



'Mickey' Thomas
enjoys her retire-
ment at home sur-
rounded by pictures
of her family.

Diane Saling/
Ruidoso News

She's been there and done that

83-year-old retires after 19 years with the state Monument
Division in Lincoln and life full of challenges

BY DIANNE STALLINGS
RUIDOSO NEWS STAFF WRITER

Minor "Mickey" Thomas officially retired Nov. 30, after 19 years with the state Monument Division in Lincoln.

But she didn't act hastily. She waited until she was 83, probably the oldest state employee on record. But then, Thomas isn't someone to be daunted by age or challenge. She didn't even start working for the division of the New Mexico State Museum until she was 64.

She's used to switching gears at a time when many people are putting on the brakes.

After helping on the family ranch, running a fruit stand and raising five children, Thomas began nursing again when she was 52 and started working in the state museum when she was 60, under the now-defunct state Lincoln County Memorial Commission.

She initially helped out in a wool shop in the settlement, but her friend, Pat Ward, who headed the Commission, wanted her to work for the state.

"She said I'd have to take a test and I told her it'd been 50 years since I went to school. I never was good in math, but I studied an old English book and I scored 97 out of 110 questions, the highest of the 20 who were referred to her for interviews," Thomas said.

When one of the commission members had a falling out with the governor, the group was stripped of its administrative powers and the property in Lincoln was leased to the Lincoln County Heritage Trust for about 15 months. The Monuments division took back the property and Thomas was moved into a job first as a ranger and then as a clerk/receptionist in June 1975.

But receptionist didn't mean sitting at a desk. Besides cleaning duties, she filed and cataloged all of the photographs in the monuments museum.

"That kept us busy in the win-



Thomas spent many years at this desk in Lincoln.

courtesy photo

ter," she said. "I was told to read books so I could answer questions and interpret the history for people, and I read until I had mental indigestion."

That kind of enthusiasm is typical for Thomas, says DeAnn S. Kessler, Monument Manager in Lincoln.

She's worked with Thomas for 14 years in Lincoln, which lies between Capitan and Hondo on U.S. 380.

"She's greeted hundreds of thousands of visitors and shared her logical wisdom consistently," Kessler said. "This lady is a walking encyclopedia. At 83 years of age, 64 years of marriage, raising five children, working as a hospital nurse, farming apple orchards, cattle ranching and working as a state employee for more than two decades, there's not a crossword puzzle she can't work."

"Mick's been an excellent coworker and a close personal friend to Lincoln State Monument employees. I'm proud to have worked with her and will miss her immensely."

Growing up

Thomas grew up in El Paso, attended Austin High and Texas Western University, where she studied nursing and lived the single life.

Back then nursing students weren't allowed to marry.

"The ones who tried were found out and kicked out," she said.

Her mother sent her to a dude

ranch in Silver City one summer. To avoid having each girl at the ranch pay \$2.50 for grandstand seats at a local rodeo, an arrangement was struck with several of the single cowboys to get the girls admitted as their wives.

"John Thomas was my husband," but he was the only cowboy who didn't ask out their wives that night to a dance," she said. "He was an athlete and didn't go to dances before an event. At the end, though, he treated me royally."

That was July 4, 1934. She went back home. They corresponded for the next month and married Aug. 21.

They lived near Lincoln, now a historical landmark community, but then still a sleepy little settlement that progress and time had bypassed. Eighteen months later, she was running a fruit stand and living in the back of the building transported from Fort Stanton. More moves followed in the same general area of Picacho and Hondo, before the couple settled in San Patricio for 29 years.

"The owner wanted \$500 for the house, an L-shaped, three-room adobe," she said. "My husband asked if he could wait until after July 4. I stayed home with our two little girls and we sold \$20 from the fruit stand. My husband rode in a rodeo in the morning in Ruidoso and in the evening at Fort Sumner and won \$244 each. With my money added,

we got the place.”

They moved the house twice as they changed locations.

“Dad said we were the only people he knew who moved their house with them,” she said.

A 1965 flood caused extensive damage, but the Thomases borrowed money and began repairing the house about the same time they were buying the ranch they now live on about a mile west of Lincoln.

“I told my husband, we can’t afford both and he said he’d rather live on the ranch,” she said.

By that time, the house had grown to 12 rooms full of furniture. After selling it, the Thomases stored their furniture in a barn and lived in a trailer. What was to be a temporary arrangement last 12 years.

“I hated it,” she said. “One of my daughters suggested I buy a bigger mobile home, but I said it would still shake in the wind.”

She was determined to move into a solid structure, so her sons built an apartment for their parents above the well house on the ranch. They still live there today, sharing the sunny deck with two mongrels, Tobie and Spot, they took in and neutered.

Thomas was used to working.

“You didn’t live around my husband and not work,” she said. “I baled hay, picked apples and ran the stand.”

At the museum, she worked

with other employees to create a household display, she sewed curtains and she compiled detailed information on inventory and exactly where every item was displayed or stored.

She even took apart every gun in the display, cleaned and reassembled it.

“Father was a police officer and he demand-

ed that all of his children know how to take apart and clean guns and put them back together,” Thomas said. “That was our only recreation. Dad and the family went out to the shooting range.”

When she joined the Monuments division, it was the first time she ever paid into a retirement fund.

“I wanted to work there 25 years, but my body gave out and I felt I wasn’t carrying my weight,” Thomas said.

Her ability to scrub anything shining clean and keep it that way was legend at the division and before, when she worked at the hospital in Ruidoso 22 years earlier.

The mutual admiration society goes both ways. Thomas said.

“We had the best team in the world with Jack (Rigney, former Monuments manager, who also retired recently) and Dee,” Thomas said. She’s happy to see Kessler succeed Rigney as manager, she said.

Thomas said with her new free time, she’s looking forward to spending more days at her home on the 10-section ranch and visiting with her family, including her five children: Catherine, 62, Virginia 60, Frances, 57, Jack, 56 and Stanley, 54; nine grandchildren and nine great grandchildren.