

## *The Girls of Atomic City* by: Denise Kiernan – Oak Ridge history through fresh eyes!

(As published in *The Oak Ridger's Historically Speaking* column on March 5, 2013)

Denise Kiernan, is the author, along with her husband, Joseph D'Agnesse, of *Signing Their Lives Away* and *Signing Their Rights Away*, excellent books about the lives of the signers of our Declaration of Independence and the United States Constitution respectively. The latter title is cited in the *Wall Street Journal* as "raising the question of how exactly the miracle was accomplished and that it should at least give readers some hope for our own seemingly uninspired political era."

Denise has now written, *The Girls of Atomic City*, a tremendously important work on the history of the Manhattan Project focused here in Oak Ridge. She tells the story through the eyes of the "girls of Atomic City" which really means she has used some of our most valued citizens who actually lived the history that Denise is attempting to capture and who have devoted extensively of their time to help her "get the story right."

What a great experience it has been to see her as she grew from an author looking for a new challenging project to a person who found something special in an online article I wrote that included a photo by my hero, Ed Westcott. She found the article of sufficient interest to cause her to file it away in her folder of projects to pursue and to do additional research to learn about the "secret city" of Oak Ridge.

Denise has evolved from that author surfing the internet for potential material to someone who has developed an extremely close relationship with several of the women (and some of us men) here in Oak Ridge. She and Joe are exceptionally personable and easy to get to know. Fanny and I have developed a love for them and enjoy connecting with them each time they visit Oak Ridge.

We took them to Mt Cloud restaurant and other special places Fanny and I enjoy. They are now our close friends. Many of the subjects in her book feel the same way about Denise and Joe. They look forward to their visits to Oak Ridge. Of course, you can say, Ray, this is "just a book," but its reality is so much more.

To think of this project only in the sense of the finished book is to miss the heart of the interactions and to fail to comprehend what has happened between the women Denise interviewed and her and Joe. Something much more powerful than writing a book has taken place!

Helen Brown has waited patiently as her health has begun to fail her, asking me every time she sees me "when is Denise's book going to publish?" She is so proud to be included. Other subjects feel the same joy at having been interviewed by Denise. She makes each person feel they are vitally important to the story...and, you know, they truly are!

Denise has taken a remarkable scientific experiment that turned into what has been labeled the world's most significant technical achievement and has put the details of that story into comprehensible and practical language. She had done that using these "girls of the Atomic City" who did not have privileged access to the technical and scientific details, but who did the actual work needed to achieve the desired results...without even knowing exactly what they were doing.

I was there when she met Connie Bolling, at the age of 101. I had insisted she talk to him...partly because I liked him and wanted him to be the subject of Denise's interview to make him feel good about being singled out. He won her heart instantly. Connie was a supervisor of a group of the "girls of Atomic City" who were operating the calutrons at Y-12.

This connection I arranged for Denise and Connie resulted in several other very productive contacts that Denise interviewed. She has never forgotten that special day when we went to the assisted living center to see Connie. Denise said, "While I was waiting in the lobby of his assisted living facility, I met Dot [Jones Wilkinson] and Colleen [Rowen Black]. They introduced me to people they knew and this became a pattern. Everyone I met introduced me to another 'old timer' from the war days."

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An insight into Denise's thinking regarding the nature of the book, *The Girls of Atomic City*, can be seen in this quote, "...I realized that this might be the only book a potential reader ever cracks open about the Manhattan Project, so the project as a whole had to be explained as well. Otherwise, the stakes are not clear. I also liked the idea of the two worlds: those who knew and those who didn't. I wanted those worlds to start to overlap and collide around the time of the Trinity test. So the challenge was making sure the science and situation were clear without being able to use words like 'bomb' or 'uranium'."

Denise also said, "What I hope the *Girls of the Atomic City* adds to the literature about that era is a look at one of the most significant – if not THE most significant – scientific developments of the 20th century from the perspective of those who were not a part of the decision, those who were not privy to all the facts, people who were just trying to do the best for themselves, their families and their country. Many times history focuses on those in charge, and I think there is great value to the stories of 'the others,' people who happened to find themselves in the midst of remarkable moments in time. They add an important layer to historical events that should be examined and shared."

I asked Denise to share with you readers some of her thoughts about her experiences with Oak Ridge and our citizens as she did the research for *The Girls of Atomic City*. Here is what she said, "So many things fascinated me about Oak Ridge when I began working on this book. One thing I continue to find interesting is that while a lot of people in Oak Ridge know what went on here during World War II, nearly everyone I meet outside Oak Ridge doesn't know much of anything about it at all. Oak Ridge was born in secret and, in many ways, remains a secret."

"When I was considering writing this book, I asked many friends and colleagues what they knew about the secret cities of the Manhattan Project. Again and again, I found that even history buffs only knew about Los Alamos. Their knowledge ended there. Then one day in Asheville I met a young man in his twenties who had grown up in Oak Ridge. I asked him what he knew about his hometown's history.

"Surprisingly, he too had little idea of the town's contribution to World War II. In the introduction to the book *Oppenheimer and the Manhattan Project*, editor Cynthia Kelly, president of the Atomic Heritage Foundation, wrote that recent surveys at the International Spy Museum in Washington, DC, found that 90% of people who walk in the doors of this popular museum don't know what the Manhattan Project was about at all.

"Still, I knew if I was going to write a book related to the Manhattan Project that it had to be done in a way that had never been done before. I decided I had to focus on the women of Oak Ridge because all the big books had focused rather heavily on the MEN -- mostly the scientists and the decision-makers.

"After Ray introduced me to some women in town, one thing led to another and each lady introduced me to another and another and another. Invariably every woman I met said exactly the same thing: 'Well, I don't really know much. I didn't do anything important...'

"The World War II generation is not one to brag, I learned. Everyone was very humble about their contributions, however big or small. But then, when these women began to speak, it turned out that each one I spoke to knew a lot of wonderful details that shed light on this important time in American history -- details that young people today know little about.

"So my book tells the stories of the Oak Ridge ladies in between the stories of other women scientists and individuals who worked on the bomb. I am very grateful to the women of Oak Ridge who took me into their homes and shared their stories with me. I love them dearly. I hope the book will be as interesting and inspiring to readers as the women (and men) of Oak Ridge continue to be to me.

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What an amazing tribute Denise pays to our fair city and our heroes and heroines of the Manhattan Project! See why I like her so well? She and Joe are such strong proponents for Oak Ridge and they truly have adopted us.

I am pleased to have been provided an advance copy of *The Girls of Atomic City* and allowed to be among the first reviewers of this seminal work. I highly recommend it to you. It can be purchased beginning March 5, 2013!

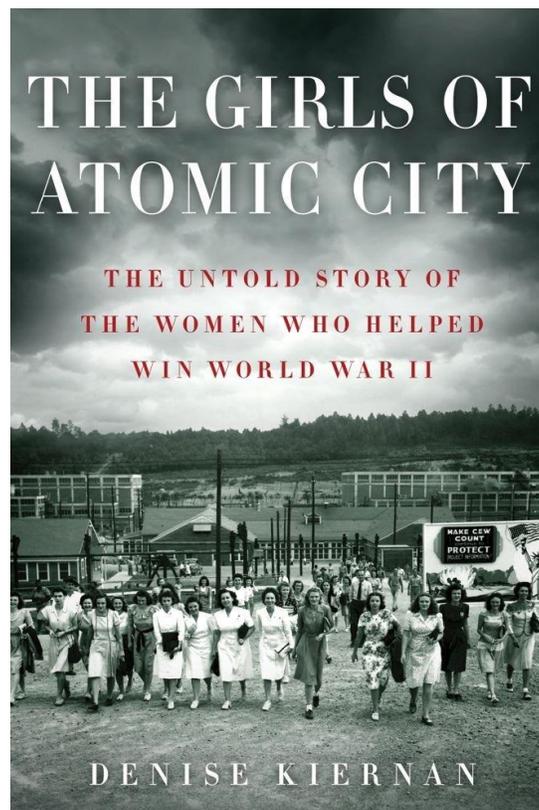
*The Girls of Atomic City* is available wherever books are sold: all online book retailers (Amazon, Books A Million, Barnes & Noble) and at any local bookstore (for those who don't like computers). If you are an e-book reader, you can read the book as an e-book too! The book buyer at Books-a-Million in Oak Ridge has informed Denise she plans to have copies on hand.

The below link will take you to a video where Denise talks about her experiences researching *The Girls of Atomic City*:

<http://videos.simonandschuster.com/Denise-Kiernan-on-THE-GIRLS-OF-ATOMIC/2093814870001>

You can meet Denise when she is in Oak Ridge next. She will be speaking on her book at the invitation of Friends of the Oak Ridge National Laboratory and the Oak Ridge Heritage & Preservation Association at the American Museum of Science and Energy on **Tuesday, March 19, 2013, at 6:00 PM**. I am sure she will have some books with her and you can purchase signed copies.

It is exciting to have a nationally known author focus on Oak Ridge! Plan now to come join us.



*The Girls of Atomic City* goes on sale March 5, 2013

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Denise with her hero, Ed Westcott (she sees his photographs as artistic images and thinks many others should see and appreciate them...I agree!)