

Those early days as we remember them Part VI



Lester C. Furney (second from right), who formerly handled public relations at Argonne and is author of the article below, is pictured here in February 1956 with (l to r) Major General D. J. Keirn, Major General James McCormack, Jr. (Ret.), and Lt. General James H. Doolittle (Ret.) during a coffee break in a briefing session with the Research and Development Group of the U. S. Air Force.

Lester C. Furney

former Assistant to Laboratory Director Walter H. Zinn

Ever since receiving an invitation to contribute an article to the *ARGONNE NEWS* about my impressions of the early days, I have been trying to decide what was my most unforgettable experience. No one could have lived through World War II, through the exciting days of Trinity, Hiroshima, and Nagasaki, and through the hopeful months when Argonne National Laboratory was just a dream in the minds of a few of the wartime scientists at the Metallurgical Laboratory, without having amassed enough memories to fill a lifetime. All of these days were interesting and exciting and I have many fond memories of them. The remembrance, however, that keeps coming back time after time has to do with my introduction into the Plutonium Project. The first few days were the most unusual ones I have ever experienced. It all goes back to May 22, 1944, when I disappeared into Eckhart Hall and began a career that was supposed to last a few years but stretched into more than twenty.

Upon arriving in my office I learned that both my boss, Laboratory Director Samuel K. Allison, and my immediate supervisor, Assistant Laboratory Director Harcourt "Ace" Vernon, were out of town. I was told by Mr. Vernon's secretary that one of his capable assistants, Mr. Leroy Thompson, would explain my duties to me and would help me get started.

Mr. Thompson attempted to explain my duties to me without telling me anything about the Laboratory's program and objectives. He told me that I was to concern myself, initially, with the receiving, inventorying, and safekeeping of a number of rare and valuable materials which were used in the as yet unexplained research and development program. He provided me with a list of the names of the division directors and told me that I should interview them to learn about their problems with these as yet unnamed materials. When I asked questions, I got vague answers; and when I really pressed for more information, Mr. Thompson told me that he couldn't tell me anything more.

After gulping once or twice and organizing my thoughts as best I could, I started out for the New Chem building where I talked with the Director of the Chemistry Division and with a number of his senior scientists. I was armed with a pencil and with a notebook in which all of the pages were prenumbered. The notebook's outside cover was stamped, at top and at bottom, with the word "SECRET." I was instructed to use this notebook for all items that I wished to

record and to avoid writing on any other paper.

As I interviewed the scientists, I made careful notes of what I had learned. One of the top scientists in New Chem told me that he got a shipment of “hot” and “cold” slugs each week from Site X. I asked him how the stuff was delivered. He told me that it came on the truck which shuttled each week between the Laboratory and Site X. I hadn’t learned a great deal, but I had learned that the project was big enough to warrant running a truck each week to somewhere.

In due course I had accumulated a lot of pieces of information in a real-to-life jigsaw puzzle. When Mr. Vernon asked me, a week later, to tell him what I had learned, I was able to give him a report which made him sit up and take notice. He didn’t know — and I didn’t tell him — that I had not forgotten the many speculative articles about uranium fission which I had read in 1939 and 1940. The news of a project to harness the energy of uranium fission had not taken me completely by surprise.

As I continued to interview the scientists that first week, I learned that “cold” slugs meant ordinary uranium metal which was usually in a cylindrical shape. “Hot” metal meant uranium that had been made radioactive in the uranium pile at Site X. I learned that Site X was something of a branch of the Metallurgical Laboratory which for security reasons was located in the hills of Eastern Tennessee. I learned that Site A was a secret laboratory located a few miles southwest of Chicago, and that Site B was an old brewery just south of the U. of C. campus. I soon began to hear a little about Sites W and Y, but it took me some time to find out where they were located and even longer to find out what went on there.

These weren’t the only codes that were used around the project. I soon learned that several of the key scientists traveled under pseudo names and that the man you thought was Dr. Smith might not be Dr. Smith at all.

When the atomic bomb was dropped on Japan and when the government released the famous Smythe Report, I learned a lot more than I had been able to pick up around the Laboratory and I guess this was as it should have been.

Read more articles on Argonne’s early days at <http://www.ne.anl.gov/About/early-history-of-argonne/>

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