

### Y-12 and some leaders in 1980s, part 3

Continuing with the mercury contamination at Y-12 and three of the leaders who had responsibility for addressing the issue in the 1980s, this final installment will conclude the review of their roles and will look at a potential future outcome from the situation. Those leaders were Joe LaGrone, Gordon Fee and Bill Wilcox. Concluding with Bill's responsibility will provide insight into the use that can be made of the technical document he and his team produced in 1983.

Bill Wilcox, in his role as technical assistant to the president of Union Carbide Nuclear Division, Roger Hibbs, led the team that investigated the mercury releases at Y-12. His detailed approach to investigating the facts, led to a most authoritative account describing the various spills and quantifying, as much as possible in hindsight, the amounts known to have been spilled as well as unaccounted for in other ways.

The DOE response to *The Appalachian Observer's* freedom of information request had resulted in a declassified version of a document stating that about 2.4 million pounds of mercury had been lost or unaccounted for during the operations at Y-12 that used mercury. Imagine Bill's task. The public information was released, and the newspapers published information they could obtain. He needed to quickly provide a current look at the situation that could be counted on as accurate and fully disclosing what happened.

Bill's report remains one of the best references and contains the details and chronology of events now leading to the understanding of how mercury contamination spreads. Such documents serve a larger purpose than merely documenting the contamination.

Ultimately, Oak Ridge may again impact the world as reported in the *Knoxville News Sentinel's* December 20, 2011, article, "ORNL research could advance understanding of mercury, Y-12 impacts."

The article stated: "Oak Ridge National Laboratory is engaged in a multiyear, multimillion-dollar research effort to better understand how mercury behaves—and sometimes devilishly transforms itself—in the environment. As such, it's becoming a recognized center for mercury research. The ORNL team reportedly made a big splash at an international conference earlier this year in Canada with some of their findings."

The article concluded: "Oak Ridge, ironically, could also be one of the real beneficiaries of the mercury studies. Mercury discharges during Cold War operations at the Y-12 nuclear weapons plant seriously contaminated the site and East Fork Poplar Creek, which now serve as a test bed for some of the research investigations. Lab results could potentially be applied to cleanup operations here, as well as mercury-tainted waterways around the world."

So, in the midst of all the turmoil, the dedication demonstrated by these men, as well as countless others, to address the issues square on was just a culmination of their past experience and built upon the shoulders of giants who had gone before at Y-12. The accomplishments of winning World War II and fighting the Cold War had prepared them and others to succeed in these new sets of challenges.

If ORNL can indeed learn from the "test bed" of East Fork Poplar Creek and mercury contamination can be better understood so as to allow clean up of mercury contamination in other locations around the world, Oak Ridge can hold its head high knowing we continue to benefit the world with scientific discoveries. As has been the case in the past with other such discoveries, I believe this one will also become reality.

My frustration is that we do NOT give adequate recognition to the really significant technological discoveries and scientific advances made at Oak Ridge. Economic development and growth in our city may be restricted by our lack of appropriate recognition. Oak Ridge is an excellent "brand" but one that we may fail to realize its full potential. Y-12 is a part of this brand, as are other key parts of the DOE operations here.

With the debate about the Manhattan Project National Historical Park upcoming, such facts should be included. Education is to be the primary thrust of the National Park Service of the future, what better place to conduct that transitory experiment than right here in Oak Ridge? Y-12 will play a role there too.

Y-12 is a large part of the history of Oak Ridge and continues to play a hugely significant role in its future. The main nuclear-related missions that help keep the nation and the world secure remain vital. Environmental cleanup is also a mission being pursued at Y-12 and other Oak Ridge sites. Our future will hold other sensitive issues that must be addressed, and other leaders will have to step up and lead as did Joe, Gordon and Bill.