

Wynona Arrington Butner – Calutron Girl!

(As published in The Oak Ridger's Historically Speaking column on August 15, 2016)

This Historically Speaking column results from an email exchange with Richard Butner. He contacted me in May, 2015, asking if I still wanted to locate Calutron Girls. Of course, I said, "Yes!"

He went on to tell me that his mother was in that famous Calutron Girls photo. I was even more interested. I said, I know Gladys Owens is on the right up front, where is your mother located in that photo? He said, "She is on the left up front." Imagine that!

That exchange resulted in Richard taking the time to complete an oral history interview with his mother. Here is the result of that interview.

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Phoebe Smith was my best friend's sister. As soon as she got a chance to get a job, she went to Oak Ridge. We'd played together all of our lives; the Smiths lived right across the creek from us. She'd written me letters telling me that it was a good place to work, and she made good money.

I decided well, I'll go visit her and see if I can get a job. I had suffered through Mr. Brown's chemistry classes, and needed the money. I thought I'd be able to do some things I couldn't do otherwise and maybe I could help my family and so I went to Oak Ridge. I went in May or June of 1944.

I worked as a calutron operator at the Y-12 plant, separating the U-238 and U-235. The building had silver electromagnets that pulled bobby pins out of your hair. Screwdrivers would stand out in your pockets. All the Y-12 people worked shifts around the clock. I worked a swing shift and I worked seven days a week. We got a day off now and then but not many. From four o'clock in the morning on it was really tough. Your internal clock doesn't change that quickly.

I took the class in welding. That was the very first thing I learned to do when I went to Oak Ridge. Some of the best welders there were women. I didn't like welding, and I'm sure glad I found something else to do there. I was a science major. So they brought me a chemistry book and handed it to me and said "if you read the first thirty pages of this book you will get some ideas about what we hope to do here."

Tubealloy was a nickname for the Product. They called it the Product. Somebody would say if you could get a tablespoon full of it and sell it to the government, you'd be a billionaire.

We didn't know that we were working with uranium. If you were a chemistry student, you had an idea that the Product was somewhere in the bottom of the periodic table. We were just surmising. You put two and two together and figured out that it had to be some kind of explosive but you didn't know what it was going to be.

We all wore little fountain-pen-sized dosimeters. Part of signing out of the plant was to check the amount of radiation that you had absorbed, every day.

Everybody wore a badge with their picture and their name on it, and a Roman numeral. Those with a number five were in the know. And I had a badge with a Roman numeral four on it. That told them that I was not in the know, but that I had a job that was closer to the Product than a lot of people did.

A lot of people had pretty good ideas and we shared them but you didn't know who to talk to. One of the girls in my dorm was, we found out later, one of the informants.

I've always been such a talker, it sure was a hard job not to talk to everybody that you met and try to figure out what was going on there. I think probably a large number of people there, even though they were not specifically in the know, figured out a lot of it.

I can remember as well as if it had been yesterday, sitting on those stools. You had to keep your eyes on those meters in front. You had a whole bunch of dials and the temperature had to remain constant. If it

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gets too hot, you get some liquid air (liquid nitrogen – Ray) and cool it off. We used to pour that stuff on the floor and stand in it. To cool off, because we didn't have air conditioning anywhere.

I saw General Leslie Groves, head of the Manhattan Project, lots of times. He was always in his Army uniform. I never had any direct contact with him. I saw Robert Oppenheimer. Everybody got excited when the big wheels came through. They always had an entourage with them. Robert Oppenheimer always had on a big old black hat. You don't get excited too much about it; you've got to keep your eyes on that machine.

I was never afraid in Oak Ridge. I never worried about walking down the street to catch the bus in the middle of the night. There were people everywhere all the time. It was like walking down the street in Paris. There were Military Police on every corner. I never talked to any of them unless it was when we were coming in and going out of the Project.

Every car that went in and out got searched. Every letter that was written was opened and read. When I would write home or whatever, you couldn't tell them what you were doing. I was young and terribly innocent at the time. I've learned a lot since then.

The cafeteria was open 24 hours a day because somebody's eating all the time. They had a little church called the Little White House on the Hill (Chapel on the Hill – Ray). The Catholics had church, the Protestants had church, the Seventh Day Adventists or whoever else had church, all in the same church at a different time of day.

It was the most segregated place. Not one black person when I was there worked in any capacity other than janitor or maid or cook. It bothered me that the black people had such menial jobs.

My time was spent in the cafeteria eating, washing my clothes, ironing my clothes, sleeping when I could. I went to the movies maybe twice while I was there. For me the thing that was important was getting my clothes washed. You had to wash them out by hand, in big vats. They had rows of vats: wash water, rinse water. And then you found a place to hang them up when you got through. They had an ironing room. You couldn't have any electrical devices in your room. No cooking. No alcohol. No men. It was pretty dull!

I didn't do a lot of socializing, and had two left feet when it came to dancing, and wouldn't try roller-skating. I had no interest in tennis. They had a library bus that went around to the dorms, which had a lot of books you could check out. You just left them on the table in the dorm and they'd pick them up. So I read a lot.

WHAT'S YOUR FONDEST MEMORY OF LIVING AT OAK RIDGE?

The biggest thrill to me was as a little country girl getting to go into a big city like Knoxville. The first store-bought coat I ever owned in my life, I bought in Knoxville. I bought my first pair of I. Miller shoes. We ate in the nicest restaurant every time we went. They had white tablecloths, and they had finger bowls. I'd never seen finger bowls; I didn't know what they were for.

I had a boyfriend named Simeon Galginaitas, from Sheboygan, Wisconsin. He worked in the same building I did. He was some kind of physicist. I went to Knoxville with him several times, mainly because he had a car and he was a nice guy. He took me to eat in Knoxville, and took me shopping.

Phoebe was my roommate. I went with Phoebe and her boyfriend to Norris Dam, one of the big Tennessee Valley Authority projects. We didn't have electricity until I finished college. TVA went in and built all those dams and then they started providing electricity to everybody. We went to Norris Dam one day and rented a canoe. We spent a whole afternoon in the canoe on Norris Dam without a life jacket. That was pretty stupid!

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Daddy didn't want me to go to Oak Ridge, he thought I was too young. His only daughter, she couldn't go off by herself. I left home with probably ten or fifteen dollars and you had to pay for your food when you ate it. One day, I can remember it as well as if it were yesterday. I had one dollar in my billfold. And payday wasn't until Saturday.

And I lay down across the bed in my little room and was thinking, what am I going to eat until I get paid? And I got a letter from my Daddy that day, with money in it. There are some things that are blurry but that's one that stands out in my mind: my fear that, what am I going to eat for the next three days? I don't remember the amount he sent, but I remember I had one dollar before he sent it.

HOW DID IT MAKE YOU FEEL WHEN THEY DROPPED THE BOMBS AND YOU REALIZED THAT'S WHAT YOU'D BEEN WORKING ON?

I had lost a cousin, John Lovedahl, a great guy. He was a bombardier. And [my brother] Zane was in the Pacific Theater and that was the worst of all. I knew a lot of people in the service and I thought it was great to end it at the time.

But over the years I've changed my mind. I really don't know if we did the right thing or not. I have mixed feelings. Was there not some other way that we could've settled this?

The horror of the whole thing, the children that were just out playing when they dropped the bombs. They were burned to death. It's hard to say that we did the right thing.

At the time I thought we did because the war was over.

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Thank you Mrs. Wynona Butner and Richard for taking the time to document that oral history! I am sure you learned some things about life in Oak Ridge that you had either forgotten or never knew.

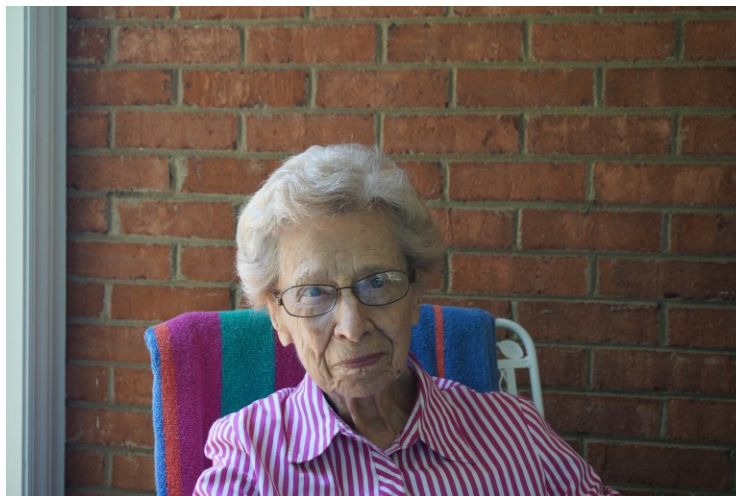
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I have now identified three of the women in the famous Ed Westcott photo we fondly refer to as the “Calutron Girls” – Gladys Owens is on the right up front, Wynona Butner is on the left up front and Ruth Huddleston is third from the front on the left.



Wynona Butner today

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Wynona Arrington Butner as she appeared when she came to work in Oak Ridge in 1944