

Dr. Googin and his early days at Y-12, part 2

In the last article we began to describe Dr. John M. Googin's arrival in Oak Ridge in May of 1944. Through summarizing his autobiography of the Manhattan Project era his arrival and early days here were noted. When we left off, John was on the bus headed to his first introduction to Y-12.

After boarding a bus in Oak Ridge at the main terminal and travelling south and then turning west in Bear Creek Valley, John soon arrived at the North Portal of Y-12. John mentioned in his autobiography that all during the short bus trip, his mind was racing and I am sure that arrival at the "massive bus terminal" caused him to wonder even more intently just what was he about to experience. Buses from cities that he knew were as much as 50 miles away delivered workers to this terminal, arriving and leaving every few seconds at shift change and every hour from the Oak Ridge Bus Terminal all day long.

John got off the bus and proceeded to find his way to the proper guard room, showed his papers to the person checking people in. This could well have been a young lady as Tennessee Eastman Company hired young ladies to serve in their guard force. However, I doubt that was the case with Dr. Googin as he would surely have noted that detail in his writing. He did not miss a thing and was known for his attention to detail throughout his career.



The young John Googin. In the autobiography of his Manhattan Project days at Y-12, Googin referred to himself as the "junior chemist" or the "new recruit."

He then passed through a row of guards in "their little stands." They were placed along the portal where people were allowed to pass who had proper badges and were shown the short walk down the hill to Building 9202.

The number on John's badge was 17,187. He observed that "a lot of people had made the transition into the secure system in the year and a few months since the project had started," this again being just another indicator of the sense of wonderment he held and the attention to every little detail that registered on that brilliant mind of his. Don't you know he enjoyed every aspect of life because to him everything was truly something from which to learn.

The date of his arrival at Y-12 was May 17, 1944. That was a day that Dr. Googin marked in later life as a turning point in his very life and a date that destiny took hold of his career. He never regretted his decision to come south and to experience the unknown. He found his "sweet spot," his niche, his life-long love (second to Janet and his four daughters) in this place called Y-12.

When John arrived at Building 9202, his first stop was the office of B. J. Schmidt, the head of the department known as Bulk Treatment. John found his office on the first floor of 9202 and noted that it was located at column D-9, in the back part of the building.

In John's own words, he describes what he saw as, "There was a large scrubbing system visible through the windows of the office that was mounted on the side of the building, storage tanks and a small electric substation."

John continues, "This office was just across the hall from the office of Dr. Bell, who was the head of the Chemical Operations. There was an office for the building engineer next door. There were secretaries with the up to date (1944) manual typewriters, mimeograph machines, and clerks with the latest in mechanical calculators."

He further observed, "The office with a southern exposure was hot even in May. The windows were open, and a standard piece of equipment seemed to be a fly swatter. Strangely enough, another standard piece of equipment seemed to be a gas mask. The recruit (This is what John called himself in

his autobiography) was beginning to have some doubt about the nature of the work.” Can’t you just imagine what was going through John’s quick mind? He must have been imagining everything under the sun that might be going on at this “Y-12.”

He continues in his autobiography, “This new recruit was asked to sit down across the desk from Mr. Schmidt. He was introduced to a tall blond person named Edwin Samuel Vitalla to whom the recruit was to report. The first order of business was to be a quick tour of the small part of the facility to be worked in and then a return to the office for further discussions.”

John went on the brief tour of a small section of Building 9202. He made keen observations and remembered all he saw. He likened the equipment he was being shown to an earlier experience where he had worked in a bleachery and dye house during the summer while in school.

When the tour was completed, Dr. Googin had already formed a pretty good idea what was going on in this small section of Y-12. Next we will see how he arrived at his conclusion and what he did that startled the managers of this portion of Y-12.

Thanks to Dr. Googin’s family, we have obtained some early photos of him. This first photo was taken when he was graduating Bates College in Lewiston, Maine, in March, 1944. He was awarded an honorary Doctor of Science degree by Bates College in 1968.