

Thelma Luther Tribute

By Dr. Ron Eckoff

Thelma Luther was born in Luther, Iowa on August 21, 1911. She graduated from Nursing School at Mercy Hospital in Des Moines, and earned a Bachelor of Science in Public Health Nursing from the University of Minnesota. She was then employed as a public health nurse in Washington County Iowa in 1936.

A little background: In the 1920s local public health units were proposed for the counties in Iowa. Each city, town, and township had their own board of health (city or town council or township trustees) which were responsible for public health in their jurisdiction. In 1924 county health units were established in Dubuque and Washington Counties. By 1936 county health units were established in Washington County, Des Moines County, Woodbury County and Polk County, exclusive of Des Moines. In 1936 a district health plan was proposed with public health nurses hired on a county wide basis (by the board of supervisors), paid jointly by the county and the state health department. For many years they actually received two separate paychecks (until the IRS wouldn't allow it). A group of counties was organized into a district with the state providing medical and nursing supervision and a public health engineer.

District 1, established in 1936 was headquartered in LeMars
District 2, established in 1937 was headquartered in Center-ville.

District 3, established in 1937 was headquartered in Manchester.

District 4, established in 1939 was headquartered in Fort Dodge.

Public health nursing became a separate division of the health department July 1, 1937.

In 1936 there were 195 maternal deaths in Iowa and a special project was established in Washington County. In this project the department paid local physicians for prenatal care for indigent and borderline mothers and provided prenatal and postnatal nursing care for all mothers. The project achieved a substantial reduction in maternal deaths. I believe Miss Luther was a part of that special project and also served as a general public health nurse in Washington County. After several years in the county Miss Luther became the supervisory nurse for District 7 which was headquartered in Washington. The supervisory nurses were called supervisory nurses because they supervised the county level nurses. They assisted the county board of supervisors in hiring and they did the performance evaluations of the county nurses.

After earning her MPH in Health Administration from the

University of Michigan in 1949, Miss Luther became the Director of Education within the Public Health Nursing Division in 1950. She continued in that position until being named Division Director in 1966. She was director until her retirement September 15, 1977.

During her tenure there was a rapid expansion of public health nursing in Iowa. Medicare and Medicaid were established in 1967 and the new local health act was passed by the Iowa Legislature in 1968. With local boards of health and the ability to charge fees for services, it was possible to generate interest in establishing public health nursing services in the counties. The department also had some federal funds to assist with start up or expansion. Between 1966 and 1976 the number of counties with public health nursing services increased from about half to 96 of the 99 counties. Many counties also increased from having just one public health nurse to two or more. Miss Luther was always very supportive of public health nurses continuing their education.

Miss Luther was named a Fellow of the American Public Health Association. The designation is reserved for selected members of the association and based on professional accomplishments. She served as president of the Iowa Public Health Association and of the Iowa League for Nursing. In 1949, the Middle States Public Health Association was organized in Des Moines with Dr. Walter L. Bierring as its first president. The group met in Des Moines again in 1959 and in 1966. Miss Luther was secretary/treasurer when the group was disbanded in 1968. In 1969, Miss Luther was selected by the American Public Health Association-National League for Nursing, Inc. to serve as a member of the board of review for accreditation of community nursing services.

The highlight of every year was a spring garden party for the regional supervisory nurses hosted by Miss Luther and Pilar Garcia.

Miss Luther loved to travel and after retirement, she and Pilar traveled to all seven continents. She was happy to get into an inflatable Zodiac from the base ship in visits to Antarctica and the Amazon River. The Swiss Alps and the Taj Mahal were also among the exciting destinations.

Actually, a year before retirement, she spent two weeks in Yucatan, Mexico helping with health related projects of students enrolled in the Yucatan Program of Central College in Pella. The program had been in operation for eight years, but this year students from the School of Home Economics of Iowa State University were included for the first time. The students stay for ten weeks and develop inde-

Thelma Luther Tribute continued



PROGRAM COMMITTEE

*From the April 30, 1961 IPHA News Letter
IPHA Program Committee*

L to R: Edmund Zimmerer, MD; R.B McAllister: Clyde Berry, PhD; Thelma Luther, RN; Stanley Hendricks, DVM; and Marjorie Lyford, RN

pendent study projects. Miss Luther prepared a 9 page report which was published in the IPHA newsletter. "My role was, along with the Iowa State University instructor's, to assist students to select health related projects for independent study, to assist in making the necessary local contacts to gather data and to assist in correlating data. This is very similar to work I have always done as a public health nurse in organizing community projects and assisting students."

In 1980 the Iowa Public Health Association honored Miss Luther by naming an award after her. A list of honorees can be found on the IPHA website. We would now like to honor Miss Luther again by establishing an endowment to support an annual Thelma Luther lecture. The goal is

\$10,000 and \$5,250 has been pledged. Watch for more information about how to contribute to this endowment.



Thelma Luther, RN; Dr. Ron Eckhoff



Dr. Pilar Garcia and Ms. Thelma Luther attending IPHA's 85th Anniversary Celebration