

Charles Vanden bulck – The story of the name and a man of integrity

(as published in The Oak Ridger's Historically Speaking column on July 12, 2011)

Part two:

The story of one of the Manhattan Project's earliest senior staff members and an Atomic Energy Commission pioneer, Charles Vanden Bulck, presented in last week's *Historical Speaking* column was a most intriguing one for me to research. Many times there is a back story that is equally interesting but does not directly bear on the historical aspects of the primary story. This is one of those situations.

In the research for the Charles Vanden Bulck story, I was delighted by the information Charlie (the son) provided regarding his father's name, "Vanden Bulck." I started out thinking the name was Vandenbulck and struggled with the variations I began to find right away.

I first thought that was what Charlie used for his name, but later found that he uses "VandenBulck." I found the Tennessee Department of Transportation's database had the name wrong. It was listed as: "Buick, Charles V." The representative thanked me for the revised information and updated their database.

Another example of the confusion of the Vanden Bulck name on the bridge comes from Dave Miller. Dave remembered some years back when Highway 95 was repaved and the shoulders repaired that the signs naming the bridge disappeared. Dave had lived neighbors to the Vanden Bulck family and took it upon himself to get the situation corrected.

He called the Tennessee Department of Transportation and made them aware of the signs being missing. Soon he was connected with the sign shop directly. They promised him they would get right on it and within a couple of weeks they called Dave back and said the work was complete and the new signs were in place.

Eager to show his family friends what he had accomplished to assure the name of their ancestor remained attached to that bridge, Dave took his camera to the site to document the deed. Was he ever amazed when he got there and found the signs. There were two brand new signs standing pretty, one on each end of the bridge, announcing the bridge was named for Charles Vander Buck!

Dave could not believe his eyes. He quickly returned home and called the TDOT sign shop. He first thanked them for their prompt service but told them than had "done a terrible thing!" They were aghast!

In three days the problem was corrected and the signs read "CHARLES VANDEN BULCK BRIDGE." Dave proudly photographed one of the signs and sent the photo to Charlie VandenBulck.

Before I leave Dave Miller, let me share a story he told me about Charles Vanden Bulck's wife, Gertrude or "Gertie" as Dave knew her. Dave said, "When I was in the 1st or 2nd grade, we were doing vocabulary and the word, maid, came up. The teacher slowly went over the term explaining that a maid was a person who helped around in other families' homes. They helped with chores like cleaning and ironing. Then the teacher asked if anyone had a maid that helped in their house?"

Dave continued, "I popped up and said I did! We had a maid and her name was 'Gertie.' The teacher said she knew a lady named Gertie Vanden Bulck. I said, 'Yeah, that's the one!' She said, 'Colonel Vanden Bulck's wife, Gertie, is your maid?'

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Dave said he replied, “‘Yeah, she helps Mom all the time.’

Dave concluded his “Gertie” story by saying the term “maid” could have also referred to what was called a good neighbor. He now recalls that all the neighbors helped each other out. His Mom just happened to have been a hair dresser in her youth up in New York and it came in mighty handy for putting in those wartime permanent waves.

Now back to the Vanden Bulck name. Looking at names similar to this I have found most often the Vanden portion is separated into “Van den.” So, there is even more variety to the name.

Charles was born in Antwerp, Belgium, in 1904. The Vanden Bulck family migrated to the United States in 1913 with their young nine year old son. They settled first in Hoboken , NJ, where Charles’ father worked as a longshoreman. I believe it was at this juncture as the family came through Ellis Island that the name may well have gotten mixed up.

Charlie VandenBulck has decided to spell his name without the space. I asked him about that. He replied, it was to reduce the confusion. He could either be near the front of the alphabet or near the end of it, but he tired of having to check for both.

Something as simple as picking up laundry was always confusing, he said. So, he did keep the capital “B” but determined the single word spelling created less trouble for him and his family routinely.

So, where did all this variety originate?

To find the answer, we must go to Charles Vanden Bulck’s very last job. After his retirement from the Atomic Energy Commission in 1960, he took a job with the American Machine and Foundry or AMF a recreational equipment company for many years that started out as the first automated cigarette manufacturer.

However, in 1960 and 1961, AMF had 42 plants and 19 research facilities across 17 countries. One of their product lines was the launching system for Inter Centennial Ballistic Missiles for the U. S. Air Force. It was this work that brought to light Charles Vanden Bulck’s name given him at birth.

Charlie told me that when his dad went to work for AMF they requested a security investigation necessary for the U. S. Air Force contract work. When they looked into his dad’s background the investigation delved as far back as his birth city of Antwerp, Belgium.

There they found a birth certificate for him, with his parents’ names, Francois and Marie Powels van den Bulck. Everything checked out, except the name for this baby born on May 9, 1904. The name on the birth certificate was, “Carlos Youhanus Cornelius van den Bulck.

Wow, now see what I mean? Don’t you just know the folks at Ellis Island who processed this family through in 1913 said, “No way can we put all that down...this young boy of nine is going to be Charles Vanden Bulck” and that was that.

Just when you think I have told you all there is to be told about the variations on the names of the VandenBulck family name, let me wrap up this part of the story by telling you what the “F” in Charlie F. VandenBulck’s name stands for. Yep, you guessed it...Charlie’s middle name is in honor of his

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grandfather.

But Francois is not what is listed on his birth certificate. There it is listed as Franz. Charlie did not know until his grandmother told him at age 17 that his name was intended to be Francois for his grandfather. So, his name is officially, Charles Franz VandenBulck, but his grandmother intended him to be named for his grandfather, Francois.

Finally, I think it is fitting to end this saga of Charles Vanden Bulck and his family with a couple of letters that give insight into one of his most basic characteristics, honesty. Dealing with literally billions of dollars throughout his career, he was known as someone who was always honest and who knew the rules and implemented them with integrity.

The first letter comes from three of the people who obviously helped with his retirement party in 1960, Clark Center, Logan B. Emlet and Oral Rinehart. These three men were all three managers in the AEC contractor, Union Carbide Nuclear Company. The letter, dated July 26, 1960, just prior to Vanden Bulck's retirement the next Friday, reads as follows:

Dear Mr. Vanden Bulck:

Please, Please, Mr. Vanden Bulck, don't have Milo investigate this party.
We promise that all expenses have been, or will be, paid from funds other than gov ernment
Fund Accounts numbers 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, or 6.

Very truly yours,
Union Carbide Nuclear Company
Clark E. Center
Logan B. Emlet
Oral Rinehart

As you can see, the letter is obviously a light hearted reflection on what was likely a routine practice implemented most often by "Milo" being sent to investigate any suspicious activities that might have led to misuse of government funds. The next letter comes from an earlier time, but reflects the same basic characteristic honesty. It too was shared at Vanden Bulck's retirement.

Dated January 5, 1953, the letter reads as follows:

Mr. Thomas T. Crenshaw
Sargent, Webster, Crenshaw & Folley
310 National bank Building
Watertwon, New York

Dear Tom:

Receipt is acknowledged of the Cheddar Cheese which you sent to me. I am returning the gift under separate cover.
As you know the Atomic energy commission has adopted a policy prohibiting acceptance of any such gifts.

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This has been done in order to eliminate any possible criticism of the Commission and its representatives and thereby save both the AEC and the contractors considerable embarrassment.

I appreciate the fine thought with which it was tendered, but you can also appreciate that under the circumstances I cannot accept the gift.

With kindest regards and best wishes for a Prosperous New Year, I remain,

Very truly yours,

C. Vanden Bulck
Assistant Manager
Oak Ridge Operations

Another letter read to poke a bit of fun at the retiring high level manager who had obviously maintained a scrupulously clean slate even to the point of refusing to accept a gift of cheese. I have seen similar "roasts" of effective managers when they retire and it is given and taken as a most complimentary gesture.

So, there you have it. I have had some really great fun with the Vanden Bulck and VandenBulck name and all the variations associated with it. Yet the more enjoyable part of this story has been learning about the great Charles Vanden Bulck, truly an "Atomic Pioneer," who was unknown to me. Finally, I have thoroughly enjoyed getting to know Charlie VandenBulck, a true philanthropist who is dedicated to the support of the Children's Museum of Oak Ridge.



Charles Vanden Bulck, a Manhattan Project Atomic Pioneer and an Atomic Energy Commission Manager whose reputation for honesty and integrity was unsurpassed