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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, Leroy White (Name of interviewee) residing at 242 South Benedict Ct
 (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
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 (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, Leroy White ^{Bart Callan} (Name of interviewer or agent for or duly
 appointed representative of DOE), accept the interview (or oral memoir) with
Leroy White (Name of interviewee) for inclusion into the DOE Oral History Program.

Signature of DOE or its Representative: [Signature]
 Date: 4/16/05

Signature of Interviewee: Leroy White
 Date: 4/16/05

Signature of Interviewer: [Signature]
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K-25 Oral History Interview

Date: 4/16/05

Interviewee: Leroy White

Interviewer: Bart Callan

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[1:00:08]

Callan, B.: Okay, we're back on. I want to ask you about K-25. When was the first time you saw the K-25 building?

White, L.: Well, in -- I guess that was in -- in 1947? I think that's right. Because I was working in -- in ORNL and then from out of ORNL, we had a lot of medical stuff that had to go to K-25 and all of the three plants. I was circulating then through all of the three plants, you see, because I was working in the Medical Department in ORNL. So that was -- so I sort of covered the whole -- whole area, you know; in other words, K-25, Y-12, and X-10.

[1:01:36]

Callan, B.: So when you first saw K-25, what did you think about that building. Describe it for me. What were your thoughts when you first saw that building?

White, L.: Well, I guess [laughing] what I looked in -- you know, K-25 was, oh, there was a lot of buildings out in that area. Of course, they were sort of pre-fab kind of stuff because it was -- because that was the original setup there, you know, in order to get things, I guess, going [laughing] in the right direction. And -- and really, it was, I guess, in the beginning that's -- that's a big conglomeration of stuff in that building [laughing], in building something for -- to accommodate what they were doing. You understand what I'm talking about. So broad, broad area, and of course, a lot of people working out there and I mean people were working there and they're were, I guess, trying to be creative in their -- in that line of work and stuff. [laughing] Which everybody was busy.

[1:03:10]

And of course, it's the same identical thing there, I guess, today. Trying to reach for high heights. [laughing] That's the way of life anymore, you know.

Callan, B.: I know. What did they tell you was being done out there? How would you describe the work that was being done?

White, L.: Well, this was -- this was sort of -- they didn't -- they didn't talk about, you know, about the work and stuff. In other words, you'd be told what you're supposed to do and you're not supposed to

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discuss it -- what you're doing with anybody else outside.
[laughing] You understand what I'm saying? And we -- you --
you must remember the fact that you were working in sort of a
rather secret community.

[1:04:20]

Callan, B.:

And what was that like, the secret community?

White, L.:

You just didn't talk about -- didn't talk about what you were
doing. People didn't talk about what they -- they says now, you do
what you're told to do [laughing] and that's it. And you didn't
have -- you didn't have a whole lotta time to stand around tell 'em
-- tell 'em whole history of your life. You know, you just go on,
do what you're supposed to. And I think --

Callan, B.:

Had to wear badges?

White, L.:

Yeah, you had to wear badges and identify yourself. You had to --
and if you was in the wrong place, somebody's going to tell you --
tell you better get in the right place. [laughing] But you know,
you had to get -- you had to get yourself -- take care of yourself in
-- in some places because it was lot of -- lot of stuff being thrown
around and stuff just like today. [laughing] There are some places
I bet right now, they shouldn't have people in, I guess. [laughing]
If you know what I mean.

[1:05:43]

Callan, B.:

What different jobs did you work, specifically, what exactly did
you do in the time that you spent out there?

White, L.:

When I went -- when I went out there, the only thing they had to
do with -- with blacks out there was custodial work. That was all,
in other words, black people, and of course, they had -- had other -
- well, some people out there who was, I guess, had degrees in
whatever they were doing and -- and God knows I don't know
what they were doing. [laughing] Didn't -- didn't wanna ask,
either. [laughing] But anyway, I worked in the Medical
Department out there in -- in ORNL. And of course, under Dr.
Gene Felton and, which was a very fine experience for me because
-- because it was a whole lot of things that Gene Felton did not
tolerate as far as race relations because he was Jewish. [laughing]
And if you had any differences about that, he'd tell you right then

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you in the wrong area here because I'm Jewish myself, you understand what I'm saying, don't you? [laughing]

[1:07:19]

And -- but you know what -- it -- it was not a bad experience working with him because he was just right down to earth and he'd let you know if you was wrong in your thoughts, he'd tell you that, too. [laughing]

Callan, B.:

What did you like the most about working out here?

White, L.:

Well, I think the flexibility of it we have and -- and the kind of people that you have to work with. It was, I think, a rather mellowed down kind of -- it wasn't the plain old hard country kind of an approach that you had to use around certain people. You understand -- I don't know if you get where I'm coming from or not, but now, some, you know, some people was hard core racists, if you know what I'm talking about, and, you know, I -- I had to -- I had to learn to work with those people, how to do things their way and stuffs -- and stuff. And -- and have a moderate kind of approach about what I do and how I was able to manage, you understand what I'm saying? [laughing] And I don't know -- it -- but it was -- I think that I put forth a real good effort to -- to try to do things in a moderate way, you know, where the people would -- would pick up their idea because I want us to do things halfway right because I didn't -- I didn't have no special education at all in no -- in chemistries and all that kind of stuff. [laughing] You know. Just (indiscernible) what I -- what I read and stuff. And -- and sure enough, I worked right in the Medical Department out there and it was quite an experience, believe me.

[1:09:44]

Callan, B.:

Give me some examples of how African-Americans were treated differently.

White, L.:

Well, it's -- well -- well -- well -- well -- your race. Can I ask you that?

Callan, B.:

I was raised in New Mexico.

White, L.:

Okay, well, you're -- that's all a different -- different game altogether. [laughter] And yeah, because I've been in Mexico, too. But anyway, you know, it was -- it was the same old, may I

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say, same old cracker kind of environment that you had in Georgia, Mississippi, Alabama, all of that, you know? It's no different. Racism is a thing that [laughing] --.

Callan, B.:

I don't really know. Can you kind of explain to me how it was different?

[1:10:43]

White, L.:

Well, you know, people -- racism is something that -- that dominates -- dominates one race of people. And -- and I don't know. You know, that's hard to explain when you -- when you being brought up in a -- in a black community. And, you know, what people think there, they're better than you are. [laughing] And you're just a, you know, [laughing] and I'm sure you've read a lot about that.

Callan, B.:

I have read and I've heard recollections.

White, L.:

Yeah, yeah -- thing is and I'm sure that you -- you well understand race relationship in -- in the early 40s and -- and on up through your life. If you born in Mexico, I don't care if you was born in Heaven, you'd still know. [laughing]

Callan, B.:

Over at the K-25, you said that you'd been out there. You didn't work there a lot but you had a brother that worked there. What were the working conditions like? Was it warm, was it cold? What were the working conditions like over there?

[1:12:12]

White, L.:

You know -- you know what? It was same kind of conditions that you -- that you -- that you face up to in Alabama, Mississippi, Georgia, where I was born down in there and stuff, and. But, you know, it depends a lot upon your -- your relationship with your immediate family is what -- what really -- and how well aware you are of about what kind of environment you're working in. You understand?

[crew talk]

Callan, B.:

Those aren't the working conditions I'm talking about.

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White, L.:

Well, now, you know, as far as -- as far as the work conditions, I sort of milled my way into, well, into the Medical Department there and Dr. Gene Felton, he was -- he was the leadership out there and believe me, he was a -- a -- a real operator, what I called it. He was -- he was down to earth, he didn't come with no -- he didn't have time for no -- no race relations [laughing] (indiscernible) all over the place, he just told you the way it had to be, and that's the way it was. You understand? [laughing] And -- and if I had to -- had to go and do a job today, I'd like to have a person like him to -- to sort of lay out the job to me because I knew he would do it right and it didn't make no difference about how you felt about it, they -- the Felton way was the way he wanted it done. [laughing] You know what I'm saying? The Felton way is -- is the way it had to be done and I really always admired him for that because it was no -- it was no black in it, it was no white in it, it was just individuals. You understand what I'm saying?

[1:14:44]

Callan, B.:

And that's the way it should be.

White, L.:

[laughing] Doggone right! [laughing]

Callan, B.:

What about your co-workers? What were they like?

White, L.:

You know, most of 'em migrated in there from -- from Alabama, Mississippi, Tennessee, Georgia, and all like that. And so I ended up just being one in the midst of them. [laughing] And we had to all learn together and, you knew all of your supervision and everybody. We didn't have any -- any blacks, you know, into supervising and all that kind of stuff. All didn't have none of that. Everything was just predominantly, I mean, in the upper categories, didn't have no blacks in it, but finally we ended up with some blacks that came in, you know, later down the line. And -- and really, it sorta -- sorta made you feel more at home anyway. [laughing] Yeah, I'll tell you right now!

[1:16:05]

Callan, B.:

What kind of health care was given to you while you were working up there? Did you get good access to health care?

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White, L.: Oh, yes. You know, that was the reason why Felton was there. Because that health care, he was really a unique person in that particular arena. And -- and he didn't chew any bones about his feelings because he was Jewish. [laughing] And he called the shots, too, man! [laughing] And I could appreciate that. And he - - he was really a good -- a good leader, had -- reflected -- kind of (indiscernible) I expected out of -- out of him and all the people around him. [laughing]

[1:17:06]

Callan, B.: Did they perform regular health checks on you?

White, L.: Well, yes. They, you know, I was right there in the Health Department, so, you know, like, well, people that worked out before me, they knew what -- if they -- if they caught you doing something out of order, they'd tell you, say, "Hey! You don't do it that way, baby. You -- you do it this way." [laughing] You understand? And -- because everything -- everything out there was just sort of under the same kind of a shelter. You understand? And you had to be careful about how you -- how you move around and they made you aware of that, which I appreciated.

And -- and, of course, I worked out there for 45 years. And I really never had -- I never really had any -- any problem with things out there. Of course, if you open-minded, you -- you know, and paid attention. [laughing]

Callan, B.: What about your social life out here? What kind of things did you do for fun back in the days?

White, L.: Well, you know, just normal coun -- country life around here, you know. Most of the people here were just -- just country people from Georgia, Alabama, Mississippi, South Carolina. [laughing] That's all you -- all you -- all you met around here. So you weren't -- you didn't feel out of place, you understand what I'm saying. [laughing] But you know, and like, for some of the people around, I guess, and we didn't have no -- we didn't have no problem around here. I -- I really never had any problem.

[1:19:24]

Callan, B.: Did you guys have dances?

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White, L.:

Oh, yeah! We -- all of the dance halls 'round here was just right up here off Illinois Avenue. [laughing] I used to live right up on 240 -- let me see, that was 101 Bettis Lane. Boy, that's way back in days! [laughing] That was just right -- right here off Illinois Avenue.

[1:19:55]

This Illinois Avenue went right through the black neighborhood here in -- in Oak Ridge. And we used to go down to the -- the baseball field used to be just down the way there and -- and, you know, we played, well, I used to play ball, too. Baseball.

And of course, we -- we had a -- we had a good time around here. Not a -- not a dull moment around here back in those times. Course, people had a choice that they just sort of do what they want to do. [laughing] And -- and -- and it was nobody's -- nobody's particular business, you know what I'm talking 'bout. And, of course, lot of -- lot of, I guess, the usual trend the same thing we have today, people drinking liquor and all that kind of stuff and -- and doing their thing. [laughing] And -- and I guess you have to do that in your own freedom. You know, if you feel like you're doing it your way.

Callan, B.:

Go!

White, L.:

[laughing]

Callan, B.:

Sort of broad perspective thing. What do you think future generations should remember about K-25 and the work that was done here during World War II and beyond? What do you think is historically important about this place?

[1:21:39]

White, L.:

You know, I think the -- I think the real thing here is, you know, somewhere we -- somewhere we've got to remember the fact that all of us have a responsibility to something we have, you know. And -- and really, now, they've -- they've -- they came in here with an idea, they put the idea in perspective, and now that's all over with, now, clean up the mess. That's all -- all it is. [laughing]

Callan, B.:

Do you think --?

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White, L.: That's a short way of putting it. [laughing]

Callan, B.: Short but sweet way of putting it.

White, L.: [laughing] Clean up the mess. That's all.

Callan, B.: Keep it simple but very true.

White, L.: Uh-huh. (affirmative) Yeah.

Callan, B.: Overall, do you think that history will feel that this was an important and good step in history or that what we did was a bad thing out here? What do you think?

[1:22:51]

White, L.: Listen, that goes along with -- with society. You know. When you're growing up and all this sort of thing, if -- if your government support -- supports you in what you're doing, then you gotta go along with it. And I -- I think that this was, well, we could be in a much worse war situation than we're in right now. Back in those times. But they tried to do it in a modern way, I think, and I -- I don't know -- I think that really -- I think they were doing -- I think they're keeping things under control some kind of way. I -- I'm not in that arena myself but -- but I know one thing, I think they're doing something. They have enough people out there [laughing] working there. But anyway, I -- I don't have nothin' to do with that. But it's -- I -- I think they're -- I respect what they're doing. I really -- really respect what they're doing. They're trying to do something with it and -- and of course, I think people just have the -- have to have the idea that -- that we're doing the best we can about it, you know. And I think -- and with that attitude, I think you can -- you can work with it. [laughing]

Callan, B.: Thank you.

If you were writing a story about Oak Ridge and K-25, what topics would you cover in that story? What would you think would be important to write about?

White, L.: Well, now that's a -- that's a -- that's a good question. Well, is -- now, that's a real broad question you askin' there for sure. [laughing]

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Callan, B.: (indiscernible) broad questions. I like to see what kind of answers I get.

White, L.: Yeah, well, thing --.

Callan, B.: (indiscernible)

[1:25:29]

White, L.: Yeah, well, thing is, you know, it -- I've thought a lot about -- about that question and you know, in -- in -- back in the -- if somebody would've walked up to me and say, "If you had to write about something, environmental situations," of course, back in that day, it was -- that wouldn't have been a decent thing to write about, I don't think. I mean, contaminants and all that kind of stuff. Because you know, you're out there working in this stuff and -- and they're telling you to be careful about what you touch and all that kind of stuff, but you had to keep that under your hat. [laughing] So it's just -- environment like that, you know, you workin' in it. I don't know whether I'd want -- want to write about those things. Not with me being out there and they says, "Don't touch this" and "don't touch that". You know.

Callan, B.: Did they give you a fair amount of safety equipment?

White, L.: Oh, sure! They -- they clothed you with the right things and all that kind of stuff, trying to keep you clean. And -- and I could -- and you have to be conscious of the fact that -- of -- of cleanliness. You know. You -- you don't take your food and scatter it around all over the place [laughing] in -- in a non-safe environment. [laughing]

[1:27:17]

Callan, B.: I would imagine not.

White, L.: [laughing] So you just -- so actually, laying all jokes aside, they -- I think they put out a real good effort to try to protect individuals from some things because it wasn't all clean. [laughing] And they was -- they was lettin' you know it was not all clean. [laughing] So, I don't know. It was just one of those things. But -- but you know, all in all, if you are -- you are an attentive person with environment -- environment situation back in those times, it wasn't

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a pleasant area to be in and I -- I was sat down and told that when I came in here. So I tried to keep that in the back of my mind says now, "You're going to have to follow the instructions." [laughing] And if you can be instructed, they was trying to give you a right -- right kind of instructions about your safety as an individual. And I -- I appreciated that.

[1:28:44]

Callan, B.:

Okay. Are there any other topics that you want to discuss or anything else that you think I left out that you want to mention about K-25 or Oak Ridge?

White, L.:

Well, you know, like ORNL was most -- most of my workplace, and really, I don't -- I don't know of any -- anything that hadn't been (indiscernible) by the people that -- that do the writing around here, you know. [laughing] Yeah, I tell you right now. But it's -- I don't know of anything that I -- because I think they've tried to keep us well aware of what -- what went on here and -- and they -- and I think -- I trust the authorities as far as when it -- when it -- you know, explaining some of the things that happened here in -- in Oak Ridge and stuff. And you can't -- in our nuclear world, I know we can't expect for it to be -- be [laughing] a totally nice, clean environment. [laughing] You understand what I'm saying? [laughing] Because -- but I think that all in all, I think we should commend some of the leading people who had to do this -- had to do that job here and I think that they ought to be commended for what they tried to do. And I don't -- and of course, I -- I think individually, you -- you have to look at the -- at the thing from a broad perspective when you say well, you know, you worked on this thing and they tried to instruct you to keep your hands clean, keep your mind clean, keep your --. [laughing] And -- and you know what, you had to think about all of those things. It's like being a farmer or whatever you are in Georgia or whatever.

[31:20]

That's where I was born and raised, right down there --

[2:00:06]

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Callan, B.: Okay, we're back and we're talking about maybe some of the people that should be recognized or commended for what they tried to accomplish out here. Which people are you talking about?

White, L.: Well, I mean the -- the whole -- whole working environment. I think -- I think they sort of locked hands and tried to do a decent job in what they was doing and what they were doing with. You get that?

Callan, B.: Uh-huh. (affirmative)

White, L.: [laughing] And all -- all of us were just -- just a bunch of people that, you know, you had leadership in it, but you know that leadership had to work through your people. You know. And try to keep people safe. And I think they did a very good job of that. I -- I really believe that because they worked hard trying to with all -- all of health physics and everything else, you know, doing that job. And if -- you know, that's just like working in your home.

[2:01:52]

Callan, B.: How's that?

White, L.: If you -- if you're working in your home with your family, you gotta have some safety features in your home for your family. It's just like work -- if you're working in nuclear science or whatever -- whatever you're doing. You gotta have some -- some order in it. [laughing] Some safety in it. Whole lot of mixed -- mixed -- mixed emotions in things that you have to remember in that to keep things in order. You know? And I think some of the people need to be commended for what they have tried to do in order to make things workable here in Oak Ridge.

Callan, B.: Thank you. That was beautiful. Any other comments that you can think of that you'd like to talk about out here?

White, L.: Well, I don't -- I really -- you know, with me being just maybe a -- what is called a custodian and all that kind of stuff in -- [laughing] -- and that was my -- my thing was trying to keep things clean.

[2:03:28]

Callan, B.: See, like you said, it takes all kinds of people lockin' hands to make something happen.

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White, L.:

Yeah. Sure! And -- and it includes technical people as well as the people actually doing the clean up. You understand what I'm saying? So I don't know. It's just one of those things. But --

[2:03:48]

Callan, B.:

What sort of clean up did you have to do? Was it just normally just like floors? Did you have to clean up anything strange?

White, L.:

Well, you know what, if they had -- if they had a spill like any chemicals they thought was, they'd have special people to go in there --

[End of Interview]