

Y-12 ribbon-cutting makes history

By: D. Ray Smith | *Historically Speaking* | The Oak Ridger | July 17, 2007



Ed Westcott, the official photographer for the Manhattan Project, is surrounded by, from left, Alice Piercey, Dorothy Coker, Lillie Allred and Marie Guy, four of the women pictured in Westcott's famous 'Y-12 Shift Change' photo that is now a 30-foot by 50-foot photo mural in the Jack Cass Center.

Let's interrupt the series on the troop train wreck to insert a recent history-making event. I will try and complete the troop train wreck story soon.

As many of you know, the Y-12 National Security Complex is where I have my day job. It has been so for the past 37 years. I am very proud of working at Y-12 and have grown to really appreciate its history. Because of that and my natural bent toward things historic, I have been allowed to devote time and energy to documenting Y-12's history in various ways over the past few years.

The demolition of over 250 buildings at Y-12 sparked the need to interpret the history of those buildings and to document them in pictures and video before demolition. As a member of the Infrastructure Reduction team, I helped identify the buildings to demolish. I soon learned that every one of them had a story or stories. We attempted to capture many of the more pertinent facts and details of the Manhattan Project structures as they were identified for demolition.

However, nothing we do now can capture the true essence of the early years, except for a few locations where the past still remains unchanged. Building 9204-3 (Beta 3) is one such building. We opened that building to the public as part of the 2005 Secret City Festival and allowed 2,000 visitors to see the exact equipment that helped separate the uranium 235 for Little Boy, the first atomic bomb used in warfare.

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That same equipment has been used over the years to separate the isotopes of all the elements on the periodic table and is the genesis of the medical isotope program. So the same equipment that separated the uranium for Little Boy also separated the stable isotopes for medical research.

While the history is hard to capture, we do have a treasure trove of authentic information in the many excellent photographs that Ed Westcott, the Manhattan Project official photographer, has left for posterity. Seventy of those photographs that so ably and artistically tell the amazing story of the Manhattan Project are already hanging in the New Hope and Jack Case centers. Another 130 are planned to be used throughout the hallways and other public areas of both buildings.

On Tuesday, July 10, 2007, a truly historic event occurred at the Y-12 National Security Complex. The last time a change this huge happened at Y-12 was on February 1, 1943, when construction began on the massive Y-12 electromagnetic separation plant. The New Hope Center and the Jack Case Center are office complexes which are radically different from anything built at Y-12 over the years. The Jack Case Center is the largest office complex ever constructed at Y-12.

Ed Westcott's photographs lined the walls of the New Hope Center where over 350 community leaders, media personnel, elected officials, and invited guests gathered in the morning for the public ribbon cutting. Special guests of honor were the interviewees who helped make a moving and informative documentary short film especially for the important occasion. Other guests were former residents of the New Hope community and some people who once worked for Jack Case.

The spacious lobby of the New Hope Center was comfortably filled and the Y-12 History Exhibit Hall was buzzing with its first visitors. The 400-seat auditorium was largely full. The first experience of hosting the community was a huge success!

The Y-12 History Exhibit Hall was open for the event. Among the many exhibit items was a special loan from Fay Martin — the piano from the New Hope Baptist Church. She recalls her family purchasing the piano for \$35 from the New Hope Baptist Church in late 1942 when the church was being vacated to accommodate the Manhattan Project. She has been storing the piano in her home for many years. The stool that the church used with the piano is on loan from Wilma Brooks.

The ribbon-cutting featured Naomi Brummett, who along with Zach Wamp and other dignitaries cut the ribbon. Tom D'Agostino, National Nuclear Security Administration's deputy administrator of Defense Programs, presented Mrs. Brummett with a NNSA commemorative coin and thanked her for the sacrifice made by the community when the Manhattan Project took their land.

After the formal public ribbon-cutting, the group filled the auditorium and was shown a 12-minute video: "Y-12's New Face." The video featured interviews with many New Hope community former residents, including John Rice Irwin, Elmer Brummett, Wilma Brooks, and former Y-12 employees Bill Wilcox and Gordon Fee, speaking about Y-12's historic leader Jack Case. The brief video also included George Dials and Ted Sherry jointly announcing the historic change in Y-12's relationship to the community through the New Hope Center and the opportunities for improved communication within Y-12 brought about by the Jack Case Center.

Along with the video, the Y-12 National Security Complex also announced its new "face" through several key speakers who reinforced the significance of the change taking place as Y-12 modernizes. One such speaker was the National Nuclear Security Administration's deputy administrator, Tom D'Agostino. His favorable impression of Y-12's historic modernization effort was documented in media coverage where he stated that Oak Ridge was leading the way across the DOE Nuclear Weapons Complex and that he would be "copying" the model from Oak Ridge at other locations. Oak Ridge sets the pace!

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Congressman Zach Wamp said, "These two facilities change the face of Y-12." He also made several other complimentary remarks about the privately-financed buildings. He compared the costs of constructing these two buildings to the much higher costs of the visitor center being built at the nation's capital. Lawler-Wood and Turner Construction personnel who heard his remarks must have been proud.

BWXT Y-12's president and general manager, George Dials, commented, "We stand on the shoulders of giants," as he honored the large number of former Y-12 employees in the audience who were the special guests of the event. Former Y-12 managers who attended the events were Ken Bernander, who actually started up the calutrons in the Beta buildings at Y-12; Finus Patton; Harvey Kite; and Ken Sommerfeld. Helen Brown, a "Calutron Girl," and Connie Bolling, a former Y-12 calutron supervisor, were there as well. Harold and Harriet Cofer, both former Y-12 employees, also attended. All of the visitors and their hosts enjoyed the first lunch served in the Jack Case Center cafeteria.

The ribbon-cutting at the Jack Case Center featured the members of the Jack Case family as well as some of the women who are pictured in the huge 20-feet-by-50-feet mural that nearly covers the north wall of the cafeteria. The mural was given to Y-12 by Turner Universal and STG Architects who designed and constructed the two buildings. Pictured in the mural and in attendance were Lillie Allred, Dorothy Coker, Marie Guy and Alice Piercey. Agnes Houser was unable to attend as she recently broke her hip.

The mural is made from one of Ed Westcott's most famous images, that of the Y-12 shift change, where the women are walking up the hill leaving Y-12 at the end of the shift. Ed took that picture while in the back of a pick-up truck with his camera mounted on a tripod to get the proper angle. One feature of the photograph is that the original includes parts of two of the original Manhattan Project Alpha buildings. Other buildings in the photograph directly behind the women are now demolished. One of those buildings was the first administration building at Y-12.

The women, along with Ed Westcott, the photographer, also autographed a smaller version of the enormous mural. As Agnes Houser could not attend the event, I took the photograph to her in the rehabilitation center where she also autographed it before it was framed. So one more historic photograph, with autographs of the photographer and five of the ladies featured in the image, has been created and is being framed to be displayed along side the mural.

The Jack Case Center is named for the Y-12 plant manager with the longest tenure. He served for 15 years as Y-12's leader and was well known across the DOE Nuclear Weapons Complex. Case promoted the "can do" attitude of Y-12, and touted Y-12 as being capable of manufacturing anything the nuclear weapons complex needed that could not be done elsewhere. Jack Case is enjoying a resurgence of recognition because of the choice by Y-12 employees to place his name on this the largest office building ever constructed at Y-12. His leadership is recognized as playing a key role preparing Y-12 to help win the Cold War. Y-12 today continues to be a vital part of our nation's defense.

So, July 10, 2007, was a day when Y-12 again made history. The ribbon-cutting is but the first of many opportunities we hope the public will have to experience the history of Y-12 through the Y-12 History Exhibit Hall in the spacious New Hope Center.