

Henderson, Gary

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K-25 Oral History Interview

Date: 9/21/05

Interviewee: Gary Henderson

Interviewer: Valerie Smith

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Name/Org: Gary W. Snyder 721567 Pro2Serve Date: November 17, 2005
Guidance (if applicable): CG-SS-4 September 2000

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[crew talk]

Smith, V.: Do you have any questions before we start?

Henderson, G.: No, I don't have any.

Smith, V.: Now at some point, Dustin may --

Male: I'll give you a five minute warning.

Smith, V.: He's going to give me a five minute warning when this tape is about up. Now that doesn't mean the interview is over. That just means that we need to change the tape.

Henderson, G.: Okay.

Smith, V.: And there may be a time if there's some sounds going on outside or he may need to adjust your microphone or something like that.

Henderson, G.: Okay.

Smith, V.: He'll just do it.

Henderson, G.: Okay.

Smith, V.: So you know, if you see him approaching or anything like that, that's just the norm.

Henderson, G.: Okay. [laughter]

Smith, V.: Did I explain that well? [laughter] Okay. But really, this is a unique opportunity I think to capture your story and the story of others. And so I really want you to feel free and open.

Henderson, G.: Okay.

Smith, V.: We wanted to talk about -- Cause we want to know what it was like to be here during the time that you were working and how you were treated and things of this nature. So, I'll be delving into whatever area I'm interested. I guess --

Henderson, G.: Okay. So it's probably somewhere along the line you would probably start out when did I first come here. Stuff like that.

Smith, V.: Yes. Yes. The first few questions are going to be pretty generic just to get an understanding of where you're from and your

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educational background.

Henderson, G.: Okay.

Smith, V.: And how you got here. What you were – What were your first impressions of the area. You know, those types of things.

[02:41]

Henderson, G.: Okay.

Smith, V.: And then we can start talking more about work and helping and you know what you may have done for recreation or, you know, how you were treated on the job. You know, those types of things.

Henderson, G.: Okay.

Smith, V.: We'll just follow the path that seems to be of most interest.

Henderson, G.: Okay.

Smith, V.: And so it'll be that type of a thing, which is a little different for me, because I'm an engineer. So I'm sort of used to precision. [laughter] If you give me 20 questions, I want to go through the 20 questions.

Henderson, G.: Okay.

Male: We're ready.

Smith, V.: You said that five minutes ago. [laughs] Okay. All right. We'll go ahead and start. All right. Could you please tell me your name and would you please spell it?

[3:32]

Henderson, G.: My name is Gary Henderson. G-A-R-Y H-E-N-D-E-R-S-O-N.

Smith, V.: And where were you born?

Henderson, G.: I was born in Tuskegee, Alabama.

Smith, V.: Okay. And what type of work did you do in Tuskegee before you came here to Oak Ridge?

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Henderson, G.:

Well, after when I was very young, my parents moved to Asuka (phonetic sp.), Florida, and that's where I started school and everything. And we lived in Florida 'til I was about nine years old. Then we moved back to Alabama, a little place called Opelika, Alabama.

Smith, V.:

Uh-huh (affirmative). I know where that is. And did you stay there? What ages were you there in Opelika?

Henderson, G.:

Okay. I lived in Alabama from age nine until I was seventeen. And I came to Oak Ridge, Tennessee to visit my brother, and I like here and I've just stayed.

[04:55]

Smith, V.:

So was your brother working here in Oak Ridge at the time?

Henderson, G.:

Yes.

Smith, V.:

What type of work did he do?

Henderson, G.:

He was a laborer.

Smith, V.:

Okay.

Henderson, G.:

And that was in 1949 when I came here.

Smith, V.:

Okay. So you found out about job opportunities through your brother here when you came for a visit?

Henderson, G.:

Well, my brother were already here. And of course what influenced me to coming to Oak Ridge; I had a second cousin living here also. And he came back to Opelika, Alabama on vacation. And during his two weeks vacation I talked to him and asked him about job situations and everything. And he said the jobs were plentiful. And of course, that influenced me a whole lot because I, as a young person, I always wanted to move to a big city in the bright lights. And cuz of, not knowing that Oak Ridge, it wasn't the type of city I was expecting. But the longer I lived here, the better I liked it. And so that was in 1949. And with the exception of being in the military for two years, I've been here pretty much all the time.

[06:29]

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Smith, V.:

Okay. So –

[crew talk]

Smith, V.:

Okay. So when you were 17. Then you went to the military? Or what age did you come here to Oak Ridge?

Henderson, G.:

I was 17 years of age when I moved to Oak Ridge.

Smith, V.:

Okay.

Henderson, G.:

And after I moved here I got a job as a laborer. And of course, the way things was set up by then I lived in the huts. And once you get so into the huts, the next part is to find you a job. And so to get a job, you had to go to the union hall. And of course, the union hall, it was down in the Jefferson area that's near the Boy's Club. And whenever different companies need X-numbers of mens, they would call the union hall, and they would send out 50 whatever. And you might be there for a day or two, but by then it was a lot going on and jobs were plentiful. So it wasn't hard to get a job. And so after I was here two days, I was sent out on a job.

[08:02]

Smith, V.:

Tell me what was your first impression of Oak Ridge when you first came here?

Henderson, G.:

Well, when I first came here I was -- been hoping to see a big city, something like New York. But that wasn't the case. I came here at night and everything was lit up and different. [laughs] But the next morning after I got up and a few days later, I discovered that it wasn't what I was looking for. But I got the job and went to work because I didn't have a lot of money. And so that was the next, hop in. Let's go to work.

[08:48]

Smith, V.:

Describe what it was like living in the hutments. Describe the hutments and the living conditions and what that was like for you.

Henderson, G.:

Ah, that, ah – Back then it was set up sort of on the military style. You had a bunk, and we would pay like a dollar and forty cents a week for rent and real economical. And we had a cafeteria we can go and eat if you chose to do that. Or the way the huts were set up allowed the fellas (phonetic sp.); they would cook food on a hot

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plate and something in that order. But everything was real economical and cause – Take care of that part of it. But far as my free time after working, I was – We had a pool room. I used to enjoy playing pools and playing cards. And I always had a kind of a religious background on Sunday. I would go to church and then back to my home. [laughs] You know. My hut.

Smith, V.:

Now tell me about the – your housing in comparison to where the whites were living and what the situation was there.

[10:31]

Henderson, G.:

Well, far as our location where we lived, the single peoples, they were separated. All the men were in one area, and we had a sort of a security fence and the single ladies would be on the other side of the fence. And peoples with families that were married, they lived in flat tops. And so far as the race goes, that didn't bother me a whole lot because they lived on the other side of town, so to speak. And we all had our little separate places that we would go. At that time, we didn't have a movie theater here in Oak Ridge, and I would go to Knoxville a lot of time.

And during the weekdays, whoever was in charge of the drive-in theater, you could get in a distant long as you didn't disturb the white people, so to speak, because we wasn't allowed to go into the theater. But we could sit in a distance and watch it, and you could hear the sound. But you just wasn't allowed to go in. And that didn't bother me a whole lot, because that was a way of life. And, but of course needless to say we had our own restroom and they had theirs. And restaurants and stuff like that. Everything was just sort of segregated. And, but you got used to that type of living, and it didn't bother you a whole lot.

[12:52]

Smith, V.:

Okay. What – Tell me about like where you would wash your clothes or get a haircut or where you went to church, the after-hour activities, that people did.

Henderson, G.:

Okay. At that time, we had a fella (phonetic sp.). He would come by and pick up your laundry and dry cleaners then, cause you pay a small fee for that. Or you could take it yourself to the dry cleaners. And most of the time that was the way I went about my laundry. I would put it in the cleaners. And what was your other question?

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Smith, V.:

About your hair, getting your hair cut.

Henderson, G.:

Okay. We had our own facility for that. We had our barber shop, and the white had theirs. Because they didn't come in ours or we wasn't allowed in theirs. [laughs] That was the way that played out.

Smith, V.:

Okay. So tell me, I want to talk a little bit about your educational background. What is your educational background?

[14:23]

Henderson, G.:

Okay. When I first moved to Oak Ridge I completed the eighth grade. And later years after I went into the military, I saw a need to go back to school. So I started taking some classes when I was in the military. And after I got out I finished high school in Knoxville, a little place called Austin East High School, Austin Eden School. And I finished high school and got my high school diploma. And at that point, I was able to apply for a better job.

And of course, I'm getting a little bit ahead of you probably now. This was -- I finished high school in 1959 after I had came out of the military. And at that point, I applied for a technician job at K-25. And I was able to get the job. And before that time, I was working in the Y-12 area, biology division. I was an animal caretaker and I worked as an animal caretaker. That was for Union Carbide starting at January. And I worked there until March of '53. And I was drafted into the Army. And after I got discharged from the Army, I came back to Union Carbide and got my old job.

[16:13]

And during that period of time, I decided to go back to high school. And as I stated before, I finished in '59. In 1967, I applied for a technician job at K-25 and was able to get the job. And I worked at the K-25 facility from 1967 'til 1974 as a technician. And that job played out and I was able to get a job at X-10 as a technician. And I worked there from '74 up 'til 1990 and I retired.

Of course, the company changed names a little bit. Because I started out with Union Carbide -- Union Carbide, and somewhere along the lines when I was working at X-10, Mike Marietta came into the picture and they taken over. And so that's when I retired from Mike Marietta.

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Smith, V.:

So what was your first job that you had when you first got here?

Henderson, G.:

My first job when I moved here, it was as a laborer. I worked here in the Oak Ridge area for like six months. And I went back to the union hall, and they sent me from there to a job called Maxim Construction Company. And that was the company – It was K-29. And I worked there I would say from 1950 and to '52, because I started working for Union Carbide in 1952 as an animal caretaker at biology division.

[18:31]

Smith, V.:

How did you – Tell me a little bit about your job as an animal caretaker. What did you do?

Henderson, G.:

Okay. My responsibilities as an animal caretaker was to change the animal bedding. Make sure – WE would change the bedding twice a week. And we changed the water bottles twice a week. And we were the – The animals had earmarks, and as they died, because we was dealing with experimental animals. And it was the animal caretaker to read the animal I.D., and you would make out a label. And you wrapped the animal and put it in the freezer. And later, someone would come along and they would perform autopsy on the animals and see what caused it to die.

Smith, V.:

What kind of experiments were being done on the animals? Do you know?

[19:36]

Henderson, G.:

Ah, some of them were exposed to radiation. And back then, I didn't have lots of interest. I didn't keep up with all the details of what they done. I just was – I mean, cause I only wants to get a paycheck. And I didn't have much interest in what was being done to the animals.

Smith, V.:

I understand. So you started out as an animal caretaker.

Henderson, G.:

Yes.

Smith, V.:

And then is that when you went into the military? Could you summarize again your first job in that profession?

Henderson, G.:

Okay. After I started working for Union Carbide, I worked with the company until March 1953. And I was away for two years,

and I came back to Union Carbide in the latter part of '55. Because after I got out of the military, they had to reactivate my clearance. You would have to have Q clearance to work in these areas. And even though I just went straight from the company to the military and from the military back to the company, but they had a certain amount of things that had to check out for their own records, I guess.

[21:22]

Smith, V.: So you said you had a Q clearance back then.

Henderson, G.: Yes.

Smith, V.: Did only certain people working in certain areas have a need for a Q clearance? Or did most people who worked out there have to have a Q clearance?

Henderson, G.: Ah, good question. [laughs] At that time, everybody that worked in the restricted area, they would have to have a Q clearance, because at – Before you could get into the area, there were a guard and he would check you. You would have to have your badge. And in later years, there were peoples that they didn't have to have a Q clearance to work in certain areas. But you would have to have a badge to get into the area. But he particular area where I was working, it required a Q clearance.

[22:18]

Smith, V.: Now, how did you get to work back then?

Henderson, G.: Okay. Going back to the beginning when I first came to Oak Ridge, ah, we had buses. And you could – It wasn't a ticket. They had a little machine you could put a dime in or give it to the bus driver. And you could go anywhere in Oak Ridge for ten cents. Now sometimes you had to get what you call a transfer. But you could get that transfer and get off one bus and get onto the next bus. And after you complete wherever you're going and you're ready to come back home, you had to pay another dime to get back home. Cuz you could go to and from work for 20 cents is basically what I'm saying. And that was all the money that you needed for transportation.

Smith, V.: Now when you first started out as a laborer, what literally did you do during that first six months or so you were here?

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Henderson, G.:

Okay. At that point, we – Not me, but you had peoples to dig ditches and lay pipes. And what the laborer would do, they would just fill in the dirt, and you had what you call an outamp (phonetic sp.). You would just pack the dirt onto the pipes to make the – fill in the foundation solid. And so, and later after we laid the pipes, peoples come in with bulldozers, and they would smooth out the land. And later, they would come along and start building houses.

[24:14]

Smith, V.:

So you were a laborer for housing at times?

Henderson, G.:

Yes. Uh-huh (affirmative).

Smith, V.:

In the beginning.

Henderson, G.:

Yes.

Smith, V.:

Okay. What about did you ever – What were some of the health – Or what were some of the benefits of working here? I mean, did you come here primarily because of the pay? Was the pay better than what you were getting at home? Or you just wanted a job? What was the reason for you wanting to come here?

Henderson, G.:

Ah, Opelika, it was a small city, and as a young man, I just wanted to move to a larger city. And in talking to my cousin, I thought Oak Ridge offered all of those things. [laughs] And it wasn't a lot of difference in the pay than what I was making, because before I came here as a young man, I was working for a block company, and my job there – That was in Opelika, Alabama. I was making blocks. You had a machine, and you just – certain things you do. And you was just – Your job was to make blocks all day.

[25:49]

And during that time, it paid a fairly decent salary, because nobody made a whole lot of money back then. And of course, when I came here, you could make a dollar an hour, and I was making a little less than that when I came here. But you adjust to certain conditions. And I didn't have much responsibility because it was only just me. And I didn't need a whole lot.

Smith, V.:

I understand. What about the – Did you end up getting married while you were here? Meeting your wife? Or –

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Henderson, G.: That was later years after I got out of the military. Um, after – Cause during my stay in the military, I was impressed with my experience there. I liked the military. [laughs] And it wasn't my intention to get out. But I served 16 months in Korea, and after my time was up there, they shipped me back to the states. I wanted to go see my parents. They were in Alabama, and that's where I got when I got discharged from the Army.

[27:15]

Henderson, G.: Well, first of all, when I was shipped back from overseas, I still had three months – a little more than three months to stay in the service. And I visited with my parents and told them my plans. And they didn't like the idea of me staying in the military. And they wanted me to get out. And I just took them as their advice, and I didn't push it any further. And I just obeyed them, and I went back and I finished my two years out. And I went ahead and got discharged. And at that point, I came back to Oak Ridge and I applied for my old job and got it. And as time went by, about a year later before then, I had met my wife. And I liked her a whole lot. And as time went by we fell in love and agreed to marry and start a family. And we've been real successful. Have a lovely family and wife. We've been married 49 years.

[28:21]

Smith, V.: Okay. We'll probably stop it right here. That was a good stopping point. I want to delve into –

[End of Tape 1]

Henderson, G.: Then when I got discharged from the military, and so that's where I met my wife. I lived in Clinton for a while. And later years after marrying her, I moved back to Oak Ridge.

Smith, V.: Okay.

[crew talk]

Smith, V.: Okay. I'm going to start back with a few questions about your work. What did you like the most about working out at the – here in Oak Ridge?

Henderson, G.: Ah, the highlights I guess would be my experience at K-25 that

would top everything. Because at that point, when I went to K-25 as a technician, I still was working with animals. And we would inject the animal with material, and it would cause the animal to grow tumors. And at a certain point, we would put the animal to sleep and remove a certain portion of the tumor, and we would use clamps and clamp the animal back up, and he or she would wake up and carry on with his normal life. And of course, the tumor continued to grow. And at a certain point, we would sacrifice the animals. And the other peoples would take it and run further tests on it. But that was my job to sacrifice the animals and get as much blood as I could from the animals. And they just do different tests on the blood samples.

[2:51]

And I done that for say like three or four years. And after that, that job played out and I went from that. I was trained to work in tissue culture. And my job was just growing cells and supply different people with whatever number of cells they wanted. And I didn't have anybody looking over my shoulder. I was just in the building just by myself. And I would just work at my own pace, and I was very relaxed. And I just enjoyed that type of freedom and you know, just working at your own pace and pretty much doing like you want to. Of course, you had certain responsibility. You had to maintain a certain standard. But I had a lot of freedom.

[03:52]

Smith, V.:

That's very unique. I'm wondering, was this a job that you were just placed into, or did you express an interest, or did somebody see some special talent in you? Or what -- Tell me how that -- all that came about.

Henderson, G.:

I would think the peoples saw after meeting me and talking with me, I showed a certain amount of interest because of the money the job paid. And at that time, I had a family, and I needed more money than what I was making as an animal caretaker. And that impressed me a whole lot the -- from the financial end of it. And I didn't mind meeting the challenge, even though I didn't have training in those areas. And they was willing to train me. And that was a good opportunity for me. And they kept my end -- their end of the bargain, and I kept my end, too. [laughs] So they were able to train me to do those little jobs, and we had a good relationship.

[05:14]

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Smith, V.: So it seems like you – that was really a promotion for you, so to speak. If you go from an animal caretaker to –

Henderson, G.: A technician.

Smith, V.: To a technician.

Henderson, G.: That was a big step. Mainly the pay. It was a big difference there. And that impressed me.

Smith, V.: Now did you – was this a job that came up on the bid board, or did someone approach you about the job and say we'd like for you to do this? Or how did exactly did that come about? Did you go from being an animal caretaker to a technician?

Henderson, G.: Ah, it wasn't on the board, but I had heard that this particular program there was interest in hiring a technician. And some of us went from Y-12 to K-25 to interview for the job. And I was the one that got it.

Smith, V.: Now do you know who were the other people who interviewed? Were they white or black or do you know?

[06:18]

Henderson, G.: White.

Smith, V.: They were white. So, in what year timeframe was this again?

Henderson, G.: This was in 1967.

Smith, V.: Okay. And were there more opportunities for blacks to move up during that time? Or what was happening then?

Henderson, G.: The best I remember, things were just beginning to open up for blacks. Because there were opportunities where you could take different training, and they would train you to do different things. Like in the electric -- electrical department, mechanics. In different facilities, there was opportunities. And because they were hiring minorities in a lot of these jobs, the black people, they hadn't been exposed to too many of them for whatever reason. And of course, at one time it was real common as far as a black person could go.

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[07:30]

It was mainly teaching, preaching, and something in that order. And you was very limited outside those areas. And that's the impression that I got. But the people just saw a need to hire more minorities. And so that's, I think, one of the things that helped me in getting the job at K-25. Because they didn't have a black technician.

Smith, V.:

Now what – You talked a lot about what you liked the most about working at K-25. What was the thing that you disliked the most about working at K-25?

Henderson, G.:

Well, I really didn't have any dislikes at K-25. There wasn't disagreement because I was – A lot of my time I was busy training. And it seemed like by the time I got trained to do my job and relax and doing it real well, that job come to an end. It was always a challenge before me, and I didn't have time to think about the things that I didn't like because it wasn't any. And all my experience at this job was good. The people were real friendly, and they would help me whenever I had questions. And they just were always there for me.

[09:15]

Smith, V.:

Okay. Let me go back a bit to your family life. What year did you get married?

Henderson, G.:

I got married August 27, 1956.

Smith, V.:

Okay. And you said you and your wife had how many children did you guys have?

Henderson, G.:

Ah, I have two step-children, and my wife and I, we have five. A total of seven children.

Smith, V.:

Okay. So what was the education like at Oak Ridge for your children back then? What schools and what was it like?

Henderson, G.:

Okay. As they were growing up at that time when we got married, the school was just beginning to open up to black people's public schools. And of course, during my stay in Clinton, that's where we started our family. And I believe '57, there about, when John Casper come along. And leading up to that, I was real happy in Clinton, but he influenced the peoples and made things kind of

difficult for the black people, because they bombed the school and done a whole lot of unnecessary things. But later years, they learned better. And I don't think that problem exists now. But that was then, and this is now.

[11:12]

But back then it was kind of difficult for black peoples when they started moving into areas that perhaps they thought you shouldn't be.

Smith, V.: Tell me more about John Casper.

Henderson, G.: John Casper, he just popped up from nowhere, but he was able to come in to Clinton and hold his meeting and influence the peoples. And later on, the KKK people, they came through in March. It was just a difficult time for black peoples. And nobody lost their life or anything, but there were a lot of threats. And of course, you could have, you know, when people start bombing schools. It wasn't like the Birmingham situation. And the Clinton situation, they didn't take it that far.

Smith, V.: What school was bombed?

[12:20]

Henderson, G.: Ah, the Clinton High School. And they didn't want the black kids to enter the high school.

Smith, V.: Were your kids going there at that time?

Henderson, G.: At that time, my kids wasn't – They wasn't of age for high school, but later years before then, the black people, they would have to go out of town to another city where there was a high school. And a lot of them would have to pay their own fare. And so it was very difficult being a black person, because you just had certain privileges taken away from you.

Smith, V.: So where did your kids go to like elementary school?

Henderson, G.: My kids, they went to elementary school here in Oak Ridge. But at that time, the elementary school was in our community. And the white kids had that school, and we had ours. But later years that would change. And there were some discussion when we made the switch, but never no real problem. The people was more

intelligent and was able to solve their problem without trouble.

[13:59]

Smith, V.: Without any violence I presume.

Henderson, G.: Yes.

Smith, V.: What was your relationship like with the supervisors that you had, especially at K-25?

Henderson, G.: I actually, I didn't feel like I had no supervisor, because after I was trained to do a job, like I said earlier, I was in the building by myself working at my own pace. And everything was at my fingertip. Because when I got ready for a coffee break, I could come back up to the main building and join in with my friend. And we'd sit around and chit chat. And after that, I'd go back to my work area, because I had certain amount of work I was expected to do each day, even though nobody was watching me. But I knew that was my job and certain things I had to do. And I'd just work at a certain pace so that I could always complete my assignment.

Smith, V.: Now were you –

[crew talk]

[15:41]

Smith, V.: Were you the only – Were there other technicians that were doing the same type of work that you performed?

Henderson, G.: Ah, the particular work that I was doing, once I was trained, that became my job. Because the other technician that was doing that job, he was allergic to animals. [laughs] And that's why I got the job. [laughter]

Smith, V.: Okay. Uh-huh (affirmative).

Henderson, G.: And so that worked out real good.

Smith, V.: Uh-huh (affirmative). Did you have any idea that the work you were working on was for the war effort? I mean, when you were doing your job, you know, did you have any idea of what all you were doing was about or was for?

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Henderson, G.:

Um, later years when I transferred back to K-25 and doing technician work I realized there was a purpose behind it. And these things, they do – they was doing tests on animals. In later years, they would go from that to people.

Smith, V.:

Uh-huh (affirmative). And tell me about those tests you were talking about on people? Do you know anything about that?

[17:11]

Henderson, G.:

Well, one point particularly, because I didn't have a whole lot to do with it, but I can remember peoples working with the doctors was working with dogs. And they would – Let's see. How can I word this? Ah, I'm trying to think. Just like peoples with kidney problems. Before that, I can remember the doctors. They were doing the same things on animals trying to learn the techniques and get it in place. And they got pretty good at it. And of course, when they first started out things didn't go too well. We lost a few dogs. [laughs] But after a certain amount of practice, they got so that they become pretty good at it.

But my job was to just go get the animals and bring them to them, the doctors. And of course, the way we would do that, on Monday morning I would get up and go to the dog pound. They always had plenty of dogs. And I'd get a load of dogs and back to the facilities. And a lot of the dogs would make it and some of them didn't.

[19:04]

Smith, V.:

What type of interaction, if any, did you have with the doctors? And how did the doctors treat you?

Henderson, G.:

The doctors were always real nice to me. Ah, actually you would not know that they was doctors unless they told you, because they just act like, you know, I'm talking to you. The classification differences, I don't think they paid that any attention, because I never did refer to them as doctors. And there have been places I worked in that was doctor whoever. [laughs] You have to put that on there. [laughs]

Smith, V.:

Yeah.

Henderson, G.:

But down there it wasn't the case. And other places, too, were like

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that.

Smith, V.:

I understand. Um, what was your most challenging assignment that you had working out here?

Henderson, G.:

I would say just leaving the K-25 going to the X-10 area. After I worked there a while, I worked with the group. It was called the Smoke Program and where they would do different tests on the cigarettes and working with the machines and making certain adjustments until I learned that, and doing the calculation. It was a challenge for me, but I would ask questions, and I learned to do that and adjust the smoke machine and smoke the cigarettes and collect the data and the whole nine yards. But it was a challenge. It was a struggle, but I learned to do it.

[21:09]

And after that, I got all relaxed in that job, and it come to an end. [laughs] And I was transferred to another group. And this group, they worked with water samples. And when I first went there, there's always people to train you looked like. And they trained me and got me up and going. And I learned to operate the instruments and process the samples just as the other technician. And the peoples were real friendly. And when I retired, the peoples have always been training me, but I was training them. [laughs]

Smith, V.:

I understand. What was your most significant accomplishment working in Oak Ridge?

[22:17]

Henderson, G.:

Again, it was I would say after I left K-25 and went to X-10. The peoples liked me well enough they reclassified me. And that was a big accomplishment, because they adjusted the pay. And it just was a big difference in the pay scale. And when I retired, I had reached the top of my pay scale.

Smith, V.:

So what was your job title at X-10?

Henderson, G.:

When I first went there, I kept my same classification, laboratory technician. And as I transferred from one job to the other one, ah, let's see. I'm trying to think of the classification. But because of the type of work that I was doing, they changed my classification a little bit. And of course, they adjusted the pay along with that. I

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think they called – It seemed like it was analyst. I was classified as an analyst.

And later on before I retired, I went to another department. And when I retired, I was classified as a science technologist. And it was a big jump in the pay. And I was enjoying the work, but like I don't know if I stated earlier, but I was you know, counting my military time. I was out there like 40 years. And my wife had already retired, and I had already raised my family. And I retired at age 59. I haven't regretted not one moment of it. It's just been a real joy. Sort of unreal.

[24:45]

Smith, V.:

So about the housing, you first started living in hutments.

Henderson, G.:

Uh-huh (affirmative).

Smith, V.:

Tell me where you ended up living during from when you first got here to when you retired.

Henderson, G.:

Okay. When I first moved to Oak Ridge in 1949 I lived in the Whitman area. Ah, I can do a little better than that. It was over on Illinois Avenue most likely. I would say the opposite side of the road, but where the Dean Stallin (phonetic sp.) Ford Company is located. I lived on the opposite side of the road, but I lived there in the huts for three or four months. And they moved to the area where I'm now living. And at that time, it was called Gamble Valley. And they built houses for the families that were married. And the single peoples, we lived in the dormitories. And it was a little different in the rent.

[26:18]

In the hut, I paid like a dollar and 40 cents a week for rent. But when we moved to the dormitory – Of course, it was so much nicer facility and more convenient. But that was like around ten dollars a month. Not a lot of difference, but it was some difference. And that's where we are living in this area now, but leading up to that – I'm jumping around on you a lot. But I lived in Clinton for a short period of time and from Clinton back to Oak Ridge.

Smith, V.:

I understand. Okay. Is this a good stopping point?

[crew talk]

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[End of Tape 2]

Smith, V.: -- stand the job and what you did, because it seems like you were given a lot of independence.

[00:12]

Henderson, G.: Uh-huh (affirmative).

Smith, V.: And just you know, allowed to do your own – your job.

Henderson, G.: Oh, yeah. Uh-huh (affirmative).

Smith, V.: And that's very intriguing I would say.

Henderson, G.: Yeah. In the animal facility where from 1952 until '57 see, I wasn't given no privileges, and it was just opened up a whole window of opportunity when I did that and was able to get out.

Smith, V.: Uh-huh (affirmative).

Henderson, G.: And of course, it was a little bit of a challenge, but I was willing to learn, and I wanted to advance myself. And so things went real well for me.

Smith, V.: Okay. Well, I've got a few more questions.

Henderson, G.: Okay.

[crew talk]

Smith, V.: Okay. Is there any – Let me before we start. Is there anything that you would like to expound upon a little bit more or explain a little bit more that we've already talked about?

[01:14]

Henderson, G.: Not really. The only thing. We didn't talk too much about my military, but that was exciting to me because after I was drafted into the military, I didn't like it at all. In fact, I went AWOL a few times. [laughs]

Smith, V.: You did? (Indiscernible). [laughter]

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Henderson, G.:

And this was during my basic training, but they got me through it. And they – Once I took 16 weeks of basic training and after we completed our training, our first sergeant, he said, “I know some of you guys are not coming back, but you’re gonna (phonetic sp.) wish you had.” [laughter] And he said, “I can say that.” And he looking right at me, but I took my 15-day leave and went home. And I came home like I was supposed to. And when I got back, they shipped me from the states to Korea.

And during that little period of time, once I got overseas to Okayama, Japan, they were processing me. And they stopped fighting in Korea. And that was just like coming back to the states. And of course, they continued to process me until I got to Korea. And once I got over there, I don’t know. I think I have always liked challenges. And I got into my new section. I was in the artillery. And I was in a gun section, and they, the fella who was chief of section, after I was there about a month, he rotated back home. And the next fella that was in line for to take over the section, he accepted that gladly. And he asked me if I wanted to be his assistant.

[03:32]

Of course, he talked to a group of people, because I was brand new, so to speak. And I’d been there a month. And of course, I was a PFC at that time. And of course, when I accepted the position it was called a gunner’s position. But with that, you need to be at least a corporal. And they went ahead and made me acting corporal, and I was just you know, right over – Just had been over there just a few months. And that impressed me. And after I was there four months, they went ahead and made me corporal. And that was a big difference in the pay scale, because back then you didn’t make a lot of money. But when I went overseas, I was making I’d say – In basic training I made like 78 dollars a month. And once I went overseas it seemed like it went up to about a hundred. And once I made corporal, it went up to 135. And after I made corporal, there become a slot – Another fella rotated.

[04:50]

I had been corporal about three months, and the other fella, he didn’t want to lose me. But I had an opportunity to take over a gun section and be head of the section. And I showed interest, and I got the job. And later on down the line when I became eligible for sergeant, I went for a test and something about the papers that I

was able to pass it. And they made me sergeant, and I had only been overseas no more than eight or nine months. And some people stay in the service a lifetime, and they don't – Not lifetime. But a long time, and they don't make sergeant. But that really impressed me, and I you know. There's just that short of period of time and I was sergeant. And so I was just so happy.

[05:45]

Smith, V.:

Yeah.

Henderson, G.:

I tell the fellas what to do. [laughs]

Smith, V.:

Yeah.

Henderson, G.:

And I prefer it all, too. [laughter]

Smith, V.:

That's a little hard for me to imagine. I guess I could see. My dad was in the military in the world war.

Henderson, G.:

Okay.

Smith, V.:

He was in the Air Force for about 20 years.

Henderson, G.:

Okay.

Smith, V.:

So I spent some time in Japan. In Okinawa also growing up.

Henderson, G.:

Okay. Okay.

Smith, V.:

I understand this military background.

Henderson, G.:

[laughs]

[06:11]

Smith, V.:

Okay. I think I'd like to focus on as far as wrapping up here, probably – I would say probably a little bit about just some – probably just some final thoughts or words just looking back on your experience. And if there's something that you would want future generations to remember, what it would be. And those types of questions.

Henderson, G.:

Um, let me think for a minute. Things have changed a whole lot say when I was growing up. And now peoples from both sides,

they are more intelligent. And they just deal with things entirely different, and I like that. And they are more opportunities if peoples want to take advantage of them. And there's always problems, but you have to look out for yourself and try to meet some of the challenges and look at the bright side of life instead of being so negative.

And I think there's a lot of opportunities now a days, even though times are hard, but there's still opportunities out there. You just have to find them. And that's just the way I see it and my opinion.

[08:11]

And of course, back then even if you had the background, there just wasn't many opportunities for blacks. That's what it boiled down to in a nutshell. And now that is just not the case. I mean, you know, even though we have some problems, but it's not like it was back then. It's a lot different. We made a lot of progress.

Smith, V.:

Now if you were writing a story about Oak Ridge and K-25, what key topics would you cover?

Henderson, G.:

That's something I have to think about. I don't know if I can give you the information you really want. Ah, cause when I went to K-25 – I'm basing my thoughts on when I was a technician. It was opportunities out there. And with the opportunities come freedom. And if, you know, looking at the bright side of things. And you know, you can always be negative, but just giving peoples the benefit of the doubt. And looking at myself, I think – I couldn't say anything negative.

[09:40]

Smith, V.:

Now, are there certain aspects of the Oak Ridge story that you think people have not talked about enough or that you haven't either read about? Or do you think there's some forgotten things out there that people just – that you would like to see brought to light?

Henderson, G.:

Right off the top of my head, I can't see anything that have been left out. I think there has been a lot of progress made. And of course, they're going to – You can always improve. But just right off the top of my head, things are slow, but we are getting there. You just have to keep focusing. Keep trying to make it to the top.

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Smith, V.:

I understand. Is there – If you had to do it all over again as far as coming to Oak Ridge, would you?

Henderson, G.:

Ah, I think since I came to Oak Ridge I've made a lot of progress. And this is where I met my wife and raised my family. And I've done quite well, so to speak, and if I had a went some other places, I may have missed some opportunities. I don't know. But just looking at the big picture, I would do it over again. Because I've already experienced what happened in Oak Ridge. And I know what happened, but those other places I didn't go and wasn't exposed to them. So I like what I have experienced, and I'm glad I stayed in Oak Ridge.

[12:02]

Smith, V.:

What – Is there anything else that you want to talk more about that we may have touched on?

Henderson, G.:

I can't say that more I can add to the discussion unless you can pull something out of me. [laughter]

Smith, V.:

I think I've pulled quite a bit. [laughter] Ah, this is – I'm hesitant, a little hesitant to go back to this, but I think I need to.

Henderson, G.:

Okay.

Smith, V.:

I want to go back to the school situation with the bombing of the school. And you said there were threats and things of this nature going on, and you know, the clan marches and that type of thing.

Henderson, G.:

Now that was in Clinton, not here at Oak Ridge.

[13:01]

Smith, V.:

Right. Right.

Henderson, G.:

Uh-huh (affirmative).

Smith, V.:

What was the reaction of the people in Oak Ridge to what was going on in Clinton?

Henderson, G.:

Well, the peoples in Oak Ridge, particularly my supervisor, he was very frightened. He wanted me to leave Clinton and get out. And he said, "Gary, it's too dangerous over there." He said, "I think you should leave. It's just not safe." And of course, these --

everything was being televised and on T.V. And it was just kind of frightening to the people that lived there.

But this was one thing I didn't tell you because I didn't realize what was going on. But the same night that they had the demonstration in front of the courthouse, there were wall-to-wall white peoples. And not knowing what's going on, I walked right through those peoples and crossed the next street and went to the movie and enjoyed it. And when the movie was over, I walked right back through them, and they didn't touch me. And the next night, they turned things upside down. And it was, you know, entirely different ballgame. And as time went on, there was more and more violent little things to disturb you and make you uncomfortable. We just never had experienced anything like that.

[14:55]

And of course, during the day everything's real peaceful, but at night [laughs] when the trouble start.

Smith, V.:

Did you and your family experience anything personally?

Henderson, G.:

My wife, she was pregnant at the time. And of course at her request, I would take her outside of Clinton. And she of course wanted me to stay with her. So that made me a coward. [laughs] And with -- And on the background I was very unhappy at leaving Clinton, because I felt like I should have been there for whatever came out of it. I was willing to stay and do my part to defend my home. But instead I was trying to protect her, and I couldn't be on both sides.

[15:53]

Smith, V.:

I understand.

Henderson, G.:

But my choice was to stay there and take whatever come. But it all worked out. But a lot of unnecessary problems from the lack of experience for and exposure for whatever reason. The people just lost control, and they went about doing things the wrong way.

Smith, V.:

I understand. Okay. Well, I'd like to thank you for your time.

Henderson, G.:

Well, I thank you all for, you know, inviting me here. And hopefully we covered some things that will be beneficial to somebody. [laughs]

Henderson, Gary

Smith, V.: I would think so. [laughs]

Henderson, G.: So you went to Tuskegee but it would get real hot down there.

Smith, V.: Right.

Henderson, G.: And I picked cotton in miserable weather, and that was a way of life. And of course, I recognized that with my parent, and that's why I left at a young age to try to – I help, you know, give them certain things; otherwise, they would not have gotten. Cause I had real good parents. And I never forget them.

Smith, V.: Yeah. Now what were your kids doing there?

[17:22]

Henderson, G.: Ah, my kids, they all grown. And they doing well. Not as well as I would like for them to. Two of my kids finished college. And the one that didn't finish, he's an electrician. And another one that didn't finish, he's the cook. And another one went to school a long time, but she decided to get married along the way and it's life. And her marriage didn't work out, and she had two children, and we love them dearly. We spoil them, and we spend a lot of time with them.

Smith, V.: Yeah.

Henderson, G.: And they think a lot of us. And they just feel like, you know, I'm their father cause they've seen more of me, and I've taken a lot of time with them. Wouldn't have it no other way.

[18:28]

Smith, V.: Yeah. Right.

Henderson, G.: And it's just a real good experience.

Smith, V.: Well, good. Sounds like you really –

Henderson, G.: And they are doing very well, the grandkids. My granddaughter, she will finish high school next year. And I pleased with her grades. The next one down, she's doing quite well and they both real life, too.

Henderson, Gary

Smith, V.: Uh-huh (affirmative).

Henderson, G.: You know. I'm hoping I can impress them to go to school, which I didn't do.

Smith, V.: Yeah. Yeah. Well, yeah. It seems like you're passing along all the right things. Opportunities are definitely different. I know, because I have an engineering degree.

Henderson, G.: Okay.

Smith, V.: And I was talking to somebody several years ago, this black person. And he's a chemist and has a degree in chemistry. And he said – And I was getting my master's at the time. And he said, "Well, I remember a time when if you were a black, you couldn't even go to school and get a master's. At least not at a predominantly white school. You know.

Henderson, G.: That's so true.

Smith, V.: Yeah. And it just made me think how far, you know, we've really come.

Henderson, G.: Oh, yeah. And somebody paid a price for that.

Smith, V.: Yes. Because my mom told me, because she was saying because she used to go to New York during the summers to get work.

Henderson, G.: Uh-huh (affirmative).

Smith, V.: In between her college years. And she made the comment, she said, "You couldn't even get a job."

Henderson, G.: That's right.

Smith, V.: And I thought – That just seemed too odd to me that you couldn't even get a job because you were a black and you had to go all the way to the north.

Henderson, G.: Uh-huh (affirmative).

[20:15]

Smith, V.: You know, just a lot of things that me as a person, I don't have to contend with.

Henderson, Gary

Henderson, G.:

Right. Exactly.

Smith, V.:

And so that is just a reality check.

Henderson, G.:

Oh, yeah. Uh-huh (affirmative). You already kicked me out of your time. [laugh] (Indiscernible) supposed to do. [laughter]

Smith, V.:

(Indiscernible) cause my mom used to say, "Well, you couldn't get a job back then." And voting. And you know, you had to pay a poll tax.

Male:

You had to pay a poll tax.

Smith, V.:

Yeah. In the south.

Henderson, G.:

Yeah. There've been a lot of little things (Indiscernible) along the way, and it just wasn't too many opportunities out there, what it boiled down to.

Male:

Right.

Henderson, G.:

But now things have changed.

Smith, V.:

Yes.

[20:58]

Henderson, G.:

There's some opportunities out there. You have to go get them.

Smith, V.:

But you know, what I think the things that concerns me as a black person is I don't know if my generation, cause I'm 35. I don't know if my generation and the generation coming up of blacks – My concern is they may not understand the struggles or the way it was back then. And they may not realize and take advantage of the opportunities they have now or to realize hey, my grandparents or my great – You know, they couldn't even think about doing what I'm doing now. And just not taking advantage of everything that's put before them.

Henderson, G.:

Right. Uh-huh (affirmative).

Smith, V.:

But, so that's why I think history is so – My mom was an American history teacher. So you know, I'm all into that anyway. So, you know. [laughs] So just very, very interesting.

Henderson, G.:

My granddaughter, Shea was interviewing my wife and I just to get

some information. Shea had to write a paper for school. And she was asking me things along these lines, and when I was in the military after I came back from overseas, and it was down in Mississippi. I had my uniform on, fully dressed, wasn't bothering anybody. Went into this restaurant to get something to eat. And these fellas, they were going to eat me alive. I said, "You all just calm down." I says, "I'll get out of here. Wherever you all want me, just don't bother me."

And it really aggravated me, but now they couldn't get away with stuff like that now.

Smith, V.:

Right.

Male:

Well, you went and fought for your country, and they came back and were still giving you grief.

Henderson, G.:

Oh, yeah.

Male:

What about with the military? Was there a lot of segregation within the military?

Henderson, G.:

Overseas, no. But here in the states it wa -- things were different. And I would expect that.

Male:

Right.

Henderson, G.:

But overseas, you didn't have problems, you know. You and your buddies, you all get together and play and the same way when you -- Of course like in my situation, we would go to the capital of Korea, which was Seoul. A lot of peoples hang out there, particularly soldiers.

Male:

Uh-huh (affirmative).

Henderson, G.:

And you and your friends, you're going to go there and hang out for the weekend. And it's just like you and I talking. And we used to go up to another little place called Yong Ban Pol (phonetic sp.) in Pusan (phonetic sp.). And you know, I didn't see, you know the peoples over there did (Indiscernible), but the guys didn't show it.

Male:

Right.

Henderson, G.:

And it was just treat you, you know, human.

Male:

Right. Like you should be.

Henderson, Gary

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Henderson, G.: Uh-huh (affirmative). But that little instant, you know, me -- I had a uniform on. The fellas, they just didn't see none of that. I had been overseas and come right back to the states and could have got killed in my own country.

Male: Man. The stuff with your job, and you to me, from listening to you, you've advanced more than any black person that we've interviewed or that I had the opportunity to talk with. And that really blows me away. That what I was saying earlier. It's very inspirational to listen to -- I mean, this stuff really didn't bother you. The stuff that was going on here and the segregation during that time period.

Henderson, G.: Uh-huh (affirmative).

Male: And you speak with most of the black people, and they were saying well, you know, it's just a way of life. But you really seemed to step above that and seize your opportunities and go well on past what was available for your people at the time, which I think that's amazing.

Henderson, G.: Well, I wouldn't take anything from the ones that were above me. They saw some things in me to give me that opportunity.

Male: Right.

[25:22]

Henderson, G.: And I was just trying to make the best of it. And in each group that I went, I excelled. Even when I retired. They told me I could come back as a consultant.

Male: That's great.

Henderson, G.: But I think I had enough. [laughter] (Indiscernible). I said we on a good note, and we're gonna leave it there.

Smith, V.: Yeah.

Henderson, G.: So I retired in, you know, on good behavior. The people liked me, and I thanked them for it.

Smith, V.: Yeah. Yeah.

Henderson, G.: But when I retired, I retired.

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Henderson, Gary

Smith, V.:

Yeah. Yeah.

Henderson, G.:

I just didn't go back.

Male:

Do you live in Oak Ridge now?

Henderson, G.:

Yes.

Male:

You do?

[26:06]

Henderson, G.:

Uh-huh (affirmative). And I still see my buddies quite a lot. We have big old gathering where all the retirees meet. And that's pretty good seeing the fellas. Of course, some of them passed away. That's life.

Male:

Right.

Henderson, G.:

But we still have a good relationship.

Smith, V.:

Very interesting. Okay.

Henderson, G.:

All finished?

Smith, V.:

Yes, we are. Very, very good.

Henderson, G.:

Well, --

[End of Audio]

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