

Y-12 and some leaders in 1980s, part 2

Last week the mercury contamination issue facing Y-12 in 1983 was reviewed and three leaders suggested as key individuals who had responsibility for dealing with the issue. The individual leaders were Joe LaGrone, Gordon Fee and Bill Wilcox. Each of them had pivotal leadership roles in the 1980s.

First, Joe Ben LaGrone: Born in Deadwood, Texas, Joe was raised on a farm, worked at J.B. Beard Steel Company right out of high school, drove a school bus while going to college, was a radio broadcaster and oil field worker, hitchhiked 21 miles to work to run a jack hammer on a road construction job, all this long before he was asked to come to Oak Ridge and “clean up the mess” that was here in the early 1980s.

After graduating magna cum laude in 1961 from Centenary College of Louisiana, Joe began his career with the U.S. Atomic Energy Commission (AEC) in 1962 as a management intern, selected on a nationally competitive basis. He has held numerous positions of increasing authority and responsibility in various operations within the AEC, ERDA and DOE.

He was the manager of the DOE San Francisco Operations Office, acting under secretary and acting deputy under secretary for eight months in 1981, and he came to be the manager of the DOE Oak Ridge Operations Office in 1983. His reputation for tackling tough situations and producing successful outcomes while simplifying bureaucracy, working with great depth of technical understanding and demonstrating strong leadership prepared him for the challenges of the mercury situation in Oak Ridge, as well as the many other challenges he faced during his tenure here.

Joe has intentionally kept a low profile since retiring from DOE in May 1995 and, on more than one occasion, has helped me gain insight into Y-12 history by quietly calling to help me understand just how things happened. For example, the guard towers at Y-12. He explained how those were purchased after his arrival in 1983. Joe also told me he personally named “Lake Reality,” the holding pond for East Fork Poplar Creek, and did that as a way to send a clear message regarding the importance of the environmental issues.

He was asked personally to come to Oak Ridge to help with the many issues facing the operations office. Among his first actions upon arrival was to bring together the people who had to work the issues and to lead the process of interaction. He was well prepared to tackle the multi-faceted issues.

Working along with him was Gordon Fee. Gordon was on the contractor side of the issues and had to ensure the actions that needed to be taken were implemented in a fashion to make sure they stayed in place. There were many changes that had to be made, and leading change of the magnitude demanded during the early 1980s required a leader that the Y-12 workers could trust and would follow.

Gordon had come to Oak Ridge in 1956 when Bill Wilcox hired him to work at K-25. He left in 1962 to go with Union Carbide Research Laboratory, where he stayed until 1972. When he returned to Oak Ridge, he became the director of the Engineering Technology Division with offices at the Oak Ridge National Laboratory. He was moved to Product Engineering at Y-12 to prepare him to replace Jack Case as the Y-12 plant manager.

Gordon replaced Jack Case in 1982 and was soon in the middle of the environmental issues that I am sure complicated his job significantly. However, his past experience and the management team left in place that had been hand-picked by Jack Case were able and ready for any challenge. They embodied the “can do” attitude created by Jack Case’s leadership.

Bill Wilcox had just completed his job as technical director of both Y-12 and K-25 in 1981 and was serving as the technical assistant to the president of Union Carbide Nuclear Division. Bill had started his career at Y-12 as a chemist and had personally prepared the first batch of uranium 235 separated at Y-12 and shipped to Los Alamos. He had worked all those years in the technical director’s position and was now on the president’s staff.

When the declassified mercury report was released and the extent of the mercury losses at Y-12 were made public, these three men were central to the response and their unique preparedness to deal with the challenge was a real asset to Oak Ridge. The combination of their talents and those of countless others, who worked diligently to ensure accurate information was obtained, studied and provided to appropriate groups and individuals, were called upon in a herculean effort to respond to the demands placed on them.

These demands even included a congressional hearing held at the American Museum of Science and Energy led by then Tennessee Congressional Representatives, Al Gore, Jr. and Marilyn Lloyd. Imagine dealing with that on top of the other pressures placed on the leaders here in Oak Ridge.

The scrutiny placed on this small town in East Tennessee was not the first time Oak Ridge had been in the nation's and even the world's spotlight, but it surely was the most difficult to prepare for as the information was both hard to obtain and difficult to understand. But rather than "winning a war with the Atomic Bomb," this event was contaminating the town of Oak Ridge.

The next installment will conclude the examination of the mercury contamination at Y-12 and take a look to a possible positive future outcome.