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K-25 Oral History Interview

Date: 5/17/05

Interviewee: Margene Lyon

Interviewer: Connie Callan

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[crew talk]
[1:00:06]

Callan, C.: Okay. Today is May 17, 2005. This is Connie Callan, the interviewer. And we're interviewing Margene Lyon.

Lyon, M.: Margene.

Callan, C.: Margene. I'm sorry.

Lyon, M.: That's okay.

Callan, C.: First, we always start with the question, state your name and spell your name.

Lyon, M.: Margene, M-A-R-G-E-N-E Lyon. And my maiden name is Wilson. So it's Margene Wilson Lyon.

Callan, C.: And spell Lyon.

Lyon, M.: L-Y-O-N.

Callan, C.: Okay, you can talk as long or as short as you want to on any of these questions, but let's start with where you were born and please expand if you wish.

Lyon, M.: Okay. I was born in Abbeville, South Carolina, which is a very small town. I guess when I was born it was about five thousand people. I lived on you would call it a mini-farm within the city limits of Abbeville.

[1:02:16]

My dad had bought all this land around us. So I grew up with -- I had a pony. I had a horse. I had some goats. I had chickens, dogs. It was a wonderful life.

Uh, the town there is like all southern towns. It has a statue in the middle. And around the statue there are the grocery stores and all the boutiques, which now they don't have the grocery stores there, but they have all the boutiques. It's a lovely little town; a lot of history there.

When I graduated from high school, we had 46 in my graduating class. I went to a small college, which was 15 miles from

Lyon, Margene

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Abbeville, Lander College, which was a Methodist college. It's now Lander University.

I was in school there, and they had -- the war was on. We had a two-year secretarial accelerated course. So one of the PR men from Union Carbide that ran the three plants in Oak Ridge in the beginning came down and interviewed us.

[1:03:46]

And I came to the medical department at K-25 because I was interested in the medical field. Some of my other friends also came to Oak Ridge.

My husband to be was in Ubablastok, Czechoslovakia getting ready to go to the South Pacific. One of his men came in and said, "Doc. A bomb made in Oak Ridge, Tennessee outside of Knoxville was dropped this morning." He said, "I'm from Knoxville. There is no Oak Ridge, Tennessee." Oak Ridge had been build while he was overseas. He said, "You come in here drunk one more time and I'll pull your stripes."

Well, he didn't have to go to the South Pacific. He came back and eventually became medical director of K-25. I married the boss, had three children, and I've been here ever since.

Callan, C.:

That's an amazing story. [laughter] I think you just went through all of the questions. You've already talked about why you came to work at K-25. Let's talk about your recollections in more detail about K-25. (Indiscernible).

[1:05:08]

Lyon, M.:

Okay, when I came to Oak Ridge, I came in 1944. And of course we didn't have any paved roads. It was all gravel. And I lived in the dormitory, which was all new to me because at Lander we had suites rooms.

Well, the dormitory here, you had about 50 girls using the same big bathroom. And you didn't have any washers and dryers. So they had one room that you did the laundry in. And everything you had to iron then. So this was all new to me, especially everybody using that one big bathroom, because I had never done that.

Lyon, Margene

2005 NETS, LLC

But we had -- They had gone into all the colleges and universities and brought girls here. So you met some real, real nice people. And I still have contact with some of those.

The mud was horrible. And then when it turned to dust. When you went to Knoxville, the people in Knoxville did not like the people in Oak Ridge. We were coming on their turf, and the people around here in a small town didn't like us either.

[1:06:35]

So when we would go to Knoxville to shop -- And of course, we had to go on a bus. And we called them cattle buses, because they were left over from the 1935 World's Fair. And they brought them down here. And they rattle. But that's the only transportation we had. So we'd go to Knoxville. But I always took an extra pair of shoes, because if the people in Knoxville saw your shoes they knew that you were from Oak Ridge. You either had dust on them or mud.

So you'd take an extra pair of shoes and put them in the locker at the bus station. This was unusual because they were very -- The people in Knoxville were very rude. And they don't like us. They really don't like us now, but we brought so much money into that city that they now feel that yes, they should have been nice to us.

But we had a lot of entertainment. But the only places that were cement were the tennis courts. So we had dances just about every night. And they went in and got into the colleges and universities and got the GIs that were engineers and chemists, put them in the service, and brought them here.

[1:08:03]

So you had plenty of dates. And the GIs were from the northern states, you know. And this was all new to me, because I was from a small town of five thousand, and this was really exciting. All this dancing and everything -- not every night -- but most of the nights.

And then we had all kind of athletics. They had ball teams and everything, except no one could come in -- The football team at the high school here -- This is football country. They could not come in here and play because they couldn't get passes for all of them. So we had to play all of our games away from here.

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Lyon, Margene

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But, and we only had one church -- The chapel on the hill -- The Jews used it on Saturday -- The Catholics, Baptists, and Methodists had one hour on Sunday. Then you got out. Now we have a church and a bank on every corner. I still go to the chapel on the hill. It's a -- And anyone that's had any contact with Oak Ridge, they want to be married at the chapel on the hill.

But at that time, especially the GIs that were getting married, they could not send out invitations, because the people couldn't get in here. You either had to have a secret -- You had to have a pass.

And my mother and father, the people in Abbeville thought how could they let a daughter go to Oak Ridge? And they went down and they interviewed the principle of my high school. And I think they thought maybe I had robbed a bank. But everybody had to have a Q clearance that worked at the plant.

[1:09:52]

So it was the safest place they could let me go. And I enjoyed it thoroughly because -- I guess because I met people from all over the country, from different cultures. Now after I had the three children and they went to school here, the kindergarten was show and tell. And it used to be a new pair of shoes or a jacket. Well, that's not true in Oak Ridge. It's something from the culture. The country where they came from.

[1:10:30]

So my children began growing up in kindergarten. And we prize our schools here. In fact, we're building a new high school here because the Spallation Neutron Source.

My three children graduated from high school here, and I have one that's a Navy Captain in Virginia, Norfolk. My daughter is a security engineer and Y-12. And my other son is a broker with Edward Jones.

So the people that -- I work at the visitor's center, and the people ask me, "Weren't you afraid of your children growing up here?" And I said, "No. They don't glow in the dark, and they don't babble." They've turned out to be very, very good children.

Callan, C.:

[laughs] (Indiscernible).

Page 5

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Lyon, Margene

2005 NETS, LLC

Lyon, M.: Don't you laugh. I see you laughing.

Callan, C.: What did you say? They don't glow in the dark and they don't --

Lyon, M.: Babble.

[1:11:34]

Callan, C.: And then they don't -- Okay. I was interested when you were talking about how they went around and recruited women all over. Could you talk a little about that and some of the people and women? What they used to do and how you've kept up with them even today?

Lyon, M.: Well, see they needed so many women for secretarial work, but they also needed women in other parts. And they found that the women had more patience. We had a lot of things that you just had to turn a knob and you sat on a stool. So, they found that the women had more patience than men.

So a lot of women got jobs here. And I have a lot of friends. And we now have a thing called Silver Tops. And these are people that retired from Union Carbide. My daughter said they should be Blue Tops, but they're Silver Tops. And a lot of the GIs that came here, they thought they were coming to Tennessee. That we was going to be bare foot and outdoor plumbing.

[1:12:57]

Well, once they got here they liked it, because we're surrounded by mountains and lakes. So a lot of the GIs, once the war was over and they could go home, they stayed here. And this Silver Tops is made up a lot of the GIs that are still here.

We had a reunion '63 reunion for the GIs that came in. And so I was down there, and they said, "Well, you're not a GI. How did you get in here?" And I said, "Well, I ran the medical department." And they came through the medical -- All the GIs came through the medical. And I guess I knew as many GIs as anyone at K-25.

Callan, C.: Well, let's talk about exactly what work you did at K-25.

Lyon, M.: What did I do?

Lyon, Margene

2005 NETS, LLC

Callan, C.:

Yes. Describe it in more detail a typical day at K-25.

Lyon, M.:

Okay. Alright. I was a medical secretary to Dr. Cameron, who was the first medical director at K-25. And I think he came down from Mellon Institute. Very, very nice. Very intelligent person.

[1:14:15]

At that time, you had to take shorthand. And we did lots and lots of x-rays. So I would go in with him. He read all the x-rays. So this was part of my job to take the dictation down for all the x-rays. And the system we had was a little plastic tube. It wasn't plastic, but something. And so he dictated into that. Then when you got that tube, we had to scrape it off. And that was my job too.

But I also did all secretary work for him. I wasn't the only one. We had huge medical records, a large lab. So the medical department was quite large. It had to be. And it ran 24 hours a day. We had doctors there all day. But I just worked the day shift. So --

Callan, C.:

And what kinds of things, as far as the medical records. What kinds of medical issues did you see in general? What kinds of things did you record?

Lyon, M.:

Well, we had -- We established all kinds of return visits, and I had, you know, was in charge of -- If -- We did a lot of lab work as I said, and returns, people that had to come. And my job was to be -- Was to notify their supervisor and the intern. So this was part of my job, too. So, but it was mainly -- I mean, just like a medical secretary in any physician's office.

[1:16:14]

Callan, C.:

Well, I know you've talked a bit about K-25, but do you have any real vivid recollections that come to mind as the most vivid recollection when you talk about K-25?

Lyon, M.:

Well, we had a strike at K-25. So they decided that they -- Of course, we had a place to sleep since I was in the medical department. And they put us in the different parts, and I went to the laundry. And I had never ironed or done anything with men's overalls and what have you.

Lyon, Margene

2005 NETS, LLC

So I put the overalls flat. Took the big roller what gave the crease like this. So all these people -- And they still kid me about this. Here they were walking with the creases on the outside. [laughs] But anyway, that -- And a lot of them went to the -- Well, wherever they needed us, that's where we went.

[1:17:33]

I have a friend and they put her in the cafeteria. And I think they fired her the next day. And we had one lady -- Of course, it was very nice. We made ice cream on the back porch. Everybody took food in. So -- and they brought other food. As you know, we have water that they can bring barges into K-25. So they brought food in there.

I guess the strike was, you know. But other than that, it was a day. You went to work. And you came home. And all these friends, you know, would come by. It was a happy time. It really was. -- Very interesting. So, I enjoyed it.

Callan, C.:

These are two questions together, and I think you've talked about them, what you enjoyed working at K-25. But the questions I always ask together, what did you like most about working at K-25? And what did you not like about working at K-25?

Lyon, M.:

I guess I liked the people most of all. Now I did not like having to ride a bus. And I guess the living conditions were bad. I didn't like living in the dorm. And everybody had to either eat at the cafeteria.

[1:19:06]

So the people -- Cause we had a lot of nurses, and they got to live in apartments and what have you with their husbands. And it was always nice to go get a home-cooked meal. You always wanted to take them something, so I could always get to the PX through one of the GIs. And you would take them a jar of mayonnaise that you couldn't get in the store. [laughs] Or we could get hose, pantyhose that you couldn't get outside.

So it was -- As I said, it was very interesting. And the houses that they had here are the flat tops and the dorms. And the ladies dorms they put on one side of the road, and the men dorm on the other. I think they thought that would keep them apart, but it didn't. [laughs] But a lot of my friends married GIs during the

Lyon, Margene

2005 NETS, LLC

war here. So -- And some of them are still here. So --

Callan, C.: Now why is it that K-25 -- Why could you get the mayonnaise and the pantyhose, I mean the hose there but not --

Lyon, M.: It was during the war, and you couldn't get them. But they could get them at the PX.

Callan, C.: But they could get them there. Okay.

Lyon, M.: Right. Right.

Callan, C.: Let's talk about communication. How did you communicate to fellow workers in a secret facility?

Lyon, M.: Well, since I was from South Carolina, they couldn't understand me and I couldn't understand some of them. But -- Especially those from the northern states. But we had no trouble communicating.

Callan, C.: I'm talking about as far as the secret issue.

Lyon, M.: You didn't talk. You didn't talk about what you did. When you went home at night, you didn't talk about what you did.

I had a top secret file that I had to take care of. And these are things that were not to be talked about and not to be published. So they were locked up in there.

[1:21:32]

Callan, C.: What were the physical working conditions like at the facility?

Lyon, M.: Well, that's it. [laughs] The mud and the dust and living in a dorm. It was, you know. And we had no air conditioning. It was before air conditioning. So it was hot. And that was before they did the energy thing. You just turned up the heat, you know, in the winter time. Because the dorms had very, very little insulation. And you didn't have a telephone. The only phone you had was in the office. So if you wanted to make a call, you had to go to the office. You know, a lot of things were not like they would be today.

Callan, C.: What rules were important? Can you think of some important rules at K-25 that everyone had to follow?

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Lyon, Margene

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Lyon, M.: You didn't talk. What you did there, you didn't talk about it.

Callan, C.: Talk about some of your co-workers. Any memorable ones that you want to speak about? And did everyone pull their own weight at the plant?

[1:22:53]

Lyon, M.: Um, well, one of the girls that came from Lander with me, she became secretary. The -- we had a large special engineering detachment here, which were the GIs. They put them in service and brought them here. So, they decided they'd have a yearbook. And this was my roommate. And so she did the typing for them down at the special engineering detachment where the mall is now. That's where the special engineering detachment was.

She did the typing there, and then I had some friends from a little town called Bell Buckle, Tennessee whose grandfather I guess had started one of the first web schools. One of them went on to join the Navy. And the other one went -- joined the army. They were very intelligent people, so they got jobs, you know, with -- Top rank people.

Then I had one that was -- that worked for General Groves who was the top man here in Oak Ridge. So, and she was from Kentucky. So -- real interesting people.

[1:24:26]

Callan, C.: We have a whole section on health issues, health conditions -- and since you were in the facility that dealt with health. I usually just read all of these together, and then if you want to talk to any of them about how much emphasis the company and supervisor placed on safety. And was health regularly monitored while you were working at the facility? And health monitoring conditions. If someone got hurt, what happened? Those kinds of things. Do you want to talk about any of that? Let's start over.

Lyon, M.: No. No.

Callan, C.: No. Not at all. Do you want to talk about what kind of radiological chemical monitoring was performed? And were you informed of the results as a patient?

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Lyon, Margene

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Lyon, M.: I wasn't monitored at all, but we did, as I said before, a lot of lab work, a lot of X-Rays, and the people -- Some of the people on the streets here in Oak Ridge now, I might not know their name, but I can tell you their urinalysis.

Callan, C.: Oh, okay. [laughs]

[1:25:43]

Lyon, M.: You might want to cut that -- but anyway. [laughter]

Callan, C.: Now what year did you say you came?

Lyon, M.: When? 1944.

Callan, C.: You didn't talk about 1945, the news and the role of K-25 in the Manhattan Project. Do you remember that day on August 6, 1945? And do you recall that day and what happened to you?

Lyon, M.: When the bomb was dropped?

Callan, C.: Uh-huh (affirmative).

Lyon, M.: Yes I can. We danced all night long. And Dr. Cameron expected me to come to work. And a lot of them didn't go to work because they danced all night. But that was a very, very happy day. I sure do.

Callan, C.: And did you all realize your contribution to that effort?

Lyon, M.: No. Ah, there were very few people that knew exactly what was going on. I mean, we knew that it was a war effort, but we did not know exactly what was happening.

[1:26:54]

Callan, C.: The period of 1945 to '48, how do you think that history will view the Manhattan Project and its outcome now that you're looking back in time at it? And how people will view it?

Lyon, M.: Well, I think it's one of the -- Well, I know it's one of the best kept secrets ever, because K-25 was built in 18 months. And now it would take that long to get the paperwork together. So this -- It was -- I think that's one thing -- the secret of getting all the people here and getting everything done and how fast they did it.

Lyon, Margene

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Because now -- Well, the media would be here within 12 hours. And it wasn't here. How they kept it a secret, you know. And of course, Union Carbide's main office was in New York -- and how they got it all together. I mean, it was very, very -- It's unbelievable how they could get it all together as I look back now to see it.

[crew talk]

[1:28:19]

Callan, C.: Let's do one more question. Do you know much about the period between '45 and '48 they call the expansion program. Do you want to talk at all about that?

Lyon, M.: I don't know that much.

Callan, C.: Okay.

[crew talk]

[End Tape 1, Begin Tape 2]
[2:00:07]

Lyon, M.: I work at the visitor's center.

Callan, C.: I met you there once. I think you -- do you remember that? I went by to ask you about Nashville.

Lyon, M.: Right. And of course I give a history lesson to everybody coming in. So -- [laughs]

Callan, C.: Oh, yeah. It was great. I remember. You told me how to drive around Oak Ridge.

Lyon, M.: Uh-huh (affirmative).

[crew talk]

Callan, C.: Okay, we're back. Let's talk about what you were talking about during the break, which is A, B, C, D, and --

[2:00:45]

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Lyon, Margene

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Lyon, M.:

Okay, the houses that they build here were A, B, C, D, Fs, and Gs. And these were the cemestos. And an "A" had two bedrooms, one bath. "B" was a little bit larger. "C" had three bedrooms and one bath. "Ds" and "Fs" had three bedrooms and two baths.

Now they were built on the middle part of Oak Ridge. But they were built so fast. They were bringing them in here on trucks. And you could go to work and there'd be a gravel drive. And when you'd come down that evening, there'd be a house. It was just about impossible to see how fast they were building.

And they were all situated so that they all faced the street, because once a week they would come down and fill your coal bin. Everything was coal fired. Now the only thing we have coal fired is a steam run bull plant [Bull Run Steam Plant], which is just outside the city. Everything has been changed to either gas or electric here.

But, so the door you see is the door to the utility room. Your front door might be facing the back side of the house.

[2:02:06]

These were sold in the early '50's. If you were living in an "A" it sold for 800 dollars. The "Ds" and "Fs" top price was three thousand. Now they own the market, especially the Ds and the Fs that overlooked the Cumberlands for 100 thousand dollars. They were built with the best of everything, because you and I were paying for them.

The hardwood floors are gorgeous. And the outlay is very, very nice. They are still in demand. Most of them have been renovated. And as I said, they're in the middle section.

Now we had cemestos. We had flat tops. And they were flat. A lot of people have put the roofs on them. We had dormitories. We had hutments. Because when the bomb dropped, we had 75 thousand people working here. And the average age was 27. So we had lots and lots of children. So we built grade schools. And near the elementary schools we had a grocery store and drug store. So the children could walk to school, and the parents could walk to the store.

[2:03:29]

Lyon, Margene

2005 NETS, LLC

Now these school system, they -- It was kind of like a little community within a community. And then after the war, we now have four elementary schools. And the other schools are being used for something else. But we now have one high school and two junior highs. I still call them junior high.

And as I said, 75 thousand people working here. Now we run around 30 thousand people. But our schools are noted for being very, very good because we think we have more gray matter her than anyplace in Tennessee. [laughter]

Callan, C.: Well, I think you know so much about the history because you said you work at the visitor's center.

Lyon, M.: Yes.

Callan, C.: And so I'm going to divert a bit from the question and ask you -- I know you see a lot of guests that come to the visitor's center.

Lyon, M.: Right.

Callan, C.: And ask you about K-25. Can you kind of talk about what people are most interested in or comments you've heard from them about the period that you want to talk about?

[2:04:46]

Lyon, M.: Well, most of the people do not realize that they can't go into K-25. And they come in and say, "Well, my sister worked there or my brother worked there, and I want to go there." And you can't. We do have an overlook that you can see.

Now, K-25 was so large that you either had to ride a bicycle or drive a car. Well, the GIs from the northern states of course had public transportation, so they didn't know how to drive an automobile. And me being from South Carolina, I got my driver's license at 14. So we had to establish driving schools to teach these GIs how to drive an automobile. Cause we had little clinics, medical clinics within the K-25.

So if I went down, I rode a bicycle. But that's how -- It's a humongous -- Unless you've ever been into it, you'd never realize how large a building it is.

They had a reunion for us, and they invited all the people for a

Lyon, Margene

2005 NETS, LLC

luncheon because they wanted us to see K-25 before they started tearing it down.

[2:06:13]

Well, when I went out, I wanted to see what they had done to the medical department. But I went back and I found my office. I found my husband's office. So some of the buildings they have just -- have taken care of, but others they're tearing down. So, and I can see why.

Callan, C.:

Okay. I was going to ask you about the Cold War period, your recollections from '48 to '64, but this is a question that I think usually folks comment. Which is what are your thoughts now about how the activities accomplished at K-25 revolutionized the world?

Lyon, M.:

Well, if it hadn't been for K-25, my husband would have gone to the South Pacific, and I'm not sure he would have survived. I think it's a wonderful -- I think it saved a lot of Americans, and it saved a lot of Japanese.

Callan, C.:

Let me see. You talked a lot about your job and what you did. I think you talked about the strike, but is there anything else you want to talk about the conflicts that might have occurred between management, the workers, and the union at K-25?

[2:07:36]

Lyon, M.:

No. I don't think we had any. In fact, when we left -- of course, my husband was in management of course. And he'd have to go testify for all this stuff. But then when we left, we opened a private practice, family practice in town. And these union workers were our patients.

Callan, C.:

Now we're going to talk about women. And I know you talked a bit about how they recruited women.

Lyon, M.:

Uh-huh (affirmative).

Callan, C.:

And that they found certain positions for women because they were more able to work on tedious-type jobs.

Lyon, M.:

They had patience -- right. And we had a lot of things within the K-25 that they just had to -- a valve had to be turned a certain way

Lyon, Margene

2005 NETS, LLC

and certain this. And as I said, they found that the women had more patience than the men. And they recruited people just to work there. In fact, I met a lady that came in to the visitor's center this week. And that's what she did.

[2:08:54]

Callan, C.:

Now did they get promoted from those positions, or did they end up in those positions the whole time they were here.

Lyon, M.:

Oh, no. No. They got promoted. Yes. They got promoted. And I must say they -- The pay scale was very, very good. And most of them after the war, you know, as a lot of them -- we would turn -- we didn't need a lot of them, but they went into other jobs for the DOE as it is now -- and they stayed with K-25.

Callan, C.:

Let's talk about minorities and Afro-Americans and minorities. How were they treated, and do you recall any minorities at the plant?

Lyon, M.:

Well, we had a lot of them, but they were used as janitors. But they -- being from South Carolina, we had on our little farm -- I mean, we were very close to our black people. And the black people were treated very well out there. They were not used as much for -- as I said, we had engineers and what have you. But they were usually most in the cleaning area and the cafeteria area. But they were paid well. I mean, there was no -- they didn't -- they were not slaves.

[2:10:42]

Callan, C.:

I think you've talked to this. Do you want to say any more about what it was like for spouses and children of the people that worked at the plant? Can you talk about the family life?

Lyon, M.:

Well, I wouldn't know, because I was single. And, but -- So, I couldn't talk about that.

Callan, C.:

You talked a lot about living at Oak Ridge and the conditions just in the town of Oak Ridge and what it was like to be the secret city. Is there anything else you want to talk about relative to just Oak Ridge and the town? Or do you think you pretty well covered that?

Lyon, M.:

I think I've covered it. [laughs]

Lyon, Margene

2005 NETS, LLC

Callan, C.: Okay, we're into the final questions. And you might have covered it in different ways, but I always like to ask again. What do you feel that future generations should remember about K-25?

[2:11:40]

Lyon, M.: I think they should realize that the bomb that we helped make saved so many lives. I think they don't realize that all wars are horrible, but, and a lot of people were killed, but it had to be to end the war. I think. And I think the history here; I think you're doing a wonderful job by putting it down so that the future generations will understand just how important K-25 was -- how important Oak Ridge was.

Callan, C.: Well, this next question you don't have to answer, but everyone has a different idea of what's important. And so I always ask, if you were writing a story about Oak Ridge and K-25, what key topics would you cover?

Lyon, M.: Hum. I don't know. I mean, there was so many people. And as you look back, all those people coming together and have a secret, which it was a secret. And in fact, I had a man that came to the college, recruited us, and all we were told it was -- The war was on, and it was a government project. I mean, they didn't tell us that we were going to grind corn or wheat or what have you. It was just a government project.

[2:13:42]

And you wonder why so many people would say, "No. I want to know what I'm going to be doing." But that wasn't asked. They just told you that it was a government project.

Callan, C.: Well, this is the last question. And my last question is always is there anything that you feel that you haven't covered or any question we haven't asked that you want to talk about right now so that we haven't missed something that you really wanted to talk about.

Lyon, M.: No. No. I think you've covered it. I hope I haven't talked too much. [laughs]

Callan, C.: Well, no. It was wonderful. That's it.

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Lyon, Margene

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Lyon, M.:

Thank you.

Callan, C.:

Thank you. That was wonderful.

[End of Interview]

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