

BLACK MOUNTAIN NEWS

Dedicated to the growing Swannanoa Valley

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Back to normal

Ridgecrest site of county's largest disaster

by Cynthia Reimer

Business is back to usual at the Ridgecrest Baptist Conference Center after over 300 attending a Sunday school conference there were stricken with food poisoning Saturday night.

In what officials have called the worst medical emergency in Buncombe County history, victims began to pour into Memorial Mission Hospital emergency room after 9 p.m. Saturday. Vomiting patients were soon filling halls, makeshift treatment areas in lounges, and, finally, the hospital cafeteria.

Doctors quickly ruled out botulism, a sometimes fatal form of food poisoning, as the source of illness and named as primary suspects salmonella and staphylococcus.

"It make people very sick" Mission Assistant Administrator Bill Moore explained the bacteria, "but it typically is not serious."

As victims continued to arrive, Memorial Mission put its disaster plan into effect about 10:10 p.m. About 200 off-duty hospital personnel quickly reported for work.

Though the largest number of patients prepared for in practice disaster drills was 100, hospital officials said they were pleased with their ability to handle nearly twice that number Saturday.

There was little doctors could do for the victims except to let the vomiting and diarrhea run its course. Dehydration was prevented by IVs, and Moore said that at least 50 gallons of Gatorade was purchased from local distributors. Gatorade is helpful in bringing the system back to normal and giving the patient strength after severe vomiting and diarrhea, Moore said.

About 1,500 ate at the buffet-style dinner at Ridgecrest Saturday night, the first meal of the Sunday school conference.

At the emergency room a young couple brought in a sick friend but were unaffected by the illness themselves. They described the evening's events.

"We had dinner at 5:30 or 6," the woman explained. "Then after the worship service, about 8:30 or 9, people just started getting sick. There was a choice of two meats and some seem to feel it was a meat."

The Black Mountain Fire Department received the first ambulance call at 9:17 p.m. for the "possible food poisoning" of one person at Ridgecrest. The ambulance was barely dispatched, according to Fire Chief Gary Bartlett, when a call was received for aid for 12 more victims.

A Ridgecrest bus, vans and ambulances began arriving at Memorial Mission shortly after 9:30. Before the

night was over, Emergency Medical Service vehicles from all over the county, as well as vans, buses, private cars and hearses were all used to

transport the miserable patients to Memorial Mission, St. Joseph's, and the VA hospitals in Asheville, Marion General Hospital and the American

Enka infirmary.

By early Sunday morning, only 64 remained hospitalized, and only one of those was in serious condition. This type of food-poisoning, Dr. Richard Landau, Memorial Mission pathologist, explained at a Sunday morning press conference, is self-limiting and usually dangerous only to small children, the elderly and those with diabetes, heart trouble or other health problems.

Some of the victims were in the first stages of shock when they arrived, Moore said, while others were suffering from dehydration.

The cause of the outbreak was a tasteless toxin present in something served at the buffet dinner, Dr. Landau said. "Ham, potato salad, pastries are classically associated with this," he said.

Buncombe County health officials began Sunday to examine foods at Ridgecrest and to interview patients to get at the cause of the food-poisoning. At press time, the cause was believed to be staphylococcus bacteria present in the sliced ham. Health officials are still searching for the source of contamination.

About 1:30 Sunday morning, some patients had recovered enough to return by van or bus to Ridgecrest. By 5 a.m. only 20 remained at Mission.

Anna Bell Price, supervisor of central activities at Ridgecrest, said the conference continued on schedule and none of the participants left the conference.

"We served the breakfast meal on Sunday morning following that (Saturday) evening meal," she said. "We've had no more problems. Everything is under control."

Mission assistant director Leon Bennett said the nearest experience the hospital has had to Saturday night's disaster occurred about five years ago when 35 burn victims were brought to the hospital following a prison fire in Marion.

That was easier for hospital personnel to handle, Bennett said, than Saturday's disaster because, "the sheer number (of victims) taxes the facility, personnel and supplies."

Black Mountain responds

Black Mountain Emergency Service personnel were first to arrive at Ridgecrest after receiving a 9:17 p.m. call for a "possible food poisoning." Almost immediately, a second call came in for aid for 12 more victims.

Before long, 35 ambulances were transporting victims, doubled up with stomach cramps, over I-40 to Asheville and Marion hospitals. Ambulance and police sirens filled the night for miles.

Black Mountain Fire Chief Gary Bartlett set up a command post at the Ridgecrest gate, where he and Black Mountain Police Officer Gary Sorrels coordinated ambulances and equipment.

A triage, or patient evaluation center was set up by rescue personnel, Officer Jerry Kerlee and Ridgecrest employees near the Ridgecrest infirmary.

When Civil Defense Preparedness Director Jerry VeHaun arrived on the scene about 10 p.m. he declared a disaster, Chief Bartlett said.

"This is not a drill. This is not a drill," radios relayed, as all Buncombe County personnel and equipment were called into service. Emergency personnel from other counties also responded to the call.

Swannanoa sent 10 emergency medical technicians and one rescue vehicle to the scene.

Black Mountain Police Officer Regina Wilson, also employed by Ridgecrest as a security guard, was on duty there that evening. She described the part area emergency personnel played at the scene.

The conference center, able to accommodate over 4,000, has many dormitories known only by names where patients were located. "The ambulance drivers didn't know Ridgecrest," Wilson said. "It's difficult to direct people." The Black Mountain Police Department directed drivers, and maintenance employees of Ridgecrest got into the ambulances and directed drivers to patients.

"For an unrehearsed crisis, everybody worked beautifully," Wilson said. She said that the conference center plans to send letters of thanks to agencies that helped in the crisis.

I-40 from Black Mountain to Asheville was blocked off to regular traffic and officers placed to direct patients in private cars to hospitals.



Tom McKay (left), Dr. Richard Landau and Bill Moore address questions at a press conference. Related pictures on page 8.

The WLOS-TV hot air balloon will be on hand for the Sourwood Festival.

Sourwood Festival opens Wednesday

Black Mountain-Swannanoa Chamber of Commerce "Fourth Annual Sourwood Festival" will begin August 5 and run through August 8.

Andy Andrews, chairman of the Sourwood Committee, announced that while the festival will feature most of last year's outstanding events and more, a number of changes have been made. One was to center the majority of the activities in the downtown section of Black Mountain. The parade on Wednesday August 5th will be a good old hometown parade. The hot air balloon will really soar up into the skies and not be hampered by power lines and buildings. And, an additional street dance will be held on Friday night on Cherry Street.

Once again the festival will feature attractions, sports, music, a variety of food—something for everyone in the

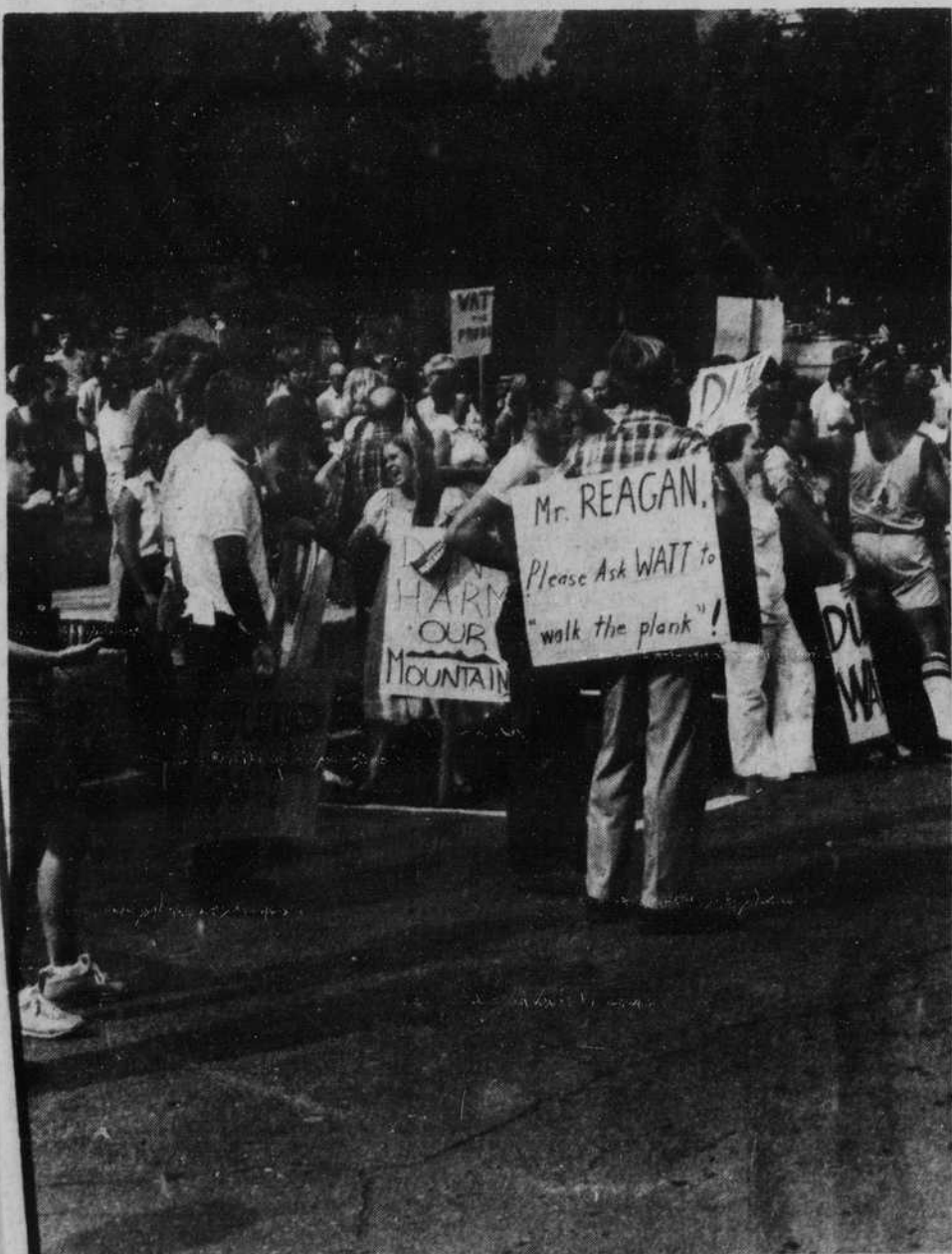


family to take part in and enjoy. Free transportation between sites and events will be by surrey and hay rides.

George Venturella, co-chairman, said there is still time for anyone to enter the parade and other competitive events. Just call the Chamber at 669-2300 for further information.

Mayor Tom Sobol and president of the Chamber, Margaret Slagle, encourage people to come out throughout the festival week and enjoy themselves.

News deadline--5 p.m. Monday



Creative signs and slogans cropped up everywhere when 700 protesters gathered at a rally to express their disapproval at the policies of Secretary of Interior James Watt.

Watt visit draws cheers and jeers

by Cynthia Reimer

U.S. Secretary of the Interior James Watt told a crowd gathered to greet him Friday at the Asheville airport that he intends to "open America to Americans." The Americans Watt had in mind were not environmentalists.

"When it's a choice between backpackers and hunters and fishermen, we're going to go with the hunters and fishermen every time," declared the controversial official to a group of lumber industry employees.

Watt was accompanied by Representative Billy Hendon who was instrumental in bringing him to WNC to speak at the annual Asheville Area Chamber of Commerce dinner Friday evening.

Introducing him to the 100 or so gathered at the airport, Hendon called Watt, "a man who thinks like we do."

Watt said in a press conference following his 9:30 a.m. arrival that he would not support legislation allowing oil drilling or lumbering in the national parks. He said he was greatly concerned about health and safety conditions in the parks, which he believes will cost \$1.6 billion to correct.

Asked if public criticism has caused any changes in his policies, Watt replied that the environmental groups have now lost "their privileged position in Washington," which has "opened America to Americans."

Watt administrators about one third of the total area of the United States, including national parks, forests and other public lands.



James Watt (left), and Rep. Bill Hendon.

Following the airport press conference, Watt and Hendon left to confer with U.S. Forest Service and Smoky Mountain National Park officials in North Carolina and Tennessee.

His welcome by the lumber industry at the airport was warm, with music and signs supporting his policies, but local opposition roused 700 protesters at a rally and march Friday evening in Asheville.

A coalition headed by Ralph Burns staged the rally, with speakers from area and national environmentalist groups speaking to cheers from the crowd.

Marchers ranging from grandmas to toddlers carried posters and sang "This Land is Your Land" in a line half a mile long up Charlotte Street to the Grove Park Inn, where Watt was to address the sell-out Chamber dinner.

At the Inn, the protesters chanted, "Stop Watt! Stop Watt!" The Secretary of the Interior did not publicly acknowledge the presence of the group.

Kay Cole joined about 40 other protesters from the Black Mountain

area at the rally. She said she had mixed feelings about the effect. "It was a good showing of people," she said, "but I felt like we were doing it for the media. I felt we should have been at the airport."

Weather review



July 21--high 85, low 60 degrees.
July 22-- high 83, low 65 degrees.
July 23--high 82, low 57 degrees.
July 24--high 83, low 64 degrees.
July 25--high 86, low 63 degrees; .45 inches precipitation.
July 26--high 88, low 62 degrees.
July 27--high 84, low 64 degrees.

Weather information courtesy of WFGW Radio, Black Mountain.