

# “Loretta Simmons” spelled backwards = “Blair Supply”

By Dan Tousley  
NYRWA Circuit Rider III



If you have spent any amount of time in New York State involved in the slightest in the Waterworks or Sewer Industries and you have not heard of Loretta Simmons, then ask the person standing next to you. There is a very good chance that they have!

It is with great respect, as well as, sadness that I bring you news of Loretta's passing on Wednesday, November 10th, 2004, in Rochester, New York. She will indeed be gravely missed.

I am going to make an admittedly feeble attempt to do justice in portraying a story about a very remarkable lady who dedicated her life to nurturing and customizing a small construction business called the Frank Blair Co. in Hilton, New York through a couple of name changes, a business merger, and finally realizing her father's dream resulting in Blair Supply Corporation, a major icon in today's water, sewer, highway, and construction businesses.

Loretta used to accompany her father, Alvin, on various jobs when he operated the Frank Blair Co. in Hilton, New York. She did the same when her father started his own business in 1946 in Rochester. Loretta, age 19, and her brother, Elwin, were made partners in the Alvin Blair Co. in 1953, located at 244 Paul Road. She and her brother incorporated after their father's death.

She joined the Rochester Chamber of Commerce in 1958, later helping to establish the Gates-Chili council. She was the first woman to be elected president after the then 79 year history of the Rochester Chamber.

Loretta served as National President of the National Utility Contractors Association (NUCA) in 1985. Furthermore, she was awarded the association's prestigious “Ditch Digger of the Year Award”.

Among other groups, she was an active member of the Rochester Chapter of the National Association of Woman Business Owners (NAWBO). Loretta's personal, as well as business interests, were in the betterment of the water and sewer utilities serving the residents of New York State. She has been a long term member and supporter of New York Rural Water Association.

Loretta's Dad entrusted the 'Bookkeeping and Administrative' responsibilities of the business to her knowing full well that especially as a woman, she would need sharp skills in these areas to be successful in the future. He told her: “When the business needs to borrow money, it will be up to you to get it or we simply won't get it!” She did well.

When her brother was forced to retire in 1970 for

health reasons, Loretta merged Blair Supply and Alvin Blair Co. into Blair Supply Corporation.

The author was fortunate to have worked for Loretta and to have known her for many years. I remember 'day one', while she was giving me a 'guided tour' of the Rochester facility that she said “Good morning” to a busy warehouse worker who was passing the other way. He returned her greeting with a gravelly growl to his voice. She immediately turned on her heel and with genuine concern inquired as to when he had caught cold, how he was feeling, and what was being done to restore his health!

It became apparent that for many years Loretta had the rare and unique capability of operating a business with a personal, family type of atmosphere, yet within the realm of business professionalism. Loretta was well respected by her peers and competitors alike. I'll always remember attending an American Water Works Association convention in Indianapolis with Loretta when Blair Johnson was purchasing agent for the company. I was very impressed with the reception the 'Blair Crew' got when we entered a room full of hundreds of people from all over the country. I wondered if anyone in the room did not know Loretta and Blair!

She had a wit that she kept pretty well honed and would from time to time share with her people. I recall a time, when after 12 months she had to dismiss an unproductive employee. She said to me: “I don't know what he was upset about; I carried him three months longer than his mother did!”

Loretta Simmons had many outstanding lifetime achievements to be remembered for, but for me it is her personal attributes of intelligence, strength, determination, stability, grace, and tremendous integrity that she demonstrated daily that come to mind as I reflect on Loretta. Job well done!

Adieu means 'good-bye', 'farewell', 'I commend you to God'. We at New York Rural Water Association wish Loretta's husband, Eldon, well. We wish Blair Supply Corporation continued prosperity. And to Loretta, we thank you, and we bid you 'ADIEU'! ♠

## Fast Fact

*There are more than 400 golf courses and 55 downhill ski areas in New York State?*