had been conducting these services since 1926.

Mrs. Kittie Klahn was issued Registered Sanitarian number 424 during this initial registration period. Her registration information indicated that she had been working as a Food Inspector for the San Francisco Department of Public Health since July 1926. She appears to be the first woman registered as a sanitarian to be conducting routine food inspection services on a full-time basis. On June 16, 1945 the Board of Supervisors appointed Rose B. Harris to the position of Sanitary Inspector and/or Sanitary Officer of Merced County. She was issued Registered Sanitarian number 619.

These initial 12 women were all registered because they were working as sanitarians at the time the Registration Act became effective. They were the only women registered of the initial 1,000 registrations issued. Therefore, women represented 1.2 percent of the Registered Sanitarians in 1946. This percentage dropped to .52 percent as only one additional woman was registered in the next 1,500 registrations issued. The decline in women obtaining registration may have been due to the events of that period of time following World War II when most women left the work environment to stay at home raising the family.

Miss Louise C. Seibel was issued Registered Sanitarian number 1461 on March 15, 1950, and there would be no other women registered until 1961. Miss Seibel was a registered nurse working in the Institution Inspection Division of the Sanitation Bureau of the City of Los Angeles Department of Health. She applied for registration as a sanitarian in 1948 but was not eligible to be registered under the grandfather provisions of the Act and therefore became the first woman to become registered through the examination process. Prior to taking the examination, she had to complete some additional courses to become eligible for registration as a sanitarian. Mr. Charles L. Senn, Engineer-Director, Bureau of Sanitation for the Los Angeles City Health Department, confirmed her work experience to the State Department of Public Health and suggested that her academic records be reviewed and a determination made of additional course work she should complete before taking the registration examination.³ She completed several courses and successfully passed the registration examination.

Nearly 11 years later, Miss Kathleen Shimmin became the next woman registered. She had received a Bachelor of Science degree in Public Health (Sanitary Science) from the

University of California, Berkeley on June 11, 1960 and was recommended for admission to the next examination for registration as a sanitarian by Associate Professor Walter Mangold.⁴ Miss Shimmin received Registered Sanitarian number 2522 on March 1, 1961 following her successful completion of the registration examination held on February 15, 1961. There is no record of her working as a sanitarian in California.

Doris M. Schofield was the next woman registered as a sanitarian. She was issued Registered Sanitarian number 2791 on March 4, 1964 and retired as a supervisor from the Los Angeles County Environmental Health Division. It would be a little over two years until the next women sanitarians were registered in California. On July 1, 1966 both Ginette Richard and Theresa V. Wistrom were issued Registered Sanitarian numbers 2990 and 2993 respectively.

When contacted and asked to recount her perceptions about entering the environmental health profession as the first woman to work for the Los Angeles County Environmental Health Division, Mrs. Schofield provided the following information: *In 1962 the Los Angeles Times classified ads were still listed as “Men” and “Women.” The only jobs listed for women were nurse, secretary, housekeeper, etc. So I looked under “Men” and found Los Angeles County was advertising a job for an entomologist. I went downtown to apply. The Personnel Office reviewed my credits, and I only had 12 units of entomology instead of the required 16. They asked if I would be interested in being an Assistant Sanitarian, and after a brief description of the job, I was very interested. I was interviewed that same day by Stanley Martin and Jim Foster and offered the position. My first assignment was with the Training Section. I wasn’t really aware of what a curiosity I had become. My co-workers were always courteous to me. The public, however, was shocked and called the office to verify my legitimacy.*

A substantial increase in the number of women successfully entering the field of environmental health as sanitarians started during the decade of the 1960s when 14 women were registered. As shown on Table I, this trend continued through the 1970s. Carol Good was the 31st woman registered as a sanitarian and recounts the tenor of the times and the issues she faced when she entered the environmental health field: *To get the real “flavor” of the fall of 1969, one can put it into the context of what was happening in the news: first man on the moon and the Vietnam War. There were no such things as letter carriers, only mailmen; no firefighters, only firemen; no police officers, only policemen; and no flight attendants, just stewardesses. In high school I wasn’t offered any competitive sports activities, and only boys could go out for track and field. In basketball gym class we were only allowed to run half-court because girls were not physically strong enough to run the whole way. There were few girls in my college math and science classes because “girls didn’t excel in those areas.” When I first tried to apply for a job as a sanitarian in Sacramento County in the fall of 1969, the Personnel Officer said I couldn’t because I was a female. When I was hired, they called me “that lady sanitarian.” When I answered the phones, most men asked for someone else because “they didn’t want to talk to a secretary.” The staff was in a quandary about office parties because they would have to “clean up their language.” In most people’s minds this was going to change everything, and yes, there was resentment. Pre-*

conceived prejudice reared its ugly face from time to time, but each time it was dealt a blow by those staff who were able to sort out the real priorities. Over time the great dynamic force of equal opportunity eventually made its way into the 21st Century, and so in most instances people are now evaluated on ability. My young adult children can hardly imagine what things were like so few years ago!

Diane Eastman, the 32nd woman recorded as being registered as a sanitarian in California, served as a pioneer for women entering into leadership positions within the state and national professional organizations. She served as the first woman president of the California Environmental Health Association during 1983-84. Fifty years after the formation of the National Environmental Health Association, Ms. Eastman served as that organizations first woman president during 1987-88.

Ms. Eastman was asked to share her experiences on being a woman in environmental health during the 1970s. She provided the following information: *I was the first woman in both of the environmental health departments in which I have worked. Many men were able to treat me as a human being. The inter-personal skills I learned then are true even today. It helps on the “human” side of the gender gap if women are able to avoid distancing themselves from men by being overly sensitive to gender specific issues. To be taken seriously, a woman must be assertive and not arrogant, must keep things in perspective, and must not lose her sense of humor. I was witnessing the sealing of a new water well when the driver of the cement truck asked the well driller if he knew there was a woman on the job site and what was she doing there. That kind of problem belongs to the other person. I knew I shouldn’t make it mine. The driver eventually realized how he appeared and apologized. Then there was the director of the environmental health department who told me that he was giving the position to a man because he had a family to feed and women were to leave their careers for their children.*

Diane Evans, the 28th woman registered as a sanitarian and the longest serving woman director of environmental health in California, provided the following reflections on her 30 plus years as a woman in the environmental health field as she announced her pending retirement. *I’ve never forgotten my first interview for a sanitarian trainee position in Fresno County in 1968. I was asked the usual things: what was my background and my degree, did I understand the duties of the position? But then I was asked whether I was planning to have children and how soon. I had seldom felt so awkward; that type of question somehow didn’t feel “right”. Of course, that kind of questioning is completely inappropriate now, but back in the days when environmental health was foreign ground for women, it was not at all unusual and was, in fact, the norm.*

I had the great good fortune to have Clayton Aurenheimer, a supervisor with the Fresno County Environmental Health program, be willing to take me under his responsibility. He mentored and nurtured me, and he earned my respect and gratitude. I felt his loss keenly when he left the environmental health profession. By then I was in Sonoma County where I became a senior and a supervisor before becoming Director in Santa Cruz County in 1986, a position I am retiring from this year after more than 30 years in environmental health.

I've seen so many changes in the profession and practice of environmental health, not the least of which is that now half the new entrants to the profession are women. That's quite a turnaround for what used to be largely a "good old boys" world—no offense to any of the men who I've been privileged to know and work with. If it weren't for them and their willingness to take a risk, I and the other women who first began entering the environmental health profession back in the 1960s simply wouldn't be here at all. I owe Clayton, Bergie, R.O., Lester, and Bob so much—I wish I had thanked them adequately. Perhaps writing this brief reminiscence is one way of doing so now.

DHS registration figures for 1999 indicate that it is now commonplace for women to practice in the field of environmental health. A total of 148 individuals were registered as environmental health specialists (the title that sanitarians are known as today) during 1999 and women represented 34 percent of this group. This percentage increased during the year 2000 when 44.6 percent of the 121 newly registered environmental health specialists were women. It is of interest to note that the July 2000 registration examination in California produced 34 new environmental health specialists with 18 (53 percent) of them being women. The percentage of women practicing in the environmental health field within California increases each year as the older, predominantly male, environmental health specialists retire and increasing numbers of women become registered and enter the profession. At the close of the year 2000 there were 1,058 women environmental health specialists actively registered in California. This total represents 31 percent of the 3,414 environmental health specialists currently registered in the state.

Table I

**Listing of Initial Fifty Women Sanitarians
(Environmental Health Specialists) Registered in California**

Name	Year Registered	Registration Number
1. Davidson, Marguerite	1946	179
2. Doyle, Ethel M.	1946	180
3. Fahlberg, Anne K.	1946	189
4. Gibson, May Phyllis	1946	190
5. Hume, Francis R.	1946	206
6. Lawson, Alice M.	1946	243
7. Lund, Harriet	1946	245
8. Thompson, Agnes N.	1946	285
9. Klahn, Kittie G.	1946	424
10. Harris, Rose B.	1946	619
11. Dyer, Genevieve E.	1946	688
12. Zdvorak, Bessie P.	1946	770
13. Seibel, Louise C.	1950	1461
14. Shimmin, Kathleen	1961	2522
15. Schofield, Doris M.	1964	2791R
16. Fuschetti, Fair Ochs	1965	2903
17. Ialongo, Patricia S.	1966	2956
18. Richard, Ginette	1966	2990
19. Wistrom, Theresa V.	1966	2993
20. Wright, Gena M.	1967	3035
21. Notani, Prem S.	1967	3100
22. Barron, Jacqueline E.	1968	3128
23. Herbst, Alice M.	1968	3159
24. Fershko, Grace H.	1968	3167
25. King, Faith F.	1969	3189
26. Jambiazian, Angel M.	1969	3258
27. Keith, Bonnie J.	1969	3260
28. Evans, Diane L.	1970	3296
29. Mushin, Joalyn A.	1970	3345
30. Miyake, Kathie A.	1971	3405
31. Good, Carol J.	1971	3425
32. Eastman, Diane R.	1971	3444
33. Fascia, Domenica M.	1971	3478
34. Iversen, Judy K.	1971	3524
35. Salazar, Martha S.	1971	3551
36. Taylor, Mary G.	1972	3582
37. Simmons, Kathie J.	1972	3603
38. Freimuth, Sylvia M.	1972	3609R
39. Bachmann, Rita R.	1972	3612
40. Rollis, Margaret A.	1972	3613
41. Crane, Rebecca A.	1972	3618
42. Jordan, Kathryn L.	1972	3631
43. Anderson, Sigrid E.	1972	3644
44. Ray, Rebecca	1972	3647
45. Huber, Virginia L.	1972	3653
46. Walters, Yvonne S.	1972	3656R
47. Novacek, Gayle A.	1972	3658
48. Wong, Connie K.	1973	3711
49. Stearns, Donna L.	1973	3732
50. Nolte, Audrey J.	1973	3747

(R indicates retired registration status)

¹ Walter, William G., Ph.D., and Marshall, Ida F., Editors, "Women in Environmental Health," *Environmental Health 1937-1987, Fifty Years of Professional Development with The National Association of Sanitarians*, National Environmental Health Association, 1987, p. 100.

² Seventh Annual Convention, National Association of Sanitarians, Inc. announcement, *The Sanitarian*, Vol. 6, September– October, 1943, page 365.

³ Senn, Chas. L., correspondence to E. A. Reinke, Chief, Bureau of Sanitary Engineering, State Department of Public Health, October 28, 1948.

⁴ Mangold, Walter S., correspondence to E. A. Reinke, Chief, Bureau of Sanitary Engineering, State Department of Public Health, November 1, 1960.