

Harold Cofer and the COLEX process, part 1

December 23, 1953 saw a tremendous expansion of the COLEX process being planned for Y-12. The Atomic Energy Commission approved a 50 percent increase in the size of the COLEX process being planned for Building 9201-5 and also approved the addition of Building 9201-4.

This tremendous push from the AEC for Y-12 to make significant progress had its origin in the explosion of a thermonuclear-type nuclear weapon by Russia on August 12, 1953. Building 9201-5 was cleaned out in November, 1953 and Building 9201-4 was cleaned out in preparation for new construction by February, 1954.

Right in the middle of all this activity to prepare these huge buildings for this new mission was someone who in later years would be one of my friends, Harold Cofer. Harold hired in to Y-12 on August 12, 1946. He had spent the war years in the Navy "Seabee's" officially named Construction Battalions (CB's). Harold remains proud of the work accomplished by the Seabee's and will explain their importance if asked.

He was stationed in the Philippines when the atomic bombs were dropped on Japan. He enjoys telling the story that he was known to be from Tennessee and some of his buddies even knew he was from a place called Oak Ridge. Well, the news said the uranium for Little Boy came from Oak Ridge, so they asked Harold if he knew anything about that uranium. Harold, said, "Sure, I know all about it!" Of course, he knew absolutely nothing about it.

By the time Harold got out of the Navy and returned to Oak Ridge, he had developed electrical and mechanical systems maintenance skills and was hoping to get a job at the government plants in his hometown. He succeeded, but his first job was not what he really wanted to do. At Y-12, Harold first worked as a Process Services operator in Building 9204-1 (Beta 1), one of the Calutron buildings.

He tells of walking through the building taking temperature readings on the calutron magnet assemblies. He was careful not to talk to the Calutron girls in the control room and felt that the supervisor of the area always watched him closely to be sure that Harold followed the posted sign that said, "Do Not Talk To The Operators."

Tennessee Eastman Company announced a large layoff in late December, 1946 and began the actual layoffs after the first of the year in 1947. Harold was laid off in February, 1947. He later learned that TEC had actually made an error in that they were not supposed to lay off veterans. However, he did not know that at the time and was just one among several thousand people who lost jobs when the decision was made to stop operating the calutrons at Y-12.

Harold had married his wife, Harriet in January 1947, and she worked for Roane Anderson Company in Oak Ridge, the company who managed the city and maintained all the equipment. She arranged for him to get an interview and he was hired within a week of losing his job at Y-12. It was during his tenure at Roane Anderson that Harold was selected to drive the car in the Gate Opening Ceremony on March 19, 1949.

In August, 1950, Harold was again hired to work at Y-12. This time, however, he did get into maintenance area, although because his navy training in the Seabee's was not documented as official training, he was hired as a skilled trades assistant. He credits Mr. J.C. Ezell with helping him get job assignments that kept him challenged and allowed him to demonstrate his skills.

On January 1, 1953, Harold was promoted to Electrical Foreman. Here is Harold's first-hand account of how that promotion occurred. Some of you who recall Y-12's early years will likely identify with the process.

Harold said, "One day in December, 1952, Jessie Lanier and I were working on a platform mounted on the power poles east of Building 9201-3. We were reconnecting some of the differential relay control

circuits in a large junction box. A black Ford car stopped below the poles and Carl Newman got out and said, 'Hey Bub, come down here and get in the car.'

"I scrambled down the pole, got into the car and Newman introduced me to Charlie Kasperek. Mr. Kasperek was the senior engineer responsible for assembling the workforce for a new Y-12 program referred to as ADP (Allow Development Program). Ezell and Pipes had turned my name in as a prospective foreman in this new organization." (J. C. Ezell was Harold's general foreman and Ed Pipes was his foreman).

Harold went on to describe the conversation in the car and was told to take a day to decide. He was only 25 years old at the time and was a bit concerned that he might be seen as too young to be a foreman, but he took the job.

On the last day before being set up as a foreman Harold was having lunch with some of the people he had worked with on the test crew when Ed Pipes handed him an envelope with five \$20 bills in it. Ed said, "Here take this, you may need it." Harold said that Ed hadn't forgotten how long it seemed between monthly paydays and the first month without a weekly check is a stretch for newly promoted folks.

Next we will explore Harold's introduction to the ELEX (Electrical Exchange) and COLEX (Column Exchange) processes for separating lithium 6 needed to build the thermonuclear weapons of the Cold War.

