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Transcript

Name: Mary Gellert

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23:01:07

Q:

Okay. We always save the hardest question for first.

A:

That's okay. Probably it's no answer, don't know.

Q:

If you could just give us your name and the spelling.

A:

Mary Gellert. G-E-L-L-E-R-T.

23:01:24

Q:

Great. We usually start with a little bit of background. If you can just tell us a little bit about your family, where you were born, where you went to school.

A:

I was born at Dover Indiana. Went to school at Dover from grades 1 through 8 in Guilford High School 9 through 12. And I'm from a family of seven and I am married now and have four children and five grandchildren with one on the way, yes. And that's probably it. I do real estate appraising as my line of work. And um we camp and we, but we do it not in tents. I like Holiday Inn camping such as motor homes and we travel, yeah that's our big hobby. And that's about it. We enjoy the grandkids a lot. That's it, yeah.

23:02:20

Q:

Um, first of all um tell us about how you got your job at Fernald in 1959.

A:

I think my feeling was that I got it because my brother and sister were there. And because of that they had been there couple years; three or four maybe prior to what I was there. And when I graduated from high school or prior to graduation I put my application in and they called and told me I had the job but I had to wait till the end of June before, which would have been when I turned 18 and wait for my clearance. And then I went to work there. That's how I feel I got my job.

23:02:59

Q:

And who's your brother and sister?

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A:

My brother is Harold Knue and my sister at the time was Carolyn Knue but her married name is Simmermeyer. And she lives in Cincinnati and Harold lives in Dover.

23:03:14

Q:

Tell us about when you went in for your interview. Tell us about that day, what was that like?

A:

The only thing I really can remember was the typing test. I was so nervous and I flubbed up really bad and they let me try it again. And other than that I don't remember that it was any big deal. It must not have bothered me one way or the other because I don't remember that. I remember the typing test.

23:03:41

Q:

What did the site look like when you got there?

A:

A lot of cement. That's the way I remember everything, you know, I remember going into the personnel building and I remember the security. It was probably very awesome to me because, you know, growing up in this little town of Dover and we didn't get very far away in miles at that time and so it was an exciting feeling. I remember, you know, just kind of seeing a lot of cement.

23:04:16

Q:

Now you said you had to have Q clearance to work there.

A:

I couldn't tell you what, you know, what clearance but I've been hearing that name with the interviews or that letter and I remember back that I think that's what they called it was Q clearance.

23:04:34

Q:

And you had to wait a couple of months to get Q clearance, what were they doing?

A:

As much as I know they were checking whether I had a criminal record and probably whether I was dependable, would I be a good employee. That's all I can tell you. I had different people tell me that they had calls or it might have been letters at that time that they were checking on me. But other than that I don't know.

23:05:01

Q:

And who did you hear from that they had called or contacted?

A:

I don't remember. Don't remember that at all.

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23:05:09

Q:

So maybe your brother and sister sort of warned you to that, that was going to happen?

A:

Probably. I'm sure, I'm sure that whatever I knew about the place came from them.

23:05:21

Q:

Now tell us a little bit about security on site, what was that like?

A:

Uh, I don't remember that it was, you know, anything frightful. I just remember that we had to wear our security badges and we had to show them when we entered the plant. And um that's all, you know, we'd see security people as we walked in but that's all I can remember.

23:05:48

Q:

And what was your understanding of uh the mission of Fernald when you got there?

A:

I was under the understanding that it was very secretive and I would not understand it. And I did not understand it. I typed, I was a clerk typist and I typed what they gave me but I did not understand one iota of what I was doing as far as what I was typing.

23:06:17

Q:

Was it reports or forms or?

A:

Uh I remember repor-, or forms, like fill in the blank forms. That type thing, that's what I remember.

23:06:30

Q:

Good. And what was a typical day like at Fernald?

A:

Um, that was, we came to work and we got our coffee and there was a lot of chitchatting because there was not a lot of work. Uh, I did not work hard. I did not work a lot and I was told at least, you know, appear busy and I always had my crossword puzzles there. And I hope they don't come back and take my paychecks away from me. Uh but it was that way and we kind of were pretty a close knit little group.

23:07:08

A:

But it was probably because we all got to know each other so well. But I don't think that everyone was as, what should I say, that weren't as busy as what I was. I seen other people busier. I think my job

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was probably an assigned position that they filled but there just wasn't any work there for me. You know, I'm sure like today where they double up the work volume and give to one person that probably should have happened at that time.

23:07:43

A:

But I'm not complaining because at that time I was making \$63 a week and my friends who all went to insurance companies were only making like \$42 or \$43 dollars a week. So I felt like I landed a really good job, yes.

23:08:03

Q:

Who are some of your favorite people that you worked with?

A:

Oh, goodness. There were a lot of them. I remember um I probably will just come up with last names but there was a girl name's Bea Ramer and I always enjoyed her a lot. There was a Fay, I can't remember Smithson or Smitherson, there was Wilma Brickner. She worked down the hall from me and Eileen Doleman. There was a woman named Rose, now we're talking a lot a years, I can't remember what her last name was.

23:08:36

A:

And the guys, there was a Mick Teatsel and a Joe Votaugh, Mr. Clopsign and Mr. Sireland. I could probably go on but these are the ones that are popping into my head right now.

23:08:53

Q:

And um, what's your understanding of what Fernald did now?

A:

I, of what it is doing now is cleaning up a process that I still don't know, still don't understand, only what I've read in the papers. And I, you know, really guess I had other things to worry about that I still don't know what they're cleaning up. That's all that I can tell you, that they're just trying to clean it up.

23:09:25

Q:

And as far as the, um way that you got around on site when you had to, did you ever have to leave the lab?

A:

Just to go to lunch. Um, and if we had any, like I remember going for physicals over in the medical building. Um, no I don't remember that being a problem at all. Or to go to the cafeteria. I just remember there was security around but I don't, I don't remember it being a problem, you know, that I was ever stopped or whatever as long as I had the badge on.

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23:10:01

Q:

Good. And uh tell us a little more about your job. What did your responsibilities entail?

A:

I really don't know. I came in as a clerk typist and I, Mick Teatsel I remember him, and he was the one that has since passed away and I was assigned to his group in the chemical department. And there was just so little work and I don't know that I was ever told other than I would be typing for this little group. That's all I remember.

23:10:42

Q:

Now you told me a funny story about Bea a couple of minutes ago about uh your dress?

A:

Oh, yeah. Bea was such a sharp dresser. And she instantly was my pal. I still think so much of Bea. And I can remember because of her gorgeous clothes and my little country clothes that she would uh tell me, you know, how I could add to this outfit or add to that outfit.

23:11:14

A:

And I still, I think of her a lot. I see her maybe once a year but oh she's just such a nice lady. Yes, I liked her a lot. But never hard on me, no, she was a good lady or is a good lady, yes.

23:11:33

Q:

And uh, in the surrounding area since you've been in this area for quite a long time, did you know what Ross was like, actually it was Venice then, what that little town was like before Fernald was there?

A:

No, I don't, no. We did no, in our day with one car with seven people and you know boys always got the cars that I don't know that I had been there probably five times in my life prior to going to work there. And maybe not that many.

23:12:10

Q:

Great. And um did you ever have anything unusual that happened while you worked at Fernald?

A:

I can't think of anything. I know it was a pleasant experience. I never found it of course it wasn't hard but the people were very, very nice. I can't remember an unpleasant person. You know, I'm sure everybody had some bad days but I don't remember them. I felt like it was a good experience.

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23:12:43

Q:

And what were your impressions of the workers that worked out on the process side, that were actually out in the plant?

A:

I never did see them. I never, except maybe walking to and from the plant in the start of the day or at the end of the day. But no I never did see them. And I shouldn't say that totally 100 percent, maybe one or two would come in but I don't remember that.

23:13:08

Q:

And uh how many women were working on site while you were there?

A:

Total on the whole or in our building?

Q:

Like, you know, as much as you can remember like sitewide.

A:

Okay. I couldn't even remember. Uh, I think like in the chemical department there were probably four women to all the men that were in that group. That's what I remember.

23:13:35

Q:

So in those days what kind of jobs did women usually have?

A:

Secretarial, clerk-typist, uh we mentioned Rosemary, uh librarian because the library was right across the hall from us. And uh it was mostly all that type, you know, I remember the female nurses and female cafeteria workers but other than that I don't remember seeing any women anywhere else.

23:14:05

Q:

So like chemists or engineers or anybody that worked in the process side.

A:

If there were I did not know it.

23:14:14

Q:

Okay. And uh during your years at Fernald uh how did you communicate with your friends and your family about your job?

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A:

Uh, it was probably just as well I didn't know what I was doing because there was nothing for me to relate to because I really did not know what was going on. I really, and that may seem really hard to believe but I knew nothing. Other than I would type whatever they had for me to type but I didn't know even what I was typing, or what it meant. You know, I could ABC's you can do that but no I didn't have any idea what this was about. So I couldn't get in trouble because I didn't know what I was doing.

23:15:03

Q:

So when you were first hired at Fernald and you got a clearance um did they give you a talk or anything from security about, you know, not talking about your job or anything like that?

A:

If they did I don't remember. I don't remember that. I'm sure they did, you know, because we came in of course the first day it's personnel and you have to get your physical and do that. But as far as really remembering that I don't remember.

23:15:32

Q:

Okay. And um, handling documents, did you handle a lot of different documents?

A:

No.

Q:

Okay. 'Cause a lot of the times people had, did you have a safe or anything that you had to put your document in?

A:

No. If I did I don't remember that. Although now that your mentioning that it seems like I had to remember a combination but I can't remember. I probably did, I haven't thought about that. And it's ringing a bell. Probably tomorrow or the next day I'll remember.

23:16:05

Q:

Now your brother Harold worked there for a number of years.

A:

I think 40 plus.

Q:

Yeah, he was there for a long time. And after you left in what 1961? (Comment - uh, huh) Did you sort of talk about work at all or did he tell you anything that was going on with Fernald later on in the years?

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A:

Never, never. We just talked about, you know, he's at Fernald, I'm home taking care of kids. Never discussed what he was doing.

23:16:32

Q:

Now in the mid '80's there was a lot of um media attention because there was some dust collector releases out at Plant 9 and uh Donahue came and did a show and Ira Joe Fisher did a show and there was a lot of national media attention; how did you react to that?

23:16:50

A:

I guess, you know, with us living around here and we were safe and, you know, we didn't have any bad things happening in our life at that time that I don't remember that it was a big deal to me. You know, it was like, what is the hype. And maybe there should have been and maybe there shouldn't have been but I don't remember getting excited about it.

23:17:16

Q:

Did you ever worry about your brother working there during those years?

A:

Uh, I kind of looked at it as he didn't worry about it so, and I kind of respect his intelligence to the point that I thought well if he's not worried I guess I don't need to be worried. We're kind of independent thinkers, you know, and that's kind of how we are. And if he would have thought it was a big problem I'm sure he would have left.

23:17:49

Q:

Great. And um do you know much about the cleanup that's going on now like watching TV or.

A:

I don't pay a bit of attention to it. It's, yeah there's too many other things I have in my life that I just don't worry about it. So I just kind of pick up when someone's in town, you know, maybe someone from the government, you know, it may perk my ears. But as to what they're doing I don't pay any attention.

23:18:23

Q:

Okay. And uh let's see. Um, how much do you know about, well the Cold War years. That was sort of really the height of the Cold War was when you were there. Um just as a typical American how did you feel about the threat of Russia?

23:18:46

A:

I think we grew up with that threat. Uh, I don't, I guess it was just always a scary thing, you know, to me. I remember as a child, you know, that was a, but we didn't have the media to, you know, at that

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time either that it seems so far away at that time. Which it really wasn't but yeah, I felt frightened from that bombing and it probably was not um anything that was warranted but it was always there.

23:19:30

Q:

When you were a child and you were going to school in this area, did you ever discuss that in Social Studies or anything like that?

A:

The Cold War? I must have for it to have frightened me the way it did. Because when we were in elementary school we didn't have TV so from the radio and newspaper it must have been enough. I remember yes I remember being frightened. Hearing older people talk about the war but you know life goes on doesn't it. I don't stay up awake or stay awake thinking about it but back then it was kind of on my mind.

23:20:10

Q:

And of course shortly after you left Fernald then there was the Cuban Missile Crisis. Can you tell me a little bit about how you reacted to that? You were just what probably just had your first child when that happened.

23:20:21

A:

I remember we were with my sister Carolyn and her husband and we were very fidgety that evening. Um, that I remember pretty vividly. And we had a friend that was in Florida in the service at that time and he would have been, so we kind of picked up on that pretty much. So and listening throughout the evening when they were supposed to make that decision whether they were going in or not, yeah it was kind of nerve-wracking.

23:20:51

A:

And thank God they didn't, you know, they dropped everything but yeah, we didn't know it was Russia coming in thinking probably not but there was always that maybe they would type thing.

23:21:05

Q:

So uh maybe you kind of feel like you grew up sort of in the shadow of the bomb. (Comment – uh, huh) Tell us a little bit about that?

A:

Well, I guess I just, it's not a big, big deal. I remember all of this going on. Uh, you know, and it being a part of our life and it was frightening but not frightening to where it kept me awake at night type thing as a child I don't remember that, you know. But we were tough.

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23:21:46

A:

They didn't bring psychiatrists in every time somebody had a problem back then. We just gut it out and go on, you know. And we survived so, no it was there but it, you know, it didn't hamper my well being.

23:22:05

Q:

When you were working at Fernald were you at all aware that it may be a target?

A:

If I was I don't remember it at this point. And you probably know it probably was. And see I never even thought about it until now you bringing that up. Oh yeah it probably was uh-huh. Probably a good one. No, I didn't know that.

23:22:30

Q:

And were you aware at all of how Fernald was contributing to the um Americas mission at the time?

A:

No, no I was not aware.

23:22:44

Q:

How about now?

A:

As I look back uh there was a lot going on that I did not know. Just everything about it I did not know and there's still a lot I did not know. And with you working there you're probably surprised at how many of us did not know. It was a good income for people like myself who I mean we came from, you know, very poor backgrounds and so I guess we looked at it more as survival maybe.

23:23:21

Q:

And knowing what you know now which is obviously there was radioactive material on site, how do you feel that they didn't tell you that?

A:

I think that's just a sign of the times. I think that happened a lot. And I can't look back and worry about that. I've got again too many other things in my life that need attention and I just can't worry about it. And, you know, if some day that job does me in, you know, there's nothing you can do about it so you just go on. It's never been a big item with me. My oldest daughter had a brain tumor like what was it six years ago and so she is much more paranoid than I am.

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23:24:11

A:

And she says I know it had to be Fernald, you shouldn't have worked at Fernald, that had to be Fernald. And, you know, how could you ever prove that, you know, so anyway she would be more paranoid about things like that than I am. So that, you know, it's life we have to feel blessed that it was not a cancerous tumor and we just go on. It was hard times but, you know, there are other people that have harder times than that.

23:24:44

Q:

Good. Um, generally how do you feel about having worked at Fernald?

A:

I feel fine with it. You know, someday I may change my mind but at this point I feel fine with it. I don't hold, you know, any animosity towards them. And again if I had a father, sister or brother or whatever die because of it I'm sure I would probably feel differently. But I don't know that I could tell you anyone that I know that had died from it.

23:25:20

A:

So I just really, I'm not uncomfortable with it. And I'm sure they should have told but I think that a lot of that was going on in all facets of government, what do I want to say. Things that they were doing that we all didn't know that maybe they thought it was the best for all of us. How do we know what their intentions were.

23:25:50

Q:

Good. And uh I'm sure that you've probably heard that in the surrounding community a lot of the community members got together a class action suit um to sue the government for emotional distress and also loss of property how do you feel about that?

23:26:07

A:

Well I'm in real estate and I do appraising and I have talked to appraisers that find that it really has not affected the property values that people are trying to make others believe it is. And they're still growing in, you know, this whole area. Harrison, Bright, um Oxford, you know, even around the Fernald area in Harrison, very close that if it was that frightful, I don't think you would see development. So I really don't think it's hurt property values.

23:26:47

Q:

Now since you do work with real estate and land and those types of things, of course they're tearing Fernald down right now (Comment – right) and that's going to be gone soon. Hopefully all the buildings will be gone what would you personally like to see done with that land. That's quite a big chunk of land.

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23:27:01

A:

That is. How many acres is that?

Q:

It's like 1,050 somewhere around in there.

A:

That is a lot. I didn't realize how much. I guess I've never thought about it. I just, I don't know. I would have to give some thought to that because, you know, that for public use such as a park or something like that, that would never fly. Um, I don't know, I don't know. I would have to think about that.

23:27:30

Q:

Good. Uh, let's see. Was there anything that you wanted to add? Anything that we didn't cover that you wanted to cover?

A:

No. I just am not real uncomfortable. I may change my mind someday when I sit down and maybe read a final report. Probably my lack of knowledge of what really has been happening in the cleanup might be why my attitude is what it is. But maybe once I would get my hands on a lot of information I may feel differently.

23:28:05

A:

But right now I'm just, you know, we're fine. Our life is going fine and hopefully it stays that way and you don't know what tomorrow will bring. We could get hit by a truck, you know, and never know if that would have ever affected us.

23:28:24

Q:

Great. That's it. (Comment - okay) We're going to do something now we call nat sound and that's just a little bit of room tone. So if we can have quite on the set for about 30 seconds. This is nat sound.