

# Triumphing Over Typhoid, Volcanoes and Mad Cow: Yakima Health District Celebrates 100 Years

**A** MENINGITIS OUTBREAK, MOUNT ST. HELEN'S VOLCANIC ERUPTION AND BOUTS OF MAD COW DISEASE, WERE THREE OF THE DISASTERS THAT HELPED KEEP THE YAKIMA PUBLIC HEALTH DISTRICT BUSY OVER THE COURSE OF A CENTURY.

The above list doesn't even include a pandemic of Typhoid Fever, which nearly wiped out the residents of the Yakima Valley 100 years ago, exposure to mercury and chemical fires—not to mention dealing with the day-to-day public health risks.

Coping with disasters of this scale have made the Yakima Public Health District unique and well-versed. Even in an era of budget cutting and reduced funding, the district's dedicated employees, some of whom are Local 17 members, have helped the residents in the Yakima Valley through many health threats. This summer, the Health District celebrated its 100th anniversary, making it the oldest combined city and county health district in the nation. Its formation was also used a model for other health districts across the U.S.

Local 17 staff members were on hand to commemorate the day. Local 17 Union Representative Roberta Burnett, Special Projects Coordinator Nikola Davidson and Communications Director Taryn Gerhardt were there to present a proclamation and



Local 17 Staffers Nikola Davidson and Roberta Burnett with member Art McEwen.

congratulations for the District's valuable contributions.

"I'm glad that Local 17 was part of the centennial celebration and reminded those in attendance that what makes the Health District innovative and successful is it's exceptional staff," said Davidson.

Additionally, several regional, state and federal lawmakers (or their representatives), and key public health officials, also presented letters or proclamations.

One of them was Secretary of the Washington State Department of Health, Mary Selecky. Selecky talked about a few of the public health threats in Yakima including the eruption of Mt. St. Helen's in 1980, which covered the area in a foot of ash; a Meningitis outbreak (a dangerous bacterial infection) in 1989; and in 2003, the first incidence in the nation of Mad Cow Disease

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(a contagious disease that crippled cows and worked its way into the food supply).

"These were all moments of response and incredible times of learning. This is what it is really about, making our communities safer," Selecky said.

The U.S. Public Health Service Assistant Surgeon General, Admiral Patrick O'Carroll also attended. He talked about how and why the Yakima Health District was formed. O'Carroll recounted the story of how a



Washington State Department of Health, Mary Selecky and Local 17 member Art McEwen



Typhoid pandemic struck the region in the late 1800s and early 1900s.

“People were dropping like flies from diseases we don’t see anymore,” he said.

At the time, Yakima had a bustling economy, producing many agricultural products including apples and other crops. There were civic organizations and thriving communities, but people were dying.

Seeking help, public officials in Yakima wrote the United States Health Service and asked them to send someone to help uncover

the root cause. The U.S. government sent Dr. Leslie Lumsden in 1874. He discovered that Salmonella and Typhae bacteria were spreading through the community.

In letter Dr. Lumsden stated: *“The high rate and prevalence of Typhoid Fever in North Yakima in the summer and fall of the years 1908, 1909 and 1910 was due for the most part to local dissemination of human excreta from insanitary privies.”*

People were cooking, washing and living too close to their outdoor toilets. Well water was also being contaminated.

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In 1911, one of the first public health districts, Yakima, was formed. Both government and civic organizations came together to help stop the spread of disease and educate the community on public health risks.

*“Now what Yakima County has done, I believe many others in the U.S. can do,”* Lumsden stated in his letter.

Several representatives from other health-related organizations told stories about working in partnership with the health district over the years.

Dennis Klukan, Yakima Health District Administrator said at the ceremony: “No public health agency can stand on its own. We depend on our community partners.”

Several Local 17 members helped organize the celebration including Art McEwen. McEwen works in environmental health in the Solid Waste and Hazardous Materials section. McEwen said that even today, making sure water is safe and sewage is properly treated is still an important part of what the health district does.

Shuler Hoss a representative from Governor Gregoire’s office summed up the health district’s contributions:

“They have made these things (outbreaks and diseases) disappear because of the preventative programs they have put into place.” ■



U.S. Public Health Service Assistant Surgeon General Admiral Patrick O'Carroll