

Y-12 uranium storage facility—a “dream come true”

The next two columns will take a different approach. Rather than proceed chronologically we will look at a career at Y-12. We will see Shirley Cox as she progresses through the ranks and actually provides the first impedance for the just finished highly enriched uranium storage facility.

Recently the Highly Enriched Uranium Material Facility was highlighted in this column. The public was invited to see the newly completed storage facility designed to protect the nation's highly enriched uranium that is not in a nuclear weapon. One of the many visitors who toured the facility was Shirley Oden Cox, retiree from Y-12.

Shirley came to Oak Ridge when her dad, William Lewis (Bill) Oden, moved his wife and two children to here in September, 1944 to take a job at the K-25 Plant. His job with an ammunitions plant in Little Rock, Arkansas had just ended and he learned of work someplace in Tennessee near Knoxville. The Manhattan Project Clinton Engineer Works was advertising in many surrounding states and hiring was still on the rise in Oak Ridge.

Shirley, next to the oldest of five Oden children, began her career at the Y-12 Plant in 1963. She hired in at the lowest entry level position in the clerical field. Having just graduated from Oak Ridge High School where she had taken all the typing, shorthand, and any other business class she could get into, she knew that was her vehicle for getting a “good job at the plant.”

Ironically, it was actually her basketball skills that helped get her a first interview at Y-12. Bill Akers, her church-league, combined city-league, basketball coach was also one of the managers within the Personnel Department at Union Carbide's Y-12 Plant. He helped guide the young high school graduate through the process to get her application in the right place for consideration.

Shirley began working her clerical position within the Y-12 Statistical Services Control Department where John Lay, Sr., was the supervisor. There were four other women within the department and all of them were much older than Shirley.

Realizing that “entry level” salary was just not going to satisfy Shirley for the life she wanted to provide for her family and herself, she began searching for opportunities beyond the “secretarial field.” She soon would be venturing into work at Y-12 where females were not frequently employed.

Shirley worked her way through a few levels of administrative promotions, up to a secretary to a Department Superintendent, and then realized the only “promotional opportunity” visible to her was to await the retirement of one of the six division head secretaries currently employed. Well, fortunately for Shirley and women in similar situations, along came the “Affirmative Action Act.” At Y-12, this meant non-degreed women and minorities could have an opportunity to get into career “fields” previously designated pretty much for the “white males.”

As a result, Shirley went out on a limb and applied for one of the “Materials Dispatcher” positions, and was given the job. It was not the typical job that a former “secretary/office worker” who always wore a dress to work (pants were not really acceptable for women in the office during that period of time) and usually had to work “shift work”.

Through the next 15 years, Shirley worked her way through various levels of weekly and salaried positions within the Weapon Materials Management organizations. She was one of the first two females in the production end of the plant that were promoted to a “front line supervisor” position. She worked primarily in the enriched uranium operations and facilities.

In 1989, she was selected to replace a retiring icon, Ray Guinn, who had managed the Enriched Uranium Metallurgical Operations within the Metal Preparation Division for many years. The fear of jumping into a new career, moving from managing materials to the responsibility for actual manufacturing which entailed the management of up to 200 employees at peak times, did not stop Shirley from tackling her next challenge.

Upon arriving to the predominantly male environment which then employed men at least 6' 5" tall, Shirley preceded with her management style of learning from the folks that really do the work, involving the organization in planning and new projects, trusting the fine men and women (there were a few female chemical operators) to do the right thing, and do it right, and showing appreciation for the work well done!

During the Cold War period, Shirley and her manufacturing team worked long and hard to produce enriched uranium parts for all the nuclear weapons in the nation's stockpile. This material being one of the essential components of all nuclear weapons, they knew they were making a difference and helping to win the Cold War.

Next we will look at what happened to Shirley and her crews when the Cold War ended.