Martie Robertson – Life during WWII

By Martie Robertson

October 5, 2002

Box 1 Folder 19

Oral Interview conducted by Deborah Sandberg

Transcript copied by Maren Miyasaki  June 2005

Brigham Young University – Idaho
DS: What are some of your memories of Pearl Harbor?

MR: On the morning of Pearl Harbor was a Sunday morning. I was working. I used to work on Sundays sometimes, I had to, and I was installing equipment downtown, in Salt Lake, and one of the members of our ward here, I lived here, drove by me and saw me. He stopped and talked to me, and he had heard about the bombing of Pearl Harbor. He was really quite concerned because he had a son over in Pearl Harbor. He had no idea what was had on. He had just heard it over on the radio, what had gone on there. I stopped to think that what a tremendous thing that would be, just the scope of it. I went on with my work, and finished the day there and didn’t hear anymore about it until I got home. By then, this happened about ten o’clock on a Sunday morning, that he came by and I got home, news was on the radio trying to explain the scope of Pearl Harbor. It wasn’t on TV; it was just on the radio. It was a tremendous change in my life.

My job was to install equipment. I was in the equipment business, all types of heavy equipment, boilers, air compressors, laundry equipment, dry cleaning equipment, and I was doing a lot of that. I didn’t realize until a few weeks what that meant because I suddenly couldn’t get a lot of that. The total production and activity of the United States was war, and they just quit making equipment of the style I was installing. I was practically out of work. The Remington Arms Company was started in Salt Lake City. They had three big buildings where they were building ammunition. Two buildings were building thirty caliber ammunition and one was fifty caliber ammunition. I went out and applied for a job and got a job working in one of the arms plant buildings building thirty caliber ammunition. I started out as a tube setter, operating one of the machines that measured the calibers of the ammunition. It was very, very delicate. All the girls would have to sort the ammunition out and put it in a hopper and it would go through the machine, and it would measure the diameter of it, the length of it, the caliber of it, and reject any of it that wasn’t exactly right so it wouldn’t jam a machine gun or a rifle. That was my job that year and I was advanced to foreman of the whole thing. It was a big building, tremendous building, in fact I’m back working in that building, working for the Humanitarian Service. It’s the most satisfying work I’ve ever done in my life.

I went to work there until the fifteenth of November, and they closed the building down. We had made enough ammunition I guess to shoot every one in the world. Train loads of ammunition, they didn’t need anymore or any place to put it so they closed the plant down and locked the door. I was out of a job. I looked for a job and found out about a job in Pasco Washington. They were building a plant and with my skills in equipment, plumbing, steam fitting, and gas fitting, and such…Four of us from that plant signed onto go to Pasco Washington to work on the construction of that plant there. We had no idea what it was, but it was a plant that we could go up there and have a job in construction. Our families would stay there in Salt Lake, I didn’t like that, but I didn’t have much of a choice. So we got ready to go.

Two days before we were to leave to go to Pasco Washington, I had a friend of ours that lived across the street from us. He wanted to go to the employment center to look a job. I drove him down to the employment center. While he was being interviewed for a job a man came up to me, introduced himself, and he said, “You looking for a job?” “No, not really,” I said. “I just got a job. I’d been working here, but they closed the plant and I’m being transferred up to Washington.” He said, “What type of work have you
been doing.” And I explained to him the machinery and the equipment that had been measuring the ammunition and such. He said, “Well, that’s interesting, would you be interested in going to work for me?” I said, “Going to work for you where?” He said, “East Tennessee.” I had never been east of Colorado. Tennessee was far off. I said, “What would I be doing?” He said, “I can’t tell you, but it would be comparable to what you’ve been doing.” “What kind of work would it be?” He said, “I can’t tell you, but you’d fit in.” He said, “We would furnish you a home, move your family down there, and when the emergency was over we would move you back to Salt Lake City.” Well, that was a blessing, to be able to go with my family and not live in the barracks in Pasco Washington! So I came home and talked to Dorothy, and she was all for that. I talked to the other three fellows that were going up [with] me to Pasco. I asked them, told them what I was doing and he asked, “Would they be interested?” I told them that afternoon, and we agreed that we would go there, the four of us, I was the foreman in my department and two of the men were over me. They were shift supervisors, and one of the men was under me.

This was in the time of gas rations and tire rations, all kind of rations where you need coupons, all kinds of coupons. So we signed onto go. We drove with one of the fellows in his car. We had enough gas between the four of us to get down there, but before we got to Denver we blew a tire. We had a heck of a time trying to find an extra tire. We finally found a service station that had a used tire that fit, and we went on to Tennessee. It took us five days to get there. Now this was a long time ago, and there was no freeways.

We got into Oakland Tennessee, we found Oakridge, and we got there Christmas Eve, 1943. A couple of days later we went into the office, to sign up. Well, we had no idea what we were doing. No one would tell us. They only said that it would be comparable to what we were doing. We signed up and got on the pay roll. They said, “Now this a very secure plant. The fact that you had security from the Remington Arms Plant initiate you to start you here, but we have to check your security.” It took them three weeks to check us out. We signed up and got on the pay roll. They said, “Now this a very secure plant. The fact that you had security from the Remington Arms Plant initiate you to start you here, but we have to check your security.” It took them three weeks to check us out. We lived there and they gave us a little apartment, and we lived in that apartment for the three weeks it took them to check our security. Then they sent us out into the plant. It was still under construction. We had different areas. This was a new area in the hills and valleys of Tennessee. It was large, but it was surrounded by a barbed wire fence and [they] patrolled around it all day long. You had to have a badge certificate to get into it. Then, you had to have a different badge to go into area as we called it. We went there and got acquainted. They were still working on the building. The building we were going to work in was still under construction.

We had worked for about a week when they called me in. They said, “We have a house for you, here’s three houses. Go select on and tell us which one you selected.” I went out and selected one on the top of the hill, the front porch looked into a valley of trees and the back door looked into another valley, wonderful place. I selected that place. The fellow I drove out with selected a house the same day and we went back. We got there, all this gas rationing and tire rationing, I put my car in the garage of a friend of mine and we got on a train to Tennessee. We had a compartment on this train; we had three children, David, Judy, and Norm. Norm was just [a] baby. We got into Oakridge Tennessee about three o’clock in the morning, sided our car on a railing and about seven o’clock, an army van came and picked us up and took us to our home. It was a beautiful
home, bare, nothing in it. Our furniture was on a van somewhere. We stopped by the army headquarters down in the village and loaded up with cots, blankets, pillows, two card tables, some folding chairs, few dishes, and army bare necessities and that [was] what we [were] living on until our furniture got there.

The next day I went out to the super attendant’s office and reported to work. He asked, “How are you getting along?” I said, “Well fine, we’re here. We’re camping. We don’t have furniture, we don’t have anything.” I spent the day there getting acquainted, and the next morning I went to work, he asked, “How did you get along?” I said, “We’re barely making it.” [They had just built this place that was to be the home of 75,000 people and down in the valley, I’d say three or four city blocks, our city blocks they were, had a grocery store and other stores.] They were building a grocery store about a block from us on top of the hill from us and that we had to walk to get our groceries.

I had to go to the super attendant and he greeted me and says, “How would you like to go on a trip?” “A trip? I just got back from one.” He said, “I know, but I need you to go on this trip.” I said, “Where?” He said, “California.” I said, “For how long?” He said, “Two or three months.” I said, “When?” He said, “Tomorrow morning.” I said, “You must be kidding. My family is here, [that] doesn’t know a soul in the world, no automobile, no furniture, nothing and you want me to leave them!” He said, “Yes I do. I give you my word that your family will be taken care of.” I went home and talked to Dorothy. She was flabbergasted. She thought I would be here. She said, “When would you leave” and I said, “Tomorrow morning.” So we prayed about it, talked about it. That was my choice; I mean that was the choice I had. I got [on] the train with another fellow from Casper Wyoming. He and I took the train to Berkley California.

There could be no connections between Berkley California and Oakridge Tennessee, absolutely couldn’t phone them, couldn’t phone one another, couldn’t write one another. Dorothy would write me a letter and she would give it to a man, and I would get it in Berkeley California. I would write a letter give it to someone and Dorothy would get it in Oakridge. Payday I would go to the Bank of America, I would sign the check they would give me the cash. I would give cash to this man and he would give it to Dorothy. There was absolutely no connection between the two. It was a secret, the most secret project in the United States. At that time Roosevelt was president, and Truman, had a Truman committee and he was in charge of security. He came down to Oakridge to investigate it, and he didn’t even get through the front gates. It was that strict.

So I was in Berkley California at the University of California, in the radiation laboratory, that’s where we worked. We didn’t talk about it. It’s just where we worked. We worked there everyday. We had an apartment and we walked there everyday to work in the radiation laboratory. We worked there with Dr. Lawrence, Dr. Oppenheimer, Dr. Schmidt, and Dr. Van Atta. They were four men we got to work with. They were instrumental in the motion of the atomic bomb. Now, we had never heard of the atomic bomb or anything about it, but we were working with two college graduates, and they were in the same department with us. And one day they brought a book home and showed it to us. They took it to work. We were reading it, looking at it in the radiation laboratory. Dr. Oppenheimer came by and asked, what book is that? We showed him, and its title said Why Smash Atoms? He asked, “Were did you get that?” “In a bookstore downtown.” He said, “I want to tell you something about that book.” He said that book cannot be taken out of this room. “You cannot talk about it anywhere with anybody.
You can read it, discuss it, but you cannot talk about it or show it to anyone.” Well, we did discussed it, Why Smash Atoms? Why was it so secret? Well, these two young men came up with that thought that we were working on an atomic bomb. So it was very, very secret. So I went down and bought a book so I could have one too. I don’t know where it is. I’ve had it for years, but I can’t seem to find it.

So we worked there for almost three months and corresponded with Dorothy, I don’t know how she got along. The neighbors were wonderful, the were two on each side. The morning we got there, we brought in the beds and the cots and the card tables and such. Just as we got them in there the neighbor next door, she and her mother who was living with her mother who was living with her, her husband was a secretary officer in charge of the Oakridge area, brought over dinner. A wonderful dinner, just set it out there for us and that’s the types of neighbors we had.

So one day we were working with 55 to 58 men, all working on this project. One day they called us together and said, “We’re all caught up here, your plan is ready to get started, you’ll be leaving a week from Monday to go back on a special train car, all of you together, instead of two cars.” So I got thinking about it. I went to the head man, and I said, “When I went to Oakridge Tennessee the told me that we wouldn’t need a car because of gas rationing and gas rationing. My car is in storage in Salt Lake, and I would like to take the train to Salt Lake, get my car, and drive down to Oakridge.” He said, “That’s alright. You can leave a few days early.” So I did. Got on a train to Salt Lake picked up my car and Dorothy’s mother who lived there, and we drove down to Oakridge. We got there a day before the train [and] all the other workers got there.

I went on to work that day, and the super attendant asked how I was getting along. I said, “Fine.” He said, “We’re ready to start out. I need four shift supervisors and I’d like you to be one of them.” That was a really wonderful opportunity. He asked, “Do you know anyone else who could fill that?” I said, “We got two men out here who came with me who were supervisors before we came out from Remington Arms. They would be wonderful.” He said, “Alright, who are they?” I told him. He said, “Alright. That’s fine. I need one more. I’ll fin’ someone else.” So we started out working, the three of us who came down to Oakridge together, as shift supervisors in that plant. My job was in charge of the maintenance of the units of which the product was refined. I can’t explain it to you because it was all charged. We were working with 34,000 volts of electricity in a vacuum tank. The vacuum tank was twelve feet high, eight feet deep and a big oval. These units would be inserted in there and operate in a vacuum under this huge electrical charge. That refined the product. My job was as shift supervisor to maintain these units. That’s what I did.

We enjoyed living in Tennessee. It’s beautiful country. We worked shift work. We would go to work at seven to three, three to eleven, and eleven to seven, about eight hours. Our work was about three to four miles, not in the area we lived in, and we called it the Y-12 area. It was about three miles out there, and we would take a bus out. Every three weeks we would change shifts. When we changed midnight shift to day shift we’d have two days off for a recovery.

With our ration books, with tremendous people living there, we couldn’t get meat. We couldn’t get a lot of things, you know, that was rationed. I know, one day we would take the car, I had unlimited gas because I was a supervisor, unlimited gas and tires, and on my days off we head off for the little crossroad towns in Tennessee. Just little country
roads and there would be this grocery store there. We would go in and see what they had to buy. I went into one of them one time and there sitting on the counter was a case of White Star tuna fish, one can missing. I had my ration book, well I had five ration books with me, and I said, “How many cans of tuna will you sell me?” He said, “I’ll sell you the whole damn case,” he said. “People here don’t eat tuna fish.” So he sold me the twenty three cans of tuna fish, and I didn’t have to give him a ration stamp. So I took them home and Dorothy was able to trade tuna fish for a lot of things.

Well, we’d go out and get a lot of things. We couldn’t buy shoes. We’d have to go into Knoxville to find shoes, things for the kids. We did a lot of things because I had unlimited gas and we’d tour an awful lot. At that time I was still shooting a bow and arrow, they had an archery club there, and we’d go shoot tournaments, so we really, really enjoyed it.

But the thing I really didn’t enjoy was the way the people there treated the black people, the niggers. Now we had a lot of niggers working at the plant. The only job they could hold there was sweeping the floor and cleaning the toilets. That’s the only thing they could have. I remember one time we had on the night shift, I meet a young fellow, a black boy, who had just graduated from one of the colleges and had an engineering degree, but was sweeping the floors. That’s all he could do. And I had a good relationship with him. One day I got a notice in my mailbox, it said, “It’s been reported to us that you are getting very friendly or personal with a black man,” nigger is what they call it, “I suggest that you brake it off.” The way they treated the blacks, it was terrible. On the tour out to the area it wasn’t unusual, I remember three times it happened, to see a dead body on the side of the road at seven o’clock, one time at three o’clock the body was still there. That’s how they were treated. I remember they didn’t have any sidewalks, they had boardwalks, not made out of concrete, but out of boards like on a deck. The ground there is red clay and it rained a lot. That red clay is just red and sticky. Step on it and it was terrible. I would watch black people come down the sidewalk, and there’s come three men walking down. They’re walking single file to let people pass, but when they would see a black person come they’d go three abreast to make the black person step down into the mud. It was terrible. One day I was down on the first floor and mud had been tracked in. There was a black man, oh about 40 or 50 years old sweeping the floor with a strait broom. And the dust was billowing up. And there was a carpenter working in the corner of the room. I was getting some information and parts there. I heard the carpenter walk over and say, “I can’t work with all this dust. Now you go somewhere else and work till I get through. I can’t work in this dust.” And turned around and went back to work. The black man stood there and didn’t know what to do. His job was to sweep that floor. He stood there for a little bit and started sweeping again. The dust started billowing up. The carpenter turned around and looked at him. He walked over to him, and put his hammer out of his loop on his leg. Just walked over and hit the man with his carpenter hammer in the temple. The man was dead before he hit the ground. He put his hammer back in his overalls and started to work again. One of the men there, in the department, he called security. A five minutes later a pickup truck came and two men came in. One grabbed him by the wrist, the other by the ankles. They carried him out to the pickup truck and one, two, three threw him in the pickup truck and they drove off. Far as I know this man didn’t even put in a hour of work. That’s how they treated the people. We saw in Oakridge. You went to get a drink, the fountain was
white and colors. Don’t let a colored be caught drinking out of a white fountain. The
same with restrooms. I went to take my car into Knoxville one morning to get it repaired,
and I got on the bus. Buses were trailers, fifth wheel trailers, thirty feet long, built like a
pickup truck. It was a homemade bus, to go home. I went in and sat on the side half way
back, there were two seats on each side, didn’t think anything of it. We stopped at a stop.
A couple of people came on, but a black lady, elderly lady, and she came on by me and
started on. All of the sudden I heard a yell. “Get out of there!” And the conductor came
back grabbed her. She had crossed the back of the bus; there were five seats and two
seats on each side for the black people [to] sit. If it [wouldn’t have] taken black people
stood up as it was today. There wasn’t ten people on the bus, but there were five black
people on the back seat, and she sat down in an isle seat in front of the black people. He
came back there and he said, “You get out of that seat.” She said, “But all of the other
seats are taken.” He said, “I don’t care. Don’t ever let me catch you sitting in a white
seat again. You stand up.” And that’s the way they treated the black people.

One morning we saw the headline in the paper. They dropped the first atomic
bomb. That was the atomic bomb. It was the first time they noted that the atomic bomb
was being built, what Oakridge was about. We didn’t know what we were making out
there. It was very secret. I went into the super attendant and I said, “I have a contract
with the government that when the emergency is over you’ll move me back to Salt Lake.”
“That’s right,” he said, “But the emergency isn’t over, go back to work.” So I went back
to work. Thursday, three days later they dropped the second bomb. I went to the
supervisor and said, “Now it’s over.” He said, “Yes, it’s over now. It’s all been taken
care of.” I told Dorothy and the kids that we were going back to Salt Lake City.
Oakridge was the twenty-sixth home I had lived in [during] my life. That’s too many. I
said, “We’re going back to Salt Lake City and build a home and never move again!” We

DS: What was you most vivid memory?

MR: Well, the most vivid memory I had is when they dropped the atomic bomb. We
knew we were working on a bomb, some of us did, but we had no idea what a
tremendous thing that was. To hear of the tremendous devastation that was, and it
changed the world. Thank goodness there haven’t been any more atomic bombs used. I
[am] sure we have a lot of them. But I think that was the most strong memory I had. We have wonderful memories of the church group there. We were involved. I was in the Sunday school and Dorothy was in the Relief Society Presidency, and we were very close even today, even though there aren’t a lot of us left. It was a wonderful experience.