

# The Girls of Atomic City author says Americans fascinated by Oak Ridge!

(As published in The Oak Ridger's Historically Speaking column on March 25, 2013)

Carolyn Krause gives her perspective on Denise Kiernan's recent talk on her new book, *The Girls of Atomic City*, at the American Museum of Science and Energy. I appreciate Carolyn for doing this *Historically Speaking* column. I was also pleased to see Beverly Major's fine reporting of the event in The Oak Ridger. I believe we have been blessed by having Denise come our way.

Denise has adopted us and is promoting Oak Ridge across the nation. She is even going on national television talking about her book. Read that to mean that Oak Ridge, TN, will get exposure at the national level in a most positive light!

Here is Carolyn Krause's excellent treatment of talk Denise Kiernan gave to over 300 people:  
...

The people of Oak Ridge kept the secret, but the largest building there gave a broad hint to anyone in an airplane.

It was the mile-long "U" of K-25, completed in March 1945 (and demolished recently). U can stand for uranium, generally called "tubealloy" during the Manhattan Project days so enemies would not suspect that uranium was being enriched for use in an atomic bomb.

Denise Kiernan showed the slide of the K-25 "U" from a bird's eye view as she addressed 300 people on her new book *The Girls of Atomic City*. She teased the crowd, asking, "Who came up with that idea? Top secret, eh?" Her observation drew considerable laughter.

She gave the talk on March 19, the 64<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the opening of the gates to the newly incorporated City of Oak Ridge. She has been promoting her book around the country, including in New York City and Washington, D.C. A week after the book came out, it made the New York Times Best Seller List.

"The country is fascinated by your town, your women and other people," she said. "I told the true story of the Manhattan Project through the eyes and experiences" of the Oak Ridge women and others she interviewed and through her research. Her talk focused on questions people in her audiences ask about the book and Oak Ridge.

**How did you find the story?** She was working on another project and came across Ed Westcott's famous photo of the calutron girls on stools at control panels. "I wanted to find out more about this place," she said. At the time she lived in Asheville, N.C.

**Why did you focus on the women?** The story has been told many times through the eyes of General Leslie Groves, Enrico Fermi, Robert Oppenheimer, and Arthur Compton. Most of the focus has been on Los Alamos, N.M.

"I wanted to tell the perspective from women in the Manhattan Project," she said. "Imagine that you are 18 years old and you are being told that you will go to a place somewhere in Tennessee, where there's a job for you, but you're not going to be told what you will be doing."

In the age of Facebook and Twitter, she added, young people cannot fathom how someone would take a job without knowing a lot about it and the location.

"I try to explain to people my age and younger that the women may not have known where they were going, what they would be doing and what role they would play in the larger war effort, but they were told that the work they would do would help end the war and that was enough.

Everyone was touched by the war."

# The Girls of Atomic City author says Americans fascinated by Oak Ridge!

(As published in The Oak Ridger's Historically Speaking column on March 25, 2013)

The topics she heard most about were mud and dating. "I talked to many people who actually lost shoes in the mud," she added.

The mud was understandable. To build a town whose population grew from 0 to 75,000 in three-and-a-half years, "you have to tear up a lot of stuff." Groups out of state she has addressed "are blown away at the pace at which construction took place here."

**How did they keep [the existence of] this town secret?** Kiernan said her audiences seem to think that an "invisibility shield came down" over Oak Ridge except for the people who could get through the gates.

"There were reminders to please be careful about what you are saying," she said. "There was voluntary self-censorship throughout the country. Scientists and newspapers were not publishing [certain information] because no one wanted to be responsible for derailing the war. That's fascinating to young people. It's hard for them to understand people's willingness to not know and not talk about things."

People she interviewed in Clinton said they used to see trains coming in with lumber, bricks, and tankers holding chemicals, and then leave empty.

"Everything's going in, nothing's coming out," they told her. "The only thing that went out was a coffee canister with a few teaspoons of uranium that a guy carried in a briefcase chained to his wrist. No wonder they managed to keep it secret."

**What jobs did women get?** Elizabeth Edwards was brought down from the main branch of the New York Public Library to start the rolling library and public library here. Oak Ridge women worked in administration and transportation, as telephone operators, as technicians, as calutron operators, and as statisticians.

One woman manager told her, "I had men working under me making more than me," Kiernan said, "It was a wonderful time for women, but there were limitations and frustrations."

**How did you do your research?** "I interviewed people here and went to the Smithsonian Institution, UCLA School of Medicine, and the National Archives in Washington and Atlanta (which has 5000 boxes of files including the Atomic Energy Commission archives)."

Dr. Eric Clarke, psychiatrist, was asked to establish a mental health practice here, she learned from her research. "He speaks with such incredible affection and admiration for the true pioneer spirit of the people who came, stayed and banded together to make the best of what was a trying and stressful time when you have to meet a deadline and don't know what the deadline is."

Clarke had never been to a town constructed completely from scratch. He found that some people he talked with didn't like Oak Ridge because of the mud. Yet many others loved it because of the camaraderie, shared purpose, and opportunity to do something to help end the war. They hoped to stay as long as possible.

Life was easier for employed single women than for married women with children. "Housewives spent time alone, and it was hard hauling kids around and getting groceries home on wagons in the mud."

Kiernan ended with her favorite question: **Is Oak Ridge still there?**

"I got this question in New York once and twice in Washington, D.C.," she said. "Oak Ridge is still a Secret City to some."

## The Girls of Atomic City author says Americans fascinated by Oak Ridge!

(As published in The Oak Ridger's Historically Speaking column on March 25, 2013)

She told her audiences that Oak Ridge still exists and recommended that they attend the Secret City Festival and visit the American Museum of Science and Energy, from which tours begin.

"If you take a town and stick a bunch of single men and women inside a fence and tell them to dance four days a week, the town's not going anywhere. It's going to get bigger pretty quickly. Whether the government intended it or not, a community grew up here."

...

Thanks to Carolyn for her perspective on Denise's talk and to Denise for her devotion to Oak Ridge. Thanks also to Denise for personally getting to know these Oak Ridge women she interviewed and writing them into her excellent book on Oak Ridge elevating them to celebrity status.



Denise with Helen Jernigan

## The Girls of Atomic City author says Americans fascinated by Oak Ridge!

(As published in The Oak Ridger's Historically Speaking column on March 25, 2013)



Denise with Kattie Strickland



Denise with Virginia Coleman