

Dr. Googin and his early days at Y-12, part 11 — Early days of noise, secrets, and military ‘types’

As we continue the story of John Googin’s early days at Y-12, he also noted in his biography of the Manhattan Project years, some observations about Oak Ridge in general. John’s perception was acute and his interest intense in all things he encountered. A new pioneer town must have held an attraction to him when he could find time from his pressing work schedule to engage in the local social life and commerce.

He was riding the buses around town and notes they were free. In the summer months John found the city of Oak Ridge filled from ridge to ridge with dust from the unpaved roads and in the winter months with black smoke from the soft coal being burned to heat the homes in inefficient furnaces.

The Y-12 “horn” could be heard all over town. I wonder if this was a steam whistle. As you may know, “Big Toot” – the historic Y-12 Steam Whistle that for years sounded the shift changes at Y-12 could indeed be heard in all of Oak Ridge. In fact, that is the reason it was finally silenced...a strong complaint from at least one vocal person living in Oak Ridge who regarding the “noise” from that “horn” to be annoying and wanted it stopped.

Someone knows the details of that story, I am sure. But I wonder if anyone could tell me the actual “horn” that was in use when John Googin mentions the sound of it in 1944. If so, please contact me with the details.

There have been at least three steam plants in Y-12 over the years and a fourth one is being constructed now. The two that I suspect would have been in operation in 1944 would have been Building 9401-1, completed in June 1943 and located in the eastern portion of the plant near Building 9202 where John would have worked, and Building 9401-2, completed in December 1943 and located in the western portion of the plant.

John also noted that you could at times hear a roar in the background along Outer Drive. That, he said, was “Y-12 running.” But he quickly states it was the sound from the ventilation fans in the rows of Alpha buildings that made the noise, not any element of the basic Calutron process, which John noted, “all ran rather quietly.”

Being interested in people and always one to notice when someone was trying to impress the “big bosses,” something John surely could never have been accused of doing, the military personnel were noted by John as being of two kinds. The military personnel who were in Oak Ridge had been selected from all branches of the military services because of their skills.

One type of military personnel John noticed dressed just like civilian employees and worked right alongside the workers. The other type he noticed suited up in their military uniforms and attempted to be sure things were looking good when folks like General Groves or Colonel Nichols appeared on the scene, which happened periodically.

These military personnel, John equated with the Department of Energy’s oversight in later years, but in the Manhattan Project years, the oversight was provided by military officers. The Tennessee Eastman Company managers were responsible for the plant, but the military officers watched the operations closely and were ultimately the managers of the key operations.

General Groves was said to have frequented Oak Ridge especially during the early days of the start up of the Alpha Calutrons. During that failed first attempt to become operational, he is said to have actually gone on the operating floor of Building 9201-1 (Alpha 1) and made the decision on the spot to remove the Calutrons and return them to Allis Chalmers to be rebuilt.

John also mentioned that he wrote some of his buddies who were in the military and who were being staged for the invasion of Japan. While he wished to be able to tell them of the project on which he was so intimately familiar and knew what was being done at Y-12, he refrained. He only said he was working on something “big” and important enough that it might keep them out of Japan.

One soldier answered his mail with a statement that “he knew about radar and proximity fuses, but what else could you say?” Well, John could not say anything more about the atomic bomb specifically or what was actually being done at Y-12. However, he did mention that after Little Boy was dropped on Hiroshima, he received notes of thanks from his military friends with whom he was corresponding.

Bus trips to Knoxville provided John opportunity to observe the same black smoke hanging over the city there as was found in Oak Ridge and for the same reason – soft coal being burned for heating. His trips to Knoxville always included a stop at the University of Tennessee library. There he would research those books where the texts on uranium were found to be well used with a discolored streak along the closed pages and the natural tendency to fall open to the sections describing uranium.

Social life in Oak Ridge was abundant. But John’s “more-than-one-shift-a-day work pace” kept him from taking full advantage of the dances on the tennis courts and other such engaging activities. He was much too busy with the task at hand...making the material needed for the world’s first atomic bomb to be used in warfare.