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Oak Ridge Form 5: Oral History, Deed of Gift Release for Interviewee

DEED OF GIFT RELEASE FOR INTERVIEWEE
 K-25 ORAL HISTORY PROJECT
 U.S. DEPARTMENT OF ENERGY'S ORAL HISTORY PROGRAM

I, Jim Steele (Name of interviewee) residing at 2716 Wilburforce Ave.
 (Address of interviewee) do hereby permanently give, convey and assign to the United States Department of
 Energy (DOE) my interviews (or oral memoirs), and the recordings, tapes (audio and or video), and any
 transcripts of my interviews conducted on 9/21/05 (date) at Pro-2-Save
 (location).

In doing so, I understand that my interviews (or oral memoirs) will be made available to researchers and the public
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I, Valerie Smith (Name of interviewer or agent for or duly
 appointed representative of DOE), accept the interview (or oral memoir) with
Jim Steele (Name of interviewee) for inclusion into the DOE Oral History Program

Signature of DOE or its Representative: Dawn E. Meyers
 Date: 9/21/05

Signature of Interviewee: Jim Steele
 Date: 9/21/05

Signature of Interviewer: Valerie Smith
 Date: 9/21/05

Steele, Jim

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K-25 Oral History Interview

Date: 9/21/05

Interviewee: Jim Steele

Interviewer: Valerie Smith

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Steele, Jim

[1:31]

[crew talk]

[2:36]

Smith, V.: The first thing I'm going to ask you once we get started is I'm going to ask you for your name and if you could spell your name. And then the second question I'm going to ask you is where were you born and we'll just get some background information.

Steele, J.: My name is James, but everybody calls me Jim, so you've got Jim there so.

Smith, V.: Whichever one you want to use.

Steele, J.: Doesn't matter.

Smith, V.: Okay. [laughter]

Steele, J.: I go by both of 'em anyways.

Smith, V.: Okay.

Steele, J.: Okay.

[crew talk]

Smith, V.: Okay. Could you please tell me what your name is and spell it.

[3:14]

Steele, J.: Okay. Jim Steele. J-I-M S-T-E-E-L-E.

Smith, V.: Okay. And where were you born?

Steele, J.: I was born in Knoxville, Tennessee, in the Mechanicsville (phonetic sp.) area. And I was raised there. Left there in '58. Got married and came to Oak Ridge, so I've been to Oak Ridge since '58.

Smith, V.: And what is your educational background?

Steele, J.: High school and I finished a course in woodworking at Alston High School (phonetic sp.), Veterans' Training School.

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Smith, V.: When did you come to Oak Ridge and how did you come here?

Steele, J.: Well, I came here in 1958. I met my wife and we got married in 1958 and then I moved to Oak Ridge.

Smith, V.: Is your wife from Oak Ridge?

Steele, J.: Well, actually, my wife is from (indiscernible), the little town about 6 miles out of Morristown (phonetic sp.), east of Morristown, and she was born there, but they've been in Oak Ridge since, oh, early -- since the 40's. Think they came here in something like '48. '45 or '46, they came.

[4:39]

Smith, V.: So what type of work did you do before you came to Oak Ridge?

Steele, J.: Before I came to Oak Ridge, I worked for the Knox (phonetic sp.) Department Store in Knoxville. And I, like I said, I took G.I. Bill and went training and woodworking. And when I came to Oak Ridge, I was working at the Knox Department Store. That was in 1960.

Smith, V.: So what year did you -- how did you get to Oak Ridge? Or how did you start working in Oak Ridge?

Steele, J.: Well, in the Biology division where I worked at, it was sort of a family thing, really. My father-in-law worked there and my wife worked there, and I had a brother-in-law that worked there. So they got me a job. So then, that's -- after I came to Oak Ridge, that was 19 -- I started working at the plant in 1961.

[5:46]

Smith, V.: So you worked in the Biology division?

Steele, J.: Yes. Uh-huh. (affirmative)

Smith, V.: Tell me about what you did there.

Steele, J.: Well, in Biology division, it was a building in the Y-12 area that -- that they housed -- in our particular building, we had only mice. We had three floors of mice. And I was what you called an animal caretaker. I'd either change them from dirty pens, clean pens, or

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put water bottles on -- on the boxes and water them, but we were considered as animal caretakers.

Smith, V.:

Okay. And how long did you stay in that position?

Steele, J.:

I stayed in that position until, I guess it was 1950 -- I mean, 1987, and then I moved to sort of a technician's job.

[6:42]

Smith, V.:

So were you -- how many lived in Knoxville? Were you familiar with what was going on in the '40s in Oak Ridge? How much did you know about Oak Ridge as a Knoxville resident?

Steele, J.:

The only thing I knew about Oak Ridge was that during the war -- during the war, they -- they ran buses from Oak Ridge to Knoxville. A lot of people that worked at Oak Ridge lived in Knoxville, so they -- they -- in fact, they had a double-decker bus that used to run from Oak Ridge to Knoxville and I knew that a lot of people worked at Oak Ridge, but as to what was going on, I didn't know. 'Cause during that time, during the war, I was -- well, let's see. I was about 8 or 9 years old. But I do remember, you know, the buses of people working -- in the (indiscernible) city, working at Oak Ridge and so forth, but as to what was going on, you know, I didn't really know.

Smith, V.:

So when you first moved to Oak Ridge, where did you live or what were the housing conditions like?

[7:50]

Steele, J.:

Well, when -- when -- when we got married, we -- we moved -- we had rented one half of a duplex and we lived in one end of it and another family lived in another end of it, and we -- we lived there until, oh, it was 19, 'bout '63. And then we built a house in 1964. And then we moved into that, but in fact, we've been in Scarborough (phonetic sp.) area the whole time.

Smith, V.:

So what was the community that you first moved into with the duplex?

Steele, J.:

The -- the house was a duplex.

Smith, V.:

Yes.

Steele, J.:

Yeah.

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Smith, V.:

What was the name of that area or where was that?

Steele, J.:

It was the Scarborough area. Scarborough.

Smith, V.:

And so, I assume that's where most of the blacks lived during that time?

[8:51]

Steele, J.:

Yeah, in fact, that -- that -- that's where -- with exception of a few blacks that lived in a dormitory area up in Jackson Square, all the blacks lived in the Scarborough area.

Smith, V.:

Now what about -- going back to the job, what was the pay like? I mean, were you paid well when you first came here?

Steele, J.:

Well, give you an example of pay. When I -- when I was working at the Knox Department Store, my salary was \$52.50 a week. When I came -- when I got the job in Biology division, it was \$67 a week. So that was an increase, but at that time, I was commuting from Oak Ridge to Knoxville and -- 'cause at that time, gas was what? 27, 30 cent a gallon? So, you know, it wasn't -- couldn't do that now. But that -- that -- but the pay was a little better, but we found out in the Biology division that -- that actually, the animal caretakers were a bit underpaid and we didn't get that straightened out until we unionized. We got a union and then that brought everybody up, you know, on the level.

[10:21]

Smith, V.:

What year did you unionize? Do you remember?

Steele, J.:

1969.

Smith, V.:

And how much of an increase -- what changed as a result of you becoming a part of the union?

Steele, J.:

Well, we -- well, we had contractual rights and, you know, we were able to negotiate in the contract certain benefits that -- that -- that -- that we didn't have, you know, as being non-union. But the main thing was -- was the salary structure. Because there was people doin' the same thing in Biology division that one person might make \$100 a week and another making \$60 a week. It was -- it was that pay discrepancy that -- that really got, you know, really got people's attention. In fact, nobody knew what the other person

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was paid unless someone would tell it. And the supervisor would tell you if he gave you a raise, don't tell anybody because he didn't want, you know, the friction. But, you know, a lot -- a lot of fellows that made \$100, \$120 a week and the rest of us makin', say \$70 a week, you know, they'd come and tell us. And so that -- that's what prompted the, you know, bargaining -- getting a bargaining agent in Biology division.

[12:00]

Smith, V.:

Now, the people who were making the higher pay in comparison, was it based on race, or just how long people had been there, or what?

Steele, J.:

Well, in the building we were in, there was no such thing as race because everybody in that building -- all them caretakers were black. Now, later on, there were -- there were whites brought in, but during that time, everybody over there was black. So you might say some of it had -- was respon -- some of it was due to some seniority. Some -- some of the fellows that were making quite a bit more, they'd been there a longer time, but, you know, we, you know, we believed that everybody -- if you're doing the same type of job, then you should be fairly equal, you know, fairly close to -- to the pay structure. And as nothing the union brought in, it brought in a pay structure where everybody knew exactly what, you know, what was going on.

[13:11]

Smith, V.:

Tell me about your job as an animal caretaker and what you did specifically.

Steele, J.:

Well, the animal caretaker, we were responsible for changing the animals from -- we called 'em boxes; most people call 'em pens, but they were two-sided box. One side -- one compartment here, one compartment here; had two lids on top of it and on top of that, you put the feed in and on top of that, you put the water in. Water bottle on. And you would change those -- those -- change the mice from this compartment, you know, to a clean compartment over there, then on this side, you'd change it to a clean compartment and then you would put feed on it; put the -- put the tops back on and put the feed on and then set it back on the shelf. And that -- well, everybody was expected to change at least six loads a day. And each load contained 80 boxes. So that's 480 boxes that you would have to change a day. And watering, you -- you put -- each box had -- had two water bottles on it. If you were -- if you were

watering, then you were expected to put out at least 30 loads of water a day. And each water wagon had 48 bottles in it. So the water would go in and you would put the clean water bottles on and then bring the dirty ones back to his watering pen, take the stoppers out, you know, dump the old water out, put 'em in a pen, and we poured in chlorine, or chloride, rather. And what they called chloride mix; mix with water, pour that in, fill it up with water, and let it sit for 20 minutes and then drain that out and refill it back up with clean water, then pour all that, then put stoppers, rubber stoppers that had a glass tube that came out. Put those stoppers in and then you'd go back to -- to your little room, put the clean ones on, take the dirty ones out. So each -- each water had at least 30 loads to do a day.

[15:40]

Smith, V.:

Well --.

Steele, J.:

One other thing, too. Another thing, the changers. We would have to wash the dirty boxes, so on each floor -- they had three floors. On each floor, they had three machines. They had machine -- and the machines were about, oh, maybe twice as long -- maybe -- 'bout -- 'bout -- maybe twice as long as this room. You would take the dirty boxes and dump 'em in a chute and they would go down into a dumpster. They would put those dirty boxes upside down, put 'em in a machine and the machine would push 'em through a washer. Then when they would come out on the other, end, they would come out and there'd be a person standing on the other end that'd take and put shavings in 'em and another person would take 'em and stack 'em on the dolly. And then they rolled that way. So you -- you would change 6 loads a day, 100 -- 480 boxes, and then you would wash at least 30 loads a day or something like that. It'd just depend upon how many changes on the floor and how many boxes were being changed.

[16:46]

Smith, V.:

Now, what was -- were there experiments being done on the mice or what was all of this for?

[16:53]

Steele, J.:

In -- we were in the (indiscernible) genetics section. And we were -- the experiments that were done there were basically done to get the effect of radiation on the human body. And we -- there -- there -- they did have a -- a small -- a ⁷137 cesium source in the building

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that had another source outside the building, but then they had an x-ray machine. And, you know, they -- they would radiate the animals and then bring them back to the room, or -- it depends on -- on how many -- on how much radiation you want to get. Sometimes in the source room, they would leave those animals in there for, oh, they might leave 'em in there 3 weeks or a month. And once a week, somebody would have to go in that source room and change -- change those animals out. And in 1963, and '64, part of '65, we did a big experiment with the (indiscernible) physics reactor down at X-10. And there, we -- we transported the mice from Y-12 to X-10 to this source, and they, you know, we'd stay there until -- until they got the dose rate that they wanted and we'd bring 'em back to Y-12, put 'em in clean pens, and they would, you know, and we'd work with 'em there.

[18:36]

And the biggest thing there were looking for was mutations. And if, depending on the dose rate, how many mutations they would get and so forth, but the biggest thing -- the biggest look was -- was for mutation. They were expecting to get a certain amount of mutations from each experiment.

Smith, V.:

Now, what kind of interaction did you have with your supervisors or the doctors or scientists that were running the experiments?

Steele, J.:

Well, like I said, in the beginning, it was sort of a family affair, you know. Everybody -- Dr. Bill Russell, course he's dead now, but his wife, Lee Russell, is still, you know, she still goes to X-10 and writes papers, but they were -- they were good people to work for, you know. And the animal care takers and the animal research workers, everybody in that -- in that close, everybody's confined to those three buildings for eight hours a day, so you to get along 'cause if we didn't [laughing], they -- they could be chaotic if we didn't, but everybody got along real good. The reaction was real good and everybody really work hard to get along with everybody.

[19:54]

Smith, V.:

Now, what kind -- you talked about the cesium 137 sources and that type of thing. What kind of health and safety protections did you have as an animal caretaker?

Steele, J.:

Well, now, that -- the -- the cesium source room that was on the inside of the building, it was a leaded room, you know. The walls were leaded and then the doors were leaded. And it was -- it was

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shielded, I think, pretty good. Now, the x-ray room, it was regular x-ray and there was some shielding from that, but you know, there was lead around -- around the walls and things in there. But I think basically the safety -- health -- the safety was fairly safe.

Smith, V.:

Now what about -- and you stayed in that position for how long? From 19 --?

[21:01]

Steele, J.:

I started December 28, 1961 and I retired in December 31, 1994. At the end of 1994.

Smith, V.:

Okay. So how -- you said you went from an animal caretaker to a technician?

Steele, J.:

Yeah. Uh-huh. (affirmative)

Smith, V.:

And then what did you do as a technician?

Steele, J.:

Well, as a technician, I was responsible for checking pens, looking for mutations. I was also responsible for working with the other workers to help them, you know. We had a certain amount of rooms that we had to wean today. We had to mark the animals, and then in certain stocks, we kept certain stocks, you know, we'd keep certain stocks up and we'd have to wean animals and then mark their ears with marks and then put 'em in boxes and so forth.

Smith, V.:

So when you said that part of your responsibility was looking the mutations, what -- were these just physical observations or visual observations that you made?

[22:39]

Steele, J.:

Yeah. It -- it -- it would have to be visual because, well, let me back up just a little bit. Actually, the -- the animal caretakers, the changers, they were also trained to sort of look for mutations, too. And when I say a mutation, I mean if there was a -- brown mice were what we called a hybrid and we had a T (phonetic sp.), a white animal, which was, it's name -- we'd call it a T, and they'd mate the white and the brown and then if -- if you got an an -- if you got a mutation, got an animal that was born that had spots; it might have brown spots, might have black spots, well, now, that's a mutation. Some of them, their eyes would be pink. Some of 'em, their tails would -- most animals' tails were straight; their tails would have a kink in it. Or they might have one leg, you know.

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That type of thing. So, you know, that's what we -- that's what we'd look for in mutations. And they would take those mutations, and when they got grown, then they would mate them to another animal to see, you know, how far the strain would go.

[24:02]

Smith, V.:

Now, how did you go from being an animal caretaker to a technician? How did that happen?

Steele, J.:

Well, [laughing] it happened by the fellow that was doing that passed away; he died. And I was -- I was next -- I was close to next being in line for it. There was another fellow that had more seniority than I did, but he didn't want it, so then I took it.

Smith, V.:

So that was considered a promotion?

Steele, J.:

Oh, yeah, it was a promotion.

Smith, V.:

What kind of jobs were available for blacks back in the time when you started to work there?

[25:00]

Steele, J.:

If you had a degree then, you know, in the Biology division, then you -- you could go into research. But for -- just high school diploma and so forth, that was it. You know, outside of labor, janitors. But in the Biology division, you were either an animal caretaker -- animal caretaker, really. Now, my wife, when she -- she started working in 1956 and, well, she was the first black research worker. And she -- then there were 3, 2 more that came in shortly after she did. But they -- they -- they were research. They -- they would work in the rooms, you know. They would keep records, ledgers of, well, one thing in there, you had -- you would mark each animal, give each animal a number. And then they would have to record those numbers in a ledger. And then if they got a mutation, they would have to record that and then they would be responsible for keeping up with that mutation and all the other mutations that would come from that, you know, from -- from that. They -- they -- they kept the ledgers and they would have to give the reports. If -- if Dr. Wilson (phonetic sp.) or some other woman to know about how many mutations were born to this particular strain, then they would have to go in their files and get the information for 'em. That's how they were able to write the papers and things because they would keep -- they knew exactly how many mutations and what came from the mutation.

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[27:17]

Smith, V.: I think we're going to break right here.

Steele, J.: Okay.

End Tape 1, begin Tape 2

Steele, J.: (indiscernible) up in Atlanta, but she's working on her PhD in Divinity. And I have a son that manages Crystal's (phonetic sp.) out here in Oak Ridge.

Smith, V.: I'm probably going to start getting into the -- I might touch a little bit back on the activities, but I'll probably be getting more into the social/economic activities outside of work, starting with the rest of this. (indiscernible), all right?

[00:50]

Back to the types of jobs black people had when you came on in the early '60s. Did you start to see changes or opportunities for advancement or were there -- was it just kind of known that, you know, blacks work in these areas and that's it?

Steele, J.: Now, are you talking about Oak Ridge in general or are you talking about Biology division?

[1:15]

Smith, V.: Oak Ridge in general.

Steele, J.: Oak Ridge in general. There was maybe a few, but for the most part, it was -- it was sort of limited. You know, you didn't see sales clerks in the downtown area, black sales clerks in the downtown area. Now, you would see 'em in there as janitors or stocking -- you know, stocking, but the biggest thing was either laborers or janitors or -- or housework, you know, housemaids, so this type of thing. And there -- there was jobs in waiting tables and places like that for black waiters and stuff like that. But ol' Davis Brothers, you know, they had black waiters, but -- and cooks, but, you know, that.

Smith, V.: How did that make you feel?

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Steele, J.:

Well, I guess you might say being from Knoxville and being from Mechanicsville, segregation was -- I was used to it, really, because in Knoxville -- when I worked there in Knoxville, I knew I could only be a por -- a laborer or a janitor, some. Now, I did, when I left Knoxville, I was working as a warehouse clerk for Knox Department Store, but I started out as janitor. The fella that was doing the warehouse work, he -- he quit, so I moved into that job, but that was -- wasn't the selling end. I received the stock and I'd have to mark it and put it away, and fill the orders and stuff outta that, but. As far as job opportunities, it was either janitor or laborer, this type thing.

[3:37]

Smith, V.:

Now, on the job, were the facilities separated as far as like the restrooms or drinking water fountains or -- or what was that like when you came in?

Steele, J.:

When I came to Oak Ridge?

Smith, V.:

Yes.

Steele, J.:

When I came to Oak Ridge, you know, we couldn't -- blacks couldn't go to the movies, you know. They couldn't go to Davis Brothers, like to eat. Chris' (phonetic sp.) was in the downtown area and you couldn't -- couldn't sit down at the counter Chris' and eat. Now, there -- I don't think there was segregated water fountains. I know in -- in the plant, there wasn't, but I'm not sure about, you know, in the downtown area. But I do know you couldn't go -- couldn't go to a place, sit down, and eat. Now, 'cause then, I guess, middle '60s, early '70s, then, you know, when it started desegregating, that sort of broke the barriers down, but. There was a drive-in movie over where Kroger's is now. All that area was a drive-in movie. And blacks couldn't go to drive-in movie, not even in their own cars, you know, so. And The Grove up in Jackson Square, over up in ther Jackson Square in the grove, blacks couldn't go in there, in the movies, so.

[5:24]

Smith, V.:

Now, with your kids, I presume, you got married and you had kids, so I assume they started out in the Oak Ridge school system --

Steele, J.:

Yup.

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Steele, Jim

Smith, V.:

Is that right?

Steele, J.:

Uh-huh. (affirmative)

[5:34]

Smith, V.:

So at the time your kids started school, was there still segregation in the schools or had desegregation started?

Steele, J.:

Well, it had started, but elementary school, we still had Scarborough Elementary School was still segregated. And Robertsville (phonetic sp.) middle -- Robertsville Junior High then, it -- it had been desegregated. Oak Ridge High School was desegregated in 19 -- what was it? 1957, '56, '57, somewhere in there, Oak Ridge High School was desegregated, but the Scarborough Elementary School was still segregated. And it wasn't desegregated until in the middle '60s.

Smith, V.:

So by the time your kids were going to school, like they started out at Scarborough?

Steele, J.:

They started out at -- at Scarborough Elementary School, yeah.

Smith, V.:

Okay. And so was desegregated at that time?

[6:50]

Steele, J.:

No. Scarborough -- Scarborough Elementary School was segregated. I guess when -- when -- when -- when my daughter.... Yeah. It was desegregated in -- in -- in the late '60s. Because she - she went to Lindon (phonetic sp.) Elementary School.

Smith, V.:

So did you have any concern about your kids kind of being on the forefront of this segregation/desegregation? Was there any tension in the community surrounding desegregation of the schools or?

Steele, J.:

No, see, because the high school had been desegregated quite a while. Yeah, they had had some problems, but it had been desegregated for a while. The junior high schools, they had been desegregated for a while, so it wasn't that much of a tension -- that tension, or anything like that. You know, we just felt -- and Scarborough Elementary School was a good school, but we felt that it should be desegregated, too. And when -- when they -- when the school board finally -- well, actually, the school board was forced to desegregate the Scarborough Elementary School. And when they did, you know, that school closed.

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[8:23]

Smith, V.:

How was the school board forced to?

Steele, J.:

There was a group of us that -- that got together and we -- we went to DOE. It was Atomic Energy Commission then, but we -- we had several meetings with Sampson Period (phonetic sp.) who was Head of the AEC in Oak Ridge. Had several meetings with him and with -- with the Chairman of the School Board -- School Board -- and they, as a result of that, DOE told them they were going to have to desegregate the Scarborough Elementary School. So they did. Rather than -- rather than -- I think, rather than to move or bus white kids in, they decided to close the school and bus 'em -- bus the black kids out. Which, you know, we were -- you know, we couldn't complain about 'cause we were wanting the school desegregated, so. But that's what happened. They didn't want to bus any white -- white kids into Scarborough, so they closed the school and bussed the black kids out.

[9:38]

Smith, V.:

So where did the black kids end up going? Lindon or other?

Steele, J.:

Okay, the -- there was a boundary line and I forget exactly where that boundary line was, but all of the kids, let's say, from Carver (phonetic sp.) area west went to Lindon. And the kids Carver east went to Woodland (phonetic sp.) Elementary School.

Smith, V.:

Now, I want to expand a little bit upon how the Department of Energy officials were involved with the school board and forcing their hand or telling them what they needed to do. Can you take me through that process when you said a group of you got together and went to the -- what all had to happen and who did you contact first? How did that come about?

Steele, J.:

That's been -- that's been many years ago [laughing], but. We -- there was a group, Kathleen Stevens (phonetic sp.), myself, I think Bill Anthony (phonetic sp.), there was several of us that met, and we decided that it was time to do something about, you know, the segregation in the Scarborough school.

[11:01]

So, we -- first we got a petition. The petition was circulated through the community. And as a result of that petition, we

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forwarded the information to the Atomic Energy Commission. And then, the Atomic Energy Commission, they -- well, let's -- let's go back. The Atomic Energy Commission run everything in Oak Ridge, period. During that time. Course now, the school board people were elected, you know, to the school board, but the school board was answerable to the Atomic Energy Commission for its operation. And when -- when -- when we got the petition, we sent the petitions to Atomic Energy Commission, they looked at 'em and then they -- they got with the school board. And then we -- and then they called our little committee to sit down with -- with the head of the Atomic Energy Commission, the Chairman of the School Board, and other staff people. And, you know, we told 'em that every -- that all the schools in Oak Ridge except the Scarborough Elementary School was desegregated, and that we felt that that should be desegregated, too. And they -- they tend to agree with us because they told the school board, that, you know, you're going to have to do something. So the school board decided to -- rather than bus white kids in, they would bus the black kids out.

[12:57]

And one more point. At that time, the -- the -- the Scarborough residents, the parents, had to pay for the kids to ride the bus to school. Now, now it's free. But then, we -- we had to buy bus tickets every morning for our kids to ride the bus to go to school.

Smith, V.:

Did the whites have to do that?

Steele, J.:

Yeah. Yeah. Everybody had to buy bus tickets. If you rode the bus, you had to buy bus tickets, yeah. Yeah.

Smith, V.:

So do you think there's a reason why the Scarborough Elementary School was the last school to be desegregated?

[13:46]

Steele, J.:

Well, I don't know ex -- let me give you my conjecture on it. That is that if you've got something going on and you don't want to stir up any problems, you just leave it like it is. And I think the school board was content to leave it like it was until we complained about it. And I'd say if we'd not complained about it, then they'd probably -- it would be that way today. But I say it would've lasted a lot longer if we hadn't complained about it. But by complaining about it, then they saw where they needed to go ahead and 'cause it was the last section that hadn't been desegregated.

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Smith, V.:

Now, when you took this action, was there any concern that oh, I might, you know, lose my job or I might, something might, you know -- did you have any concerns about your job in taking this action?

Steele, J.:

No. I really didn't. I remember one time, I was at work in Biology division and I got a call -- well, my supervisor came and told me that I had a call from -- from the office, Atomic Energy Commission office, so I went to the telephone and it was the Assistant Director tellin' me that -- that -- that we were going to have a meeting in the AEC offices at a certain time. So I was wondering how you got my name and -- and -- well, they knew my name, but I wondered where they found out where I worked at, but I should've known they got my record up there anyway. But, no, I didn't have any concern about the job. No.

[15:58]

Smith, V.:

Now tell me a little bit -- I want to make sure we get this -- about your wife and what she did and how she was a trailblazer with the work that she did.

Steele, J.:

Well, she -- as I said, she was a technician. And she was responsible for recording all of the data that -- that on -- on the experiments that she had that she was responsible for. She would record all the data, kept up with all the data pertaining to the stocks in that they had what they called stocks. And each stock was the result of a mutation. So, you know, she had -- and she would maintain these stocks. She -- she -- she would keep them up, set up new pens and so forth. And she was responsible for all information pertaining to those particular stocks. And she -- when she -- as I said, when she started, she was the first black, you know, technician doing that, and then they hired two more after that, but she was the first one.

[17:17]

Smith, V.:

What did you like the most about Oak Ridge and your job?

Steele, J.:

Well, I was ready to get out of Knoxville. [laughing] Sorry to say, that's home. But I -- I was, you know, I was born and raised there so it was time for me to leave. But I -- I like Oak Ridge. I still like Oak Ridge. It's a unique town and it's just large enough to -- to where you can enjoy -- it's small enough to where you can, you know, be -- feel -- feel the family atmosphere. And I -- when I

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came here, I figured, well, when we got married, I figured it'd be easier for me to commute back and forth to Knoxville than it would be for my wife to commute from Knoxville to Oak Ridge. So that's why we-- one of the reasons why we chose to live in Oak Ridge. But I -- I didn't want to live in Knoxville anymore anyway, so.

Smith, V.: (indiscernible).

Steele, J.: No.

[18:26]

Smith, V.: [laughing] What was the thing that you disliked the most about Oak Ridge and your work?

Steele, J.: There's -- there's not much I dislike about Oak Ridge. I think people -- I think the citizens of Oak Ridge have been kept in the dark on a lot of the -- a lot of things that transpired, that have taken place in the plant that I think people should have been made aware of, but as far as disliking Oak Ridge, I don't. I like Oak Ridge. And I'd -- I'd recommend people living in Oak Ridge. But, you know, to each his own. A person like to live where they like to live but, I like living in Oak Ridge, but I like living in Oak Ridge and I enjoy it.

Smith, V.: What's your most vivid recollection of the time that you've spent in Oak Ridge, especially during the early years?

[19:35]

Steele, J.: Well, you know, let me put that this way. Oak Ridge since I've been here, has changed, but it had to change. If you -- if you understand what I mean. You know, things -- you know, people -- 'cause Oak Ridge is, you know, totally desegregated now, that's one thing. But people are pretty much the same. You know. There's been change, but there hasn't been that much of a change and everybody, particularly in the Scarborough area, just everybody out there knows just about everybody and so, it's sort of a unique situation 'cause Mechanicsville, when I lived over there, everybody knew everybody over there, but it was a bigger city and everything. But I think Oak Ridge is unique and there's not much that I've found that wrong with Oak Ridge.

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Smith, V.:

What's the most interesting thing that either happened to you or that you did while -- either while you were living in Oak Ridge or while you were working in Oak Ridge.

Steele, J.:

Most interesting thing. Well, I guess it would be we had -- in I guess it was 1964, '65, we -- we -- we had a city councilman that was resigning and we -- the community wanted -- was behind one particular fella. But another fella, because he had connections with -- with the city, with the mayor, and people in the city, he got appointed to that -- to the council seat. That -- that kind of upset a lot of 'em, so we had a recalled election. And now we had to get -- had to go through the community and get a certain amount of signature to sign for the recall election and we held that recall election. Of course, I've later learned 'cause one thing I do now is I work with the election commission in Addison (phonetic sp.) County. I work early voting and I have a precinct, a city hall precinct. But I learned then if you have a recall election, that the person that's been appointed to that seat, most of the time will win it. So people just waste their time goin' -- tryin' to have a recall election. But I guess, to answer your question, the main thing was that we had this recall. It caused a lot of people to think, but the fella still won. He came out and won that election. But that's the most memorable thing that took place.

[23:02]

Smith, V.:

Well, speaking about politics, when did the blacks really become politically active in Oak Ridge? Tell me a little bit about that.

Steele, J.:

Well, I guess, really, when -- when -- when was it? 1960? Either '59 or '60, when -- when DOE -- I keep saying DOE, but when Atomic Energy Commission turned everything over to the city and the city charter was -- was -- was written and formed and they had the first election for city councilman, then I think -- now, in the past, when they had elections, you know, people would vote. But it wasn't quite as intent as it was when we started voting for our own city councilmen and so forth. As a result, people got more involved in the politics in Oak Ridge.

Smith, V.:

Who do you think was most responsible for change allowing the advancement of blacks in Oak Ridge? Do you think it was more the federal government, it was more the blacks themselves, do you think just the changing of the times? I mean, what would you say sparked?

[24:44]

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Steele, J.:

Well, I think the thing that transpired in Alabama. Dr. King. And that promoted -- that -- that really got things started all over the country, but particularly in Oak Ridge. I know we -- we picketed Davis Brothers government -- Davis Brothers cafeteria. The blacks couldn't go in there and eat. And we picketed that. And there was a laundromat down in Jefferson Circle that blacks couldn't go down there, wash their clothes, so we picketed that. And as a result of that, then, you know, we picketed theaters and they were opened. The eating places. 'Cause as a result of Davis Brothers opening up, Davis Brothers being forced to desegregate, they -- I think they closed up, really. They went out of business in Oak Ridge after that.

Smith, V.:

So you think that the movement, the Civil Rights Movement helped to spark the blacks coming together here to picket --?

Steele, J.:

Sure did.

Smith, V.:

Okay.

[26:09]

Steele, J.:

That -- that was the main -- the main reason, yeah.

Smith, V.:

I think (indiscernible) because the next thing that I want to get into is....

End Tape 2, begin Tape 3

[00:41]

Smith, V.:

What kind of -- or what sparked some of the changes for advancement of blacks in Oak Ridge in their jobs?

Steele, J.:

That's kind of tough because most of my experience or time was spent in the Biology division. And there, we -- we -- we were sort of isolated or segregated, but I do know that at X-10 and at the Y-12 area, the biggest thing was janitors, laborers, and then later on, I don't know what the reason was, but they began to bring in chemical operators and electricians. I think one thing might've sparked when they started the training programs. When Department of Energy started training programs and then that, I think, was geared to training blacks as well as whites for electrician jobs, or certain other jobs within the plant. And the training -- the training -- the training was, I think, the basic -- one of the basic

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reasons why more jobs were made available to blacks than in the past. But back during the war days, the biggest things was laborer/janitors for blacks and that was about it.

[2:32]

Smith, V.: Now what kind of -- in the job that you did -- what kind of chemical or radiological monitoring did you have working as a technician or in animal care?

Steele, J.: We had the film badges then. It was a square badge and it had to have the film in it. They -- they changed those every three months. And -- but that was basically the radiation monitoring that we had.

Smith, V.: And were you informed of the results?

Steele, J.: No. Not -- not unless your badge had a high reading on it. And then if it had a reading on it, then they -- they would look into it. But, no. Even -- well, when I talked earlier about that 137 cesium source, I had to go in there, say, on Friday mornings and change the animals in that source room. And I never got a high reading out of -- or they never told me that I had a reading on my badge that was high as a result of that.

[3:42]

Smith, V.: Now, do you think that black women -- was there any difference in the promotional opportunities for black women as it was for black men?

Steele, J.: That, I can't answer. I don't know. Now, in the Biology division, we didn't see it because they -- there were three black women that were technicians and all -- and all of the caretakers were all men. So, you know, I don't -- I can't really answer that question.

Smith, V.: Let's see here. What would you consider to be your most challenging assignment or thing that you did either inside or outside of work?

Steele, J.: Most challenging. I suppose learning to mark those animals' ears, the mice's ears 'cause, see, you had to have a sequence of notches and holes and a hole would represent 1 and a notch would represent 10, so you had to -- in order -- and you had to -- you had to mark the animals right according to the book because if you didn't, that would throw the data off, so, I guess most challenging thing was

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learning how to -- how to mark, you know, how to mark the animals, mark their ears right.

[5:38]

Smith, V.: How do you think Oak Ridge has changed as a result of you being here?

Steele, J.: Me being here?

Smith, V.: Yes. What have you done or what are the things that you have done that you felt you contributed to positive?

Steele, J.: I guess when we were able to desegregate the elementary school. And that recall election, although it -- it didn't work out in our favor, but I think that was -- I think that contributed to letting people know that even though, you know, you might be a city official, you might be appointed something, people -- people, you know, you want to do -- you want to act according to the will of the people. And his promotion wasn't according to the will of the people because the majority of the Scarborough residents wanted a certain fella, but this fella, because he knew the mayor and -- and had the inside track with city councilmen, was able to get appointed to it. That's -- that's why we had the recall election.

[6:54]

Smith, V.: Now, with the Scarborough Elementary School, was the -- were the facilities --

Steele, J.: Adequate?

Smith, V.: -- yes, or were they the same as the white or the desegregated elementary schools?

Steele, J.: No. Because, see, they had built the Lindon Elementary School. They had remodeled the Woodland Elementary School. And the -- the -- the Scarborough school was pre-war. It was built, you know, during -- during the war. And it -- it was -- it wasn't falling down, you know, the -- the city -- the city maintained it, but we just felt that it was time to -- for a change, and that's why we fought to get that. But like I said, they had built the new Lindon -- torn down the old Lindon Elementary School and built the new Lindon Elementary School. And the Woodland school, they remodeled it. But they hadn't done any remodeling at the Scarborough school.

Steele, Jim

[8:20]

Smith, V.:

I want to go back to the pickets. How many blacks were involved with the pickets and did you receive any type of retaliation or threats as a result of being involved in that?

Steele, J.:

There was -- I didn't personally receive any, but there -- there were people that got some threats, but, you know, they -- they really didn't take 'em that serious. And there -- there was some reaction to the picketing, but for the most part, you know. One -- one -- one thing about the -- the people in Oak Ridge. You had -- there were a lot of white people that were involved in the picketing in Oak Ridge. I think that went a long ways to -- to 'spelling any -- any violence. There wasn't any violence, to speak of, connected within the picketing, but there -- there was a lot of -- a lot of picketing going on and there were quite a few white people on the picket lines, too.

[9:36]

Smith, V.:

So did you feel like you -- you were supported by whites and blacks alike, that it was more this is an injustice and we need to fight against it despite who the injustice is against?

Steele, J.:

I think they -- I think people felt that it was an injustice and -- and they felt that wrong should be righted. And I think that's why they -- they -- I think the city and -- and Department of Energy -- Atomic Energy Commission at that time -- realized that, you know, signs -- or -- signs of the times change. We was ready for a change. We was.

Smith, V.:

What about -- do you think that because some of the Oak Ridge community had so much of an influx from the people of the Northeast and other places that it wasn't just whites from the South, but it was people from other areas of the country -- do you think that that had any influence?

[10:48]

Steele, J.:

You know, at any given time, you'll find more PhD's in Oak Ridge than anywhere in the world. Or collection of PhD's. And I think as a result of that, that -- that -- that -- that the educational background of people in Oak Ridge realized that this needed to be and that it was an injustice. And that they -- they could see the wrong. But I think basic -- the -- the basic education part of the

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people in Oak Ridge had a lot to do with, you know, with -- with -- with being desegregated part of Oak Ridge.

Smith, V.:

I want to talk a little bit about or go back to or talk more so about the future and any advice, so to speak, that you would give to future generations, especially African-Americans.

Steele, J.:

My advice is to take care of what you have. In fact, in the morning, I've got to speak at chapel at Mountain Christian School and -- and that's what those kids -- that's what I'm going to advise them to -- well, the topic is This is My Father's World, based on Psalm and I'm going to tell them that -- that my generation has abused this planet, and because of that, you know, we're paying for it. My advice to this generation -- future generation is to take care of what we have because if we don't, then we going to see, I believe, catastrophic events like what's going on now. More so because we haven't taken care of what we should have. And my advice to them is to don't abuse what you have because you pay for it in the end.

[13:22]

Smith, V.:

Now what about -- I do want to talk about -- well, let me ask you this. If you were writing a story about Oak Ridge, what key topics would you cover?

Steele, J.:

What key topics would I cover? I guess maybe life in general in Oak Ridge and the somewhat-closeness that -- that it seems like the people in Oak Ridge have. I guess education of -- education in Oak Ridge. Oak Ridge has one of the finest educational programs in -- in the state. And I think the kids of Oak Ridge that take advantage -- a lot of kids that don't take advantage of it, but the kids that take advantage of it, it's a benefit to them. And I have to write on a topic, I would have to say the closeness of the people of Oak Ridge and the education in Oak Ridge, school system in Oak Ridge.

[14:52]

Smith, V.:

Now what do you think -- because of what you went through or the opportunities, the doors that were closed to you in the employment side of things or other aspects of life, as a result of that, what have you passed on to your own kids regarding what happened as a result of the time you grew up and working here in Oak Ridge. What did it make you pass on to your own kids as far as what to emphasize?

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Steele, J.:

Well, my -- my son, I pass on to him that nobody's going to give you anything, that you have to work for whatever you get. And I think he -- he didn't -- he didn't choose to go to the plant to work. He got into the fast food industry and that's where he is today. My daughter, she -- passed on to her, well, she's in education. And she sought an educational career and she's working towards a PhD and -- and that, but I guess the main thing that we passed on to them is that, you know, nobody's going to give you anything; you have to work for what you get. And if you work for what you get, then you can appreciate it after you get it.

[16:47]

Smith, V.:

I agree with that. Is there -- and we're coming to an end here. Is there any topic that you wanted to talk about, maybe entertainment or recreational opportunities or anything like that that perhaps we haven't discussed that you would like to expound upon?

Steele, J.:

No. Just, well, this one thing I guess. The recreational program in Oak Ridge is real good. There is opportunities for kids in Oak Ridge to excel in sports. And Oak Ridge, they have a good sports program. Boys' Club, high school, junior high school, high school. And it's just a joy to live in Oak Ridge. To me. Now, some -- some people disagree with me, but I enjoy living in Oak Ridge.

Smith, V.:

Now what about, if you have to do it all over again as far as coming here, you know, working, living. If you had to do it all over again, would you?

[18:04]

Steele, J.:

Without hesitating, I say I'd do it again and again and again. I've enjoyed living in Oak Ridge, you know, the most.

Smith, V.:

If there's nothing else that you want to expound upon....

Steele, J.:

No, that's -- that's it.

Smith, V.:

Okay. All right. We'll close.

[End of Interview]