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K-25 Oral History Interview

Date: 5/19/05

Interviewee: Madge Newton

Interviewer: Jennifer Thonhoff

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Name/Org: Dee J. KA [signature] BNP/ CICO Date: 4 Nov 15

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[1:00:09]

Thonhoff, J.: What I'm gonna do is I'm gonna have you say and spell your name.

Newton, M.: Okay.

Thonhoff, J.: And then we're just going to go into some questions and anything that you want to add, you're more than welcome to --

Newton, M.: Okay.

Thonhoff, J.: --if you don't want to share something, that's fine too.

Newton, M.: Oh, that's fine.

Thonhoff, J.: Whatever stories you have, I would love to hear them.

Newton, M.: Okay.

Thonhoff, J.: And this guy will tell us when --

Newton, M.: I look at you, not at that thing.

Thonhoff, J.: Yeah. Look at me.

[crew talk]

[1:00:39]

Thonhoff, J.: Do you think it's gonna rain -- do you think it's gonna rain hard?

Newton, M.: We're supposed to have some severe storms.

Thonhoff, J.: That's gonna be bad.

Newton, M.: Yes, it is. You all don't have to leave tonight, do you? No -- you're gonna leave tomorrow.

Thonhoff, J.: We're gonna leave -- yes. Tomorrow. Tomorrow night after we get done.

[crew talk]

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Thonhoff, J.: Okay. And can you state your name and spell it for me, please?

Newton, M.: My name is Madge Dyer Newton. M-A-D-G-E D-Y-E-R N-E-W-T-O-N.

Thonhoff, J.: Okay. And where were you born?

Newton, M.: Powell, Tennessee in 1923, November the eleventh.

Thonhoff, J.: Eleven eleven. That's very lucky.

[laughter]

[1:01:42]

Newton, M.: Yes.

Thonhoff, J.: And where were you living prior to coming to K-25?

Newton, M.: At Powell, Tennessee.

Thonhoff, J.: And what had you come here?

Newton, M.: Well, I'd gone to Business College in Knoxville and they were, you know, there were ads in the paper and what have you and so -- of course, I had worked for a short time at Knoxville before they came here. So, I saw the ads and so I went to, you know, take the tests and try to pass and get out here.

[crew talk]

Thonhoff, J.: Okay, you were going?

Newton, M.: Oh, I went to the Union Carbide office and took the test and then came to work here on 11/17/44, I think. That's the date.

Thonhoff, J.: And how long did you work there?

[1:02:29]

Newton, M.: Oh, to 1965 and I left and then I was happy to get back in 1976 and worked through 1985.

Thonhoff, J.: Wow. And what did you do?

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Newton, M.: I was secretary to the purchasing agent.

Thonhoff, J.: What did that entail?

Newton, M.: Well, it entailed buying all of the items and products for all three plants and we had about thirty or forty employees I think at that time in '44 and then of course the department increased as time went on.

Thonhoff, J.: And was that mostly a female position? Was it mostly women who did that?

Newton, M.: No. We had male buyers also.

Thonhoff, J.: Oh, okay.

Newton, M.: Just stenographers and secretaries were women at that time.

Thonhoff, J.: Being a women in the plant at that time, did you feel like you were treated fairly?

Newton, M.: Yes. Yes. We were.

[1:03:30]

Thonhoff, J.: And as far as wages go, were you -- did you feel that was fair as well?

Newton, M.: Sure. Because we didn't know any better, really, you know [laughs] at that time. We were very young. Everybody that came out here were either -- 18 and 20 so, you know, that's like a first job for many people, you know, it was.

Thonhoff, J.: Right.

Newton, M.: Yeah.

Thonhoff, J.: What were your working conditions like, physical conditions?

Newton, M.: Oh, well, you mean about the dorms or anything like that?

Thonhoff, J.: Yeah.

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Newton, M.: Oh well, first we lived in dorms. I lived on the -- in a dorm on the top of the hill where the Garden Apartments are now. And then we had to walk down the wooden sidewalks down to the cafeteria or down to get a bus and things like that. And then, of course, the conditions at the plant were fine, you know. Crowded because we had so many people coming in and all the time they were hiring people right and left, maybe like 125 a day and things like that.

[1:04:29]

Thonhoff, J.: How many people would you say that there were here at the plant in Oak Ridge?

Newton, M.: At one time it was supposed to be about 76,000.

Thonhoff, J.: Wow.

Newton, M.: So it was crowded. And you'd go to the canteen for breaks to get whatever, cokes, you know, juice or whatever they had at that time, and everybody stood in line for cigarettes and soap and things like that at that time too. Like, Tide washing powders. So that was a different place, not at the plant. You just stood in line for cigarettes and whatever there.

Thonhoff, J.: I heard the lines, if you had car, were long, long, lines.

[1:05:07]

Newton, M.: Well, no, not many people had a car at that time because it was during the war and, you know, no gas and no tires, things like that.

Thonhoff, J.: Could you describe the surroundings? Oak Ridge and what it was like? The recreational things that there were to do and --

Newton, M.: Oh yes. They had -- at Ridge Rec Hall, recreation hall, they had dances there for everyone many nights of the week. Bill Pollock (phonetic sp.) did his recording -- he had records that he played and he did a very good job.

[crew talk]

Newton, M.: So, he was made famous here, really, because he provided music for weddings, dances, and things like that for many, many years.

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Thonhoff, J.: You said weddings. Were there a lot of weddings back then?

Newton, M.: Yes, many, many weddings in the chapel on the hill.

[1:06:30]

Thonhoff, J.: Did a lot of people attend the chapel on the hill?

Newton, M.: I beg your pardon?

Thonhoff, J.: Did a lot of people attend the chapel on the hill?

Newton, M.: Yes, it was an interdenominational church so many people did attend there. It's a small church though.

Thonhoff, J.: I've seen pictures of it. It's really pretty.

Newton, M.: Uh-huh.

Thonhoff, J.: It's been well taken care of.

Newton, M.: Yes, it has. We had several theaters, you know, downtown and different places and everybody bowled. We had many bowling alleys so we bowled and danced and worked. We did a lot of overtime at that time.

Thonhoff, J.: In the very beginning?

Newton, M.: Yeah, right.

Thonhoff, J.: And when you first saw K-25, what did you think?

[1:07:15]

Newton, M.: [Laughs] I just went to K-1001, the ad building and, of course, I just saw a few buildings because the plant, you know, was out and oh, it was just tremendous. Tremendous.

Thonhoff, J.: And what are your most vivid recollections about the time that you spent in Oak Ridge?

Newton, M.: Um [laughs] meeting many different people and keeping in contact with several of them and things like that. We had, you know, we had many interesting clients that would come here that we bought

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from, you know, our suppliers and what have you. It was nice meeting a lot of them from different parts of the country.

Thonhoff, J.: Do you have any recollections of actually that you had, any particularly interesting people?

Newton, M.: Well, not right now. I can't think of anyone.

Thonhoff, J.: Did you have, when you were doing your buying and working with the vendors and things, did you have any experiences that were memorable? Things that happened that stuck with you?

[1:08:31]

Newton, M.: Well, it was, you know, very important at that time and we had -- I don't know. We had different people from different parts of the country and it was nice meeting them, but I can't think of anything that was that important. We bought all the coal, you know, for the plant. We had coal suppliers here and, of, and of course many scientists. We didn't meet them, they were -- well, they were in the lab. A lot of them worked in the lab and, you know, and in other parts of the plants.

Thonhoff, J.: And when you would buy things, how would they get shipped in?

Newton, M.: By rail mostly at that time or truck because that was it.

Thonhoff, J.: And did you make those arrangements?

Newton, M.: Yes. We had to. Yeah.

Thonhoff, J.: And was it difficult buying things, not being able to say what they were for? Did you find any problems?

[1:09:30]

Newton, M.: No, we didn't have any problem because we had a double AA priority or something like that, a top notch priority so we could get -- we got anything that we needed.

Thonhoff, J.: Oh, so that's how you guys worked around --

Newton, M.: Right. Right.

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- Thonhoff, J.:** Very good. What did you like the most about your working experience?
- Newton, M.:** Well, there's just working with many people and meeting many people.
- Thonhoff, J.:** You had mentioned on the phone with me about riding bicycles.
- Newton, M.:** Oh, they did in the big U, the big K-25 building, but I was never there. So I couldn't have done that.
- Thonhoff, J.:** What did you like the least about being there?
- Newton, M.:** I don't know. All the mud [laughs]. The rain and the mud.
- Thonhoff, J.:** It does things to your shoes.
- Newton, M.:** Yes. Yes it did.
- [1:10:31]
- Thonhoff, J.:** Did you have any problems with the fact that it was so secret? Did you have any communication problems?
- Newton, M.:** No. No, we didn't -- for a long time we didn't and then later we did get into some classified contracts, but we didn't have a problem with that either.
- Thonhoff, J.:** How did you handle classified contracts?
- Newton, M.:** Well, they were typed up and kept in classified files and then the room had a monitor -- actually, we had guards at night and when we were in town and that, you know, there was no problem there.
- Thonhoff, J.:** Were there special people that were assigned to do the classified things that had special clearance?
- Newton, M.:** Yes. We had to have special clearance.
- Thonhoff, J.:** Okay.
- Newton, M.:** Q and I think that's about it -- Q clearance really. I don't think you had to have top secret or anything like that.

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Thonhoff, J.: What was the one underneath Q?

[1:11:29]

Newton, M.: What?

Thonhoff, J.: The clearance underneath Q? There's -- Q clearance is --

Newton, M.: I don't remember now.

Thonhoff, J.: Okay.

Newton, M.: Sorry.

Thonhoff, J.: That's okay. That's all right. And did you get married while you were there?

Newton, M.: No, not for a long time.

Thonhoff, J.: Okay. Did you have family outside of Oak Ridge?

Newton, M.: Yes, my family lived at Powell.

Thonhoff, J.: Okay. How did you communicate with them?

Newton, M.: Well, I'd go home on weekends on the bus.

Thonhoff, J.: And was it difficult for them to accept or understand what you were doing when you couldn't really say?

Newton, M.: No. They didn't ask questions, you know? Actually, we -- for a long time we just did all this buying and then there were no classified documents, you know, for a long, long time, maybe 45 years, best I remember.

[1:12:22]

Thonhoff, J.: And I know there were all sorts of rumors about what are you guys doing.

Newton, M.: Yeah.

Thonhoff, J.: There were several different answers that people came up with that they made up.

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Newton, M.: Yeah.

Thonhoff, J.: Do you remember some of those things?

Newton, M.: Well, no, I don't. Not now. When we did find out, one gentleman and a buyer said, "I'm going home. We found out what we were making. The atom bomb." He called it that, so.

Thonhoff, J.: The what?

Newton, M.: The atom bomb. [laughs].

Thonhoff, J.: And what were your coworkers like?

[1:12:56]

Newton, M.: Oh, they were nice. We were, you know they were very congenial. We got along very well together. Worked well together with people.

Thonhoff, J.: So you did work well together?

Newton, M.: Yes.

Thonhoff, J.: You felt like they pulled their weight?

Newton, M.: Yes. Yes. Everybody did.

Thonhoff, J.: Everybody kind of came together.

Newton, M.: Right. Right.

Thonhoff, J.: And what about the health facilities? Did they have a nice place to go for healthcare?

Newton, M.: Yes. We had dispensary that went to the medical buildings. Yeah. It was close the cafeteria, I think. They had about five or six buildings in a row there, you know, from the ad building on down.

Thonhoff, J.: And what services did they provide?

[1:13:40]

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- Newton, M.:** Most, well, I really don't know other than physicals and people had to have physicals that came in, things like that and annual physicals after a while. I don't remember in the beginning, but maybe they were -- I came in '44. That's a long time ago.
- Thonhoff, J.:** So you don't -- you probably weren't hurt on the job very --
- Newton, M.:** Oh no. We had a good safety record and they kept trying to keep it or improve it and do things to improve the safety record.
- Thonhoff, J.:** Were there incentives to improve and do well on the safety?
- Newton, M.:** Yes. And they gave out safety awards and things like that, you know, after -- annually, I think, you know.
- Thonhoff, J.:** What did you have to do to get a safety award?
- Newton, M.:** Oh, they just -- if we didn't have an accident or if you had a good safety record.
- [crew talk]
- [1:14:38]
- Newton, M.:** Well, we had many dances, you know, that was the social part of the thing. Each plant had about four dances a year so that was fun. And, of course, bowling tournaments and that was fun. And the Carbide Courier, which was the company paper, you know, wrote about different employees and things that they had done or vacations or of interest, things like that. That was the newsletter that we had. And I think it was -- I don't know whether it was monthly or what, but anyhow it was out often and they took pictures of everybody, you know, items of interest.
- Thonhoff, J.:** Right. Well, it kept everybody kind of informed.
- Newton, M.:** Right and vacations and weddings or births and things like that.
- Thonhoff, J.:** And what were the living conditions like?
- Newton, M.:** Well, they had Hutments and they had down by the plant there and they built houses very quickly, roads, everything very quickly and then, of course, the dorms. They got them up fast. So -- and the roads, city. They started at east village and came on in, I think,

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building the houses. And, of course, we had houses here when I got here, you know, and so everybody -- most people lived in the dorms or many, many people lived in the dorms because they didn't have that many homes available at that time. And salary people and things like that got the homes at that time.

[1:16:17]

Thonhoff, J.: And did you live in the dorms?

Newton, M.: Yeah, for many years.

Thonhoff, J.: And I'm gonna go to -- I know you weren't working actually in K-25. The facility you were working in, administrations, did you know what they were doing in the factory?

Newton, M.: Not at all. Nothing. Nothing.

Thonhoff, J.: And what was your reaction when you found out when they dropped the bomb?

Newton, M.: We were very excited and very surprised because we didn't know what we were doing so it was a happy day.

Thonhoff, J.: Was it expressed throughout the city?

[1:16:57]

Newton, M.: Oh yes. Um-hmm.

Thonhoff, J.: Can you explain and describe that day?

Newton, M.: Well, we had the dorms, people were doing the fire alarm thing, ringing that. We went on down to the tennis court and they were dancing and all that, you know, taking pictures and things like that. It was really an eventful evening.

Thonhoff, J.: A big celebration.

Newton, M.: Yeah, right.

Thonhoff, J.: And do you know what kind of work was being done at the facility after the Manhattan Project?

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Newton, M.: No. No. We were in town and that's up town near Jackson's Square and so, you know, you didn't even go into the plant when we were up there except to Y-12 for a physical. We had to go there for an annual physical after we left K-25.

Thonhoff, J.: What are your thoughts about the activity accomplished and how it revolutionized the world?

[1:17:51]

Newton, M.: That's [laughs] -- that is really something. I really can't express it, you know, they've done so many great things that I don't know. They've done a lot of things for man -- there're doing things for mankind now, too, that are great that we don't know anything about until it's published or something.

Thonhoff, J.: What kind of things?

Newton, M.: Well, like, oh, they were trying to improve gasoline, for example. I knew two people that went -- were awarded a medal or something. They went to DC to the President who ordered them there. They were at X-10, I think, and they received a medal for their work on gasoline, whatever they were trying to do. And just different things. At the festival last year, they had -- I've forgotten now what it was. Something that they use on the front lines to save boy's lives or trying to save men's lives. It was a piece of metal, you know, like almost a dune buggy but something like that and --

Thonhoff, J.: Really?

[1:19:13]

Newton, M.: Yeah. And I've forgotten the term now, but anyhow, you know, it's different things that we don't know about that they're doing at all times to help people and in many ways I'm sure in the medical field too, I'm sure.

Thonhoff, J.: Oh yeah. Absolutely.

Newton, M.: Isotopes and all that.

Thonhoff, J.: Absolutely. Well, how do you think history will view the Manhattan Project?

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Newton, M.: Well --

Thonhoff, J.: Or how would you like for history to view the Manhattan Project from your perspective, being there, being a part of it?

Newton, M.: That it was a very successful venture or what have you that saved many lives and, of course, some people have gotten sick here as they know, or we know.

Thonhoff, J.: Right.

[1:20:01]

Newton, M.: I had cancer and so, but anyhow, with all the people that were involved, I think it's a very small number that had gotten cancer or what have you.

Thonhoff, J.: Do you feel like that was due to your work here?

Newton, M.: I don't really know, but many people have had it that worked here and so I think somehow it was contracted. I don't know.

Thonhoff, J.: Possibly related?

Newton, M.: Right.

Thonhoff, J.: We spoke about women and how they were treated and their job titles? There was also minorities that were there. Were there any minorities where you were at?

Newton, M.: No. Not for many, many years. Many years, at least 20 or 25.

Thonhoff, J.: Wow.

Newton, M.: There weren't that many.

Thonhoff, J.: So it's been a while.

Newton, M.: Yes.

[1:21:02]

Thonhoff, J.: Did you have access to working with any minorities or --

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Newton, M.: Yes.

Thonhoff, J.: Do you feel like they were treated --

Newton, M.: Yes. As far as I know they were.

Thonhoff, J.: They were treated fairly?

Newton, M.: Um-hmm. Right. Right. They were.

Thonhoff, J.: I've heard a lot of things about how working here in Oak Ridge has created lasting bonds. Do you feel that that's true?

Newton, M.: Yes, I do. I've been in contact with several friends for all this time. One in San Diego, one in Chicago, one in Houston, and many other have passed on, you know, some in North Carolina, Florida, yes. Yes, I do.

Thonhoff, J.: How did you start building these bonds? What was the basis of the friendship?

Newton, M.: Well, association, vacations, and then still keeping in touch, correspondence or telephone calls.

[1:22:07]

Thonhoff, J.: Right.

Newton, M.: Yeah.

Thonhoff, J.: What started the friendship? How did that blossom?

Newton, M.: Well, riding to work together or eating lunch together, you know, or living at the dorm together, roommates or what have you. Things like that.

Thonhoff, J.: What do you think future generations should remember about K-25 and its accomplishments?

Newton, M.: Well, I think it was a wonderful place. It has been a wonderful place. They've done a great job and hope that they will in the future. They seem to be doing a great job at ORNL with all of their projects, but I have no idea what all of that will accomplish.

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[laughs]

Thonhoff, J.: What do you feel was your greatest accomplishment?

Newton, M.: [laughs]. Nothing. [laughs].

Thonhoff, J.: There has to be.

[1:23:06]

Newton, M.: Well, maybe just surviving all of it, you know, and probably surviving it and still having a good outlook about the work and about the people and the town and all of those things.

Thonhoff, J.: That's good. That's wonderful. Are there any stories or anything that you'd like to add about some of your recollections?

Newton, M.: Yes, I have one.

Thonhoff, J.: Okay, wonderful.

Newton, M.: We were the Carbide Girls, it was a club, we entertained different people that would come here -- you know -- like the Alabama band and the MIT students and things like that, different groups of people that were here from time to time. And then in the parade of opening of the gates in 1949, we were in the parade and had a great time. It was fantastic. And then in 1992, they asked me to do the parade and get a group together. So, I was happy to do that and three of us were in the parade -- that were in the 1949 parade.

[1:24:14]

Thonhoff, J.: That's wonderful. A little reunion.

Newton, M.: Yes -- one from San Diego, Elsie, and Burton Hockey and Janine Elliot from Memphis. And then I was in it and we got to ask other friends that had been here like in the forties. So it was fun.

Thonhoff, J.: And you mentioned that you were part of the Carbide Girls? What was that?

Newton, M.: Yes. That was a club, an organization. We did dances, you know, sponsored dances and different things, you know, during the years.

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Thonhoff, J.: That's wonderful. It sounds like you kept yourself busy and --

Newton, M.: Yes we did. It was fun. They had beauty contests, you know, all kinds of things. They had tennis -- people played tennis and all that, you know, we had a lot of things going. But bowling, I think, was more prominent or more personal and more popular because, you know, it's easier to do that, I guess. It was fun.

[1:25:11]

Thonhoff, J.: So you -- how would you in a nutshell say -- what would you say about your experience here?

Newton, M.: Very enlightening, fun, interesting, and I hope helpful in many ways, you know. I'm just glad to have had a job here all that time because you did meet a lot of interesting people.

Thonhoff, J.: And is there anything else that you would like to add? Any recollections? Any stories? Anything else?

Newton, M.: That was the big one was the two parades, you know. Let's see. Well, just many, many popular dances and parties and things like that.

Thonhoff, J.: What would happen at a typical dance?

Newton, M.: Well, they would have bands. Sometimes we had big bands, big, you know, hair and things like that and then local bands, Dick Jones and David Blessing. I don't know. And the GIs had a band here way back in the early days so. It was just fun. It was just a friendly town. Everybody was from out of town so, therefore, I think that's why it was such a friendly town. Everybody spoke to everybody and all that, you know, as they do down south.

[1:26:25]

Thonhoff, J.: Yeah, I've noticed how friendly it is here.

Newton, M.: Yeah.

Thonhoff, J.: It's amazing to think they've continued that legacy.

Newton, M.: Yeah, well that's good.

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Thonhoff, J.: It's wonderful.

Newton, M.: Yeah.

Thonhoff, J.: I think I'm done unless you have anymore stories that you would like to add? Do you have some stuff? Do you want to look at that?

Newton, M.: Well, just dances and things like that.

Thonhoff, J.: Well.

Newton, M.: Well, nothing not important really. Here.

Thonhoff, J.: I would like to hear as much as you've got.

Newton, M.: Here --

Thonhoff, J.: Whether you deem it important or not.

[1:27:00]

Newton, M.: Here is this picture.

Thonhoff, J.: Oh heavens. We'll get a still picture. We'll get a picture --

Newton, M.: Okay. That'll be fun. And here is, oh -- I did have a Carbide Courier of -- and here is a 1992 one.

Thonhoff, J.: Oh goodness. Look at that.

Newton, M.: And I had a Carbide Courier that they celebrated the sixth anniversary of Carbide and I thought that might be interesting, but I don't really know -- let me see. If I'm bother you or anything -- here are bowling pictures.

Thonhoff, J.: Oh --

[End of Interview]