

Denise Kiernan – The Girls of Atomic City goes INTERNATIONAL!
(As published in *The Oak Ridger's Historically Speaking* column on June 6, 2013)

Our most famous current author of a book on Oak Ridge history, Denise Kiernan, returned to Oak Ridge on Tuesday, 5/21/13, to speak at the League of Women Voters lunch about "The Girls of Atomic City." Her book featuring several Oak Ridgers has climbed as high as seventh on the New York Times Best Seller list! Now that may well be a record for a book on Oak Ridge! And that's not all, the book is soon to go international, but more on that later in the column.

First, let me tell you about the event this past Tuesday. The Social Room of the Unitarian Universalists Church was filled to overflowing. Many of Denise's "girls" were there and proud to be given well deserved recognition. Those in the crowd who could purchase a book were toting several for the author to sign. Several individuals complained that some of the local stores were out of stock.

At one time during her talk, Denise just stopped everything and said, "Stand up if you were here in Oak Ridge during the Manhattan Project." Many in the audience stood to resounding applause. At first only the ladies who were here during the Manhattan Project stood and then soon a few men stood...well that brought the house down. Pretty soon everyone in the room who had been here during the Manhattan Project were either standing or straining at their walkers or canes and reaching for support as they too attempted to stand to accept the applause.

I stress the feeble nature of some of our seniors to point out to readers of *Historically Speaking* that we have treasures among us that are quickly slipping from our grasp. Our Manhattan Project era seniors are reaching the age when their mobility is often limited, their hearing is failing, their stamina is growing less and less and they are often beginning to have trouble with their memory. Of course, many of us younger folks have some of those symptoms to a greater extent than do some of our seniors.

For example, I dare not question the facts that Bill Wilcox, Ed Westcott, or Bill Tewes (all 90 years old or older) recall and I really dare not question the memory of Colleen Black, Helen Jernigan or Earline Banic (and I dare not tell you these ladies age!). Of course, I have just gotten myself in really big trouble with several other folks because I left out so many names of people who could have easily been included...but you get the idea.

As was the case when she first talked to an Oak Ridge audience at the American Museum of Science and Energy in March about *The Girls of Atomic City*, Denise was again in touch with her audience and knew that Oak Ridgers represented a different and more knowledgeable audience about things that existed in Oak Ridge. She took the opportunity to talk about her experiences sharing Oak Ridge history with people who are not aware of it. Our history, that all too often we may take for granted, is a huge new insight to many with whom she is coming in contact.

She told of questions like, "Is Oak Ridge still in existence?" Imagine that.

At the beginning of her talk, she credited Ed Westcott and his photographs as being something totally unique to Oak Ridge. She admonished us to realize how valuable the asset that Ed created for us by taking literally thousands of excellent photographs of a vast array of events, activities and people doing normal everyday things during that most unusual time that was the Manhattan Project in Oak Ridge.

Of course, she told the story of how she came to know about Oak Ridge and the "girls." One audience member asked her to repeat the story during the question period at the end of the program. She went into even more detail about the impression made on her by the photograph showing young girls right

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out of high school sitting on stools, monitoring meters and turning knobs without knowing more about what they were doing than just which meters to monitor and which knobs to turn to maintain the proper reading on the meter. This photographic image was intriguing to her, but she knew nothing about Oak Ridge at the time except it was only two hours from Ashville, NC, where she lived.

She was asked about documentary films and quickly cited Keith McDaniel's *Secret City: The War Years* and *Secret City: 1945-2006* as excellent educational tools. She noted the oral histories contained there as well as complimentary use of Ed Westcott's photographic images helped make the films excellent documentaries.

When asked if her book would be made into a movie, she was uncharacteristically quiet and carefully chose her words. She finally relented and promised the audience that if such a thing were to be decided, Oak Ridgers would be among the first people she would tell. I believe something is going on there or she would be more forthcoming with her answers as is normally her style. So, let's keep an eye out for more news along that front.

Denise also pointed out Jordan Reed, of the Oak Ridge Public Library's Center for Oak Ridge Oral History, who was in the audience and encouraged the audience to make sure time is taken to capture the stories of older people among us. She emphasized the importance of "telling your story" even if you think you do not have anything to tell.

Denise indicated that her experience interviewing for the book made her realize just how much really good detailed history individuals had to tell. She found that almost everyone she interviewed started out by saying, "Aw you don't want to interview me, I don't have anything to tell," but soon realized that she was learning new things and collecting lots of really good material from the people who "didn't have anything to tell."

She indicated that she is constantly being told stories by people she meets or who contact her by phone or email. Someone asked if she planned a sequel. I am not sure if that is the case, but she assured us that she was capturing all the stories and would determine what to do with them a little later when she finished the rush of book signings and promotional events.

A surprise to me was to see that *The Girls of Atomic City* is soon to be published in Polish! When Denise showed the PowerPoint slide of the cover of the book in Polish, she mentioned that she was doing phone interviews at a number of places in Europe. So, Oak Ridge is getting international attention!

In addition to Poland, the book has also been acquired by a Hungarian publisher. It is being translated now.

Also there have already been Brazilian and Danish publications where articles about the book have appeared. Denise has been interviewed by an Irish radio station, been approached by an Indian book website, and the book has been mentioned or reviewed by at least two British newspapers. Denise's husband, Joe D'Agnese, tells me that one of them, the Daily Mail, ran a lot of Ed Westcott photos.

Here is the link: <http://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-2306111/The-Girls-Atomic-City-New-book-reveals-untold-story-tens-thousands-women-worked-Manhattan-Project-secret-nuclear-base-Tennessee-helped-win-Second-World-War.html>

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On a more personal note, Joe says that at every bookstore Denise has visited, there is always an Atomic City girl waiting to introduce herself at the end. The crowd always applauds.

Here are two good articles about women in the Charlotte area that Denise and Joe shared:

<http://www.lincolntimesnews.com/?p=61970>

<http://www.charlotteobserver.com/2013/05/11/4029607/gaston-woman-spent-summer-at-atomic.html>

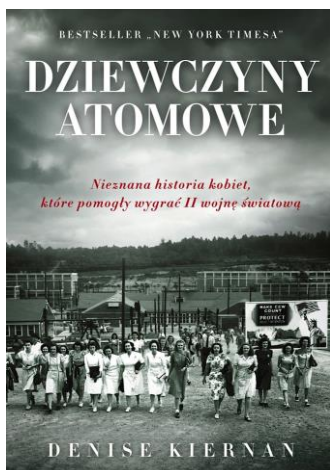
In June Denise gives a talk at the Jimmy Carter Library in Atlanta, and then a bookstore in Lexington, KY, and then she flies off for her tour out west, including New Mexico. That should be fun...wonder if THEY will ask if Oak Ridge still exists?

WOW, what a resoundingly successful ambassador for Oak Ridge Denise has turned out to be. We have been swept along with her to some really interesting venues. Now, how do we best capitalize on what may well be only yet another “15 minutes of fame” if we don’t do something to help maintain the awareness and interest.

She tells everyone to “come to Oak Ridge and see for yourself.” She points out to them that the Manhattan Project National Park bill is soon to pass Congress. At Tuesday’s presentation, Mayor Tom Beehan told the audience that he would present Denise a key to the city when the Manhattan Project bill is passed as he perceives her book and book tour as being supportive of the park and helping to get the word out nationally and internationally.

Denise has also agreed to be the featured speaker at next year’s Altrusa’s and Breakfast Rotary’s Literacy Luncheon. She sent her regrets to Katy Brown because she will be signing books out west or she would also be here for the Secret City Festival coming up on June 21 and 22.

Good things are happening in Oak Ridge!



The Girls of Atomic City is being published in Poland and soon to be released in Hungary

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Denise Kiernan, Oak Ridge's best ambassador



Mayor Tom Beehan tells the audience about the upcoming Manhattan Project National Park bill and assures them that he believes it is soon to pass

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Denise takes the overflowing crowd's photo, a practice she enjoys



Denise Kiernan, author of the New York Times Best seller 'Girls of the Atomic City' speaks to a crowd at the Oak Ridge Unitarian Universalist church for a League of Women Voters of Oak Ridge sponsored lunch



The Social Room of the Oak Ridge Unitarian Universalist Church was overflowing with Oak Ridgers – many of them having worked here during the Manhattan Project days and lived the history Denise Kiernan wrote about – Earline Banic is shown speaking at the event

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Denise listens as she autographs her book



Two of the original badges