

Y-12 History Center and some special artifacts

The Y-12 History Center was opened to the public and Y-12 personnel in July, 2007, when the ribbon was cut dedicating the New Hope Center for operations. The Jack Case Center was opened at that same time. In the four plus years since, the history center has taken on a life of its own.

Almost immediately the history center became a source of pride for Y-12 retirees and workers alike. Artifacts began to arrive and exhibits grew from just a few items at the beginning, to sixteen tables full now. Many of the exhibits result from suggestions made regarding some item of interest brought to the center.

Examples are the Blood in Gemini project Y-12 did in the 1960s for the National Aeronautics and Space Administration, the Moon Box, also for NASA, and the 48-star flag returned after 65 years, among others. We now have a virtual tour of the Y-12 History Center online at http://www.y12.doe.gov/about/history/history_center.php.

Many retirees have donated items from their personal collection. Walker Smith gave me an artifact from the BIG (Blood in Gemini) project that was built as a demonstration unit. It has a plastic side on it so you can view the internal operation of the mechanism designed to expose blood to the conditions in space.

Just last week I received a most special loan to the center, the very first isotope other than uranium separated in a calutron at Y-12. It is Copper 63. This item had been given to Leon Love as a gift when he celebrated his 25th anniversary at Y-12. It is enclosed in plastic. We will make a special display exhibit of it.

Then just today I received a phone call from Bob Wesley. Bob was the Director of Public Relations at Martin Marietta Energy Systems when he retired. He had first come to work for Union Carbide Nuclear Division in 1961 and served five years on the public information staff at the Oak Ridge National Laboratory before coming to Y-12.

The specific reason for his call was to see if I would be interested in the three volumes of news releases and press stories he had saved from his time working at ORNL, Y-12 and Energy Systems. These documents featured many highlights of Y-12's special capabilities at the time that other government agencies or private industry might be interested in knowing about. Bob had been asked to promote the technology through press releases, and he did a fine job of it.

Of course I said yes and went directly and picked them up. What I found was an amazingly well laid out set of three-inch wide white three-ring binders chocked full of papers.

Bob also showed me a scrapbook he had kept, starting in March, 1986, when he was promoted to Director of Public Relations. The newspaper clippings, from the 1980s and 1990s, contained in the scrapbook sure brought back memories.

The scrapbook is a good record of news items about Y-12, and a copy will be a welcome addition to the Y-12 History Center where visitors seem to be eager to review some old Y-12 bulletins that are bound copies. We will do the same for Bob's scrapbook.

Bob also loaned me the three volume set of news releases and stories promoting technology at the Oak Ridge government sites. I found some very interesting historical information just looking through the books.

For example, there are several news stories during the 1960s and early 1970s featuring the Apollo Lunar Sample Return Container, or Moon Box. One that caught my eye was the following caption to a photograph of a speck of moon dust that resembled a person's face in profile:

“A ‘Man in the Moon’? A speck of dust magnified some 700 times by a scanning electron microscope at the Oak Ridge Y-12 Plant revealed this cameo profile labeled ‘Man in the Moon,’ ‘Indian Chief,’ or even ‘Woman with Bonnet.’ The dust speck, smaller than the period at the end of this sentence, was being examined by Y-12 research chemist R. K. Bennett when he discovered the surprising resemblance to a human head. The dust specimen was obtained during the Apollo-11 mission.”

A second story that immediately drew my attention was the one that detailed the transition from New Hope Pond to Lake Reality, the holding ponds that serve as a stop gap measure should Y-12 release anything in East Fork Poplar Creek that needs to be held up to keep it from going into the City of Oak Ridge. This was a date I had been looking for in connection with the recent articles on monitoring the creek.

That transition took place on November 8, 1988. Here is the news release:

“Lake Reality Construction is proceeding on Lake Reality (formerly called East Fork Basin), a 2.5-acre lined sedimentation basin that will replace New Hope Pond at the east end of the Y-12 Plant. The schedule calls for the water from Upper East Fork Poplar Creek to be directed into the new basin by November 8, 1988. Unlike New hope Pond, Lake Reality has a synthetic liner to facilitate removal of future sediments from the lake. Water will be drained from New Hope Pond and treated to remove pollutants, and the sludge will be stabilized and capped. New Hope Pond went into operation in 1963 to serve as a settling and holding basin for Upper East Fork Poplar Creek, a natural stream that originates in Y-12 and flows through the City of Oak Ridge before emptying into the Clinch River.”

So, Bob Wesley has provided a treasure trove of excellent information. We will scan it and make it available to visitors at the Y-12 History Center and will also put it online for viewing at the Y-12 History Center website.