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Oak Ridge Form 5: Oral History, Deed of Gift Release for Interviewee

DEED OF GIFT RELEASE FOR INTERVIEWEE  
 K-25 ORAL HISTORY PROJECT  
 U.S DEPARTMENT OF ENERGY'S ORAL HISTORY PROGRAM

I, Lois Van Wie (Name of interviewee) residing at PO Box 11091  
 (Address of interviewee) do hereby permanently give, convey and assign to the United States Department of  
 Energy (DOE) my interviews (or oral memoirs), and the recordings, tapes (audio and or video), and any  
 transcripts of my interviews conducted on 4/14/05 (date) at 104 Inn Ln. #113  
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In doing so, I understand that my interviews (or oral memoirs) will be made available to researchers and the public  
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I, Jennifer Thonhoff, (Name of interviewer or agent for or duly  
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Lois Van Wie (Name of interviewee) for inclusion into the DOE Oral History Program.

Signature of DOE or its Representative: [Signature]  
 Date: 4/14/05

Signature of Interviewee: Lois J Van Wie  
 Date: 4/14/05

Signature of Interviewer: Jennifer Thonhoff  
 Date: 4/14/05

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**K-25 Oral History Interview**

**Date: 4/14/05**

**Interviewee: Lois VanWie**

**Interviewer: Jennifer Thonhoff**

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[1:00:10]

Thonhoff, J.: Could you state your name and spell it for me, please?

VanWie, L.: Yes, Lois VanWie, V, as in Victor, V-A-N, capital W-I-E.

Thonhoff, J.: Okay. And where were you born?

VanWie, L.: I was born in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania.

Thonhoff, J.: Where were you prior to coming to K-25?

VanWie, L.: I lived in Washington, D.C., or in the suburbs.

Thonhoff, J.: What kind of work did you do prior to K-25?

VanWie, L.: Actually, I worked for the Department of Agriculture in Washington, D.C., and I did administrative work before I came here.

Thonhoff, J.: And what kind of schooling do you have?

VanWie, L.: I have a degree from University of Maryland in political science and economics.

Thonhoff, J.: Why did you come to work for the K-25 facility?

VanWie, L.: I had met my husband at the university, and he was here at K-25 -- in Oak Ridge, working at K-25. We were married in '45, and when I came to Oak Ridge, I came as a bride.

[1:2:26]

Thonhoff, J.: Wonderful! How -- when did you start working there and when did you quit? What were the dates?

VanWie, L.: Actually, we were married in May and he was drafted in I believe June. And when he was drafted, that is when I started to work at K-25.

Thonhoff, J.: In 1945?

VanWie, L.: Yes, uh-huh, uh-huh (affirmative).

Thonhoff, J.: And then when did you quit?

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VanWie, L.: Let's see. I probably worked there through up into '46 someplace.

Thonhoff, J.: If people asked what did you tell them about the work that was being done?

VanWie, L.: When we went home, it was just secret and nobody talked about it. It was really quite a weird thing. Everything was coded down here. And you just didn't get into conversations as to what people did and when you went out, you know, people asked questions, but you didn't have any real answers for them. And you just didn't say.

[1:3:45]

Thonhoff, J.: Were there any stories about --

VanWie, L.: Oh yeah, do you want me to tell the story about [laughs] -- actually, Mrs. Roosevelt at the time was going all over the country because the President could not walk. And so she actually went out and surveyed many of us. She used to go so much that one of the big thing was, "Well, we're getting -- making airplane tickets for Mrs. Roosevelt." That was one of them.

Another one was we're making holes for doughnuts. I mean, this is the type of answers that we gave people on the outside because we didn't know -- at least, I did not know what we were doing. I had some chemistry along the way and didn't know really at that time.

I guess my husband went into the Army and then came back. While he was gone I did look into some books and things. And I do remember coming across one book and it was Mr. Compton Explores the Atom. And in it gave some things that had happened. And I thought ah-hah. I did not know how we were using it or anything else, but the idea was a (indiscernible) until it was actually -- and my husband couldn't tell me whether I was right or wrong.

[1:05:24]

I mean, that's exactly the way we were. I mean, he had clearance that I didn't have. And actually, it was rather funny here that the men would -- when you were at a gathering, and most of the men - - and incidentally they were very young men here on the project.

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The men would get in the corner and talk because they had Q clearance. And the women would stay in another corner and talk about obstetrics and their young children. And that was the way it usually happened. [laughs]

Thonhoff, J.: What did you like the most about working at K-25?

VanWie, L.: I don't know. [laughs] Actually, when I worked in K-25, the first job I had was on the cell floor. And I was a maintenance order clerk. And it was kind of fun. I had never been in a plant like that. And it was different. And they showed me around and so it was -- then I -- after I was there for a while, my husband's hours changed and I transferred to the lab. So I worked in the lab the rest of the time.

[1:06:39]

Thonhoff, J.: And what did you dislike?

VanWie, L.: I don't know that I really disliked too much. We had made friends with a lot of people. Everybody was in the same situation. We all had weird hours. Oak Ridge was a town that went 24 hours a day. And that meant cafeterias and everything else were run 24 hours a day. So it was a really very peculiar situation.

Thonhoff, J.: What was it like? What was your first impression of K-25 when you first saw it?

VanWie, L.: It was a huge building. And, you know, it had those windows way at the top and that was all the windows that it had. And we all went out there by GI busses mostly. And then there were some busses that were -- we called them the cattle cars [laughs] because you got them at a certain point and then were taken out to K-25. And you had to stand and lunched around and everything was just building and people in a hurry. And it was an exciting time.

Thonhoff, J.: Can you tell me about Oak Ridge as a community and what it was like?

VanWie, L.: Yes.

[1:09:03]

Thonhoff, J.: And what was available to do.

VanWie, L.:

Actually, I think they were very, very good on providing recreational things. There were tennis courts there. They had organized baseball and everything else. The funny thing about it is when we first came there, we lived in an E-1 apartment. That was before Nelson went in the Army. And we lived there on Viking Road. And down nearby, I can't remember the name of the place really on the turnpike, was a regular grocery store and everything else. Had wooden sidewalks and you almost felt like you were in a frontier town. I mean, getting on there. And it was -- when it rained, it was mud, and when it was -- then you had lots of dust. I remember in those days you used suede shoes, and I never brought a suede pair of shoes in Knoxville or in Oak Ridge for years. I mean it was just too much mud and dust to go in there.

It was an adventure. [laughs] And actually, across from Viking Road, on the turnpike, they were building what was called Victory Cottages. And my husband said, "You see those. People are going to live in them." You know, "I'd send you home before we were living in one of those." And six months later we were living in one and delighted to have the space. [laughs]

[1:09:48]

Thonhoff, J.:

What was that like? What was the Victory Cottage like?

VanWie, L.:

The Victory Cottage, as we had said, it was one degree up from the hutments.

Thonhoff, J.:

What were the hutments like?

VanWie, L.:

Well they were really -- have just seen -- they were square and they had, I think, a pot belly stove in the middle of them. The victory cottages were two units with a wall that was paper thin, it seemed, because I could stand in my kitchen area and talk to my neighbor and say, "Do you have an egg?" And she could hear me. I mean it. It was that close. And the bathroom area, I think, was even worse. Our next door neighbor used to -- her husband didn't particular like to get up in the morning, and she would start calling and finally Nelson, my husband, would chime in and start yelling at him to get out of bed. I mean, you were that close.

And places weren't insulated. They had one board thick of flooring. And if you cleaned and took the broom, you just swept the dirt into the cracks and it fell to the ground below.

[1:11:06]

Well, at certain times of the year, this was fine, but at certain times of the year, the wind blew and it was very, very cold. And the curtains would flop back and forth with the wind blowing because there was nothing to stop them. We had an ice box with a drip pan. And you had to go down the road to get ice. And the way we heated the victory cottages was with kerosene. It was like an old fashioned cook stove that was in there that had little things that you could lift these things to expose the fire underneath.

Well they had figured out a new thing. They had put a piece of copper tubing, oh about so big, that came around under the fire from the kerosene, which would heat your food. And the further away you were from the flame that would be medium, high, or low on cooking. And then this copper tube also collected water. And this was a way into your hot water heater. This was the way you heated your water, was through this copper tube that came through from the kerosene stove. And then it also heated your house.

[1:12:34]

Now you understand it could do -- it did all three at once. So when it was very, very warm in the summertime, you still -- to have hot water or cook your stove, you still had the whole thing. And most of the men there were in the special engineering detachment were engineers or scientists of some sort. And they were always trying to rig up a system on the hot water heater on how you could get that heated without going through the kerosene stove. It was rather primitive.

The Army did have 50 gallon drums of kerosene that were outside and they did supply our kerosene, but I've often thought, I bet we reeked to high heaven when we went into stores or anything in Oak Ridge with that kerosene smell.

That was what -- and they were very small. In fact, a few friends of ours who lived in them, we were sitting on a carport one day and said, "You know, this carport is bigger than those victory cottages because they were tiny, you know."

Thonhoff, J.:

What an experience. How did the people communicate with fellow workers at the facility?

[1:13:57]

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- VanWie, L.: Just normally. All the things in the plant were coded. So you would speak in codes. You would -- if you were talking about chemicals or anything else or the plant gas or anything else, they all had a code. H-16 or 216, I don't remember all of them, but everything was coded.
- Thonhoff, J.: What were the physical working conditions like at the plant?
- VanWie, L.: I'm sure, since I hadn't worked in other plants, I'm sure that they were like most any other, you know, working conditions. They weren't the greatest but they were adequate, shall we say, for the times and the place.
- Thonhoff, J.: Could you describe them a little?
- VanWie, L.: Huh?
- Thonhoff, J.: Could you describe them a little?
- VanWie, L.: Actually, when I was working as a maintenance order clerk -- there was a maintenance department. The K-25 plant was a very, very long compound. I think it was a half-mile long. And so, all through the plant there were maintenance shops in which various - - the welders and the -- I can't even think of what some of the people like that worked. And they had a maintenance foreman. Actually, the maintenance order clerks really worked -- did work orders for the various trades that worked in the maintenance department. The maintenance department was on one side, and we actually had a little office of our own.
- [1:15:42]
- The maintenance order clerks did have a supervisor. But these were distributed through the plant. I think there were probably six or eight at least such operations.
- Thonhoff, J.: What were your co-workers like?
- VanWie, L.: Most of them were wives of men that worked in the plant, really. In my case, my best friends were wives of some of the GIs that worked there. And then, of course, there were lots of people from the surrounding towns, who worked there too. And they were very loyal people.



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Thonhoff, J.:

And how did you guys form your bonds as friends?

VanWie, L.:

Well, actually, we -- my husband, of course, had friends, people that he worked with. And so naturally they were the people that we knew outside of the plant. And then when you became a GI, it was some of the GI people that -- in fact, one of the -- when I was working as a maintenance order clerk, it was one person working with me who was also a maintenance order clerk. And her husband was already a GI. And my husband was coming back. So, the day he came back, we met at the barracks area. And so they showed me the ropes on the barracks area. And I think we had breakfast together, and they have been friends all the rest of our lives, of course.

[1:17:29]

And through them, we met other GI families. And it was an interesting time. [laughs]

Thonhoff, J.:

What are your most vivid recollections about the time that you spent at K-25?

VanWie, L.:

I think one of the interesting times was after the bomb had dropped. I remember my husband coming from the operating floor. I don't know why I was near the place, but he came racing down the stairs and he said, "Have you heard the news? The bomb's been dropped. You were right all along on what they were making, but I couldn't tell you."

And then I got back to the maintenance department, and the head of maintenance was saying but what is an atom? And I can remember trying and trying, over and over again, to try to explain to this maintenance foreman what a hydrogen atom was. And that all things were made from atoms. And I don't think I ever got through, and they were very, very perplexed because they had -- while they were working there, they had no idea of the concept of atomic energy or anything else. And that was -- I always will remember that session. [laughs]

Thonhoff, J.:

What kinds of health facilities were available?

VanWie, L.:

Very good health facilities. There was a health department there, and it seems that anything that really happened while you were there, they were adequately taken care of, and you also had physicals at times too.

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Thonhoff, J.: How often did you have physicals?

VanWie, L.: I don't remember, but I remember that I wasn't there that long but I did have a physical. And more of a talking as to my background and various things like that because I was young at the time.

[1:19:41]

Thonhoff, J.: How much emphasis did the company and your supervisor place on safety?

VanWie, L.: Well I don't know. Safety? We had -- if we were near a substance and we needed glasses, we had glasses. In the lab, we dealt a lot with dry ice and things like that. And we always had protective gloves that went over our things. And as I recall, in the lab, we even had coveralls or something that we put on -- we were all right.

Thonhoff, J.: And was you -- you said you had physicals, so you were regularly monitored?

VanWie, L.: Yup. Not, I'm sure -- this was just monitoring, I think, just to -- I was an employee there and they just wanted to know the state of my health. I don't think it was anything connected with plant gasses or anything else at the time.

Thonhoff, J.: Right. What type of radiological or chemical monitoring was performed?

VanWie, L.: On me, none.

Thonhoff, J.: None.

VanWie, L.: No.

Thonhoff, J.: And was there any performed in the building, that you know of?

VanWie, L.: I think -- I was not aware of film badges there. Now I'm sure that some people in the plant did wear film badges, but I was not aware in anything that I was associated with that there were film badges.

Thonhoff, J.: What are film badges, for somebody who wouldn't know?

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VanWie, L.: A film badge, if you've been exposed to any type of radiation, it will expose itself. The film will be exposed.

Thonhoff, J.: And does it change colors?

VanWie, L.: No, it's in the badge itself. And I guess the people who have film badges, they regularly take that badge and check it to see if it has had excess radiation.

Thonhoff, J.: And you weren't there during the Manhattan Project then, during -  
-

VanWie, L.: Oh, it was the Manhattan Project, yes.

[1:21:54]

Thonhoff, J.: Okay. During the war, you said you had read the books and you kind of had an idea of what the uranium was being used for.

VanWie, L.: Well, not what it was going to be used for, just the fact that they were working with uranium. But what they were going to do, I don't know.

Thonhoff, J.: Did you have any idea what they were going to do when you were there?

VanWie, L.: No, uh-uhn, uh-uhn (negative).

Thonhoff, J.: What was your reaction on August 6, 1945?

VanWie, L.: Well, we found out what we were doing for the thing -- and the fact that there was a bomb, and then, of course, I guess -- a couple of -- that was Hiroshima and then a few days later it was Nagasaki. And then it was the Japanese surrender. And I think everybody was -- felt that they had contributed a great deal towards maybe ending that war in a very, very small way because at that time we always felt that if the war had continued that the United States would have to go in there and have hand-to-hand combat of Japan at the time.

And so looking back now, people often ask that question. How do I feel working for the plant. And I always say that I felt that I had contributed by a very, very small part to ending that war.

[1:23:40]

And if nuclear energy or atomic energy had not been done by the United States, it certainly would have been done by Germany. It would have been great if we did not have that today, but that is not the question. As it was said before, it was like Pandora's Box; it had been opened. And at the time, it was opened, it certainly saved a great many lives in the United States, and it certainly saved Japanese lives as well.

I guess we have quite a lot of trouble sometimes with people getting upset with us about working on the project.

Thonhoff, J.: What would you say to those people?

VanWie, L.: And my husband's first answer and one of mine too, is people forget that we didn't start the war. And they also forget when they start talking about Hiroshima, which all the victims of Hiroshima - - of course, they were -- it was very bad for them. They never bring up the topic that there was a Bataan Death March that went on at the beginning of the war in which horrible things were done on American / U.S. soldiers that were in the Philippines and that is never brought up on what was done to them. What was done by the Japanese on our soldiers and our airmen and Burma and areas like that is never brought up either.

[1:25:26]

So if you want to balance them out, there you are. War is not a nice thing.

Thonhoff, J.: Right.

VanWie, L.: But I have no qualms or uncomfortable feelings about working at Oak Ridge.

[crew talk]

Thonhoff, J.: How do you think that history will view the Manhattan Project and its outcome?

VanWie, L.: I don't know. They revise history all the time and rewrite it, so it might be interesting to see how they're going -- because people are always revising it now.

Thonhoff, J.: Right.

VanWie, L.: It was the beginning of a new era. As I said, using the power of splitting the atom or whatever it is and the fact that there was so much energy from it, it was bound to come out eventually. And it just so happened the Manhattan Project was the one that did it.

[1:26:37]

Thonhoff, J.: How do you think history should view the Manhattan Project?

VanWie, L.: It was -- as it -- it was something that had to be done. It didn't -- I mean, to end a war. We were in a war. As I said before, if we hadn't done it, Germany would. And you know, that's the way it is. And the idea was to end the war.

[crew talk]

[End Tape 1, Begin Tape 2]

[2:00:15]

VanWie, L.: A can of Spam was great.

Thonhoff, J.: I would really like to hear about that too, you know, what it was like to actually cook and what you guys ate and things like that, just every day living. We'll go over that stuff too. That's really great because I have my accustomed way of living today, and I'm sure that's different.

[crew talk]

Thonhoff, J.: What are your thoughts about how the activities accomplished at K-25 revolutionized the world?

VanWie, L.: [laughs] Well, it certainly did. It revolutionized the world in many respects. Well, you always do health. There was a lot done in medicine on the thing; probably kept a lot of nations from starting wars. [laughs] They have tried to be a little more diplomatic in certain things. There is always that threat that has kept certain things under control. I'm sure that in -- for example in computers, I think they use some of the early computers here, and I think a lot of the strides in computers were actually started because of the Manhattan Project. That's just my own personal opinion of the thing.

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[2:02:03]

But they used them here to a great extent. I'm sure there were lots of other things that were done at the National Laboratory and things like that. So, not being in the technical field, I really don't know too many of the things but I'm sure there must have been a lot of plusses.

Thonhoff, J.: What were the first computers like? Do you remember what those were?

VanWie, L.: Well most -- well they weren't our laptops, as we have today, or even our desktops. They were mainframe computers. And at that time, you used a lot of cards, were punch cards. And that's the way they did it and it was quite different that it is today.

Thonhoff, J.: Did you work with them?

VanWie, L.: No. My husband did later on. Not in the first part of it but later on.

[2:03:04]

Thonhoff, J.: Do you have any interesting stories that you remember about K-25 during the Cold War period?

VanWie, L.: I actually, during the Cold War, was not working in K-25, so I really don't know about that era.

Thonhoff, J.: Let's talk about your job and what specifically you did in as much detail as you can remember.

VanWie, L.: Actually, it was a maintenance order clerk. As I've said, I really just wrote up orders for the welders or the people who lifted heavy equipment, evacuated cells of gasses, and things like that. And so it was purely writing out orders for people to do. There were certain things if they did a certain process, there were a certain number of maintenance people that had to come in there and do that. And it was just a series of things like that, that knowing what a process was going to be, that I knew what orders to write to the maintenance people. And so that was that.

When I went into the lab, I was working with -- in special analysis and we were using a thing called mass spectrometer which was really analyzing gasses that -- and telling what various elements

were in the gasses and things like that. And I worked there most of the time and then I went to the assay room, which is where we were seeing how the separation process in the gas was progressing, shall we say, or how it was. Because we were taking some of the gas from the plant that they were trying to heat different isotopes and they were trying to separate them -- not separate them. They were trying to concentrate them. So it was really in the assay rooms to see how the concentrations were going on from that.

[2:05:14]

So -- and there were all women doing that assay work. We had a man, usually a shift supervisor and the main shift were men, but the rest were all women in the assay rooms.

Thonhoff, J.: And how was that, the working conditions there with all the women?

VanWie, L.: Fine, fine. Everybody knew what to do and went ahead and did it. And we got along fine. You know, we had a job to do and we did it. There weren't complaints or anything else.

Thonhoff, J.: What was your most challenging assignment?

VanWie, L.: I really don't have any particular one at my job. I was sort of one of the lowlies of the -- [laughs]

Thonhoff, J.: Was there anything that you found particularly difficult to do or to deal with?

VanWie, L.: No, the only thing difficult to deal with is that we had to make up a solution of dry ice and -- I can't remember what else -- actually make a very cold situation. And we used things like sawed top of a thermos bottle, but of course it was round. But it was that type of thing. And we put it in that. And sometimes, if you weren't careful, you put the tube through that vacuum, which was a vacuum of course, and then the stuff would come up in your face, which was very pleasant. And it was after one of those experiences, and my husband had gotten out of the Army then, and he had decided it was about time I stopped work. And "No, no, no, this is fine. I'm doing fine." And one day when that hit me, I thought this is ridiculous. [laughs] And that was the day I told them I thought I was resigning. [laughs]

Thonhoff, J.: What was your most significant accomplishment?

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[2:07:32]

VanWie, L.: In the plant, nothing. I guess just working.

Thonhoff, J.: No, just your significant accomplishment. It could either be individually or as a group. What do you think is the most significant accomplishment?

VanWie, L.: Of --

Thonhoff, J.: Of the time?

VanWie, L.: Oh, of the whole group? It's getting that job done to get the bomb that finally, you know. I guess that's what we did. We were just supplying the material in which they could use in the bomb.

Thonhoff, J.: And what about individually, for you just during that time frame?

VanWie, L.: All I was doing was doing a job on analyzing what was in the plant gas, is all I was doing.

Thonhoff, J.: Well that's incredibly important.

VanWie, L.: Well, yes, it was. And that's what we were doing, to see if the separation process was -- not separation. It was a concentration process, was going on, with the uranium hexafluoride, and see if the two isotopes were -- the heavier isotopes was becoming more of a concentration. That's what we were doing.

[2:08:54]

We were just testing to see how the skills over in the plant were going on. [laughs]

Thonhoff, J.: Do you recall any conflicts that occurred between management and the workers and the union?

VanWie, L.: No, actually it was very smooth. It really was. At least in my experience, it was fine. They were very nice when my husband had to -- had different hours and stuff to work it so that I could still work in a certain -- you know, if for example in special -- when I was in special analysis, I know he had to go on evening shift. And they just put out work for me to do during that evening shift. And there was no problem. I just gave my report of what I had found



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out the night before and that was it. And they were very obliging in this whole thing.

Thonhoff, J.:

Did they do that for most husband and wives?

VanWie, L.:

I'm sure they did, that they bent over backwards to help us out on that.

[2:09:59]

Thonhoff, J.:

And you said that you worked with a lot of women doing the analyzing.

VanWie, L.:

Yes.

Thonhoff, J.:

What other kind of roles did women play?

VanWie, L.:

I'm sure -- they were in the cafeteria and areas like that. They were also in the plant up on the operating floor. As I said, they had them in the maintenance order clerks. They had them upon the operating floor managing -- doing things on -- they have a thing called a line recorder. And a good many of the operators on the operating floor at line recorders, were women.

Thonhoff, J.:

Could you explain what a line recorder is?

VanWie, L.:

I can -- I was -- Line recorder was a mass spectrometer -- Anyhow, which I had worked on before -- But actually one funny thing is that my husband had thought that being a line recorder operator would be just fine for me. And he said you'd be between buildings. Now, if you had heard that, I would figure that there's this building and there's this building and this building, and you'd be in a catwalk between buildings. And I thought that's not for me.

[2:11:19]

Well, actually when I got up there, the buildings were buildings but they had no barriers. The operating floor was a complete floor a half mile long. In fact, they all rode bicycles, you know, from one end of the floor to the other. And so I wouldn't have been alone stuck in a catwalk someplace like that. [laughs] There was a lot going back. And I've often laughed about the fact that I would have been in between buildings. But it was purely a designation of this building and that building.

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Thonhoff, J.: And what about minorities? Did you have any contact with Afro-Americans or any other minority groups of people?

VanWie, L.: There were blacks around, in what capacity I don't remember. There were not -- in the maintenance department, I don't think I was in contact with any or saw any in that particular part. They probably were outside. You know, there was other work that had to be done outside, you know.

Thonhoff, J.: And do you know if they were treated any differently, or do you recall?

[2:12:29]

VanWie, L.: I don't remember that they were. I mean, I don't remember seeing anything written or anything else about them. I know the question came up about separate facilities and things like that. When I came to this part of the country, it was quite a revelation, for example, to see in bus stations, to see colored facilities for men and women. Also drinking fountains were also that way too. And I was not used to this. And I think if it had occurred in the plant that I would have recognized it immediately, because this is not the way I had been brought up really.

Thonhoff, J.: What was your life like as a -- being a family? How was that?

VanWie, L.: As I said, we lived in the victory cottages, and my husband was a GI. And then when he got out of the Army, we did get a house. And that was a real thing. I mean, you had a refrigerator, for example. And you had a stove and your neighbors were a little way away from you. [laughs]

Thonhoff, J.: You couldn't ask them an egg through the wall?

VanWie, L.: I'd have to do some walking to get eggs. And anything went wrong with the house, you called I think it was Roane-Anderson and they would come to fix it.

[2:14:07]

We did have a stove -- our heating system was a furnace, and they would deliver coal. And it was a coal furnace. I mean large blocks of stuff. You couldn't bank that fire like you could normal things. If you banked it at night, which is what you normally do,

this big bunch of hot air would come through. It wasn't an easy stove to regulate for heating. You were either hot or cold. It didn't seem to be anything. And it was awfully dirty, terribly sooty. I could remember -- I think it was a substance called Climax or something -- some kind -- it wasn't a plastic. It was something like erasers or putty, you know. And that you'd go down the walls to get all that soot off the walls. I mean, cleaning the walls. And you use this putty like thing to get that stuff off the walls.

Another thing, I remember my mother came to visit one time, and she saw this ivy coming up there near the dining area. And she said, "Do you have that in a pot?" And I said, "Uh-uhh (negative)." It just came up through the walls and I saw no reason to stop it, so I just trained it around the cords on the lights.  
[laughs]

[2:15:49]

They were not -- they were adequate, shall we say, but they weren't well -- a lot of holes in them, shall we say. But it was very nice. Compared to the victory cottage, it was wonderful.

Thonhoff, J.:

Could you describe what future generations should remember about K-25? What do you think is important and the emphasis should be placed on?

VanWie, L.:

It's the place where it all started. I guess it really was. It was the first commercial -- things like this have been done in labs but this is the first time it had been put to the test, to actually build it, build a building that could do the separation of uranium.

Now future generations might think well, we shouldn't have had it in the first place, which, as I said, is sort of having your head up on the clouds because we would have gotten it. But we were here and this was the first. Some people will say that, that is not the thing that should make us happy, but it's probably -- but it was there.

[2:17:19]

Thonhoff, J.:

And what do you think should be taken down for the history books about the facility?

VanWie, L.:

As I said before, it was built for a purpose. The scientists had come in and said, "We think this will work." We think that we can

produce an explosion using these gasses. We have to have enough of it from a plant, and it had been done in the lab, or at least it was thought it could be done in a lab. And then they thought well let's try it.

And I think at the time, or later when we found out what we were doing, we felt it was so many young men who were doing this that perhaps if they had been older, they wouldn't have the -- I'm not saying guts, but they wouldn't have had the thing, "Well let's go try it on the thing," which they did. And I think the average age of the scientists and things was, oh, like 25 or 27 years old. It was very young on the project.

But as I said, I have no regrets for working there or living here. My husband was there for all his -- until he retired, and so we have that question put to us many times. And we say, "No, we don't regret what we did."

[2:19:02]

Thonhoff, J.:

What are some stories or some recollections that you have about your experience here in Oak Ridge?

VanWie, L.:

Oh, actually in the early days, the whole area was, you know, fenced, it was all guarded, even the -- where you lived. I mean, you could not get into the Manhattan Project, period. And there were gates at various places, and they were patrolled by the military police. Therefore, you could have no unexpected visitors. And you had to have a pass for getting into the area. And I guess the funniest one, which my husband will have a fit because I tell this story.

But when we were married, we were married in Washington and came back to Oak Ridge. And we came in Edgemoor Gate, and he had forgotten to get me a pass. And there was absolutely no way that I could get into Oak Ridge until he got me a visitor's pass.

And so, I stayed at the guard shack and he took the bus in Oak Ridge and returned a few hours later. And then, of course, another bus wasn't scheduled for quite a long time. Just about that time, I'll never forget it, a Kraft Mayonnaise truck came through. By that time, he had gotten the pass for me. And he went out to the driver to find out if he would take us into the town site. [laughs] And the driver said he would.

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[2:20:53]

And so I went as a bride into Oak Ridge on a Kraft Mayonnaise truck. [laughs] We didn't have housing. We stayed at the -- I forgotten what it was. I think it used to be the Alexander Hotel or something. I've forgotten what the -- Guest House was what it was. We stayed at the Guest House until we could get some housing. And of course, I got a residents pass shortly after that. But anybody else, including my mother, had to have that pass. So you didn't have any visitors at all.

Thonhoff, J.:

What did you have to go through to get a pass?

VanWie, L.:

You'd have to go to the town site and -- for example, I don't believe anybody who had been born in a foreign country could come in. You couldn't get a pass for anybody who had been born out of the United States because I had friends who had -- I think her sister had married somebody from Belgium or something, and they could not get in. There were people here, I guess, working who had been born out there, but that was an entirely different situation with scientists. But coming in as a visitor into the residential area, you couldn't do that.

And another funny thing, coming through the gates, you had to have a pass for cameras. They always searched you for liquor because, of course, Oak Ridge was dry. And I remember one time coming through the gates and my husband had some hair tonic or something and, of course, it gurgles. And I remember the guards hearing it gurgle, went through those suitcases to find it because they figured it was liquor. And yet he had a pass for a camera, which they never did find. [laughs] But the hair tonic was a real, you know, gurgle on them things. But we went through the gates like that. So it was interesting from that.

[2:23:00]

And then we also, during the war, of course, had food shortages like everybody else did. And it was a great day when we found a can of Spam on -- somebody had taken more than their allotted amount. I think you were allowed one can of Spam and somebody had tried to take two, and I got the check-out counter and spotted that Spam under there. And, you know, we made it just like baked ham, you know, scored it and put the cloves in the top and had ham, Spam.

However, at the -- when he was in the GIs, there was a PX there. And they did bring in Hershey Bars and washing detergents and washing powders and lots of that thing. And so we used to give them to the -- to our friends, etc., who didn't have them because those were in short supply.

[2:24:04]

After living in the victory cottage for a little while though, we moved to Harriman, where we could get an apartment or so. And some of our friends went there. And there were GI busses that went out to these various places around Oak Ridge. And life was a little better in those -- after the victory cottage and those things.

Oh and they could get cigarettes at the PX, which were also in short demand, things like that.

Thonhoff, J.:

Did a lot of people smoke back then?

VanWie, L.:

Oh yes. Many, many people smoked. And I guess they could get beer at the PX, if I recall. It's hard to remember, but I do know of them drinking beer at the PX.

Thonhoff, J.:

What was the town of Oak Ridge like? Did they offer anything?

VanWie, L.:

They had town -- what was town site, like Jackson Square. There was grocery stores and small department store and there were a couple of movie theaters. There were a lot of movie theaters and there were other sites, I think -- there was one at Grove Center, and I forgot -- there were -- let's see, was there one at East Village, but anyhow, they had some of these things. The satellite really was there at Jackson Square, which they called town site. And there was a chapel on the hill, and there were schools. And many of the churches met in schools. In fact, our church met in a school.

[2:25:56]

There were a lot of recreational halls, which they had dances and various things. Weekends they had, in the summertime, they had dancing on the tennis courts and things like that. So there was a lot actually -- they had lots of clubs, organizations that people could join for hobbies or things like that. So they did provide a lot of things for the residents to do in Oak Ridge. But it was a community that was different. [laughs]

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Thonhoff, J.: Are there any more specific stories that you remember anything that you would like to go over or talk about?

VanWie, L.: No, I can't remember. Can you think of anything I've told you?

[2:26:54]

Thonhoff, J.: No, just anything that pops into your head about --

VanWie, L.: You know, when you go out to K-25 now, you can't see it. Occasionally, if you know where to look, you will see fire hydrants, you know, the thing for water. Both sides of that road were covered with trailers. Instead of the trees that you see today, there were trailers. And the fire hydrants, of course, were for fighting fires on those trailers. Also there were hutments there.

If you know the spot where the road makes a Y, one of them, I think, going to -- I can't think. I haven't been out there for so long, to one of the bridges to the plant. From that point on, into K-25, on both sides of the road were trailers or hutments all the way in. I mean, and down, of course, there's nothing but trees there.

But I remember the first day I went into apply for a job at K-25, seeing all those trailers and everything else. And then, of course, there were also spots before you even got to the plant, where there were -- you had to have passes too. And the men couldn't -- had Q clearance but they had badges had certain places they could go in different other plants. There wasn't this business of going back and forth in the early days. You stayed in designated areas, which were designated on your badge.

[2:28:44]

Thonhoff, J.: How did they designate it on your badge?

VanWie, L.: By numbers or letters or something like that, telling which areas that you could go into. So not only were the plants -- the town itself to get into but then there were parts where there were guard stations before you got to K-25 -- well they still today into Y-12, I think. And X-10 was the same. That was the way it was called. X-10 was the same way. You could not just go through those, even though you were in the residential area. Then for each of the buildings you have to have passes too.

And so if you only worked in a certain area, this was usually designated on your badges where you -- so there was never going back and forth in the plant of the ordinary people. Now the men, the scientists could do that. To some extent, they could do that.

Thonhoff, J.: As it was designated on their badge?

VanWie, L.: Uh-huh (affirmative). But there was a lot of security. And I know that one woman that was -- when I was in special analysis who was training me for the job that I was doing. There was one particular apparatus that I did not know how it worked, and I was trying to find out how this thing worked, and she said, "That's what they told me to do, and I don't ask any other questions." And that was the way so many people from this area were. They just didn't ask questions. They were told the job. And you'd have to be in the area to realize what the people in this area were, not security minded, but they just were very loyal people. This is what they were to do, and they were told they weren't to do anything else, by gum they didn't do it.

**[End of Tape 2, Begin Tape 3]**

[crew talk]

VanWie, L.: I don't know what other stories. Actually, two of our children were born in Oak Ridge. The third one was born in Oak Ridge, but we lived in Knoxville at the time. It was a nice place to bring up children, shall we say.

**[3:01:00]**

Thonhoff, J.: What was it like to bring up children here?

VanWie, L.: Well everybody had children. [laughs] I mean, it was a very young community. That's when I say the men would get in one corner talking business and the women got in the other corner, talking about kids and obstetrics because we had just so many kids there.

There were good medical facilities. The original hospital had been set up as an Army hospital. We had good doctors there. We had good dentists there too. So, when -- and I had my children there in Oak Ridge Hospital. It was fine. You couldn't have asked for better people, really, to attend you as far as doctors and dentists.



And the facilities were fine. And so we never wanted for that type of thing at all.

If you wanted anything for the house or anything, you usually took the -- in the early days, before we had a car, you took the big excursion into Knoxville by bus. [laughs]

Thonhoff, J.:

What was that like?

VanWie, L.:

It was 20 miles by bus, you know, and then we went to the big town because we went to Knoxville to find things in stores. In the early days, they had a small department store. Gradually things started coming in. But in the early days, if you really wanted anything, like even throw rugs or something like that, you went to Knoxville for them. So you had a long shopping list when you went to Knoxville. Gradually, of course, things started to change, especially when the city was open.

[3:02:57]

You know that the residential area, you didn't need a pass to go into. But at the first part, there were a lot of essentials that you really had to go elsewhere for.

Thonhoff, J.:

When they did they open the city?

VanWie, L.:

You know, I don't remember. I have really forgotten when they opened the city. Anyhow, we enjoyed living there, but we went to Knoxville when -- in those days they had a priority system on housing. If your job was such, you could get such and such. We had a two-bedroom house. The idea was that we could get a three-bedroom house if we had two children of opposite sex and one of them was at least 6 years old. And we were not at that stage. We had two children of opposite sex, but I think they were 3 and a year old or something or other. We decided it was getting kind of cramped. And so we took the tour over to Knoxville, found a house that had three bedrooms in it and -- went to Knoxville and found another thing.

[3:04:13]

In Oak Ridge, your conversations with your neighbors and your friends were so centered on one particular town and everything, but when we moved to Knoxville on our street there, there was a newspaper man and a man worked for the airlines. Somebody ran

a hobby shop. There were two university professors; somebody ran a golf club, real estate people. It was more of a normal thing that was not -- that we didn't have -- or we weren't with -- in Oak Ridge. It was an entirely different situation, which was refreshing after we had lived in Oak Ridge because we didn't go to Knoxville until '51. So we lived through a good deal of the early days of Oak Ridge.

It's been interesting to see how Oak Ridge has developed and schools and churches going up and enlarging. Of course, they always had schools. There was the church -- the chapel on the hill. And then as I said, many of the churches met in schools. They didn't have malls or anything like that or fast food places or that type of thing.

I remember too when we came to -- first came to Oak Ridge and when I came as a bride, I had to have a place to live. We did get an E-1 apartment. We had to go down to Roane-Anderson, which is the one that actually ran the housing part of it and rent furniture. And renting furniture was not the greatest. We got -- I remember we got two cots. We got a chest of drawers, which was the best piece of furniture we got. And I remember it had a decal of a teddy bear with its foot on a basket or something. [laughs] But it was such a good piece of furniture; we put it in the living room. And we had a couch that was just a frame with some cushions on it. Our table was just a shop table really with a piece of plywood or something on it. We had two chairs; they didn't match. And that was our furniture that we could rent from Roane-Anderson.

[3:06:36]

None of the -- that was true also of the E apartments and also in the houses. They didn't have closet doors. Everything you had, curtains that there was a track built up in the top of the -- where you would have a door that you put in stuff that would hold those curtains. And those curtains were the biggest nuisance because everything had to be moved, those curtains. And they all got dirty with the soot from the thing. And so that was constantly. No doors on closets through any of the housing, I don't believe they had closet doors, unless you put them on yourself.

I remember the first time we got a washing machine. We got a Bendix washing machine because before that -- well, what I first had there, I did by scrub board and I had to hang the stuff out on the line. And that Bendix was a big deal when I could do washing

right there in the house, not have to go anyplace or do anything. That was great!

A lot of great things coming along! [laughs]

Can't think -- early days; had lots of friends with lots of children along with our children -- did start a garden, and people did start gardens there.

Thonhoff, J.: What kind of stuff would you grow?

VanWie, L.: Oh, I think I grew roses, and I had a rock garden there, and I had daffodils, I think, and various bulbs outside there. And did a play area for our first child -- with just a fence around some trees. There wasn't all the fancy equipment, of course, for children in those days. But it was a nice thing living in Oak Ridge. But it was interesting moving to Knoxville. You know?

[3:08:43]

School systems probably were better in Oak Ridge, but our children weren't ready for school at that time.

Thonhoff, J.: What were they like? What were the school systems like?

VanWie, L.: Huh?

Thonhoff, J.: What were the school systems like?

VanWie, L.: I think they were very, very good. Always have -- Oak Ridge systems have been excellent, brought in excellent teachers and things like that.

In the days of the Army days -- well, General Groves was head of the whole Manhattan Project. We had a man named Col. Nichols who really made the daily, day-by-day decisions on things. And it was Col. Nichols who said this, and Col. Nichols said that. Well in the special engineering detachment, 50 years, we did have a reunion, and it was attended, I think, by 400 people. I think it's special engineering detachment only had 1,800 men to begin with.

But anyhow, at the 55<sup>th</sup> reunion, Col. Nichols, who then was a general, came to the reunion and that was a real stand up, appreciation. I mean, we had all heard of Col. Nichols for so many times when the men were in the Army, and he came and we

were most appreciative. He was in his 90s by the time of that reunion, but it was great because the SEC -- SED detachment has been making periodic reunions. I think they had their 60<sup>th</sup> and that's probably their last. But it's been interesting to go up.

[3:10:28]

And actually with the lab employees, they had a 55<sup>th</sup> reunion not too long ago, which was interesting, talking about old lab days. Many of the women who worked in the assay room -- [laughs]

Thonhoff, J.: Do you still keep in touch with the people?

VanWie, L.: Yes. Well, yes just a few days ago we saw some of the Oak Ridge people who live in Paducah now. So it was an interesting life.

Thonhoff, J.: Overall, are you happy with --

VanWie, L.: You know it's an experience. If nothing else, you had something to talk about of your early days [laughs] between living hutments and things like that.

Thonhoff, J.: And is there anything else that you want to say before we end?

VanWie, L.: I don't really think of anything right off hand.

Thonhoff, J.: Okay. Well that's good.

[End of Interview]