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FERNALD LIVING HISTORY PROJECT
Transcript

Name: Dottie Nieman

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Project Number 20012

Tape FLHP0178

16:01:02

Q:

First of all we'll start with your name. If you could just give us your name and spell it.

A:

I'm Dorothy Nieman. Uh, Nieman.

16:01:08

Q:

Great, if you could just give us a little background, how long have you been in the area, and how long have you lived uh, close to the plant?

A:

Well, uh, my husband and I moved here in 1967. We had not been married more than four or five years. And uh, had two small children when we moved here, a 3-year-old and my daughter was a year and a half.

16:01:30

A:

And uh, we thought this was a pretty neat place to move to, because it was out in the country and it looked so serene and beautiful. So I was really happy to move out here.

Q:

Did you have any idea what the uh, plant was when you first moved here?

16:01:46

A:

Well I had a pretty good idea since Tony had worked here a couple of years. I knew they processed uranium. And, but it didn't mean a thing to me. I didn't think there was any danger at all at that time.

Q:

And um, during the early years, uh, when you would drive by the plant or anything like that, what kind of impressions would you get from the work that was going on there?

16:02:14

A:

Well, I didn't know what work was going on there, but they had a nice big tower with red and white checks, (giggles) a lot of people thought it was dog food. (Laughs) But uh, I knew, I knew it was not that, and I knew they processed uranium, but other than that, uh, we, I really had no idea um, what it was.

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16:02:33

A:

Uh, my mother, when we moved here, she said, oh my goodness she said, the Russians are going to bomb that place because they process uranium and you're sitting right there next to them. And I said "Oh they're not going to bomb that place, there's nothing going on down there" (laughs). But, uh, I wasn't concerned.

16:02:53

Q:

Um, as far as um, being close to the plant its, its, you have an interesting story with the land that your house is on, because part of it actually was bought by the government. Can you tell us a little bit about that?

A:

This is one of the old farms out here. I don't know how many acres this farm originally had, but when Fernald went in there, they took the whole back end off of this farm, about the whole farm. And they wanted to go all the way out to the highway on this end here, this little point where the house is and the barns.

16:03:29

A:

And someone in the Frances family asked them to spare this house, because it was such a beautiful home and the barn and everything. So they cut this little point off so that this house could go with the rest of the farm. And uh, they did s-, they did spare it.

16:03:45

A:

So were surrounded by Fernald on uh, on the north access road and then right behind our barn is the Fernald fence. So we're very close to everything.

Q:

So in what year was this house built?

16:03:57

A:

The house was built in 1857 by Abner Frances. And it was in the Frances family all these years until we bought it.

Q:

So did you rent here first or did you buy?

16:04:09

A:

No, we bought it. I think the house had been rented out before we bought it but we bought it hoping to start a nursery out here, which Tony did. And we had our nursery started and it was nice, it was nice out here.

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Q:

Now in about the mid '80s. There was a lot of media attention about uh, dust collector releases and so forth coming from the plant. Um, how did you react to that?

16:04:37

A:

Well, back then, at that time I really didn't believe it. I thought it was overblown by the media and I didn't think there was any real danger for us. I was not at all concerned. And it wasn't until after the class action suit and then more articles came out in the newspaper and they started exposing and explaining more of what happened.

16:05:07

A:

I became quite alarmed at that time. Uh, you know I said oh my goodness, what's gonna happen to our children, we raised four children here. It was terribly scary. It was very frightening.

Q:

Did you talk to your children about living so close to Fernald at that point?

16:05:27

A:

Well, yeah, in the 80's we did. And I guess the children were pretty well grown up by that point you know, and I guess they had some concerns but they didn't say a whole lot about it. Uh, I guess they figured, oh it won't happen to us.

16:05:48

A:

And actually my children are still in good health so hopefully it will continue being that way.

(Tape is interrupted)

16:06:00

Q:

We're gonna put that question to you again. Uh, after your children were grown up and after you had heard about those things that happened in the 80's, did you discuss Fernald with your children and how they had lived so close?

A:

Yes, we did discuss it somewhat. But uh, it really didn't affect us. It just didn't seem real and the children weren't too concerned about it at the time. I guess they figured it's not gonna happen to me or anything, and like I said our children still are in good health, so hopefully they'll stay that way.

16:06:32

A:

But uh, they grew up awfully close to the plant.

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Q:

As a mother, how do you feel about that?

16:06:41

A:

I feel terrible about it right now. I, I feel that someday, things 're gonna you know, turn up in their health that, that uh, that they don't know about right now. Because I know that some o' those things take a long time to develop, and I think they were exposed to air uh, pollution. Maybe not water, but air.

16:07:05

Q:

Have you ever contacted anybody at Fernald to get any kinds of answers or gone to any of the public meetings to find out?

A:

I went to a few public meetings in the beginning, and um, I would lose so much sleep over it that I decided not to get too involved. I, I didn't wanna, I didn't feel that we had too much control over it anyway, so I, I stopped going to meetings.

16:07:29

Q:

What're some o' the things that worry you now?

A:

(Sighs) Like I said, I, I continue to worry about my children of course. I, I'm extremely worried about Tony, he has all kinds of cancer. And um, you know, there's no way to say it was from Fernald or not, but he's not in very good health, and you know, it's a worry.

16:07:55

Q:

Can you tell us a little bit about Tony's health problems?

A:

Well, he um, he's had lots of skin cancer, and he had a pretty large operation on his arm, taking that off. And um, he had a brain tumor, that we, it evidently was in there pretty many years that we didn't know about. It was a pretty large tumor, and that was successfully removed. And he went through 6 weeks of radiation, and, no, 4 weeks of radiation.

16:08:26

A:

And uh, so he continues to be monitored, and he seems to be all right, right now, as far as that brain tumor goes. But uh, that's something he will have his life, he has to be monitored every so many months, and they check him up to see if, if anything else has turned up. And now he has prostate cancer, and that has to be taken care of, and we're in the middle of deciding how to treat that. And uh, that's a lot for one person – really a lot.

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Q:

Tell me a little bit about the work with the nursery.

16:09:05

A:

Well, um, when we moved out here, we immediately started planting trees. I remember planting little (chuckling) bushes in, one time in the rain, we were out there puttin' little things in, and, and uh, we just decided to start a nursery and landscape business. And uh, Tony and I always worked very hard over the years to keep that going.

16:09:29

A:

And uh, always outdoors, and working in the trees. And my son was raised to work in the trees as soon as he could start. My oldest son worked out with us quite a bit. And it was, you know, it was, was a good life I think. Um, unfortunately, we didn't know what was going on right behind us (chuckles).

16:09:55

Q:

How far are you away from the Fernald plant?

A:

Well, our house is situated uh, not very far from the fence line. So we're very, very close to the plant. We're probably; our house is probably closer to the plant than, than, you know, most people, pretty close.

Q:

So your property backs up against the fence line.

A:

Property backs up against the fence line, and our house is very close to the fence line, yes.

Q:

Because I was looking out the window and I could see the yellow placards.

A:

Oh, yes. You can see all the little fence and sign from our house, yeah.

16:10:32

Q:

Here's a question that just sort of popped into my mind; how has that fence line changed throughout the years?

A:

Well, the fence line's has been replaced, but it's never been moved. And there's always been no trespassing signs there. And um, the, that's just stays the same, they've kept the, kept it where it is. And now I don't think it says I don't even know what it says now.

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16:10:57

A:

I know there's those signs on it (holds up her hands indicating width of the signs) you live next to it, and you forget what it says. But it's, you know, the same spot. They just replace the fence so many times when it gets old.

16:11:13

Q:

Tony had mentioned that they did some uh, monitoring on your vegetable garden, that they came and took some samples. Can you tell us a little bit about that?

A:

Well, we always had a big vegetable garden. And um, we grew, well, I grew all kinds of things down there, and that was just a couple yards from the fence, practically. And they would come up every, once a month and say, "Well, we'd like to take a few of your vegetables and, and test them. And maybe a little bit of your soil."

16:11:41

A:

And I said, "Why, sure. Feel free to go ahead." And, but they never had come back and told us what they had or had not found. So we always presumed because we didn't hear anything, everything was just fine. But we never did hear anything from them when they would do those tests, so we still don't know.

16:12:01

Q:

Did you know what they were looking for at the time?

A:

Well, I presumed they were looking for radioactive material, yes. I was, I was aware of that. But I, like I said, I never thought they found anything, because they never told us anything. And I never thought to ask.

16:12:23

Q:

How about water issues? Did uh, they ever come and test the wells?

A:

Yes. They uh, tested our well monthly. And um, they did send us letters on that water monitoring in the '80s, when they found out that there was some problems down there. And, er-, everyone was aware of it. But we are on the north side of the plant, and being up here, um, evidently, no contamination has ever occurred in our well. And we still use our well water. It seems to be fine. No contamination of the water at all.

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16:13:05

Q:

Living in such proximity to Fernald, um, did you ever have any uh, uh, contact with plant workers at all?

16:13:14

A:

No. No, I, I never knew any plant workers, except Tony worked there a couple o' years. But I never saw anyone. No. Never was too concerned about knowing anyone down there. They would go out the other exit, and they never came here.

Q:

So you never see anybody in town, or know of anybody in town.

A:

No. I never knew anyone. Hm-mm never talked to anyone.

16:13:47

Q:

Um, sort of years later now, um, are you aware of a lot of the environmental issues that you didn't know about when you first moved here?

A:

(Chuckling) A lot more (laughs). We're a little bit wiser now, and uh, 'course we been here so long, there's no way we're gonna leave now. It's all been done, now they're cleaning it all up. But um, yes. We've learned a lot over the years. And some of it was very upsetting. And uh, I, I feel now that uh, there's no point in going to meetings. It doesn't do anything except to get uh, it's just terribly upsetting.

16:14:27

A:

And, and the remedial work is going on and that's fine. I don't really wanna know anything about anything else. The less I know the better. It's already been done. The damage has been done.

16:14:43

Q:

What're some o' the things that you found upsetting when you went to a couple o' those public meetings?

A:

(Sighs) The extent of the pollution that was um, through, what are the, the scrubbers or those air things, all that, all that waste that flew out through the air. Goodness knows how much we were exposed to. And the water contamination, of course. It didn't affect us, my, but the people on the south end had a terrible water pollution problem.

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16:15:12

A:

And, and of course you talk to the neighbors and, well, you find out all the cancer and everything, and you say, "Well, maybe, maybe we, were exposed to a lot more pollutants than we were aware of." And then of course, another thing that's very upsetting is well they're trying to clean it up has everyb--, has anyone ever cleaned up a site like this before, and are they making mistakes, are they doing worse things than leaving it alone, you know, you don't know.

16:15:46

A:

So I decided not to go to meetings because I thought it's better I don't know. I didn't feel like I could change anything anyway.

Q:

Let's talk a little bit about the class action suits that uh, your family was involved in, since Tony worked at Fernald for two years. (Comment - yea.) There were some issues there with him being a resident as well, can you tell us a little bit about that?

16:16:10

A:

Well, when the classaction suits started uh, of course they paid us for, we had to fill out a form, and they paid us for emotional distress. And at that time I didn't have any emotional distress. I filled out everything; oh I'm fine. Everything's fine.

16:16:28

A:

So, but anyway all the people that lived around got some sort of settlement for emotional distress if they filled the forms out. And uh, well that was fine at the time. And Tony did not because he was a worker. And uh, the workers suit was going to go through later.

16:16:46

A:

And uh, well he never did get paid. They paid him two hundred dollars for his work down there, and well, that's just nothing you know. And then because of him working down there we only got half the value of our land paid, my half, so, so to speak of the land evaluation. And he was never paid, and it was just a, it was a mess.

16:17:14

A:

You know, it never got really settled correctly. I don't, I don't see how they could evenly distribute money and I guess they did the best they could, but it wasn't very well done, I guess. But uh, he never, he never got much out of it.

Q:

Help me understand why him being a worker would make any difference to your property evaluation. Did the lawyers explain that to you at all?

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16:17:40

A:

I never got a satisfactory answer to it. Because when I started asking, you know, I said, well they said you're getting your half and then when, he'll get his through the med-, uh for the workers side of it. Well, when he finally got done with the workers, or he got involved in the workers settlement, they said well we don't anything about land.

16:18:02

A:

And so then when we talked to an attorney about it, they said oh, you're too late, the time limits up, so you, sorry. But we didn't realize that as time was going on. No, we didn't know that. And uh, it's just, it's a crazy business, you know, they.

16:18:23

A:

It wasn't done evenly or according to how far you lived, some people got a whole lot and some people didn't, and I uh, you know, it was just done in an odd manner as far as I'm concerned. I don't blame anyone, but I don't think it was done too well.

Q:

Did you ever hear much about the Fernald Residents for Environmental Safety and Health, the FRESH organization?

16:18:49

A:

Yes, when that started, that started very early on, and well uh, I'm sorry to say I went to a few meetings and I thought they were a little eccentric so I didn't, I guess they knew more than I did, but I didn't like to go to the meetings.

16:19:06

A:

So I didn't get involved with it. But I guess they were on target with a lot of things, they knew more than I realized.

Q:

Did any FRESH members over here approach you about joining, or?

16:19:21

A:

Well, it's been so long ago, I guess they did. I don't know. I don't remember.

Q:

If you could go back in time about 30 or 40 years and uh, warn or tell the Atomic Energy Commission anything – what would you say to them?

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16:19:44

A:

Well, if I could go back to the old days, I would say that they should really, if they're going to do this type of work, people should be aware of what's going on. It was all top secret, and we were so unaware of any dangers.

16:20:06

A:

It was a shame that no one never knew anything, even the workers. No one was told anything. And that wasn't, that wasn't politically correct. But they would certainly do that now, I would think. That people would be more informed, but uh, they didn't say anything in those days, nothing.

16:20:28

A:

But I would, that would be the main thing, information. People armed with information can make decisions, but you can't make any kind of a decision, on where you're going to live, what your children are gonna do, if you don't think there's anything going on. So, that would be the big thing.

Q:

And since all this has happened, uh, how do you feel about the American government?

16:20:55

A:

I don't think I want to talk about that.

Q:

Okay, fine. Uh, let's see. Oh, uh, I asked this of your husband as well, you've probably seen pictures of clean up at Fernald and you've seen people wearing the anti-C's and the respirators and those types of things.

16:21:21

Q:

And your husband worked in those same areas, although you weren't married yet, (Comment - right, he was young.) right, but you know he worked in those same areas without a lot of protection on. How do you feel about that issue?

A:

Well I think that was not fair to the people that worked down there. They were probably exposed to all kinds of contaminants and nothing was ever said to them. They were completely trustful, and they went to work and did their thing, and no one ever said anything.

16:21:53

A:

And, well shoot, we used to climb the fence over there and run cows when they got out, and goodness knows what we were exposed to. Because no one knew anything, we didn't know.

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Q:

And how do you feel about the cleanup that's going on at Fernald now, which you can almost see through your window?

16:22:14

A:

Well, I hope that they, they're getting it cleaned up. And I presume after all this time they're making progress. I don't keep up on it, but I'm sure they're doing a good job, but uh, some of the little pet projects down there kind of make me wonder. I think well, what are they thinking?

Q:

Do you want to go into that a little bit?

16:22:40

A:

Well, there's two things that come right to mind and one is the wetlands. They're digging little ponds and doing something down there, and I thought what are they doing down there when it has never been decided what's going to happen to all this acreage and they're making this little wetland right along by the road.

16:22:58

A:

And it's like somebody decided to do this little thing, and then on the other road there's a little nature watch. What are they kidding here, you know. It seems kind of silly, but uh, whatever.

Q:

They're taking buildings down pretty quickly on the Fernald site. What would you like to see done with that land once all the buildings are gone?

16:23:25

A:

Well, personally I would like to see it turned into a huge park. And with some kind of a museum, a memorial to the Fernald workers and some kind of historical perspective of what happened to that area and uh, if they could actually get rid of all the contamination, I'd like to see a big park.

16:23:45

A:

I think it would be wonderful and I think uh, that would be one of the nicest things they could do because uh, parkland is uh, you know we need more parks. And why not put one down there; that would be wonderful.

Q:

And how do you feel about this, this particular project that you're participating in right now, the Fernald Living History Project?

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16:24:07

A:

Well, I think it's rather interesting, because uh, people can, uh, not that it's all-interesting but uh, you know, when people are interviewed I'm sure that out of every little conversation there's some little piece of information that someone knows something. And when you put it all together it's kind of an interesting perspective on the area, and the history. I think it's very interesting.

16:24:34

Q:

Is there anything that we didn't cover that you wanted to cover? Any question that I didn't ask?

A:

Well, I can't think of anything right now. I think that's about all.

16:24:45

Q:

Great, we're gonna go ahead and run off nat sound. So if we can have quiet just for thirty seconds. This is nat sound.