

Ralph Varnam Doesn't Plan To Let Retirement Slow Him Down

BY RAHN ADAMS

After the first of the year, Ralph Varnam won't be "dragging his heels" around the Brunswick County Government Complex anymore.

Anyone who has seen the energetic building and grounds employee scurrying around the complex over the past 13 years, though, knows the heels of his shoes are literally all he drags on the job. That's just the way he walks.

The 65-year-old Varnamtown resident plans to retire Jan. 1, but retirement doesn't mean his work shoes will get a rest. "I'm not going to go home and sit down," Varnam said. "I want to keep on working... My wife said I'm going to run her nuts."

Varnam, a Brunswick County native, has been married to the former Beatrice Lancaster for 41 years. They have two grown children—Howard Varnam of Wilmington and Karen Bridger of Long Beach—and three grandchildren.

Looking back on his 13 years with the county, Varnam said he will miss doing "a little bit of everything" in building maintenance and groundskeeping. "I work with all the departments here," he said, "and I've always tried to do my job to help keep the complex running."

Although his job has been "aggravating" on occasion—such as the times he was called out of bed at night or away from church on Sunday morning—Varnam said he has enjoyed his work, especially landscaping and other outdoor tasks. As far as any inconveniences were concerned, he noted, "I always figured it was my job, and that's what they hired me for was to do my job."

He said he lives by three rules: to say nothing if he can't say something good about someone; to treat everyone fairly; and to give a day's work for a day's pay. "I don't believe in loafing," he added.

Varnam hasn't had the chance to do much loafing over his working career, which spans five decades. His father died when Ralph—the eighth of 14 children—was only 16 years old. After leaving Shallotte High School before graduation, he worked as a commercial fisherman, then served in the U.S. Navy during World War II.

As a seaman and radar operator on a troop transport vessel, Varnam crossed the Atlantic Ocean 38 times between 1943 and 1946, traveling to Europe and North Africa. He said his ship experienced "several close calls," such as submarine attacks and enemy bombing in England.

For five years after the war, Varnam worked for U.S. Department of Commerce in Wilmington, where he



RETIRING COUNTY EMPLOYEE Ralph Varnam (left) discusses an upcoming task at the county complex with Building and Grounds Supervisor R.C. Dixon.

helped maintain a reserve fleet of ships. Then he signed on with the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers for five years,

snagging rivers all along the North Carolina coast. He spent the next 16 years working for various dredge com-

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—R.C. Dixon, Supervisor Building and Grounds

panies from Georgia to Delaware—jobs he described as the toughest and most dangerous work he has ever done.

In 1976, Varnam went to work for Brunswick County, digging and clearing ditches in the county's drainage department. Two years later when the complex was completed, he accepted his current job in building and grounds.

Throughout his 13 years with the county, Building and Grounds Supervisor R.C. Dixon has been his boss. "I think the grounds ought to speak for themselves," Dixon remarked. "Ralph's been an excellent worker."

"He's faithful. You can't even get him to take his vacation," the supervisor said, then added with a smile, "What I'll miss is I won't hear him coming down the sidewalk dragging his shoes."


When his full-time career ends next month, Varnam intends to look for a part-time job, not just to keep himself busy but also to bring in extra income. "I'm going to have to work part-time to supplement my retirement," he said.

He added that he hopes to find a part-time job besides commercial fishing since it is no longer very profitable. "If I work in the river," he said, "I'm going to do it for fun."


Varnam said he also will continue to be active at Dixon's Chapel United Methodist Church, where he has been a member for 30 years and now serves on the administrative board.

Although he wouldn't be specific, Varnam said he is thinking about running for public office in two years. He did note, though, that he wouldn't consider running against his older brother, Tracie, for mayor of Varnamtown.

And who knows? If Varnam was referring to an upcoming county commissioners' race and if he were to be successful, Dixon might not have to miss hearing the retiree's footsteps at the county complex after all.



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