

Clyde Hopkins: A marvelous man and manager

(As published in *The Oak Ridger's Historically Speaking* column on November 17, 2014)

This Historically Speaking column is the result of the death of Clyde Hopkins, beloved by all I know who worked with him. Not long before he died, he called me to ask a favor. I was pleased to help him, as we all who ever worked for him always were. Clyde was a special person, gifted with a natural ability to cause everyone who met him to like him immediately.

He never changed, anytime you saw Clyde, you saw that huge smile, that warm, friendly, eager to listen management style that was Clyde Hopkins natural approach to life. Ask anyone who knew him and they will tell you exactly the same thing...he was one of a kind and undoubtedly the kindest manager they have known.

Carolyn Krause brings you the results of her research into Clyde's oral history as well as her report from attending Clyde's celebration of life. Enjoy getting to know Clyde or if you knew him, enjoy being reminded of him and his impact on others.

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Clyde Hopkins, 85, a well-known Oak Ridge resident and president of the Martin Marietta Group before he retired in 1995 after a 43-year career, died Oct. 29 at Methodist Medical Center. He is survived by his wife Ada; his daughters, Cindy Milner and Susan; a son-in-law, and two grandsons, Clark and Grant Milner.

When Bob Merriman eulogized Clyde Hopkins at the memorial service on Nov. 8 at First United Methodist Church, he cited the "fruit of the spirit" (Galatians 5:22). "Love, joy, peace, forbearance, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control -- that was Clyde," he said. **"He didn't just talk about values; he lived them."**

Earlier, he talked about the vital role Hopkins played when Merriman's team was in Japan in 1984. On Sunday, April 1, 1984, Hopkins had been appointed senior vice president of Martin Marietta Energy Systems in charge of production.

"He could have been in Oak Ridge celebrating, but instead Clyde was in Japan helping our team market U.S. uranium enrichment services to the Japanese utility executives for their nuclear power plants," Merriman said.

"Millions of dollars and hundreds of American jobs were on the line. The U.S. was in a fierce competition with the French; we weren't doing too well."

The French brought their executives and the foreign minister. The Americans had no high-level government officials, but the Japanese uranium enrichment contract went to the United States, not France. Why? "We had Clyde," Merriman said. The Japanese officials found Hopkins to be friendly, disarming and genuine. They trusted him.

"How he loved to engage with people," Merriman said. "He treated everyone the same. He saw the best in people. He wanted to see them succeed."

He also was a fun-loving man. When the U.S. team first arrived in Japan, Merriman's team decided to row a boat down the river near Kyoto even though the day was cold and rainy and they had no raincoats.

Another boat was also going on the trip and it was filled with Japanese farmers. Each of the farmers wore a plastic raincoat and pointy hat and carried a six-pack of sake, a Japanese alcoholic drink made from fermented rice.

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When time came to launch, off they went, but where was Clyde? Then they saw him in the other boat with the Japanese farmers. In his raincoat and pointy hat, he smiled and waved at the American team as he held up his six-pack of sake.

Hopkins was born in 1929 and grew up during the Depression in a country village called Tibbs in West Tennessee. "We were a farming family and we had a country grocery store, which lost money," Hopkins told filmmaker Keith McDaniel in a 2011 oral history interview. "My father was also commissioner of roads in the county."

Hopkins attended high school in nearby Brownsville, about 50 miles from Memphis. At the age of 15 he met his future wife, 13-year-old Ada, on a school bus. She lived in a little community nearby called Nutbush. Before Hopkins died, he and Ada had celebrated 65 years of marriage.

Tibbs was a good community to live in, Hopkins said. "Everybody took care of everybody else. When one family got into trouble, the other families bailed them out."

Hopkins, who played football in high school as a tackle, won a football scholarship to Union University in Jackson, where he played guard for two years. He was quite strong, having worked on the family farm and helped build bridges as a teenager.

But he decided to major in accounting so he transferred to the university in Bowling Green, Ky., and earned his bachelor's degree there. During that time, he and Ada were married. They both got jobs in Louisville.

He was drafted during the Korean War but he got a deferment by taking a job in Oak Ridge. Union Carbide Nuclear Division hired him as an accountant in 1952, and Ada accepted a job as secretary for the personnel department. Both worked at the Y-12 Plant. Hopkins' supervisor was Al Bissell, who became the first and longest-serving mayor of Oak Ridge.

"I got hired to develop a scheduling system for each of the manufacturing operations in the plant so that all the parts for each advanced nuclear weapon were available for assembly at the same time," Hopkins told McDaniel.

Because Hopkins needed the money but couldn't do much until his clearance was approved, Bissell "toured me all over the Y-12 plant two or three times a week," Hopkins said. "He knew everybody by name, from the janitors on up, and I got to meet and know people. The best thing that ever happened to me was getting to know so many people so quickly. He trained me a lot in how to interact with people."

Bissell, one of Hopkins' 17 bosses, taught him how to manage. Bissell's boss, a man named Fred, taught Hopkins how *not* to manage. Fred was a foul-mouthed micromanager in charge of uranium and statistical processing control. When Clyde made a mistake as a new employee, Fred would insult him, asking "do you ever think between 8 and 4:30?" Clyde threatened to quit several times.

Then Fred started to call Clyde at 6 a.m. every Saturday, pick him up at 6:30 and drive him to work at Y-12 till 3 p.m. This routine irked Ada, so one time she surreptitiously buried the telephone under pillows on the floor in another room so neither she nor Clyde were rudely awakened one Saturday morning.

"Fred hardened me for whatever life would give," Hopkins said. "That was some of the best training I could have had getting started. Nobody was going to treat me worse than he did. I learned from him that I'd be better off to go the other way. Be nice to people and encourage them to get on your team."

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Hopkins became head of UCND's Central Accounting Office, working at K-25. In 1972 he and his family moved to Paducah so he could manage the gaseous diffusion plant. To upgrade the production capability, 700 more workers were needed.

"We decided to hire people off the farms and train them rather than hire experienced craftsmen to work as welders, electricians, and pipe fitters," he said. "We taught them to work the way we wanted."

He admitted that the biggest challenge was teaching the new hires to work safely. "One of my lowest times was when an employee got electrocuted in Paducah," he said.

Hopkins returned to Oak Ridge in 1978 as the executive director of Oak Ridge National Laboratory. In 1984 he was named senior vice president of Martin Marietta Energy Systems when the company became the Department of Energy's managing contractor in Oak Ridge.

He was named president of Martin Marietta Energy Systems in 1988 and corporate vice president of Martin Marietta Corporation in 1991. In 1993, he became president of Martin Marietta's Energy Group, one of six business units created within the corporation. The unit he oversaw included ORNL, Y-12, K-25 (ETTP), and two operating gaseous diffusion plants in Paducah and Portsmouth, Ohio.

He retired in 1995 when his grandsons were ages 7 and 4. They fondly recall playing Putt-Putt with him in Oak Ridge and later lots of golf. They learned their values from him.

"I can't explain how a man who grows up in a country village rises to become president of Martin Marietta Energy Group," Hopkins told McDaniel. "There was nothing I had that should have caused it to happen."

His many promotions did pose a challenge for a time. "When I transferred to another job, I felt like a lost dog in tall weeds, for about three months," he said. But he had the courage, the perseverance, and the ability to learn quickly, to get through an uncomfortable period.

"Considering all the people I've worked with, I've just been so fortunate," Clyde said. And we who have lived here and worked at the three Oak Ridge plants have been so fortunate to have had such a marvelous man and manager in our lives.

More stories of Clyde Hopkins will be included in tomorrow's paper.

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Congresswoman Marilyn Lloyd and Clyde Hopkins in 1992



Clyde Hopkins, Al Trivelpiece, Herman Postma and David Reichle in 1992