



K-25 Oral History Interview

Date: 5/18/05

Interviewee: Lois Greene

Interviewer: Jennifer Thonhoff

DOES NOT CONTAIN
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Name/Org: Robert J. Keenan ENR/CISCO Date: 4 Nov 05

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Greene, Lois

[1:00:07]

[crew talk]

Thonhoff, J.: Okay. What is your name and spell it for me, please?

Green, L.: Okay. Lois Greene. L-O-I-S G-R-E-E-N-E.

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

Green, L.: I was born in Virginia, Lake County, Virginia.

Thonhoff, J.: And where were you living prior to coming to K-25?

Green, L.: Beg your pardon?

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

Green, L.: Where did I live? Well, in Oak Ridge.

Thonhoff, J.: In Oak Ridge? What kind of work did you do before you started working at K-25?

Green, L.: I was bid public health nursing --

Thonhoff, J.: Okay.

Green, L.: -- and army nursing.

Thonhoff, J.: And that's -- how did you get to K-25 from being an army nurse?

[1:01:52]

Green, L.: How did I come to Oak Ridge? I visited my sister in Oak Ridge and liked Oak Ridge and applied for a job.

Thonhoff, J.: And you got it right as soon as you applied?

Green, L.: Yes.

Thonhoff, J.: Did you go to high school around here?

Green, L.: Did I what?

Thonhoff, J.: Go to high school around here?

Greene, Lois

Green, L.: No. Uh-uh. I went to high school in Pennington Gap, Virginia.

Thonhoff, J.: And college?

Green, L.: Nurses training in Volga, Kentucky.

Thonhoff, J.: Okay. And so you said your sister lived out here?

Green, L.: Yes.

Thonhoff, J.: And you came out here to see her?

[1:02:27]

Green, L.: Yes. She worked at Y-12.

Thonhoff, J.: Oh, so she worked at another plant.

Green, L.: Other plant.

Thonhoff, J.: And what are your first recollections of K-25 when you got here?

Green, L.: Well, it was kind of spooky at first, you know.

Thonhoff, J.: What made it spooky?

Green, L.: Well, you know, when they talked about -- I mean so much secrecy about it. And, of course, I was in the army where we had secret material too, you know.

Thonhoff, J.: So was it kind of like the army in that it was -- had classified information?

Green, L.: That's right.

Thonhoff, J.: Is that kind of how you related it?

Green, L.: Yes. Uh-huh.

Thonhoff, J.: And made it more or less spooky?

Green, L.: Uh-huh.

Thonhoff, J.: And then what years did you work at K-25?

[1:03:22]

Greene, Lois

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Green, L.: I worked from '46 to '78.

Thonhoff, J.: And that was all at the K-25 facility?

Green, L.: Yes.

Thonhoff, J.: And when people asked what was done there, what did you tell them?

Green, L.: I was telling them that we weren't allowed to discuss it.

Thonhoff, J.: And were you allowed to discuss your profession? Like, were you able to --

Green, L.: All they knew was that we were a nurse, but we weren't allowed to treat, you know, tell what we treated all the time. Some things we could.

Thonhoff, J.: Are there still some things that you shouldn't --

Green, L.: Like routine physicals we could. But we couldn't talk about sometimes that material they were working with. We didn't discuss it outside.

Thonhoff, J.: What about the people that you were -- your patients. You could talk to them about what you were working with? Or would they generally know?

[1:04:24]

Green, L.: They already knew.

Thonhoff, J.: They knew? So you talked about side effects and things of that nature with them?

Green, L.: Uh-huh.

Thonhoff, J.: And what are your most vivid recollections about the time that you spent at Oak Ridge and at K-25?

Green, L.: It was very enjoyable. I enjoyed it. I liked Oak Ridge and lived in Oak Ridge for years and then moved to Clinton, which is near.

Thonhoff, J.: What was it like?

Greene, Lois

Green, L.: Well, they called it The Secret City and that's what it was. You didn't discuss your work outside.

Thonhoff, J.: Did you have colleagues that you could discuss it with?

Green, L.: What?

Thonhoff, J.: Did you have colleagues that you could discuss your work with? Just like a release?

[1:05:17]

Green, L.: No. Nuh-uh.

Thonhoff, J.: And what about recreation and things outside of --

Green, L.: Oh. There was outside recreation. Uh-huh.

Thonhoff, J.: What was there?

Green, L.: Well, they had dances. They had car clubs, bridge clubs, and all the other sports, I guess; football and sports outside.

Thonhoff, J.: What were the things that you enjoyed doing?

Green, L.: Well, I guess I played cards, played bridge. I'm bridge avid.

Thonhoff, J.: Do you still play bridge?

Green, L.: Yes -- Three or four times per week.

Thonhoff, J.: Oh boy. I've never played. What did you like the most about working at K-25?

Green, L.: I liked the people and enjoyed treating the people, the employees.

[1:06:19]

Thonhoff, J.: Can you describe the people for me? Or what you liked about them?

Green, L.: Well, they were easy to get along with. They respected us and just generally liked them.

Greene, Lois

Thonhoff, J.:

And what did you dislike about working at K-25?

Green, L.:

I can't remember anything that I really disliked.

Thonhoff, J.:

Oh.

Green, L.:

I wouldn't have stayed that long.

Thonhoff, J.:

Did you stay in touch with the people that you worked with?

Green, L.:

What?

Thonhoff, J.:

Did you stay in touch with the people that you worked with there after?

Green, L.:

Yes.

Thonhoff, J.:

So you created some pretty strong friendships?

Green, L.:

Yes. Uh-huh.

Thonhoff, J.:

Was there any of those that you would like to talk about -- some of your friendships?

[1:07:09]

Green, L.:

Well, they were continual, they respected us and became close to us.

Thonhoff, J.:

And then you said that the people were real congenial. Did you have friends and family outside of K-25 and Oak Ridge?

Green, L.:

Did I -- was I friendly with families outside?

Thonhoff, J.:

Well, did you have family outside that wasn't a part of the facility?

Green, L.:

No. No.

Thonhoff, J.:

Everybody was in Oak Ridge?

Green, L.:

Everybody was in Oak Ridge.

Thonhoff, J.:

Okay. And how did you communicate with them? Did they kind of know what was going on?

Green, L.:

I don't understand what you mean by that.

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Thonhoff, J.: With your friends and your family, your family members, say your sister?

Green, L.: Uh-huh.

Thonhoff, J.: How did you guys communicate? Did you just --

[1:08:04]

Green, L.: Well, like you would anybody, you know.

Thonhoff, J.: Okay.

Green, L.: We didn't discuss our work.

Thonhoff, J.: You just talked about other --

Green, L.: We didn't talk about her work and she didn't hear about mine.

Thonhoff, J.: Okay. Very good. And what were the physical working conditions like?

Green, L.: What?

Thonhoff, J.: The physical working conditions? How was it physically to work at the facility? Was it comfortable, uncomfortable?

Green, L.: Comfortable. Uh-huh.

Thonhoff, J.: Were you -- did you have enough supplies and equipment?

Green, L.: Yes.

Thonhoff, J.: And your coworkers, did they pull their own weight? Did you feel like you were part of a team?

[1:08:47]

Green, L.: Oh, in perfect harmony with them. Uh-huh. Very congenial.

Thonhoff, J.: What were some of the things that you did?

Green, L.: What?

Thonhoff, J.: Being a nurse. What were some of the things that you did?

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Green, L.: We did routine physicals. We did prepare minor ailments and saw that they were transported to the right facility where there was a hospital or to their family doctor.

Thonhoff, J.: Were there ever times that were -- people had to be transported out for extra --

Green, L.: Yes. Uh-huh.

Thonhoff, J.: Can you tell me --

Green, L.: Heart attacks. Minor injuries -- I mean major injuries that we couldn't handle.

Thonhoff, J.: What was your facility able and equipped with? What were they able to accommodate?

[1:09:48]

Green, L.: Well, we could sew up a cut or a wound. And we could treat minor ailments. Tried to keep them on the job, you know, as long as we could. Gave flu shots to maintain the health.

Thonhoff, J.: And what were the things that you did the most of, the most routine?

Green, L.: Well, a lot of it they were mad at their boss, they'd get a headache -- mad at their boss, and maybe just wanted to rest for a while. We usually had the same people at the same times.

Thonhoff, J.: People with chronic headaches, huh?

Green, L.: That's right. Uh-huh. [laughter]

Thonhoff, J.: Are there some --

Green, L.: And a lot of times they just had a problem, maybe they wanted to talk.

Thonhoff, J.: Oh, that brings up a good point. Did you have any type of mental health care at the facility?

[1:10:50]

Green, L.: Any type of what?

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Thonhoff, J.: Mental healthcare for people who just wanted to talk, who were having a hard time?

Green, L.: We had a psychol -- I mean a psychologist.

Thonhoff, J.: And did people utilize him or her?

Green, L.: Yes.

Thonhoff, J.: And what were, do you know, the most common complaints or --

Green, L.: Back aches and headaches. Mad at their boss.

Thonhoff, J.: And what were the rules that were important to follow?

Green, L.: Well, we tried to take care of them as quickly as possible and put them back on the job.

Thonhoff, J.: So you guys were very thorough and quick.

Green, L.: Uh-huh.

Thonhoff, J.: Did you have a supervisor?

Green, L.: Yes.

Thonhoff, J.: What were they like?

[1:11:43]

Green, L.: They were good. They worked along with us.

Thonhoff, J.: So it was a team feeling?

Green, L.: Uh-huh. They made the assignments, you know, and so forth.

Thonhoff, J.: And you said the facilities that you had were very good?

Green, L.: Yes.

Thonhoff, J.: Can you describe them for me?

Green, L.: Well, it was safe. It was easy to take care of them. We had the equipment to do it. We took the time with them. And also some humor in it.

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Thonhoff, J.: That's my favorite part.

Green, L.: Huh?

Thonhoff, J.: That's my favorite part.

Green, L.: Uh-huh.

Thonhoff, J.: I think that a smile will cure many things.

Green, L.: Uh-huh.

[1:12:42]

Thonhoff, J.: What kind of tools and things did you have there at the facility?

Green, L.: What kind of what?

Thonhoff, J.: Tools. What did you use? What did they provide you?

Green, L.: Oh, they kept us in medicine for minor illnesses and minor injuries. And we always had an ambulance available to take and transport them. And always had a nurse accompany them.

Thonhoff, J.: Did you have a lot of nurses staffed?

Green, L.: Well, we did in early years and then it dwindled down. We ended up with four when did have shifts, see, we worked rotating shifts when I first went and we had four when I left.

Thonhoff, J.: Were there any major accidents or things of that nature that you could discuss?

Green, L.: Yes, there was.

Thonhoff, J.: Could you speak a little bit about some of those?

[1:13:44]

Green, L.: I'd rather not.

Thonhoff, J.: Okay. How much emphasis was based on safety in the plant?

Green, L.: Very much so. We had safety engineers and they were always in the -- they were, they were housed in the medical department and

Greene, Lois

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then we had, of course, other safety departments. But safety was very, was really emphasized.

Thonhoff, J.: When there were issues where the safety had not been practiced, that's when you would see the patients mostly?

Green, L.: Yes. Uh-huh.

Thonhoff, J.: And were you every hurt at K-25?

Green, L.: No. No.

Thonhoff, J.: And do you know what type of radiological or chemical monitoring was done.

Green, L.: Yes, but we weren't allowed to discuss that either.

Thonhoff, J.: Okay. Well, I'd heard they used badges that detected chemical radiation.

[1:14:56]

Green, L.: Yes, that's right. Uh-huh.

Thonhoff, J.: Anything --

Green, L.: Urine samples, you know, could detect it. That was routine.

Thonhoff, J.: That was a part of your physical?

Green, L.: Sometimes they'd get mixed up and they'd say that the guard on the gate would talk about urine specimens and he'd think they had uranium [laughs], which was --

Thonhoff, J.: That's funny. And you said you were there in the very beginning of things.

Green, L.: No, not in the very beginning.

Thonhoff, J.: What year did you come on?

Green, L.: '46.

Thonhoff, J.: '46? That's towards the beginning, not the very, very beginning. Did you have any idea what they were doing outside of the plant?

Greene, Lois

Green, L.: Uh?

[1:15:46]

Thonhoff, J.: Outside of the plant? Did you have any idea what they was going on out there?

Green, L.: In the -- going on outside the plant?

Thonhoff, J.: In the plant?

Green, L.: In the --

Thonhoff, J.: Um-hmm.

Green, L.: You mean before I started working?

Thonhoff, J.: No, while you were there. Did you know what was going on?

Green, L.: Yes.

Thonhoff, J.: And did you know what they were enriching the uranium for?

Green, L.: Yes.

Thonhoff, J.: What was your reaction then they dropped the bomb?

Green, L.: Just accept it. Oh, when they dropped the bomb?

Thonhoff, J.: Um-hmm.

[1:16:14]

Green, L.: Glad the war was over. Except that I did volunteer for the South Pacific.

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

Green, L.: Well, I think it was -- we needed something. The war had to end and, you know, I didn't have any fear of it.

Thonhoff, J.: Did you feel relieved when it was done?

Green, L.: What?

Thonhoff, J.: Did you feel relieved?

Greene, Lois

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Green, L.:

Yes.

Thonhoff, J.:

Do you have any particular incidents that happened that you remember that you would like to discuss -- any stories with coworkers or anybody?

Green, L.:

Nothing except the one I've told you about -- we had one new (indiscernible) [laughs], you know, and tried to get him out?

Thonhoff, J.:

What happened?

[1:17:14]

Green, L.:

We -- sometimes we'd have to tell a patient to, to undress. He'd undress the bottom part instead of the upper part. [laughs]. We had humor. Sometimes you have to have laughter, you know, and not dread the course when we had a death in the plant or something that was tragic.

Thonhoff, J.:

What happened when there was a death in the plant?

Green, L.:

It was a natural cause.

Thonhoff, J.:

What would they do? Would the plant provide any type of services or?

Green, L.:

No, they'd bring them to the dispensary and then we just had to transport them to where the family wanted them to go.

Thonhoff, J.:

Okay. And then did they -- did K-25 help with funeral services?

Green, L.:

No.

Thonhoff, J.:

Never.

Green, L.:

Nothing. Nuh-uh.

[1:18:23]

Thonhoff, J.:

Did your work change after the Cold War, the type of things that you did?

Green, L.:

No, we kept on the same things.

Thonhoff, J.:

So you still did the same procedures --

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Green, L.: That's right. Uh-huh. Same procedures.

Thonhoff, J.: What did you do when they put the facility on standby? Did you continue to have a job?

Green, L.: What?

Thonhoff, J.: What did you do when they put the facility on standby?

Green, L.: Nothing. I stayed on.

Thonhoff, J.: Your work was a little different because you always -- there's always a job.

Green, L.: Uh-huh. Always. Uh-huh.

Thonhoff, J.: What are your thoughts about the activities that were accomplished at K-25?

Green, L.: About what?

Thonhoff, J.: The activities that were accomplished at K-25?

[1:19:15]

Green, L.: I feel like they did a great deal, great improvement.

Thonhoff, J.: What was your job title?

Green, L.: Well, I was the head nurse when I left. I was a regular nurse, that's an MI. When I left I was head nurse.

Thonhoff, J.: What did you do, being the head nurse?

Green, L.: Well, made assignments and who would work when and where and so forth. Did the ordering of supplies and medicines and --

Thonhoff, J.: What types of things would you order?

Green, L.: Huh?

Thonhoff, J.: What type of things would you order?

Green, L.: What kind of what?

Greene, Lois

Thonhoff, J.: Things? Like medicines and stuff like --

Green, L.: Medicines. Uh-huh. Medicines and supplies.

Thonhoff, J.: Were there any particular supplies that you used more than others?

Green, L.: What?

[1:20:17]

Thonhoff, J.: Were there any particular supplies that you used more than others?

Green, L.: No. Used a lot of rubber gloves, you know.

Thonhoff, J.: Are there any instances that you can remember inside the facility besides the story of the guy who fainted and things like that?

Green, L.: Well, gosh. Trying to think of something I could tell. We had an old ambulance and we had a patient, was transferring him to Oak Ridge with acute retention. They went around the curb and the old angle of the door opened, the ambulance slid out, we didn't have to take him. He didn't have acute retention any more. They brought him back. [Laughter]

Thonhoff, J.: That scared it right out of him.

Green, L.: Uh-huh. [Laughter]

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

Green, L.: What?

[1:21:35]

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

Green, L.: Well, I guess like when we'd have a lot of maybe exposures to something and we had to get them out quick, I mean more to get rid of them because we'd have thirty or forty people. That was challenging when you'd have say 31 people to treat and check.

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

Green, L.: I guess the most significant thing was learning how to treat people, how to cope with people, especially in stressful times.

Greene, Lois

Thonhoff, J.: And how did you do that?

Green, L.: By listening.

Thonhoff, J.: Were you married?

Green, L.: What?

Thonhoff, J.: Were you married?

Green, L.: Yes.

Thonhoff, J.: Did your husband work at K-25?

Green, L.: No, he didn't.

[1:23:23]

Thonhoff, J.: How was that, having a husband that didn't work at the plant?

Green, L.: Well, he had a grocery store in Oak Ridge later. He was a wholesaler grocer and then he had a grocery store in Oak Ridge.

Thonhoff, J.: And --

Green, L.: That was nothing. I mean, it wasn't -- I mean it didn't cause any problem.

Thonhoff, J.: Were most of the nurses women?

Green, L.: Most of them were, uh-huh.

Thonhoff, J.: What other roles did women play at the plant?

Green, L.: What?

Thonhoff, J.: What other roles did women play in the plant?

Green, L.: I don't understand you.

Thonhoff, J.: What other things did women do in the plant besides being a nurse?

[1:24:07]

Greene, Lois

- Green, L.:** Oh, they worked all over. They worked as guards. They worked as computer -- in the computer thing. But they worked on the roads and grounds, whatever.
- Thonhoff, J.:** So it was pretty diverse.
- Green, L.:** Uh-huh.
- Thonhoff, J.:** What about minorities? Were they treated any differently?
- Green, L.:** No. They weren't. I didn't think so.
- Thonhoff, J.:** When you treated minorities, being a nurse, were there different standards for them?
- Green, L.:** No. Not a bit.
- Thonhoff, J.:** Everything was --
- Green, L.:** I treated everybody just the same. We all did. And we had a lot that couldn't read and write.
- Thonhoff, J.:** Were there programs to help them?
- Green, L.:** I don't think so. I don't know. We didn't, in the dispensary.
- [1:25:21]
- Thonhoff, J.:** What do you think future generations should remember about K-25?
- Green, L.:** That it helped end the war with their enriched uranium, you know.
- Thonhoff, J.:** Could you describe the great accomplishments and what should be acknowledged?
- Green, L.:** What should be what?
- Thonhoff, J.:** Acknowledged?
- Green, L.:** Well, I think it helped to end the war because that was the sole purpose.
- Thonhoff, J.:** Could you describe the feeling that you had about your friends and your coworkers?

Greene, Lois

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Green, L.: I have great respect for them, great respect for them and the way they treated me, they had great respect for me, which meant a lot.

Thonhoff, J.: Are you glad that you went to work for K-25?

Green, L.: What?

Thonhoff, J.: Are you glad that you went to work for K-25?

[1:26:37]

Green, L.: Yes. Uh-huh.

Thonhoff, J.: Are there any other stories that you can remember that you'd like to tell about?

Green, L.: I was trying to think of something. I remember one (indiscernible) and he had a minor cut, treated him for a minor cut, walked to the door and fell out, fainted, and broke his jaw. We had to send him to have his jaw wired. [laughs]. I was trying to think of something else, but I -- we had a nurse that when she gave shots, she always hit the patient and then gave the shot, that nurse is still living. She was holding the pants. When she popped him she dropped the pants and he fell (indiscernible). We had fun, you know, had to laugh sometimes. Then we had one we told a fellow to undress and go in the booth and he went in the booth and he undressed and the nurse went in and she came out, she didn't tell us that he dressed wrong. So somebody else went in, same way. I said I guess they thought we were (indiscernible). And it funny some of the things -- the patients would come in. One came in one day and the doctor said what do you think is wrong with you? She said, "I think it's my pit-too-ti-tary gland." [laughs]. And they'd come in and tell you some of the funny things. I told a patient one time, he said he had a pain in his shoulder so I told him it was myositis and he said what is that and I said, "Well, it's inflammation of the muscle." He said, "Do you mean to tell me I've got puss in there?" He thought he had puss in there because of inflammation. But, anyway -- it was a great experience and I wouldn't take anything for it and the people that I met. This is all about Mr. Winkle. He called me not too long ago. He was plant manager.

[1:30:11]

Thonhoff, J.: Did you have any stories about him?

Green, L.: Huh?

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Thonhoff, J.:

Never mind. That's it.

[End of Interview]

Page 19

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