

Spending time with the “Girls:” A night with Denise Kiernan and Guests (Ruth Heddleston, Peggy Stuart and Hazel Franklin)

(As published in *The Oak Ridger's Historically Speaking* column on September 28, 2015)

The American Museum of Science and Energy's main auditorium was filled almost to capacity Wednesday evening, 9/23/15, when three Manhattan Project veterans were interviewed by Denise Kiernan, author of “The Girls of Atomic City.” Ruth Heddleston, Peggy Stuart and Hazel Franklin responded to questions ranging from where they were born, to how they learned about Oak Ridge and got a job here during the Manhattan Project, to how they felt when they learned what they had been doing.

Each of these ladies, 88, 89 and 90 years old were remarkably clear in their responses. Their memory of those early days of Oak Ridge enchanted the full-house audience who broke into spontaneous applause a number of times when one of the ladies expressed a humorous memory or recalled the pride of patriotism they felt when helping win that awful war. Also most meaningful was the expressed difficulty they experienced when they first learned that they had helped create an Atomic Bomb that killed a large number of people in Hiroshima, Japan.

Peggy thrilled the audience with her stories of playing basketball. The audience joined in with laughter and applause as she recited the incident on the basketball court that resulted in her meeting the man who eventually became her husband. She said he was the referee and that he threw her out of the game.

With prodding from Denise, Peggy finally told the rest of the story. It seems the girl she was guarding kept pushing the basketball in Peggy's face. Finally, fed up with that attempt to intimidate her, Peggy said she told the girl, “If you do that again I am going to make you eat that ball!” Peggy continued her story, after a rather long pause to allow the audience to stop laughing, by saying, “she did it again and I did what I told her I would do. That is when the referee threw me out of the game.”

Peggy went on to say that almost immediately after the game, her coach told her that the referee wanted to see her. She said, “Well, bring him on!” Obviously, thinking he was going to give her a lecture on the behavior that caused him to have to throw her out of the game. Instead, he talked nice to her and before leaving had actually asked her out on a date! She said they soon married.

But when Denise asked Peggy when she got married, Peggy responded, “Don't ask me that, I don't remember the date!”

When asked how she felt when she first got the job in Oak Ridge, Peggy said she was just glad to get off the farm where she was raised. Oak Ridge was freedom for her and earning her own money was an important step in growing into adulthood for her.

These three ladies shared their experiences for well over an hour before Denise opened the floor to questions from the audience. The interaction with the audience members with questions brought even more delightful responses. Finally, at the request of an audience member, all other Manhattan Project veterans in the audience were asked to stand. Six more people stood to a round of applause of appreciation from the crowd.

Denise concluded by reminding the audience of the Manhattan Project National Historical Park that is being created officially on November 10, 2015, when in Washington, DC, at a “Signing Ceremony” the Memorandum of Agreement between the Department of Energy and the Department of Interior National Park Service will be formally concluded.

This action will officially create the national park. There will be signing celebrations at the three cities of the park, Los Alamos, NM, Hanford, WA, and Oak Ridge a day or so after the official signing in Washington, DC. The Oak Ridge signing celebration is being scheduled for Thursday, November 12, 2015. Look for more information to be published on that soon.

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Finally, Denise signed copies of her book, “The Girls of Atomic City” for another hour and a half! Denise’s three guests also signed her books. The lobby was filled with people who had purchased books and she graciously signed every one as well as a whole cart full of books left in the inventory of the Discovery Shop. So, if you were unable to attend the event and want an autographed book, the present stock in the American Museum of Science and Energy’s Discovery Shop are ALL AUTOGRAPHED!

Let me end with an obvious observation. As we conclude 2015, the 70th anniversary of the end of World War II, fewer and fewer of these Manhattan Project veterans are still living. I encourage you to take advantage of the opportunity to talk to anyone you have in your family or with whom you are friends that lived that experience.

We are blessed with over 400 oral history interviews in the Center for Oak Ridge Oral History and have tried to get all the Manhattan Project veterans we could to participate in that valuable method for retaining the details of each person’s history. If you know anyone who has not been interviewed, please have them get in touch with Kathy McNeilly or Jordan Reed at the Oak Ridge Public Library.

Thanks to the American Museum of Science and Energy and the Oak Ridge Heritage and Preservation Association for sponsoring the special evening with Denise Kiernan and her celebrity guests, Ruth Heddleston, Peggy Stuart and Hazel Franklin! What a great event!



Denise Kiernan coaxes stories from Hazel Franklin as Peggy Stuart and Ruth Heddleston await their turn to respond to her questions

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Denise relaxes a moment from autographing books as long as anyone brought one for her to sign

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LET'S HEAR IT FOR THE 'GIRLS' - Ruth Heddleston, from left, Hazel Franklin and Peggy Stuart sign copies of 'Girls of Atomic City,' for the crowd following the panel discussion Wednesday night. The three women were Manhattan Project workers in the 1940s.



Ruth Heddleston answers questions at the American Museum of Science and Energy event last Wednesday.