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FERNALD LIVING HISTORY PROJECT
Transcript

Name: Nancy Abbott

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Tape: 35

Project Number 20012

Tape FLHP0072

02:01:01

(Off camera: tape's rolling)

Q:

Okay. Well, our first question is the hardest question always (laughs).

A:

Is it?

Q:

We just need you to give us your name and spell it, so we have the correct spelling of it.

02:01:11

A:

Nancy Abbott; N-A-N-C-Y A-B-B-O-T-T

Q:

Great. Okay. First, we're gonna start with a little bit of background. Um, when and why did you move to the Fernald area? How long have you been here? Tell us a little bit about your family, those types of things.

02:01:28

A:

Well, we moved to Okeana and lived there two years, and then we bought this farm up here in 19-, (whispers fifty-five) and seven, and built, and lived here ever since. It was fairly close to work, so that was handy. And they had better schools up here. And ah, we raised three children; a girl and two boys. And I still live here (chuckles).

Q:

Good. Now if you lived in the area around the time um, Fernald was being built, or was freshly built, (laughs) what purpose did you and your friends think the plant served?

02:02:23

A:

Well, we were pretty sure they were going to use uranium and build bomb, ah, bombs and stuff. I know some people thought it was gonna be a feed mill, seeded operation, because it said Fernald Feed Metals Production or something like that.

A:

But, having lived here most of my life, we were gone for several years when it was being built. And then when my husband got outta the service, he applied for a job down there and got a job. So that's when we became more aware of what was going on.

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Q:

When he first applied for the job, um, how much did they tell him about what he was gonna be doing?

02:03:13

A:

Not a lot. Not very much. They, because the first thing I said to him, "how safe is it?" And said he was assured it was safe.

Q:

And how long did he work there?

A:

Twenty-six years.

Q:

And he started in what year?

02:03:32

A:

Um, '55. Ah, I think it was April '55.

Q:

And he left in.

A:

He left when he died. Basically, he was off from August 'til he died in January.

Q:

How much did he discuss with you, ah, his job?

02:03:57

A:

I know he worked in every area of the plant. He was involved in all the instrumentation, and he did, he was not specific. He knew years later, that there were problems out there, and he was very upset, but he didn't know who to get in contact to do something about it.

A:

He wasn't specific because it was supposedly all secret, so he really wouldn't say specifically what was goin' on, but there were things he said that were not right out there.

Q:

Did he have to get a Q Clearance to work out there?

02:04:38

A:

Yes.

Q:

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Tell us a little bit about having to get the Q clearance. Did they talk to you?

02:04:43

Uh, yes. Yes. We had just moved back from Huntsville, and we were living, let's see, I happened to be over at my mother's I think, over on Compton Road at the time. And they came there and the interviewed me. They interviewed my parents, and it was quite involved at the time.

Q:

What kind of questions did they ask you?

A:

Oh, I can't remember. At all. I mean you're talkin' almost 50 years ago.

Q:

And who was it that interviewed you?

02:05:18

A:

The FBI

Q:

A lot of people have told us about getting Q clearances. It's interesting thing.

A:

Yeah.

Q:

Um.

A:

Well, basically, where you lived, your background and who you've been affiliated with and everything like that.

Q:

What information do you suppose you were trying to find?

02:05:45

A:

I guess they were trying to find if he was an honest person. Uh, if, if there was any reason to suspect him of anything because the operation out there was so secretive at the time.

Q:

Good. Um, (sniffs) when he first started working there, ah, what did you most worry about?

02:06:18

A:

I, worried about what he would be exposed to out there. The uranium and everything. But they had assured him that it was safe. They didn't tell him all the if, ands, and buts out there, what was goin' on; what could happen. And I don't think he really realized when he began, that, how dangerous some

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o' this stuff was out there.

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02:06:47

A:

Because he was person that was, he'd go overboard to be careful with whatever it was; whether it was workin' on the car, whether it was workin' in the garden and sprayin', whatever. He'd make sure it was done as safely as possible, 'cause he was just that way. Safety was his first concern, no matter what area it was.

Q:

And you say he was in most of the plants.

A:

He worked in all the buildings out there.

Q:

Do you know now what he did?

02:07:23

He, well, he basically worked on all the instruments. And I know he, some of the instruments got so old, and every time they'd break down, finally, he, could not find parts and he'd have to make the parts to keep 'em goin'. And he worked in a laboratory out there, and those stations around the plant perimeter, he made those in the, the beginning. He took care of all those; the readings and everything.

Q:

Something I haven't asked you yet; what was your husband's name?

A:

Augustus Abbott, called Gus (chuckles).

Q:

Tell us a little bit about Gus um, during those years he worked at Fernald, what was his personality like? What were some of the things he enjoyed doing?

02:08:14

A:

Oh, he enjoyed his family, he enjoyed raising his cows and gardening, and vacationing.

Q:

Where did you guys usually go?

A:

Well, sometimes we went to Florida in the winter because my parents had a home down there, and we would go down for 2 weeks. And we went to Canada, and Michigan, and we'd take weekend vacations sometimes. But general, we drove to California one time, and just, West Virginia. My father was from West Virginia, so he liked to go over there in the mountains, so.

Q:

While Gus was working at Fernald, did he become ill?

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02:09:08

A:
Yes.

Q:
Tell us a little bit about his illness.

A:
Well, he started out with a lump on his neck. And he went to the doctor, no, wait a minute. He had a lump on his tongue, and it was in the summer. And he and I both had a problem with acid from tomatoes, so we assumed that's what it was.

A:
Well, it didn't get better, and it didn't get better, and it didn't get better, so finally, he went to the doctor, and the doctor decided to operate and take it out and he found out it was cancer. And he did fine after that. And later on, um, maybe 9 months, he discovered this lump on his neck. And then he went back to the surgeon, and the surgeon did a very big operation on his neck and took all that out, took some of the lymph glands out, and it was just downhill from then on.

02:10:16

A:
He, they gave him radiation, they found out that was only makin' it worse, so they put him on chemotherapy.

Q:
Did the doctors have any idea what caused his illness?

A:
My husband asked the surgeon, "do you think this could have been caused by where I work?" And he said, "without a doubt." But then when I filed a workman's compensation suit, he would say, "I don't know."

Q:
The surgeon would say.

A:
That's right. The surgeon told, my, 'cause my, I can remember that just as well as if he said it yesterday. Do you think this came from where I work, and the doctor said, "without a doubt." But then he wouldn't say that same thing when I brought suit for workman's compensation.

Q:
Why do you think that happened?

02:11:19

A:
I don't know. I don't know if he was afraid o' what he might get involved in. I never did ask him.

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Q:

Hmm. When your husband became ill, did he talk to the medical officials at the plant at all? (Pause) did he get exams at all, and at.

02:11:44

A:

Oh, he got his regular exams and everything, and after he had surgery on his tongue. Before he'd go back, they checked him out, and then he went back after he had the neck surgery, and they checked him out. But he was only able to go back for about 2 weeks until his neck broke open again, so, he wasn't able to go back to work after that.

Q:

And what did the Fernald medical department think of this?

A:

I have no idea. I have no idea.

Q:

So you never got reports or anything from them.

02:12:21

A:

No. Nothing.

Q:

Hmm. Now what year did your husband pass away?

A:

January in 19 and 82.

Q:

And so that was just previous to a lot of the media attention.

A:

Yeah.

Q:

That Fernald received.

A:

There was no media attention. There was nothing. But he was suspicious, because a friend of his, well, there were three men that worked on one project, and I can't tell ya what it is. I don't know, but they were inside of something, cleaning it out. And he knew where the one man was, and he had died already from cancer.

02:13:05

A:

And then he got sick, and he, he never was able to find the other one; the third person. And after he

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got sick and was off work, he went back to the plant to the library, and he did some research on respirators, and he said right here, it said this respirator that they told me to use is not for this kind of work.

02:13:31

A:

It's not the kind of respirator that I should have been usin'. So he was convinced that's where he got it. But he used to jog at work, during noon hour, and you can see by that report, his lungs had 2000 times as much, so he was inhalin' all the time he was exercisin'.

Q:

Tell us a little bit about the report. And we'll have that on camera in a little while, but um, tell us how that report came to you, how you managed to get that.

02:14:04

A:

Well, when I brought lawsuit, we needed to get some proof, so ah, we had his body exhumed. And they got the parts o' the body that the doctor wanted, and sent 'em off and the doctor fired a letter back right away, saying what was going on. And, then ah, Dr. Morgan, he's not an M.D., he's a, oh, I can't think. He does research.

A:

And he's the one that compiles all these records, and says you have such, a certain percent of a chance from this or that. Well, they wouldn't believe him. You needed an M.D. Well, an M.D. reads what Dr. Morgan prints in his research, and they make their findings, but that wasn't to be. They said you have to have an M.D.

Q:

So they wouldn't consider that report in the lawsuit at all?

A:

We didn't get to bring the, no. They said, then, we got a doctor from England. And he did, he read Dr. Sharma's report, and they said he had not practiced as an M-, as a family doctor, as an M.D., he had done research, too. He, he had prio-, years before, he had. But then, la-, latter years, he hadn't. So the judge plain said you had to have an M.D., and we didn't get to bring the, it before a court.

02:15:55

Q:

Were you involved in the class action suit at all?

A:

I wasn't part of, I mean, I was part of it, but not the part when they got it started and everything. Not with the group that was testified and all that.

Q:

Once your husband became ill, um (pauses) how did that make you feel about both Fernald, and I guess the Federal Government?

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02:16:27

A:

Angry, that your government wouldn't tell ya the truth. That they, they kept all this hidden. Maybe they didn't know everything, but they sure knew probably more than they were tellin' the men out there.

02:16:47

Q:

What did that make you want to do?

A:

(Beginning to sob) What did it make me do? Well, there wasn't anything I could do, by then. But I was very angry, and that's why I got involved with FRESH, to see if through them I could ah, find out any more. And those people from Fernald down there, they come to these FRESH meetings, and they tell you that that stuff doesn't go over that chain-link fence. Stand up there with a straight face and tell you that (wipes her nose).

02:17:25

Q:

Tell us about how you got involved in FRESH. First.

A:

Well, I saw it, an article in the paper was the first I had known about it. So I did some research and found out where they were meeting and everything, and then I, I joined. And I used to go to the meetings all the time, and I was behind 'em 100%, because I knew what, from the other side what was goin' on out there (clears throat).

01:17:54

Q:

Tell us about the early years of FRESH's involvement. What did they hope to accomplish, and what kind of obstacles did they come up against?

A:

Well, they hoped to get the place cleaned up, basically, and they finally got it shut down, but I think, they were loud, and the louder they got, they did get some, some results from that. Because I don't think if they hadn't a, had a FRESH group, or another group similar to them, I don't think they would, a done anything. Because there were workers that joined, and they would tell stories.

02:18:37

Q:

Now when all the publicity about Fernald, and ah, the media attention happened, it was mid '80s, '84, '85, and continued up until finally the plant was shut in 1989.

A:

Yeah.

Q:

Um, how did you react to that, when it finally all came to light?

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02:18:58

A:

Well, I felt that it vindicated me. That it vind-, I knew what I knew, and I knew that that's what my husband had said. He knew that things weren't right out there, and all these articles you would read, it just proved, that what, that they had just taken his life, basically.

Q:

And in the early years of the involvement of FRESH, how did the Department of Energy, and the Fernald officials, the folks who were running the plant, how did they react to FRESH in the beginning?

02:19:43

A:

They weren't too thrilled with 'em. They, didn't really, they come up with all these excuses, and everything, and they didn't think anything was going on out there, and everything was fine. And they'd explain aw-, try to explain away things that you knew weren't true.

Q:

Like what? Tell us an example if you can think of somethin'.

A:

Oh, gosh, I can't, right now, right off hand. Well, it's like I said with radon. It didn't go over those chain-link fences or none of the stuff. I mean.

02:20:22

Q:

Now, being a part of FRESH, did you keep up with a lot of the scientific studies they were doing about the site at that point?

A:

I keep up with it somewhat. Yeah. Because I cataloged all the clippings and everything. I put those in order for 'em, so I was readin' all these things again. Because I had kept clipped all this stuff outta the paper, too. But then I put theirs in order, so, from – ah date-wise.

Q:

And reading back over all those clippings, um, how did that make you feel in relation to the loss of your husband?

02:21:03

A:

Mad. Angry. But there wasn't anything I could do.

Q:

Do you feel like getting involved in FRESH, um, what did you hope to accomplish?

A:

I hoped to ah, to get information, and see if they got information that I could use. And I mean it just proved the things that I was thinkin'.

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02:21:39

Q:

OK, good. (Pauses) and uh, are you still involved in FRESH now?

A:

Yeah, somewhat. Not near as much. I just, just can't get all my work done and go to all the meetings.

Q:

Um, what satisfaction do you get from it now?

A:

From what, FRESH?

Q:

FRESH.

02:22:04

A:

Well, I see the job they have gotten done, or f-, forced Fernald to clean up their act, and I'm behind that 100%. So I think, and as I say, without that group, or another group like 'em, then nothing would, a been done. It's like hidin' your eyes and not wantin' to see what's out there.

Q:

Tell us about some of those early meetings. Because they had to be doozies. (Both laugh) tell us about a couple of those, how did FRESH put pressure on, it's almost like fighting city hall. Right?

A:

It's like fighting city hall or fightin', it's like fighting the government ever' step o' the way, and they're, they're the big boy, and you're the minus little thing here. And, it just, it just was hard to keep goin', but they kept on goin', and fightin' and fightin' and fightin', and they finally got some action.

02:23:17

Q:

Tell me about the day that FRESH found out that they were closing the plant.

A:

Oh, well, they were thrilled. Thrilled, thrilled, thrilled.

Q:

What about you personally; how did you feel when they decided to go ahead and close the plant?

02:23:35

A:

I was glad. I didn't see, wanna see any more people go through what I'd been through. That's mainly why I brought a law suit; as I didn't wanna see any more families suffer though what I had suffered. And if they weren't gonna clean it up, why, you know. So they finally admitted some o' the stuff.

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Q:

Good. Um, now, ah, now that the site is being cleaned up, how has FRESH's role changed, and how has your role in the organization changed somewhat?

A:

Well, now that it's being cleaned up, they, we've gotten, the people down at Fernald, they come each month; they report all the accidents, they report, and they, they're more open about what's goin' on out there. And now they're tryin' to come up with ideas on how to use the site when it is cleaned up. And safety's always been one of their goals.

02:24:58

Q:

What would you personally like to see that land used for?

A:

I don't really have, an idea what to use it for. Because I don't think it would still be safe for people to be there all the time. I know there's not the risk that there was back when my husband worked there. I know it's a lot better than that, but I don't really in my mind what it could be used for.

02:25:33

Q:

Now you, do you attend the public meetings now, a lot of the public meetings now?

A:

I don't go to near as many of the public meetings I, other than FRESH. I used to go to a lot of the meetings and everything.

Q:

Now you've probably seen a lot of photos of ah, people in full anti-Cs and full-face respirators, in those same plants that your husband worked in with little protection.

A:

Um-hm. A respirator.

Q:

How does that make you feel now?

A:

(Sighs) I, I don't know, why didn't they do all this to begin with, and why didn't they do more research into protecting the workers out there? Because basically, he wore his clothes, brought 'em home and I washed 'em.

A:

And then wearing a respirator for some o' that stuff, once in a while, he would put somethin' on his shoes, and stuff, they said, he said, and wore a lab coat and leave that there, but other than that, there just wasn't anything.

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02:26:50

Q:

Did you ever fear for you yourself and your children's safety?

A:

Not at the beginning, no. And after the fact, it's not gonna do me any good to worry about it now, because whatever is gonna happen is gonna happen. Thank goodness I have healthy, three healthy children and 4 healthy grandchildren.

Q:

Are you in the Medical Monitoring Program now? Tell us a little bit about that.

02:27:18

A:

Well, I think it's a good idea. They're turn, sometimes turn up some things. And it's just basically every two or three years, you get a complete physical. And I get a mammogram every year, and if something comes up when I do have a physical, they'll let you know either to come back and redo the test, or, or go to your doctor and check on this, this, and this.

A:

And then they've got a good follow-up program, that if they haven't heard back that they've done this, then they'll call you and remind you. And I've been bad about some o' that stuff, so it's good that they call up and remind you that you need to check whatever it is that they've found wrong.

02:28:11

Q:

Good. Then how do you feel about the work that's going on at Fernald now?

A:

Well, they're sure havin' a hard time getting' some o' that stuff together and getting' rid of it. But they're spendin' a lot o' money for nothin' because some o' these things they try to do, and then, it just falls apart, and then they have to go another avenue, so.

Q:

What do you think is the worst problem on site right now?

A:

Getting rid o' the contaminations in those pits out there.

Q:

And have you.

02:28:51

(Off camera: Actually, we're about to run out)

Q:

Oh, OK. We're gonna change tapes real quick. You're doin' a great.

(Tape ends cutting off the interviewer)

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Tape FLHP0073

03:01:00

(Off camera: we're up and rolling)

Q:

Great. Um, I was gonna ask you about shipping, but lemme ask you this first. How do you think the management of Fernald has changed from the years that your husband worked there to now?

A:

Well, I think they're more, what's the word I wanna use? They're care, more careful, but I still think they all make mistakes, because this is something they don't know a whole lot about. So I think they try, but they fall short sometimes.

Q:

Now how far are you away here at your house from Fernald?

A:

As the crow flies? Uh, about 3 miles. Because you can see it from acro-, you can't in the summer you can't, but in the winter you can see it from there.

03:02:04

Q:

Did it ever worry you, um, when you first moved here, to live so close to the plant?

A:

(Sighs) no, not now, because they're cleanin' it up. But ah, you know, having, if I knew what I know now, it'd a, scared the daylight's outta me, livin' this way. Because we had some o' those monitors up here once in a while. He would, my husband would bring 'em up to monitor.

Q:

Did he ever find anything?

A:

He never said. He never said.

03:02:48

Q:

Well, um, what was your contact with other plant workers?

A:

Not a whole lot. Uh, social gatherings and stuff like that, we just didn't have a whole lot o' contact, or I didn't.

03:03:11

Q:

And did the contact that you had, did you ever mention any of your worries about your husband working in the plant, did you (interrupted by the interviewee's answer).

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A:

No. No. Not really. But I, I know after my husband died, there were a number of people that come up to me and said, do you think where he worked caused his cancer? And I hadn't said anything, so you know, people had realized, by then, that things could not be right out there.

Q:

Do you have contact with other wives who lost their husbands?

A:

No, not really.

03:03:55

Q:

Uh, let's see. Here's a question for you. If you could go back in time, and talk to the management of Fernald and talk to the Federal government, the um, folks who were running, I guess it was the A.E.C. back then, knowing what you know now, what would you like to tell them?

A:

That they should be honest, they should have known what they were doin', they should have been more careful, they should have taken more safety precautions for the workers.

03:04:31

Q:

And what would you tell them about your husband?

A:

What would I tell about my husband? That he died at 50, so he's lost a lot o' years.

Q:

It'd be great if you could do that (they both laugh).

A:

Yeah!

03:04:58

Q:

If you could tell us a little more about your fellow FRESH members, who else is involved in the organization, and who have you worked with through the years?

A:

Well, I've worked with Carole Shorer, Lisa Crawford, Vicki Dastillung, those're about the main ones, but there have been others that kinda have dropped off like I have since things have been changed, out there. (Clears throat) and it's mainly a lot of 'em dropped out after the law suit, after they won that. A lot o' people came I think, just to get the money (laughs).

03:05:43

Q:

Now with FRESH, when you first approached them about joining, what did you tell them? I mean, did

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you tell them why you wanted to get involved?

A:

Well, I told 'em that my husband had worked there. Yes. I was up front.

Q:

And what was their reaction?

A:

They were glad, to have me. Because there was some other, well, there are s-, several men that died that used to be members of FRESH.

03:06:14

Q:

And were you involved when the Donahue show came to town? Did you see the show at all?

A:

No. No, I didn't.

Q:

Did you watch it?

A:

You know, I can't really say whether I did or not.

Q:

I think that was like 1984, 85, it was pretty long time ago (laughs).

A:

Yeah. I've tried to wipe a lot of it out.

03:06:39

Q:

Would you say that, why do you say that?

A:

Because they're bad memories (closes eyes for a second).

Q:

And ah, with your involvement with FRESH now, with the cleanup, um, what do you hope to see accomplished at the site?

A:

Well, I hope to see all uh, the bad stuff gone from out there. All the uranium, all the contamination. I hope to see all that cleared out. That's the main thing (clears throat).

03:07:34

Q:

And how do you think Fernald in general has affected the community.

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A:

Well, it's given a lot o' people jobs on the plus side, but it's ruined a lot o' families because of the health problems. So, you give a little and you take a little, I guess.

Q:

Good, good. (Pauses) uh, let's see, let me go through my list here. Is there anything that we didn't cover that you wanna say?

A:

No, I can't think of anything.

Q:

Okay. Great. Thank you so much for sharing your story with us.

Q:

And ah, we need to get a little bit of what we call nat sound, so if we could have quiet on the set for a second, this is nat sound.

03:08:53

(Off camera: okay)