

Memories of Mary Lou Curtis, Manhattan Project, Dayton, Ohio

In December 1943, I was one of about 20 people starting to work at Unit III of Monsanto, under the Manhattan Project. Our work place was the former Bonebrake Seminary, at 1st and Euclid Streets in Dayton. The building was in the process of being renovated. There was no central heating, no air conditioning, and no stairs to the third floor. We nearly froze the first winter, with only one small electric heater for our large lab. In summer, the heat was stifling. Our windows were sealed shut, I presume for security reasons.

The people I remember who were there that first winter, were Dr. James Lum (laboratory director) and Evelyn Sands, his secretary, and Dr. Malcolm Haring, later plant manager at Mound. Also there were Drs. W. Fernelius, Carl Rollinson, Fred Leity, Sergio DeBenedetti, Robert Staniforth, Joseph Heyd, and Joe Spicka (purchasing agent). In the following months Catherine Brenneman (later Heyd), Katie Williams (later Conway), Eleanor Stibitz, Rachel Buck, Doug Anger, Bob Gunther-Mohr, and Ed Kerner joined the staff.

Dr. DeBenedetti, an Italian Jew, had worked at the Fermi Institute in Paris, and had escaped from Mussolini's Italy on a bicycle before emigrating to the U.S.

There was no cafeteria at Unit III at first, and no restaurants close by, so many of us went to lunch at Unit I on Nicholas Rd. in the company station wagon. We were piled several layers deep, and a spirit of camaraderie soon developed.

The Unit I cafeteria was not open on Saturdays, so the girls took turns bringing in the lunch, which we ate in the ladies' lounge. All was well until one Saturday when the girls in charge brought in waffle irons, and made waffles for lunch. The smell of baking waffles wafted through the entire building. At this point Dr. Lum explained to us that since little was known about the effects of ingested radioactive materials, it would be better if we did not eat in the building. He assigned the station wagon to us to go wherever we liked for Saturday lunches.

My lab was the Counting Room, where we measured samples of radioactive materials, which enabled the chemists to follow their processes. This was a brand new field. Little instrumentation was commercially available, and there was little or nothing in the literature about alpha counting. Our electronics department, under the leadership of Dr. Heyd, developed and built most of our early instrumentation. We developed measurement techniques which, when we were able to publish them, established us as authorities in the field. Later, when we moved to Mound (Laboratory in Miamisburg, Ohio), we perfected original methods for analyzing many other radioactive materials.

We worked 6 days a week, and every holiday except Christmas. On New Years, Dr. Haring invited us to go to Longo's Spaghetti House in his car for lunch. I remember how he laughed when we walked in and they were playing the popular song (new to him) "You Don't Get No Bread With One Meatball".

We had a few G.I.'s working there in the early days. They were not in uniform, since our connection with the military was secret. One young man, Will Koneker, was stopped by the police on a minor traffic incident. When he would not answer all the questions the police asked, he was jailed until his superior officer was located to vouch for him.

Exchange of information, even among technical personnel, was strictly on a "need to know" basis. A memorable occasion was when Dr. Arthur Compton visited Unit III and talked to some of us in the library. He told us that what we were working on was in the nature of a secret weapon; that the Germans were working on it also, and that whoever got it first would win the war. Dr. Lum seemed to feel that Dr. Compton was revealing too much, and asked some who were there to go back to their jobs.

One day some of us were standing in the cafeteria line at Unit I when someone rushed in with a newspaper. The headline read, "Atom Bomb dropped on Hiroshima". No phone calls were permitted in or out of the Lab that afternoon, since our connection with the Manhattan Project was secret. When the second bomb was dropped on Nagasaki, and the war ended, we

who had lived through the upheaval in the nation and in our personal lives following Pearl Harbor felt only intense relief. No more killing on either side. My husband, small daughter and I could live again as a family; my two brothers fighting in the Pacific were safe.

I felt then, and feel now, pride in having had a small part in bringing this about.

Mary Lou Curtis