



Women IN RURAL WATER

By Lisa Schatz

Women have been involved in the rural water industry for many years. Board members/directors, general managers and office personnel are some of the positions held by women. Often, they are the unsung heroes who work tirelessly towards one common goal – the goal of supplying customers with ample quality water.

“I want to share their stories of how they became involved in the water industry,” says Lisa Schatz, finance manager of North Dakota Rural Water Systems Association. “These women have a combined work experience of over 120 years and are a great representation of the industry.”

From north to south, east to west these women represent rural water in a positive fashion and encourage more women to become involved.

Sandi Rupp



Sandi Rupp is the president of Southeast Water Users District.

Growing up rural, then having a career which required multi-state travels, Sandi Rupp found herself paying more and more attention to water. The reality and challenges of quantity and quality water can hit home. That reality impacted her life when she married into a third-generation Rupp family. “It was hard to realize the benefits of paying for quality water when my husband grew up utilizing artesian wells on the farm,” Rupp says.

Rupp traveled numerous states throughout her 20 years as a “section hand” for the railroads. She knew if there was ever that opportunity on the farm for water change, she was thirsty.

In the mid 90’s, an attorney representing the Dickey Rural Water System called to fill a board vacancy. And it began. Rupp was approved by the board to fill the vacancy until the next membership election. At first, she questioned her capacity serving in this position as she knew nothing about the dynamics of board operations much less a rural water system. Her education was limited to a high school diploma and she had never served or been involved with the community.

For women reading this article, she says, there is no monopoly of wisdom when it comes to being a voice. She learned in leaps and bounds how throughout the state of North Dakota rural water systems were constantly working in a diverse alliance to make a difference for communities, businesses and families. “I reflect back to those many years of struggling on our family farm,” Rupp says. “I am thankful for the hard-working efforts of those behind the scenes. As a director for nearly 25 years, the challenges are certainly real, yet the rewards continue to be priceless.”

In 2006, Rupp was elected committee director for LaMoure County Farm Service Agency. In 2009, she was elected Wano Township’s first female supervisor. Today, as she nears the age of 62, she encourages all women across the state to get involved. “It’s not always about worry, in doing the right thing, as much as the importance of doing something!” Rupp says.

Michele Schommer



Michele Schommer is the vice-president of Northeast Regional Water District and national director of North Dakota Rural Water Systems Association.

Michele Schommer has been involved in the water industry for 18 years. After many years of dealing with the struggles of utilizing well water in the city of Munich, the hopes of rural water, within the near future, was real.

Schommer took advantage of learning more about rural water and the possibility of having the option available on the farm. It brought great pleasure to learn the in’s and out’s of rural water and the wonderful people involved with water. It became apparent early on that being involved and engaged in the operations side of things and attending board meetings regularly proved to be very beneficial.

Over the years, Schommer has seen significant changes. The part of her positions she enjoys the least is “the political part of funding,” she says. However, the benefits outweigh the challenges. “Women have great ideas and see things from a different point of view. We are masters of multi-tasking and thinking outside the box,” Schommer says. “Take a chance on being involved on a board, it has been a tremendous and gratifying adventure for me.”

Michele has been married for 37 years, has three married sons and six grandchildren. In her spare time, she enjoys times with the grandkids, biking, camping and spending time outside.

Teresa Sundsbak



Teresa Sundsbak is the General Manager of North Prairie Regional Water District.

Prior to becoming the general manager of North Prairie Regional Water District (NPRWD), Teresa Sundsbak served on the board of directors for six years. Sundsbak began to develop a passion for rural water and when the manager position became available, she resigned from the board and applied for the position. Dedicating 16 years of her life to bringing people water that have been waiting for 25 years is extremely rewarding and the challenge of making that happen are the things she enjoys most. Shut-off day is the task she least enjoys.

NPRWD has grown by 45% over the last 10 years. Merging two systems and becoming NPRWD required an increase of storage by one million gallons and building onto the existing water treatment plant (WTP) to increase capacity was a necessity. As the general manager, Sundsbak oversees the office as well as the field operations. Her day begins at 8 a.m., when she visits with staff to determine priorities, follows up with requests from the day before, answers emails, returns calls, fixes problems and anything else that may arise. When asked about the changes occurring in the water industry, Sundsbak says, “regulatory with the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) is everchanging. Keeping up with technology for communicating with pump stations, water treatment plants (Scada) and meter readings is challenging. A big problem for the water industry is aging infrastructure and how we afford the costs of replacement while keeping an affordable water rate.” The most important skill to her position is to listen and communicate effectively.

In her spare time, Sundsbak loves to ride horse, work in the yard and enjoys time with family and friends. She and her husband, Mike, have been married for 47 years and have two children (Josh and Dani) and five grandchildren. Sundsbak and Mike farm and ranch south of Des Lacs with their son where they raise angus cattle and small grains. She has served on many boards, served as a 4-H leader, member of the Rose Valley Lutheran Church and on the infrastructure committee of the Chamber of Commerce.

Ann Oberg



Ann Oberg is the manager of McLean-Sheridan Water District.

Ann Oberg’s career began nearly seven years ago when she was hired to help facilitate the district change to radio-read meters and to train under the office manager. Since that time, Oberg has begun making it a career and thoroughly enjoys it.

She enjoys the fact that there is a constant to the work, along with the challenges of improving the system and responding to and preparing for all the unplanned challenges that come with working for a water utility. As with any position, unenjoyable times exist. The least enjoyable time for her is when there is a problem for a customer that may not have an immediate solution. Depending on the nature of the problem and the probability for a delayed response, she finds herself as unsatisfied as the customer.

Over the years, McLean-Sheridan Water District has seen its changes. It began right when Oberg started working for the district and the task was installing new meters with radio read capabilities. The new meters have shown to be a huge asset and aids in locating water leaks. She has seen the system greatly increase the amount of water users they serve. An expansion to the Brush Lake area, outer reaches of the system and assuming ownership of neighboring water lines greatly increased their customer base. The most essential part of her job would be time management, problem solving/troubleshooting skills, observation and good communication.

Oberg completed the Water and Wastewater Technology Program at Bismarck State College and finished with a 4.0 GPA. She received the Outstanding Student Award for the program in 2017. She holds a Grade 04 Water Treatment Operator and Grade 02 Water Distribution Operator certificate through the ND Department of Environmental Quality. In her spare time, Oberg spends time with her husband and two daughters. She enjoys watching her daughters participate in high school activities, cooking, reading, and sewing/crafting.

Geneva Kaiser



Geneva Kaiser, general manager for Stutsman Rural Water District.

Geneva Kaiser has been an employee of Stutsman Rural Water District (SRWD) for the past 32 years. She was hired as office manager in 1989 and then promoted to general manager in 2007. When she accepted the job as office manager, she quickly became aware that working for a rural water system was much more than just a job.

When Kaiser began her career with SRWD, the system was three years old. Throughout the years, the water users and miles of pipeline has grown significantly. Since 2010, the water district has been through seven phases of construction and now serves 19 cities and 2,450 users in six counties. Also, the district added the Spiritwood Energy Park to provide industrial water and waste water service to Great River Energy and Dakota Spirit Ag Ethanol.

Over time, the technological advances of AMR and SCADA have been a game changer for rural water systems. Thirty years ago, they had telemetry which consisted of a 2x4-foot rectangular metal box - eventually labeled “the dinosaur.” The “dinosaur” would alert operators when a problem arose, and staff would physically drive (sometimes hundreds of miles) to rectify the problem. With the advances of AMR and SCADA, employees often diagnose and monitor situations utilizing cell phones. On any given day, a wide variety of duties are performed, from an accountant, IT person, customer complaint, public relations, etc. “The diversity of the job always keeps it interesting, but the manager needs to be the glue that holds everything together to keep the water system viable,” Kaiser says. Kaiser enjoys coming to work every day to a job that still challenges her and has surrounded herself with a group of dedicated employees that care about rural people.

In Kaiser’s spare time she enjoys working in her flower beds and her vegetable garden. She also enjoys camping and fishing when time allows. “The award that has meant the most to me was the NDRWSA Outstanding Water Works Employee award that I received in 2016,” Kaiser says. “It was a very heartwarming and satisfying experience to receive an award like that from a group of my peers.”

There are many more opportunities today for women in the water industry. When Kaiser started in this business, there weren’t any females in jobs other than office management or clerical support. Today there are numerous female rural water managers, treatment plant operators and field operators in the industry.

Melissa Pitman



Melissa Pitman, office manager for Northwest Rural Water District.

Melissa Pitman’s career in the water industry began in October, 26 years ago.

“I never thought when I started with rural water that I would make a career out of it,” Pittman says. “I really enjoyed learning the ins and outs when I started. As the water industry began changing, I enjoyed the change and was curious to see where the water industry would lead. The people I work with have treated me so well. So, the thought of leaving never crossed my mind.”

Pitman’s favorite part of her job is the co-workers and truly enjoys coming to work every day. When the district experiences an outage and causes customers to be without water – it is the least favorite part of her job.

Over the years, the rural water district has experienced change. When Pitman began working, it was herself and the manager with 445 customer accounts. Today, it has increased to eight employees with more than 2,400 accounts. Also, technology development helps their system run more efficiently. Computer programs now monitor pump stations, pressure readings, and meter readings. In the past, staff would need to physically travel to and from to obtain that same information. The most essential skills to effectively perform her job duties would be extensive knowledge of computers, programs and organization skills.

In her spare time, Pitman likes to watch movies, scrapbook, and work outside in the yard. She and her husband, Sean, have been married for 26 years and have two sons – Dallas (16) and Denver (11). She graduated from Williston High School and received a B.S. in Business Management from Minot State University.

Sally Herda



Sally Herda, office manager for Greater Ramsey Water District.

Little did Sally Herda know that when she moved to Devils Lake in 1992 the role that water would play in her life. A career in rural water found her, rather than her pursuing a career in rural water.

Timing was everything as she moved to Devils Lake when the rural water system was under construction. Having previous municipal experience in public water systems, the transition to rural water was a natural fit. It was an exciting time to start from the ground up in a brand-new system. Today, the number of members has grown to over 2,400 service connections. As the system grew, her duties over the years changed – from handling the billing operations to overseeing operation and management of the office in general, including financial responsibilities, payroll and new account development among other duties. In 2017, Herda was honored with the “Outstanding Office Employee” award by the North Dakota Rural Water Systems Association.

One of the things Herda enjoy most in her job is the relationships that she has developed with her customers. Many have become so much more than customers; they have become friends. Knowing that she can make a difference in improving someone’s quality of life is especially gratifying. She also has enjoyed the working relationship with staff and her board of directors in a teamwork-based environment.

Like many other industries, their system has become more technology-driven with customers expecting more services and wanting a more interactive relationship. One of the most essential tools in this industry is the ability to communicate and provide effective customer service, which Herda believes has become a lost art. “I believe it is an important part of my job and who I am as a person,” she says.

Herda also works part-time for Skywest Airlines in Devils Lake which feeds into her travel bug as it gives her the opportunity for travel (a once in a lifetime trip to the Holy Land in December 2019 has been her favorite trip so far). Playing an active role in her faith and church is an important part of her life and she is involved in various ministries. Creating memories with family and friends also plays a big role in her life. Herda has two daughters, their spouses and five grandchildren live in the Fargo area who are the light of her life and she enjoys spending time with them as often as she is able. Other interests include gardening, canning, cooking, hiking, the outdoors, travel, reading and dabbling in wine-making with a friend.