

## Bob Wesley: long time public affairs professional, part 1

(As published in *The Oak Ridger's Historically Speaking* column on December 21, 2015)

I was pleasantly surprised some time back when Bob Wesley called me to make me aware of his personal collection of news articles from his career starting in 1961 as a public affairs specialist for Union Carbide Nuclear Division and ultimately becoming the public relations manager at the Oak Ridge Y-12 Plant for Martin Marietta Energy Systems before retiring in 1992. The three volumes of information he shared with us is a treasure trove of key public affairs information that is now digitally archived in the Y-12 History Center.

I remembered when Bob worked at Y-12 and, while much of the time I was not working directly with him, I was aware of his work in public affairs. He was frequently involved in news reports and I found him to be very professional when he represented Y-12 to the public. He was involved in television in Knoxville before beginning his career with the work in Oak Ridge.

Bob's career spanned much of the Cold War and ranged from the Oak Ridge National Laboratory to Martin Marietta Energy Systems where he was responsible for video support to several production organizations within the Energy Systems group of facilities in Oak Ridge, Paducah, KY, and Portsmouth, OH. By his retirement in 1992, he had been promoted a number of times and was serving as the head of Public Affairs for the Oak Ridge Y-12 Plant, now the Y-12 National Security Complex.

When I went to his house to pick up the books, I could tell he was obviously still interested in what was happening at Y-12. He kept close watch on the news and events occurring at Y-12, even in retirement. I enjoyed talking with him and hearing him reminisce about the things he had to deal with during his career that still were fresh in his mind.

He wondered, as we looked through the materials he had preserved, if we had captured these things. I told him that we did not have nearly as good an archive as he had kept. So, getting to copy his material would be a great help to the Y-12 History Center. He expressed pride in knowing that we were now preserving our history better than he felt was being done when he saw the need to do it personally. We are fortunate that Bob saw the need and did something about it.

During his 31 year career, Bob saw numerous events that were newsworthy. He maintained an interest in all things happening at Oak Ridge and especially Y-12 even after his retirement. In 1995, he was presented with a Lifetime Achievement Award by the Public Relations Society of America's local chapter. He was recognized for his long career in public affairs.

Bob recently told Frank Munger that his "first love" in public relations was filming documentaries. He and I share that interest and he was delighted when on one visit to his home I took him three sets of DVD's that contain recent documentary films about Oak Ridge and Y-12. He was genuinely grateful that I brought them to him and immediately watched them. He later provided very positive feedback on the films, but of course, he also had some suggestions about how he had done documentary films and "could teach me a thing or two about making them." He was only half joking, I am sure!

Bob also told Frank that he enjoyed giving tours of the facilities in Oak Ridge, especially to foreign visitors. Well, I share that joy with him as well. He would be delighted to see the increased number of tours being provided today. He would understand the importance of showing visitors things that make the Y-12 missions come to life for them. If they can see the authentic equipment and facilities, the heritage that we Y-12'ers share can be better understood.

Don't you know that Bob would be delighted with the Manhattan Project National Historical Park! He would be among the strongest promoters of the open sharing of information and be so proud of the way Oak Ridgers are taking ownership of the park concept. I am sure he would welcome the visitors with delight!

I asked Mike Shepherd, who worked with Bob for years, to provide some insight into Bob's career from his personal perspective. Mike had this to say, "I was called out to what was then the Y-12 Plant (now the Y-12 National Security Complex) to meet with Harvey Cobert and Bob Wesley about a new position they

## Bob Wesley: long time public affairs professional, part 1

(As published in *The Oak Ridger's Historically Speaking* column on December 21, 2015)

had the authorization to open up for a television specialist. After two interviews with Harvey and Bob, and upon hearing the starting salary versus what I was making in Public Television, I gave it about 30 seconds of thought and got a hearty 'welcome aboard.' I started on March 15, 1976 and stayed for the next 37 years."

"During the first 10 years, Bob Wesley was my direct supervisor. He very quickly became more than that to me in those very early years. I was a newly minted hotshot producer at the ripe old age of 26. Bob was a seasoned newsman and filmmaker of 46. He had been there and done that; all of which I had only experienced a small part of at my young age. While I was technologically ahead of Bob, he had me by light years in experience. It became a quest for me to find someone at the three Oak Ridge sites run by Union Carbide Nuclear Division that Bob didn't know or who didn't know him. I failed miserably because as a seasoned Public Relations professional and news hound he had covered every step of ground that I was to walk for the next few years many times.

"Bob had covered the Clinton High School integration debacle and many other East Tennessee news stories for years before he came to Union Carbide to work in the Public Relations Department and be the 'voice of Union Carbide.' He loved the look of film and the process, but quickly adapted to the immediacy of videotape and the ease of editing. Together, we started up the first corporate television operation at the Oak Ridge plants.

"Bob was an outstanding researcher and writer on many subjects as I found out. He wrote most of our early scripts and there was never any re-writing necessary due to facts being incorrect or out of order. I learned a whole lot about structuring things within a story from him despite five years of being a reporter and five years of being a producer. He just had a gift for knowing what should lead and what should come later.

In the next *Historically Speaking* column, Mike Shepherd will share even more insights into the tremendous career of Bob Wesley and the personal impact Bob had on him. The series will conclude with a touching story from Charlie Kuykendall, another one of Bob's close friends.



Bob Wesley leading a tour of the Oak Ridge National Laboratory in the 1960's

Bob Wesley: long time public affairs professional, part 1  
(As published in *The Oak Ridger's Historically Speaking* column on December 21, 2015)



Bob Wesley, Connie Dunn (first Video Assistant) and Mike Shepherd setting up for a shot in the studio located in Building 9766 at Y-12