

Y-12 replaces “Fort Knox” as standard for security

On Monday, September 29, 2008, an historic milestone was reached at the Y-12 National Security Complex. The Highly Enriched Uranium Materials Facility (HEUMF) was dedicated. This facility, seemingly long in coming, was seen by well over 1,000 individuals ... likely the last time such numbers of people will ever enter those heavily reinforced walls and walk through those huge vault doors. This record setting accomplishment was appropriately noted by many remarks from several organizational leaders who have played a role in its completion and will operate the facility for the nation's and the world's future security.

One of the most memorable remarks came from Congressman Zach Wamp's Chief of Staff, Helen Hardin, when she transposed a common saying “Y-12 is the nation's ‘Fort Knox’ for uranium” into “Fort Knox is the nation's ‘Y-12’ for gold.” What an appropriate analogy. Undoubtedly the most secure location in the world is right here in Oak Ridge! So, why not change the common comparative remark to reflect that fact. It seems so right!

As a part of the celebration, the press was invited, the dignitaries and many local leaders were bused to the site. Also several community and business leaders were given a Y-12 site overview tour. It was a day to take pride in the accomplishment of completing an enormous task but one whose time had arrived. HEUMF is the latest and most significant of several modernization efforts at Y-12.

The Jack Case Center and the New Hope Center were both occupied in July 2007 and that too was an occasion for celebration. Patterned after the Oak Ridge National Laboratory's successful private financing venture that resulted in several new research facilities on their main campus, Y-12 successfully occupied a huge new office building and a spacious and welcoming new public interface building.

To prepare for these most recent accomplishments, for the past several years Y-12 has been demolishing old World War II vintage wooden and block structures. Many were at the point of being unusable and some were even blocked off as unsafe to enter. Over one million square feet of floor space has been demolished and close to 300 buildings taken down.

At the same time there is a growing effort to assure the unique and important history of the Manhattan Project and Cold War heritage of Y-12 is preserved. Remember that the enriched uranium for Little Boy, first atomic bomb used in warfare, was separated in Y-12's calutrons. Remember also that the pace of production set by Y-12 during the 1980's succeeded in destroying the Soviet Union's economic system because they attempted to build as many nuclear weapons as Y-12 could produce.

These facts as well as other valiant efforts such as the separation of the world's first stable isotopes that were the genesis of the medical isotope program, the manufacturing of the highly specialized Moon Box, the fabrication of the enormous Sea Wolf propulsor when no one else could do it, the “hospital in a box” and other such significant achievements all took place in these World War II structures. This historic legacy of Y-12's heritage is an important element of Oak Ridge history and must be kept for future generations.

For many years, Y-12 has been the storehouse of the nation's weapons grade enriched uranium. All the nation's nuclear weapons have components manufactured here at Y-12. When the weapons are dismantled, the enriched uranium is again stored at Y-12. The 150 acres that comprises Y-12's Protected Area contains all that material for safekeeping. Soon the weapons grade enriched uranium will be relocated to the HEUMF.

This building is truly a fortress. Many who were able to tour the facility on Monday noted the similarity. From the thickness of the walls to the slope of the exterior walls to the security towers at each corner where the Security Police Officers can literally see in all directions. All these design features are reminiscent of medieval forts. The white paint gives it a modern look, but a fortress is still what comes immediately to the mind when the building is first seen from Bear Creek Road.

The specialized nature of the HEUMF is but the latest in a whole list of facilities at Y-12 that have been designed for highly secret and secure missions for our nation over the years. It may seem to some that such accomplishments are common place at Y-12 and come with little effort. We try hard not to take our security for granted or, for that matter, we try to keep safety and security upmost in our minds. Seeing HEUMF be constructed over the past many months has been a constant reminder of our primary missions at Y-12 - safe and secure operations that provide a nuclear deterrent to protect our nation and the world.

It was good to be able to invite members of the public to see HEUMF and for just a short time to celebrate success with our neighbors and friends. Thanks for coming to visit us at HEUMF. And, remember, what you saw when you visited are specialized design features that make the "Y-12 of uranium" the new standard for security.