

Bill Wilcox and Y-12

Bill Wilcox, who passed away on September 2, 2013, at age 90, graduated with honors in May 1943, from Washington and Lee University with a major in chemistry. That same month he joined the Manhattan Project. By October 1943, he had moved to Oak Ridge where he found more dormitories for women than men. He liked the ratio, being a young single man.

He soon connected with Jeanie Holder who later became his wife, but not before he had attempted to gain the favor of another young lady by lifting her up and carrying her part way across a muddy street. I say part of the way, because in the middle of the street he faltered under the weight and fell sprawling smack on top of the young girl effectively crushing her into the muddy street. Thereafter that romance never went anywhere.

While Bill maintained a keen sense of humor until his passing, his many more serious endeavors included a strong attachment to Y-12. Before his retirement in 1986, he had been named the Technical Director of both the Y-12 Plant and the K-25 Gaseous Diffusion Plant, a position he filled for 12 years.

One of his final projects before retirement was to lead the working group that investigated the mercury release from Y-12 during the 1955 – 1963 lithium 6 separation process, COLEX (column exchange), operations. His team authored the definitive report on the release that is still the most relied upon document pertaining to the mercury situation at Oak Ridge.

His first job was as a chemist in Building 9202. His job was to purify the Uranium 235 being separated in the Calutrons. Although he knew the uranium came from some process, he never actually saw a calutron during the war.

You see, even the chemists (who knew the material being processed) were restricted as to where they could go. He could go to his laboratory but not to the process buildings where the calutrons were operating.

One of the many treasures Bill has provided me over the years is a letter he wrote in which he enclosed a pass to visit the XAX facility in Building 9731. Remember, he came to Y-12 in October 1943 and the pass to allow him to view the calutrons in Building 9731 was dated November 1, 1943.

Bill's note to me says, "I did not take advantage of this pass to see the calutrons because I was busy at the laboratory that day. I have often thought that I would surely have had a better appreciation for what I was doing with that material if I had seen what was producing it and where it was going next [Into the Beta Calutrons]."

In February 1944, the first shipment of 200 grams of uranium 235 was taken from Y-12 to Los Alamos by two Army lieutenants dressed as salesmen on a passenger train with the precious material inside gold-lined coffee cup sized containers in a briefcase. Bill Wilcox was the chemist who prepared that uranium for shipment.

Bill said of that first shipment that it caused him to get the closest he ever came to getting fired. It seems he had placed the uranium in a glass funnel-shaped container resting on the lip of a metal can in which the fit was just right to hold the odd funnel-shape upright.

He placed all that in an oven, set the timer and went home for the night. When he arrived the next morning, his supervisor told him to hide that the "big boss" was looking for him and he was mad.

What had happened was that the metal can expanded when heated letting the glass container fall inside the can and when the oven cut off and the metal can cooled it contracted breaking the glass. This funny story was one that I loved to tell on Bill when I had the chance. He enjoyed it as well as the audience always does. I will keep that one alive.

Bill reviewed and edited a chronology of the first 50 years of the Y-12 Plant, written with inputs from more than 20 other Y-12 alumni. The unclassified history of the Y-12 Plant, "An Overview of the History of Y-12: 1942-1992," was published by the American Museum of Science and Energy (AMSE) in 2001. This document is an excellent reference which I use regularly as I write about the history of Y-12.

He was never far from Y-12 in his efforts to preserve the history of Oak Ridge, including his obviously most engaging effort to save the history of K-25, the Guest House and to promote the inclusion of Oak Ridge in the Manhattan Project National Historical Park. Bill served as the Oak Ridge City Historian, but he was also in recent years the most knowledgeable person about the technical aspects of all three sites during the Manhattan Project and the Cold War.

Y-12 remained a focus for Bill, even though he felt the preservation of the Beta 3 Calutrons and Building 9731 was more assured than what might result at K-25. I often discussed this with him, and he continually asked questions regarding Y-12's history being preserved and I would assure him it was being included in future plans.

I have been blessed to have Bill to go to with questions about Y-12's history and have enjoyed immensely the relationship we developed over the past several years. I will miss Bill, as will others. He truly was a GIANT in Oak Ridge history.