

# How 75,000 People Kept the Secret City's Secret<sup>1</sup>

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[During the Manhattan Project (from May 25, 1943) a Jr. Chemist, Tennessee Eastman Corp., Y-12 Plant]

In 2002, Joe Valentino retained the services of Julie Randall, president of Randall Marketing Company, to study how Oak Ridge could best market her unique heritage. One of the questions that came up most frequently in the focus groups was this: How in the world did 75,000 people keep the secret of the atom bomb?

Here are four reasons why it was possible.

**First**, it is important to realize we were in a very different wartime culture, starting with the December 7 Pearl Harbor attack. The country was unified around one question: What can I do to help win the war? People were anxious to find some way to contribute.

We had been traumatized in October of 1939 by Hitler's Invasion of Poland and by the results of battles we listened to eagerly every morning and every night on the radio.

We heard in stereo, from both Hollywood and the war machine in Washington, the message that "Loose Lips Sink Ships" and that any information about troop movements or war work should be kept to yourself.

We were eager to do our part, because we would do whatever we could to support the fathers, brothers, cousins and friends who were being drafted, trained and shipped into battle. People knew who we were fighting and why.

The war was personal to all of us. Gold Stars, signifying that a mother had lost a son in the war, started appearing in windows.

We were very patriotic; we trusted our government leaders and did what they asked. We raised our own food in Victory Gardens so there would be more food for soldiers. We saved tin foil. We Knitted for Britain. We were eager to do without so our soldiers could have what they needed.

**Second**, when we were asked to sign an Espionage Agreement and Employment Security Agreement promising to keep secret what our job was going to be, under penalty of immediate discharge and possible prosecution by the government, we took those agreements very seriously. You were continually reminded by billboards, company newsletters and the town newspaper.

On hiring in to work for Eastman Kodak I was told that I would be working with Uranium, and certainly had to know that as a chemist, but warned that we would not

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<sup>1</sup> Dictated into story form from an existing outline on September 1, 2013.

be allowed say that word until after the war. Instead, we would call it tuballoy in all our writings and speaking. And we were not to speculate on the final purpose.

Only a few – only a very, very few – of the 100,000 people who built the plants knew the whole secret of the project.

The cardinal rule was, "Do you have a need to know this information?" This rule was followed very carefully at Oak Ridge. Unlike the world of academia, industrial companies, like the ones that ran the plants in Oak Ridge, were accustomed to protecting corporate secrets.

**Third**, in a special memo to General Groves, the commander of the Manhattan Project, President Roosevelt, said, "Secrecy and security are to be paramount." The Germans were not to know how hard we were going to try to complete the bomb first.

Right away, Groves set up a Division of Intelligence and Security, independent of Army Intelligence and the FBI, to work in close cooperation throughout the war.

Groves's CIC (Counter Intelligence Corps) worked hard to trace down all rumors, traveling to Belgium, South America, the Congo, etc.

They provided body guards and drivers as well as code names and identities for absent-minded scientists and professors.

They also set up a system of workers to inform them of loose talk. Several of us were recruited to report by mail each Friday to the Acme Credit Company in Knoxville. We were given a big stack of envelopes addressed to Acme Credit Company. We mailed one envelope in each Friday. If we ever heard anything worth reporting, we would write it on an index card and tuck it into that week's envelope. (An interesting side note: Years later, at a gathering of the 43 Club, a speaker asked if anyone else had been recruited to the Acme Credit Company. About a quarter of the audience raised their hands!)

The security measures worked. Even at the end of the war, the Germans believed we had not progressed beyond the research phase.

**Last**, and probably most surprising, major credit for keeping the secret should go to the media. The government asked the newspapers and commentators to keep it quiet, and they did.

In the past, there had been plenty of articles because the whole atomic energy business was fully in the open. But after 1940, the universities started voluntary censorship.

On June 28, 1943, the Office of Censorship sent a "Confidential Note" to 20,000 news outlets saying, "You are asked not to publish or broadcast any information whatsoever regarding war experiments involving:

- Production or use of atom smashing, atomic energy, atomic fission, atomic splitting or any equivalent;

- Use for military purposes of radium or radioactive materials, heavy water, high voltage discharges, cyclotrons;
- The following elements or their compounds: Polonium, Uranium, Yttrium, Hafnium, Protactinium, Radium, Rhodium, Thorium, Deuterium.

They, too, kept the secret. They were simply doing their part to help win the war, and they trusted their government, but it took self-governance and trust that others in the media felt the same loyalty they did! It is almost impossible today to understand and believe the loyalty, respect and patriotism the editors and commentators had in that era.

So, working together in what they trusted was in the best interest of their country, 75,000 people kept the big secret of the atomic bomb project.