

**Charles Vanden Bulck – Procurement Manager for Manhattan Project**  
(as published in The Oak Ridger's Historically Speaking column on July 5, 2011)

First, I must apologize to Mary Ann Damos for misspelling her last name in the most recent *Historically Speaking* column. My thanks to the kind lady who called me immediately upon seeing my goof that allowed me to call Mary Ann to apologize before she read the article. I realize mistakes are inevitable, but I should not have missed this one and I do appreciate the readers who help me correct them.

My mention of the Charles Vanden Bulck Bridge in a previous *Historically Speaking* article produced an immediate response from Jim Kitchens. He said he knew details about the family of the person for whom the bridge was named. Before I could return his call, I was contacted by Charlie VandenBulck, the son of Charles Vanden Bulck. Please notice the difference in the spelling of the names as I will say more about that later.

I had a great conversation with Charlie and we agreed to meet on the next Friday when he came to the Secret City Festival. I called Jim and thanked him for contacting Charlie and assured him that I was following up on the story with Charlie.

Friday arrived and Charlie and I met in the lobby of the Doubletree. A delightful story unfolded. Charlie talked about living in Oak Ridge, at 111 Olney Lane, the original home of Colonel Kenneth D. Nichols (Nichols retired from the Army on October 31, 1953, with the rank of Major General). Nichols was the District Engineer for the Manhattan Project and ran the daily activities of both the Oak Ridge, TN, and Hanford, WA, portions of the Manhattan Project from the district office he established in Oak Ridge.

Lieutenant Colonel Charles Vanden Bulck was right there with Nichols as he was Chief of the Administrative Division of the Manhattan Engineer District at Oak Ridge. Can't you just imagine the excitement as these men managed some two billion dollars of government money on an experiment that had never been done before and for which every day brought new challenges to be met?

Brigadier General James C. Marshall, first District Engineer for the Manhattan District (replaced by Colonel Nichols on August 13, 1943), chose Vanden Bulck in June of 1942 to serve as his main person to handle the money soon to be flowing through the district to numerous contractors. At the time Vanden Bulck was a civilian accountant and auditor. He was quickly made a Major in the Corps of Engineers and designated as "Disbursing Officer" to give him the needed clout to perform his monumental duties.

Vanden Bulck is quoted in the Knoxville Sentinel on October 29, 1945, as saying that Marshall had said in that June, 1942, meeting, in New York City, "We have just been assigned to a new job. I can't tell you what it is. But if we are successful, it will materially aid in shortening the war. And its postwar potential is even greater than its war contribution."

The Vanden Bulck name was soon seen on checks for literally millions of dollars. He was a primary participant in the Manhattan Project negotiations with contractors who were spread thin already doing "war work." But they were exactly the contractors who were needed to construct and manage the huge enterprises required for the grand experiment of building the world's first atomic bomb.

Vanden Bulck is also quoted in that same News Sentinel article quoted above as saying, "We assured [the contractors] that we'd pay promptly, and in some cases we advanced funds into the high millions to get [the contractors] started on the work." What exciting times and what tremendous efforts exerted to help win that awful war!

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Van, as he was known then, continued to serve the Manhattan Project until control passed to the Atomic Energy Commission in January, 1947, at which time he became the Assistant Administrator. He served under John C. Franklin, 1947–1948; Richard W. Cook, 1949–1950; and Samuel R. Sapirie, 1951–1971; retiring on August 4, 1960.

In 1956, the AEC's highest award, the gold Distinguished Service Award was presented to Van in Washington, DC. He was also awarded the Legion of Merit medal for outstanding service in the Manhattan District as well as being cited by the National Civil Service League for outstanding public service.

He received a handwritten letter from General Groves dated October 19, 1961, noting his illness. In the letter, General Groves noted, "I will never forget what a strong support you were to me during the war. I am sure that like most of us you look back on that period with a great deal of satisfaction and pride. You certainly have every right to do so."

Charles Vanden Bulck died of cancer on September 29, 1962 at age 58. At the time he and his wife, Gertrude, were living in Stamford, CT. A certificate was sent from President John F. Kennedy honoring the memory of Charles Vanden Bulck. These letters are among his papers donated to the Children's Museum of Oak Ridge by his son, Charlie – a long-time strong supporter of our museum.

The bridge was officially named in his honor by Public Act, House Resolution No. 37, on March 2, 1965. As noted in The Oak Ridger, "Actually the Saturday [May 25, 1963] ceremonies will not make the name of the bridge official, the state legislature ultimately must act on all public bridge names."

Local newspaper coverage of a visit by "Gertie," as Van's wife, Gertrude was known, on May 28, 1963 noted that she had returned to participate in the Saturday, May 25, 1963, ceremony that honored her late husband's service by naming the new bridge replacing the White Wing Bridge (originally a floating bridge) with a large and high span to be known as the "Charles Vanden Bulck Bridge." This was one of three dedications that day.

The other two were the Gallaher Bridge located on Highway 58 near K-25 and downstream. It was the first to be dedicated by a "puff of smoke from a magnesium ribbon," soon followed by the dedication of the Charles Vanden Bulck bridge where Gertie was riding in the lead boat, the "Mary Anne," just behind the first barge that was headed to the new locks at the Melton Hill Dam for the third celebration, the official opening of the locks.

Sam Sapirie, then manager of the Atomic Energy Commission's Oak Ridge office, according to The Oak Ridger article reporting on the ceremonies, spoke of the accomplishments of the "late Mr. Vanden Bulck while he was a top official here both under the Manhattan Engineer District and later with the AEC."

Sapirie said, "Charles Vanden Bulck was one of the earliest of the military group who came to Oak Ridge to establish the initial project, and he contributed materially to its success. He stayed in Oak Ridge after the war as a civilian employee of the Atomic Energy Commission, and again contributed materially to the conversion of Oak Ridge from a temporary wartime project to a permanent complex of facilities for maintaining the nation's strength and developing the peaceful uses of atomic energy."

The article continued, "Van, as he was known to his associates and to his many warm personal friends, retired from the Atomic Energy Commission in 1960, after completion of more than 36 years of Federal

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Service. He was the victim last year of multiple myeloma, one of the malignant diseases which we hope will someday be conquered by peaceful atomic energy efforts.”

In the next *Historically Speaking* column the Vanden Bulck name will be explored from where Charles was born in Antwerp, Belgium, in 1904. You will discover how he came to the United States as well as when he learned the full name he was given at birth. I will also tell you more about the history of the sign that denotes the official name of the bridge. Finally, I will share a letter Van wrote that speaks volumes about his character.



Charles F. VandenBulck, the son of Colonel Charles Vanden Bulck



Colonel Charles Vanden Bulck, among the earliest Manhattan Project officers and long-time Atomic Energy Commission Assistant Administrator