

Y-12's favorite stories, part 4

We continue to look at some favorite Y-12 stories taken from *An Overview of the History of Y-12, 1942–1992: A Chronology of Some Noteworthy Events and Memoirs*, by William J. Wilcox, Jr., published by Bill in August 2001. These are “common tales” told about incidents and events in Y-12's history.

Limited access to 9766

One day in 1960 or early 1961, Plant Manager John Murray and Jack Case called in Ken Sommerfeld (still a new engineer) and told him that Assistant Plant Superintendent George Strasser and Hank Stoner's operation was in trouble. “They can't make any good thorium parts.”

They wanted Ken to go down to Building 9766, take over the operation, and fix it!

Ken went over the long list of tasks he was supposed to be doing and asked just when they wanted him to go. They both looked at their watches, and one of them said, “Well it's 10 a.m., why not go now?” Ken went.

He sat down with Darryl Cunningham who was the foreman in charge of the 9766 Thorium Shop. He had about 25 machinists working two shifts.

When Ken got around to asking just what kind of troubles they were having, Darryl offered his frank opinion that the biggest problem was that they had just too much outside “expert” help—different metallurgists, engineers, and bosses coming into the shop all the time saying try this, try that. Nothing ever settled down, and as a result, you could never pin down what was really at fault.

Case had told Ken to do whatever he thought was needed to fix the problem. So Ken asked Darryl to make a list of all the people who worked directly for him in the shop. Ken then added his own and Darryl's names to the list and took it to the guard post outside the door of 9766.

There he told the guard to remove the entry-access badges of everyone who was not on this new list from the badge racks and send that pile of removed badges back to guard headquarters!

Sure enough, sometime later that very day, Case showed up along with Stoner, the division head over this operation. The guard informed a very surprised Stoner that he was not authorized to get in! (Case had a “gold” badge—good anywhere—so he did not need an exchange badge.)

When Case found out what had happened and why, he thought it was pretty funny. Case told Ken to come the next morning to the shift superintendent's office for the daily, early morning, pre-workday, communications briefing held for all division heads.

At that session Case called on Ken (to Ken's considerable embarrassment—he being far “down in the ranks” when compared to those present) saying, “We have a special report on thorium this morning; there are now some new restrictions on access—isn't that right, Ken?” Ken said he talked as fast as he could, and just as soon and as quietly as possible, escaped out the back door.

Golf club for the moon

In February 1971, astronaut Alan B. Shepherd, Jr., was one of the crew of Apollo 14 who became the fifth man to walk on the surface of the moon. One of the things Shepherd did was to drive some golf balls with a “makeshift six iron” made at the Y-12 Plant. This “club” was, in reality, a tool for picking up samples of moon rocks made for the first moon landing over a year before. An article in *The Oak Ridger* told the story.

“In the weak lunar gravity, the balls sailed. That ‘makeshift six iron’ had been made at the Y-12 Plant here for the first moon landing a year and a half before.” It was, Paul Wilkinson explains, the handle for a “contingency sampler,” developed as a tool to pick up samples of the moon’s surface.

“There was a Teflon bag that could be attached to the end, which would have snagged the moon sample,” Wilkinson, an engineer-physicist, who was at the Y-12 Plant at the time of manufacture, explains. “Y-12 made about a dozen of them,” he recalls.

“Apparently they were still around at the time of Apollo 14, and Shepherd took one along. He was able to attach a golf club head where the Teflon bag would have attached,” Wilkinson speculates.

“Y-12 played a major role in making gear for those moon flights because of its abilities in precision fabrication. In one of the USAEC’s first agreements under which local plants could do work for other federal agencies, NASA contracted not only for these contingency samplers, but also for the boxes in which the first moon rocks were brought back by the Apollo 11 astronauts.”

“Wilkinson, now retired after 41 years at Y-12 (1943–1984), was on national television during that first moon landing. He stood by at NBC studios in New York the night of July 20, 1969, to explain the moon boxes especially, ‘to get people familiar with the hardware,’ he says. And possibly to slip in a plug or two for the very special ‘can do’ precision abilities at Y-12.” (*The Oak Ridger*, July 30, 1998, RD Smyser, page 9A.)

Also included in this section is a listing of Y-12 plant managers: Dr. Fredrick R. Conklin, Tennessee Eastman Company, 1943–1947; C. Nelson Rucker, Jr., Carbide & Carbon Chemical Company, 1947–1948; Dr. Clarence E. Larson, C&CCC, 1948–1949; W. Douglas Lavers, C&CCC, 1949–1952; Logan Emler, C&CCC, 1952–1954; John P. Murray, Union Carbide Nuclear Division, 1954–1961, Robert G. Jordan, UCND, 1961–1962; Roger F. Hibbs, UCND, 1962–1967; Jack M. Case, UCND, 1967–1982; Gordon G. Fee, UCND and Martin Marietta Energy Systems, 1982–1990; Jeffrey Bostock, Lockheed Martin Energy Systems, 1991–1995.

Here is a listing of the rest of the Y-12 plant managers: Todd Butz, 1995–2000 (Also during 1995–1998 F. P. (Gus) Gustavason was vice president of Lockheed Martin Energy Systems, responsible for Y-12, and during 1998–2000 L. A. (Lew) Felton was vice president of LMES, responsible for Y-12. For a few months in 2000, Ed Bergin was general manager of LMES, responsible for Y-12.); John Mitchell, BWXT Y-12, 2000–2002; Dennis R. Ruddy, BWXT Y-12, 2002–2005; Steve D. Liedle (acting) BWXT Y-12, 2005–2006; George Dials, B&W Y-12, 2006–2009; Darrel Kohlhorst, B&W Y-12, 2009–2012; Charles (Chuck) Spencer, B&W Y-12, 2012–2014; Dave Richardson, B&W Y-12, 2014; Bill Tindal, Consolidated Nuclear Security, July 2014–.

That concludes the favorite stories captured by Bill Wilcox through 1992. I have attempted to document some of the many “Y-12 stories” happening since. Y-12 is a special place with dedicated employees and has endured much change, especially recently. There are stories being created constantly as people

interact. It is good to recall some of them when there is a bit of distance from the actual event. Wonder what the content of an article written about “Y-12’s favorite stories” will look like in 2032?