

# Virginia Coleman: Practicing chemistry

(As published in The Oak Ridger's Historically Speaking column on June 28, 2017)

*This is the second in a series on Virginia Spivey Coleman, one of the eight Oak Ridge women involved in the Manhattan Project who is highlighted in Denise Kiernan's "The Girls of Atomic City."*

Susan Frederick has written the series of articles and Carolyn Krause has edited them. Enjoy this second installment:

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In September 1943, a female recruiter had arrived on the campus of the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, looking to lure Virginia and other pending UNC science degree majors to the new town of Oak Ridge. The recruiter described the town to Virginia as a 90-square mile reserve with free buses running night and day.

Virginia agreed to travel to Oak Ridge for an interview during the Christmas holidays. One reason was that she hoped to meet up with her college boyfriend, who was already working in Oak Ridge. She was also excited about making her first trip.

This journey was so momentous that Virginia still vividly recalled it as she described some of the events that transpired during the three days of the trip. A classmate of Virginia's, Virginia Kelly, joined her in Asheville. Kelly was traveling from Rochester, N.Y. and was hoping to get a job as a secretary.

When the train reached Knoxville, Johnny was waiting at the train station with a flower. However, the chauffeur from Tennessee Eastman was also waiting and almost immediately whisked the two Virginia's off to a boarding house.

The next day, the two unemployed girls were escorted through the gates to Oak Ridge for their interviews at Y-12. Virginia S. was offered a job working in a lab, which she accepted. The two Virginias walked to Gay Street that Saturday evening to attend a movie, but the wait in line was so long and it was so cold they gave up and went back to the boarding house.

Sunday morning they were chauffeured to the train station for a 6 a.m. departure. It had snowed during the night and the station was jammed with soldiers on Christmas pass. The train was over two hours late and inside there were no vacant seats.

The two Virginias stood in the aisle swaying with the train. The snow impeded the train, and later Kelly departed the train at Asheville, disappointed she didn't have a job. Hours later, the train finally arrived in Durham, NC about 4:30 a.m. No buses were running, too dangerous.

Three V-6 soldiers stationed at Chapel Hill HAD to be back by 6 a.m. They were able to hire a private citizen to drive the hazardous roads and let Virginia join them. They just made the deadline. Virginia's house-mother opened the dorm door for her and she collapsed in her bed.

Two weeks after she graduated, Virginia officially arrived back in Oak Ridge. Her employer, Tennessee Eastman, sent a chauffeur to pick her up in Knoxville at the train station. Tennessee Eastman had reluctantly agreed to manage Y-12 during the Manhattan Project, after first refusing, saying they had sent too many of their employees to war to undertake the job.

They left as soon as possible after the war was over. Virginia liked Tennessee Eastman. They sponsored a tennis team on which she played and a camera club, for which they built a dark room for members use.

The chauffeur ferried Virginia from Knoxville to West Village Dorm 25 in Oak Ridge. This dorm was located next to tennis courts. This was a perfect location for Virginia because she had played on the UNC tennis team while completing her accelerated chemistry degree in Chapel Hill.

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The first few months of her job used very little of the knowledge that she loved and learned as one of the few women in her UNC science classes.

As described in "The Girls of Atomic City," before she received her security clearance that would enable her to eventually work at Y-12, Virginia was tasked with training, and "entertaining" in her words, many of the other new employees in "the bullpen." (The bullpen was Tennessee Eastman's holding facility for new employees waiting for their security clearances, located at Town-Site.) The new employees ranged from janitors to graduates of Yale and Harvard.

To quote Denise Kiernan, "One of the bull pen regulars was man named Mac Piper, who had been paying particularly close attention to Virginia. He introduced himself and explained that he was going to be personnel head for the division at Y-12, to which Virginia was originally assigned. Mac wanted to know if Virginia would like to work as his assistant. The job would be in human resources and not a lab."

It would mean working days, not shifts, so Virginia accepted. When her security clearance was eventually found - it had been there when she arrived - Virginia at last went through the guarded gates to Y-12. After a few months, learning she could never be promoted in that job, as she did not have the proper training to work in human resources, she transferred to Dr. Larson's chemistry lab, and was still working days.

At West Village-25, Virginia's room was located over the coal furnace exhaust and every morning her face and nostrils were black with coal dust. Later, Virginia moved across the hall and eventually moved in 1945 to Beacon Hall, a dorm located at Town Site, now called Jackson Square.

Virginia liked the women in this dorm. They were college graduates, had many interests, started the college women's club, and babysat to earn money to give to the high school to help needy women seniors attend college. Babysitting was fun.

It was an opportunity to be in a home, take your boyfriend and enjoy the goodies left by the parents. The children were young and usually in bed before sitter was picked up. Virginia made many lifelong friends during that time.

As it turned out, Virginia and her friend Barbara Smedley were vacationing in Washington when they and the rest of the world first heard the news that the U.S. had just dropped the first atomic bomb, fueled by enriched uranium from Y-12, over the Japanese city of Hiroshima on Aug. 6, 1945. The two young women had scheduled this trip to the Washington, D.C. area to see the sights of the capital city.

Virginia and Barbara were 500 miles away from the lab and her excited colleagues when this historic event took place. Three days later a second atomic bomb, fueled primarily by plutonium from Hanford, Wash., was dropped on the city of Nagasaki in Japan.

After starting life in the Secret City in the women's dormitories, Virginia was invited by two friends, Dot Eaves (Ross) and Rose Marie Saathoff (Waggener) to move into an "E" apartment with them near the town center. She still has in her current home the 1942 Westinghouse refrigerator, which still works.

During this carefree and exciting time, Virginia and her friends continued to enjoy the unique benefits of living in Oak Ridge. They also enjoyed, after years of school, not having to study at night.

One project Virginia worked on involved Beryllium. The four members of the lab who were working on this project were first sent to Medical to have their lung capacities checked. They were told Beryllium could affect lungs, but the toxicity was erratic and poorly understood.

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All work with Beryllium was carried out under a hood pulling air away from the lab workers. Employees exposed to beryllium are still tested every three years to be sure their lungs are clear. These tests are performed locally as part of a study by Queens College.

*Next, we will see how Virginia met her husband, Charlie Coleman.*

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Thanks, Susan and Carolyn for bringing us the story of Virginia Coleman, one of our special "Girls of the Atomic City."



Virginia Coleman