

Charles Clevenger

by Rosemary Horvath
For the Gratiot County Herald



*Chief Chuck Clevenger
with Mayor Thomsen. Now, Good Luck Ahead
C. J. Bush*

Charles Clevenger is accustomed to feeding crowds. His clientele these days are students in St. Louis Public Schools and Ashley Community Schools as the food services director for both and employee of the food service management contractor, Compass Group/Chartwells.

There was a time Clevenger oversaw food preparation for hundreds on board five different submarines during his 24-year U.S. Naval career.

And his assignment as executive chef at the weekend Maryland presidential retreat during the administrations of Ronald Reagan and George H.W. Bush conjures up memories. "President Reagan liked his grilled chicken," recalled Clevenger, who was in his 30s when Reagan was in office.

Seated in his small office off the kitchen at the St. Louis middle school, Clevenger said that President Bush spent 47 weekends out of the year at the mountain retreat. A favorite story is when Bush came up to him and said, "Get yourself a beer Chuck and let me show you how I cook a steak."

Bush ate a hamburger and split pea soup every Sunday for lunch. The soup was one of Clevenger's specialties.

Asked if he still has the recipe, he replied "Somewhere at the house I do, because it doesn't meet today's standards."

Clevenger has been in his current position going on four years this July. Originally from Carrolton, near Saginaw, he and wife Debbie Brewer live in Breckenridge. "We were high school sweethearts."

During his early childhood, Clevenger accompanied his father to his places of employment. His father had been executive chef at three of Saginaw's fine dining restaurants that no longer are in existence. There was Johnny Ryan's and Treasure Island and the private Germania Town & Country Club.

Clevenger never envisioned himself taking up the trade because he saw the long, hard hours his father worked.

Even so, when he joined the Navy he signed up for what he was familiar with. He only intended to stay four years which was enough time to pay for college on the G.I. bill. He discovered food management was his calling. An extra benefit was traveling the world. Uppermost in his memory are Naples, Italy, Athens, Greece, Portsmouth, England, Holy Loch, Scotland, Williamshaven, Germany and Bergen, Norway.

Had he experienced the cuisine? "Oh yes. I sampled the cuisine. I learned the flavors and different techniques. It's true what is said about the American melting pot," that American dishes are borrowed from many ethnic groups. "Food here is diverse like a salad bowl made together as one."

The Clevengers still search for independently-owned restaurants where menus are devised. But fine dining and mom and pop places are disappearing, pushed out by changing consumer preferences that lean toward chain restaurants. Clevenger attempts to replicate satisfying meals he finds, to make them fit food requirements at school.

He says there is no difference preparing meals for kids, or presidents. "They are both hard. I get a lot of satisfaction seeing expressions on faces when they like what they are eating." He devises menus based on what kids like. Chartwells dietitians indicate a green symbol on the computer software when a menu complies with nutritional standards.

Clevenger again will organize the free week day summer meal program that begins June 13 at three locations in St. Louis: Nikkari Elementary indoors, Clapp Park outside and Church of God, 520 Olive St., indoors. The program corresponds with summer school. Last year the only feeding site was Clapp Park. Clevenger decided to expand locations to reach all sections of the city, and more kids.

Breakfast will run from 8 to 9 a.m. and lunch, from 11 a.m. to 12:30 p.m. "Meals are open to any child up to age 18. There is no paperwork involved," stressed Clevenger.

Around 50 kids participated last year. Clevenger hopes to see more. The program is sponsored by U.S. Department of Agriculture.

Emphasis is on providing kids nutritious meals year-round. During the school year well over 50 percent of the student body at all the schools participate in the Universal Breakfast program. There's the "second chance breakfast" at the middle school, which means kids who don't make school in time for the early breakfast can catch a breakfast snack bar and piece of fruit between first and second periods.

Clevenger said, "The purpose is to ensure students have a good breakfast so they improve academically. You can't learn if you are hungry."

The theory is similar to one practiced on board those submarines, some the size of football fields. When you are in a vessel submerged underwater for long stretches a morale booster and the best thing to look forward to is a good meal, Clevenger said.