

Lawrence Pack, train conductor, and Y-12's uranium?

Trains were the primary means of long haul transportation in the 1940's. Many trains brought building materials to Y-12 and other Manhattan Project sites in Oak Ridge. Conductors on these trains often wondered just what they were hauling to Oak Ridge and for what it might be used.

There is even a story that is told of Al Bissell, Oak Ridge's first mayor, that when he was working for the Clinton Engineer Works he would actually sit by the railroad at Blair switchyard and when he saw some building materials on a train coming through, he would just redirect the conductor to disconnect that railcar and place it on a side track.

Bissell would then direct the local switch engine operator to take it inside the site to be used as needed constructing the buildings there. Strange things happened during the Manhattan Project, but this one sounds really farfetched to me. But what follows may be just as strange.

Lawrence Pack, age 94, recalled in a recent Oral History interview, when he was a young conductor for Southern railroad. He had a daily run from Knoxville to Oakdale and back, and many times he dropped off boxcars filled with materials at the Blair switchyard. He said he never knew what was in those boxcars and that the Clinton Engineer Works folks had their own switch engines that would come to Blair and pick up the cars taking them to the various sites.

On a couple of occasions, Lawrence was given a clearance (as he called it) to come inside Oak Ridge and fill in for the conductor that ran the switch engine. On these occasions he was told to not ask questions, not go into any buildings and just to do his job. He said he was transported into the site by automobile and taken directly to the switch engine.

Just a couple of years ago, an old switch engine was removed from Y-12. It had been used at K-25 and had been sitting idle at Y-12 for a number of years. I can't help but wonder if that might not have been the very switch engine that Lawrence operated.

Even today, he recalled clearly what it was like to come inside the secret installation and to wonder what in the world was going on inside those large buildings. When he used the switch engine to move railroad cars around, he still never got to see inside any of the buildings.

But, the single strangest thing to Lawrence, by far, was the caboose with two armed guards he picked up occasionally. The person running the switch engine inside the Clinton Engineer Works would bring the caboose to the Blair switchyard and there Lawrence would connect it, with its two armed guards, to his train. He never knew what was in the caboose, nor did he know where it was going. He only took it as far as his run to Oakdale, and there it transferred to another train.

He said this stopped after the atomic bomb was dropped. One has to wonder about what was in that caboose. Was it maybe the uranium-235 for Little Boy, the first atomic bomb ever used in warfare, going from the Y-12 Electromagnetic Separation Plant to Los Alamos, New Mexico? There is a story told about the uranium-235 for Little Boy being transported in gold-lined containers inside locked briefcases

Did Lawrence maybe pull the caboose that had that very important material in it? If you are one of the people who actually took the uranium-235 from Y-12 to Los Alamos, please contact me (Ray Smith) at 865.576.7781 and help clear up the mystery of what was in the caboose.