

Steve Laggis's Dad



The photograph above is one that Steve Laggis's mother has kept for years as a reminder of the career her husband Mike Laggis led at Y-12. Steve saw a photograph posted online by Frank Munger, and it reminded him that he recalled seeing that photograph before or at least one very similar. Sure enough, he found a photograph he recalled of President Jimmy Carter and one other person of interest.

Steve says, "My dad is five rows back, second from the aisle in a blue tie and black glasses. He is leaning to his left. My recollection is that he was on loan from Y-12 to help ORNL during the energy crisis when some initiatives relative to coal (either cleaner burning technologies or coal to oil) were being initiated."

This would have been in the late 1970s, during yet another time of radical change for Oak Ridge.

Steve went on to say, "My dad was conceived in Greece, born in Montana to Greek immigrants, graduated high school in Michigan in 1946, and joined the Army so he could afford to go to college. He served as an occupation troop in Japan. He hired into Y-12 in 1952 after graduating from Michigan State. He was the chemical engineer I could never even dream to be. He worked in the Y-12 Development Division for his whole career. I heard him talk about a lot of different assignments over the years, but much of his career was spent supporting operations in Building 9212. He worked very closely with Herman Butler (a Y-12 legend as most of you know)."

Steve continued, "In the early 2000s I was telling him about the plant effort to start up Oxide Conversion Facility—I believe the Operational Readiness Review was going on at the time. Dad related to me a story of how he and Herman Butler came to install a second fluid bed to perform the oxide conversion process.

"It seems there was a serious issue with the product that had serious implications to meeting the mission. Dad did some research and lab work and determined the root of the problem and determined that the conversion process steps needed to be conducted in two separate fluid beds.

"Herman Butler was on board and had the maintenance work orders all drawn up to make the necessary changes. Herman Butler's boss (I've forgotten his name) was not yet convinced of the proposed change, but he soon went on an extended absence from the plant.

"Dad used the term 'weeks' to describe this absence, not months or years. During this time Herman Butler went to Roy Williams (another Y-12 legend) and discussed the proposed change with him. Roy Williams said he would agree if Dr. Googin said it was OK.

"Dad wrote a letter that Dr. Googin signed and sent Roy Williams. By the time Herman Butler's boss got back from his leave, the physical changes had been made and the second fluid bed was in operation and the problem was solved.

"This was a big problem, and Roy Williams was really pleased that Herman and Dad solved it. Their reward was that they got to go to the Chemical Show in New York City for three days. I remember riding with Mom and Dad out to Clinton to pick up Herman Butler and head to the airport. It took years before my mother stopped talking about my dad going to New York City and leaving her at home. This must have been in the very early 1970s."

As a follow on to the story, Steve said, "Glenn Pfennigwerth has a funny story about asking my dad why he was going to retire so young (at 56). Dad said, 'There's just too much paperwork, and it's no fun to work here anymore.' Dad retired in January 1984!! Think about me having to explain an Operational Readiness Review to Dad!"

Steve has now worked at Y-12 about the same number of years that his dad worked here.

Thanks, Steve, what a great insight into how things really got done in days gone by. It really makes us appreciate the accomplishments of the giants of yesterday.

Bob Spence stopped by to see the display of his "Little Boy" model in the Y-12 History Center, and he and I were discussing just this fact, in light of Bill Wilcox's passing away recently. Bob said that he was "proud to have been able to work with both Dr. John Googin and Bill Wilcox," both of whom he recalls as exceptional people.

Do you recognize others in the photo?