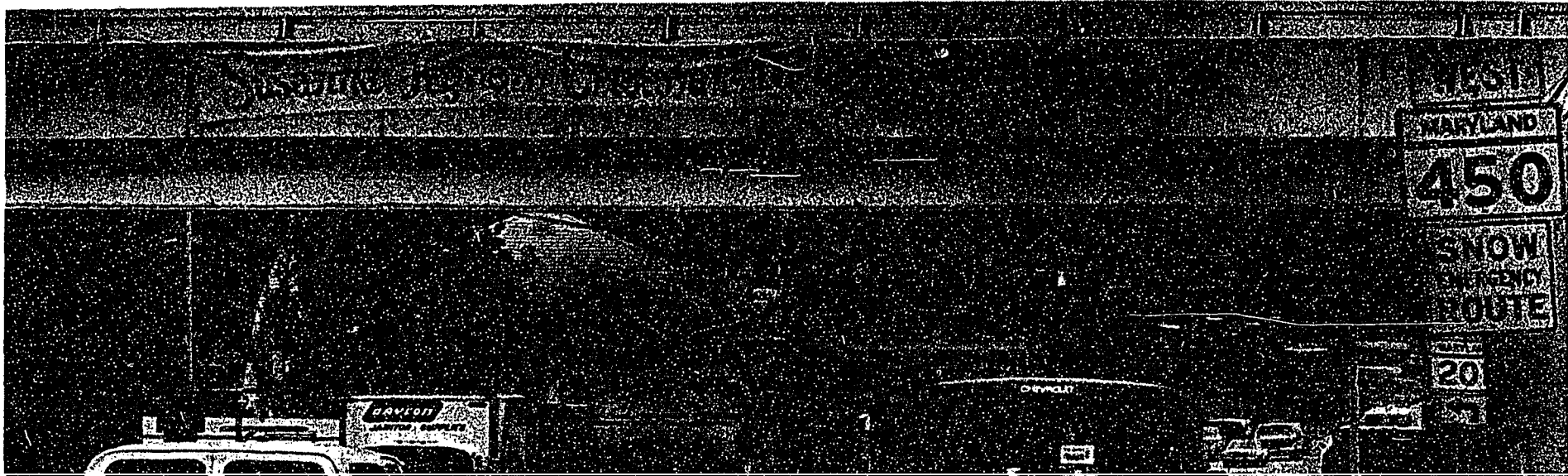


Tending Bladensburg's Business

By Judith Valente Washington Post Staff Writer

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By Vanessa Barnes Hillian—The Washington Post

A banner hangs from an overpass on Rte. 202 in Bladensburg announcing the honor accorded Susanna Kyner Cristofane for years of service.

Tending Bladensburg's Business

Retired Mayor Recalls 30 Years of Town Work

By Judith Valente
Washington Post Staff Writer

Don't ask Susanna Kyner Cristofane, mayor emeritus of Bladensburg, questions such as "how many residents live in the town?" or "what is the tax rate?" The pixyish 80-year-old can't tell you details like that.

But she does remember the day 30 years ago, when, as a Town Council member, she volunteered to pick up a five-gallon can of yellow paint that town employees were going to use to draw the first yellow lines on several streets.

"I was over at the old town hall with the mayor at that time and suddenly we realized we didn't have stirrer for the paint. So the mayor says, 'I know what to do,' and he goes home and gets his wife's electric mixer. Well, he sticks it in the can and it just throws yellow paint all over the walls. . . . I bet it wrecked his wife's mixer, too," she says as a twinkle comes to her eyes.

Cristofane was first elected to the Town Council in 1953 when Bladensburg had a do-it-yourself government: elected officials answered phones at Town Hall and ran errands that the public works force might do today.

She became mayor in 1974 and held the post until she retired from politics last May to tend to her husband and the chickens, dogs and cats on her spacious estate on 48th Street.

Last week, County Executive Parris Glendening, County Council members, the mayors of several other Prince George's County municipalities and hundreds of Bladensburg residents gathered at the town's firehouse to honor her. Glendening called her "an irreplaceable and treasured asset to the town of Bladensburg."

"I was just expecting a little shindig down at the Town Hall . . . [But] it looks like they went through the phone book and invited everybody," said the attractive, silver-haired Cristofane.

Her recollections of life in Bladensburg are a capsulized version of the town's progress in the past 80 years. The daughter of a railroad contractor, Cristofane came to town in 1904 when she was a year old. Her family moved into Bostwick, a historic mansion on the corner of 48th Street that

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By James K.W. Atherton—The Washington Post

Susanna Cristofane at home, a historic 1746 mansion that her family acquired in 1904.

Bladensburg's Retired Mayor Recalls Her Years of Service

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dated from 1746. It had been the home of an early U.S. postmaster general.

In those days, Bladensburg was a quiet country town, home to federal employes and to vegetable farmers, who carried their products by horse and wagon to markets in Washington. But the town became pretty wild during the prohibition era, the former mayor said, because it housed a number of "rip-snortin' saloons."

Cristofane attended a three-room brick school in the town and Central High School in the District. Unlike many of the girls with whom she went to high school, she enrolled in college, graduating from Goucher College in Baltimore with a biology degree. Afterward, she worked several years in the entomology department at the Smithsonian Institution, classifying spiders.

At 33, she married Felix Cristofane, who eventually became a top official of Franklin D. Roosevelt's Puerto Rico Reconstruction Administration.

It was not until 1953 that Cristofane became active in town government. "My husband went to a town meeting with a neighbor and they thought it was the worst. It wasn't handled very properly," recalled Cristofane, who, as mayor, said she would adjourn meetings rather than see them get "rowdy."

"He came home and said, 'good gracious, we've got to have better people than that.' . . ."

"I don't think he's been to a meeting since," she said, laughing.

By the 1950s, Bladensburg had passed through two major stages of development, one after each world war. It was during those periods that most of the small, moderately priced frame houses that typify Bladensburg were built. In those years, a junior high and high school were constructed to accommodate the growing number of families with children.

The burning issues of that day were whether the town would have its own police department and trash collection service.

Today, the hilly square-mile town of 7,600 residents has an 18-member police department and twice-weekly trash collection, services Cristofane

helped develop. The junior high school has closed because of declining enrollment, while the town's senior citizen population keeps growing.

Asked about her staying power in politics, Cristofane responds, "I guess the people figured they knew me. . . . I had no particular style; I just tried to use a little judgment."

The \$3,000-a-year job of mayor, she said, was never burdensome. "We're a typical small town with typical needs—police protection, fire protection, streets that need to be cleaned and repaired," said Cristofane, who also was secretary-treasurer of the Prince George's County Municipal League for 25 years.

One of her proudest achievements as mayor, she said, was starting a program to plant pear trees along town streets. "They have a lovely bloom in the spring and they don't get all straggly and lean all over everything. And in the fall, the leaves turn a beautiful red."



By James K.W. Atherton—The Washington Post
Cristofane was mayor from 1974 to last May.