

## Secrecy, spying, little privacy—a way of life here

(As published in *The Oak Ridger's Historically Speaking* column on September 23, 2013)

This *Historically Speaking* column is researched and written by Carolyn Krause. Again, Carolyn draws heavily on the oral histories contained in COROH (Center for Oak Ridge Oral History) at the Oak Ridge Public Library...an excellent resource. The article features one of our local celebrities as a result of Denise Kiernan's Best Selling book, *The Girls of Atomic City*.

Recently, I was invited to facilitate a review of this marvelous book on Oak Ridge by a local Book Club who decided to hold their discussion at Greenfield of Oak Ridge assisted living center. Several of the women featured in the book now live there. They entered into the discussion to the delight of the book club members. Feedback has indicated the evening was a huge success!

Here is Carolyn's story of Colleen Rowan Black, one of the "Girls" of Atomic City.

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Recent disclosures about U.S. government surveillance have prompted heightened concerns about personal privacy and government spying and secrecy in the name of security.

During the Manhattan Project days in Oak Ridge, citizens kept such concerns under wraps and willingly adopted the government playbook of "don't ask, don't tell." The reason: they wanted to hasten the end of the war and bring their endangered family members and friends home.

Most of the 75,000 people in Oak Ridge in 1944 and 1945 did not know the big plants were producing enriched uranium for an atomic bomb. But whether they knew or not, they responded with humor to questions the government didn't want asked.

A good source of these questions and answers is Jim Kolb's 2002 oral history interview with Colleen Rowan Black, one of the women featured in Denise Kiernan's best-selling book, *The Girls of Atomic City: The Untold Story of the Women Who Helped Win World War II*.

"People outside the gates would ask, 'What are you doing there, what are you making?' You could never tell them," Colleen said. "People who worked at the hospital would say, 'We're making babies.'

"And if you asked a laborer, if you asked somebody just sitting on a bench, 'What are you making out there?' he'd say, 'Oh, eighty cents an hour.' You'd never give a right answer."

"What do you do out there?" Kolb chimed in. "As little as possible."

"And you weren't supposed to tell how many people were working here either," Colleen said. "So, if they asked you, 'Well, how many people do you think are working out there in Oak Ridge?' you'd say, 'Oh, I guess about half of 'em.' You never, never gave an estimate."

Colleen said that she and her friends did not know what really was being made in Oak Ridge until the war was over (when people in the know shouted in the streets, "Uranium, uranium," as if they couldn't keep the term bottled up any longer). But they knew they should have turned in the people asking them those questions.

"And that was another thing," she added. "You never knew if somebody was a spy." She said the father of a friend was told to turn in anybody who asked, "What are we making? What are we doing? How many?"

"They gave him a little kit with envelopes that were addressed," she said. "He was supposed to write down the names [of people who asked questions they shouldn't] and mail them to Knoxville. So he hid the little envelopes in the closet. One day he came home when his wife had cleaned out the bottom of the closet and found all those envelopes. She asked him if he was having an affair. He had to tell her he was a spy."

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During the war, a number of Oak Ridge mothers would get together weekly to sew, talk and eat sandwiches while watching their children or putting them down for naps.

One day, Colleen said, an FBI man appeared before the women and said, "I see you all are meeting. What is it you're talking about?" And one woman said, "Formula, diapers!"

"They were watching what went on," Colleen said, noting that she learned this story from reading the cookbook that the '43 club published.

During the war Colleen worked at K-25, climbing over pipes, testing the welds for leaks and marking the leaks for the welders to repair. Her job is described in detail in Kiernan's book.

"Once in a while I wondered, what are they doing with all these pipes? What's going through these pipes? Where are they going?" she told Kolb.

In a Public Radio International interview broadcast in March, she told Bob Edwards that she did not know the significance of her wartime work. "I thought I was doing something to help win the war," she said. "I was making good money. I was having a good time. Everybody here was young. The median age was 27 years old. I was 18.

"There were 25 dances a week on the tennis court and in the recreation hall. You always wanted to meet a GI guy because he had access to the PX. The PX had soap and, with all that mud here, soap was really hard to get."

She was married at Chapel on the Hill, and she and her husband had eight children.

Just as the government kept secrets from the people of Oak Ridge, some Oak Ridgers found ways to keep a secret to ensure they had a good time in private.

At every entrance to Oak Ridge, the guards at the gate would search the trunk of each car. "You weren't supposed to bring liquor in," Colleen told Edwards. "This was a dry, dry place.

"So, you had to think, 'How are we going to get the liquor in without getting caught?' We didn't have disposable diapers then for our babies. We had cloth diapers. So, we would put the bottles of liquor at the bottom of the stinking diaper pail. The guards never looked in the pail."

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There you have Carolyn's review of Colleen's oral history found in COROH's archive. You can find these oral histories online at: <http://orpl.org/> and under "Departments and Services" select COROH and "view oral histories." Much of Oak Ridge's history is being preserved through these interviews of the people who lived the history.

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Colleen Rowan Black is recognized at a presentation by Denise Kiernan at the American Museum of Science and Energy