

From Mary Margaret Richardson, interviewed by Robert Tucker, 6 March 2000:

MMR: I believe the philosophy in those days, somehow, as I have come to reflect upon that time, was, you know, we have to hire these women, but we don't have to keep them. The philosophy, somewhat unstated, seemed to be take them out and get them dirty and they'll come in and say, "We quit."

So, of course, Kansas City, being smack dab in the middle of the country, did a lot of sanitation work. There were a lot of grain elevators and feed mills and food warehouses and rendering plants and a number of things, and, of course, being its position on the river, they had a number of terminal grain elevators.

So the early work was basic sanitation work. Well, also, I guess, the second day I was on the job, they came up to me and said, "What is your inseam size?" I said, "What? Who wants to know?" And they said, "Well, we have to get you some coveralls." You know, some of our inspectors in those days were six foot two, three, four. Well, I'm five foot three and didn't I look funny in long coveralls, so, the question was, "Well, we need to know your inseam size so we know what size coveralls to get you."

Clothing was a problem for women in those days. About the second or third day they took me to an animal feed mill. I didn't do anything. We went over to talk to management about something. But I had on a skirt, and we walked up this open grate for a couple of stories. Well, I'm sure the

guys down below got, you know, got a thrill. But after that it was, we can't do this like this anymore.

So I did wear coveralls for a while. I have some wonderful pictures in my coveralls and hard hat. But those weren't terribly glamorous, so we did settle eventually on the white trousers and the shirts, and that was more suitable attire, and I wore Wellington boots simply because it was, you know, decent footwear. I had boots.

But the early work was, of course, your traditional training in sample collections. We had some food warehouses. We did a terminal grain elevator probably in the first couple of weeks, and I wasn't really prepared. I didn't think that I was upset about it, but one of the investigators told me later, they said, "Well, we kind of figured you were because you went around the building and told everybody goodbye."

We got to this elevator, and the fellow that I was with, a very tall, raw-boned, Kansan, short bur haircut, was named Earl Stevens. We're down underneath in this leg of this elevator and the belt hasn't been used for several days and it's full of dust and on the belt are all of these tracks, and I'm thinking, "Oh, I'd hate to meet the critter that made those tracks. "

So there was a dead space under one of the legs, and some of the concrete blocks had been knocked out. Earl sticks his face in there. Well, this rat just ran right in front of his nose. Well, I'm supposed to be the one that was excited and upset when I saw my first rat. Well, Earl turns to me and his eyes were the size of saucers. "Did you see that?" We spent the next thirty minutes

trying to entice that thing out of the hole so we could take its picture. We were not successful with that.

But I never did like rats. Even when I got out and did independent work I was collecting some animal feed samples one day. I'm in this country elevator and it's dark and I hear, "Chatter, chatter, chatter," and I looked up and not three feet from me sat these two little beady eyes. Mice didn't bother me; I didn't want to be in the same room with a rat. Mice were okay, but rats . . . I saw one run up a guy's coverall leg one day, and I did not . . . You know, it didn't bother me a bit that he peeled those coveralls off as fast as he did because that was not a good experience. I always stuck my coveralls in my boots when we were out so that couldn't happen to me.

RT: When did you start traveling, covering an area on your own?

MMR: I think the philosophy then was you do a type of inspection once with a trainer, you do one semi-independently with a trainer with you, and the third time you're an expert. So it wasn't too long that I had my first road trip. Of course, I had had a couple of trips with a supervisor, and then started out on my own.

RT: Did you encounter, as sort of as a new girl on the block, if you will, any problems or any resistance on the part of industry management in having a lady inspector rather than a man inspector? Was that a problem at all?

MMR: Well, in some cases we surprised a lot of them. They tell the story of the guy in the rail yard that had just apparently gotten out of the shower and was walking through the yard office naked as a jay bird. And our car pulled up out in front and I got out, and apparently this poor man dove into the nearest locker, and he had handle marks on his back for some time, and I guess after that they started dressing when they knew women might be around.

No, industry was sometimes surprised and subsequently would complain that the women were harder on sanitation than the men. I don't know whether that was so or not, because we were taught the same way. So unless it was a stereotype that we were better house cleaners and so therefore their grain elevator should be as clean as a house, I'm not sure of that.

But generally management was extremely nice and very cooperative, and sometimes would want to do things for us that we really should have been doing . . . Like sample collection, you know. They didn't want you to go and throw your torpedo probe down in the bin. They'd rather do it for you. But then when you looked at how you were going to have to talk about how that sample was collected, it was not the right thing. So I often had nightmares of the rope from the torpedo probe wrapping around my ankle and being pulled into the bin, but that never happened. But management was generally very cooperative.

There was one time that was particularly funny, and this wasn't management, but I had been inspecting a cheese plant in northeast Iowa, and it was a small plant, and the town was also small. It consisted of a grain elevator and a post office and a café that was also the bar.

So I had been in the cheese plant in the morning, and at lunchtime I seeded to go to lunch. Well, of course, FDA had said, you know, never, never, never take a government car and park it where there's an alcohol sign. Well, it was the only place in town to go for lunch. I go in, and it's a long room and all the booths on the left side of the room were filled with eating farmers and so forth, except for the booth in the back. So here I am in my white pants and shirt, and I march all the way back and have my hamburger and my fries. I left, and on the way back to the cheese plant, I stopped for gasoline. This was in the days when, of course, the government cars all said, "Official Use Only. U. S. Government," da-da-da-da, and the guy is pumping gas for me. And he can hardly get the pump in the gas tank. Finally, he looks at me and he says, "Please, lady, tell me what you do. The whole town wants to know." So I gave him a little history of what I did and why I was there, and then I wanted to go and said, "Now go back and tell all your friends." So we caused a little bit of stir at times.