Those early days as we remember them Part IV

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Ed. note: *The following was transcribed from a tape recording made in 1965. George Svihla of the Division of Biological and Medical Research, with no specific purpose for the material in mind but appreciating its historical value, asked several Met Lab alumni in his division to thus record their memories. We expect to use others of the monologues in this series of Argonne News articles and thank Mr. Svihla and the authors for permission to do so.*

I arrived in Chicago to take up duties with the Met Lab in July 1944. My association with the Project came about pretty much by accident, as was true for so many people. I had received my doctor's degree in organic biochemistry early in 1944 from The University of Illinois. By the latter part of June 1944 I had one foot in the Navy when my friend and immediate superior at the Dow Chemical Company mentioned my situation to Dr. Warren Johnson, who was at that time associated with the Manhattan Project, during a conversation on a train. Almost before I knew what had happened I had made a date to come to Chicago for an interview early in July.

I went to the old Armory at 51st and Cottage Grove Avenue in Chicago past an imposing array of armed guards and was taken into the office of a man (also named Johnson) who was in charge of Personnel. After talking with him for perhaps half an hour and spending two more hours filling out forms, I was put on a shuttle bus and taken to a place called Site B at 61st and University Avenue.

Site B was a pretty disreputable looking building but it also had an assortment of guards in uniform, with pistols strapped to their belts. In a new appendage to the rear part of the building I was interviewed by Dr. Kenneth Cole, whom everyone called Casey because his initials were K. C. Dr. Cole was very mysterious and gave me very little information except to assure me that this was a very important operation. Dr. Cole himself was a fascinating man who wore one of the most battered hats I ever in my life have seen. He also was extraordinarily flexible. With this flexibility he managed to sit in a chair with his feet up under him, a position he apparently preferred to any other since he tended to push himself around the room on the casters of the chair. To make a long story short, I took the job and reported to work two weeks later.

When I came to work I was told, although people were very nice about it, that I could not be given any information about what I was doing until my security clearance came through. It did, about three weeks later.

I was placed in a section under the direction of Dr. Raymond Finkle. My job was to work with fission products which were sent up from Oak Ridge to determine what their toxic manifestations and metabolisms might be. From the standpoint of my training, these were rather unexpected elements. They included strontium-89, yttrium-89, zirconium-95 and its daughter columbium (later renamed niobium), cerium-144 and its daughter praseodymium-144, and several others.

Included in Ray Finkle's section were Walt Kisieleski and Bob Snyder, who were concentrating primarily on plutonium-239, Dave Anthony who stayed through the end of the war, Catherine Lathrop, Bill Brown, Blanche Lawrence, Cary Armstrong, Tom Mulhaney, and Corporal Cliff Nordine. Dr. Richard Abrams headed the second section which was working mainly on inhalation of plutonium. With him were Clarence Beilman, Sergeant Sheldon Himmelstein, Bill Lohr and several others whose names I don't remember. Paul Tompkins, Sheldon Wish, and Abraham Broido ran the hot laboratory and did most of the calibration work, and Dr. Ladd Prosser was in charge of Physiology. Drs. William Bloom and Ray Murray did pathology for the division, and George Svihla was in that general area too, doing radioautography for the most part. There were perhaps 60 or 70 people in the division all together.

Shortly after I arrived, Dr. Austin Brues and Dr. Herman Lisco came from Harvard and were important additions to the division. Somewhat later Ray Zirkle came from Oak Ridge where he'd been working on gamma irradiation of

mice near the reactors. We were all tied together by a peculiar sort of bond because we couldn't talk to anyone, not even our wives, about what we were doing. Also, there was considerable suspense in the division because we all knew that the time was rapidly approaching when the tests would be made.

This actually happened on July 16, 1945, when the first shot was conducted at Alamogordo. We were all very excited about this and somebody went out there and brought back pieces of fused desert sand which were very pretty, looking almost like a green pottery glaze, and which were also quite radioactive. Most of us spent the next several days to a week playing with radioactive determinations of these various bits of fused silica. Ralph Whitford, one of the machinists, devised a way of embedding them in lucite to make souvenirs, and I still have mine.

I think perhaps the most interesting situation of all developed just after the two bombs were dropped on Hiroshima and Nagasaki and the war ended. At that time, of course, we were permitted to talk about the work we had been doing. Sheldon Himmelstein, I remember, had a tremendous grudge against his landlady because all during the war, when he was in civilian clothes, she kept asking him why, young and healthy as he was, he wasn't in uniform. So the first thing he did was to put on his sergeant's uniform, with — as I remember — four or five hash marks on the sleeve, and go to visit her.

The University of Chicago almost immediately made plans to set up Institutes of Nuclear Studies and Radiobiology, which would be independently financed and operated rather than government subsidized. In the fall of 1945 we were told that now that the war was over the Metallurgical Lab would be disbanded and that it would be well for us to look for other jobs. Most of us did, but we also were asked to stay around and finish up any work we had going. Ray Finkle and Richard Abrams left rather quickly, and I took a position with Dr. Zirkle in the U. of C.'s new Institute of Radiobiology. However, since the Institute had no physical plant, we all stayed on at Site B until facilities could be made available. Of course, by spring 1946 the formulation of Argonne National Laboratory was underway and that settled questions for many of us.

Just a few more memories of Site B days ...

I haven't mentioned the elderly couple who ran the delicatessen next door to Site B. These people really did a rushing business around noon when fellows from the lab would go next door to buy one hard roll, two slices of salami, and fish a dill pickle out of the barrel. And if business wasn't too brisk, they also were allowed to listen to the complaints these people had. The Metallurgy Division had imported a large vertical press and mounted it next to the wall that separated the lab from the delicatessen. When the stamp press was being used, the vibration was such that canned goods tumbled off the shelves in thestore. The owners were of course furious.

They also contended that this was a very peculiar operation because there obviously was no product. Everything went in and nothing came out. Well, something did come out, but this didn't please them either. We used to incinerate large numbers of animal carcasses — mostly rats and mice and an occasional rabbit — in a muffle furnace which was ventilated through a stack on the roof. The roof was level with the store owners' living quarters, and the stench from the stacks frequently blew through their apartment. It also, on pleasant days, denied them the use of their porch which looked out over our roof.

Of course, Oak Ridge was a part of the early game. We made frequent trips down there to collect radioactive isotopes to work on in Chicago. At that time Oak Ridge had the distinction of being the biggest mud hole in the country. We slept in an army-type barracks and washed in cold water. No one in his right mind went there without equipping himself with a pair of boots and a bottle of bourbon. It was really a lot of fun.

Fond as our memories are of Site B, I doubt that anyone mourns that old building. It grew like Topsy and nobody knew where the electrical fuses were. I can remember that once, when the electricians started looking for a main fuse which had blown at about 3 p.m., they found it about 9 that night.

I moved out of Site B one day in November 1952 and never went back. Some two years later I did drive by and was startled to see that the building had disappeared and that only grass grew where we had spent the wartime years.

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