Rocky Flats Cold War Museum

Weapons to Wildlife

June/July/Aug. 2007, Vol. 1 # 4 Monthly newsletter for Friends of the Rocky Flats Cold War Museum

Photo by Ann Lockhart

Industrial Area excluded

Former weapons production site now Rocky Flats National Wildlife Refuge

Most of the former Rocky Flats Nuclear Weapons Plant's buffer zone (3,953 acres) was officially transferred to the U.S. Department of Interior's Fish and Wildlife Service July 12 in Washington D.C., per the Dec. 2001 Rocky Flats National Wildlife Refuge Act. The refuge is closed to the public and will not open for five years, pending availability of funds.

The U.S. Department of Energy retained jurisdiction over the former Industrial Area in the middle of the refuge and the settling ponds (1,309 acres) as well as jurisdiction of active mining claims (929 acres) at the northwest corner of the site. DOE's Office of Legacy Management is doing surface and groundwater monitoring and inspection and

maintenance of monitoring systems and landfill caps to ensure that the cleanup remedies of the former Superfund site protect human health and the environment.

Sen. Wayne Allard and Rep. Mark Udall championed a law to create a refuge after EPA certified that the cleanup and closure complied with all appropriate laws and regulations. The law specifies that the refuge will restore/preserve native ecosystems, provide habitat for wildlife and native plants, conserve threatened and endangered species and provide opportunities for compatible scientific research. The Preble's meadow jumping mouse at the site is a threatened species. Environmental education and interpretation are also goals.

A Comprehensive Conservation Plan for the refuge was approved in April 2005 after a series of public meetings. The plan calls for 12.8 miles of multi-use trails and 3.8 miles of hiking-only trails. Interpretive programs and environmental education for high school and college students are included.

The refuge has xeric tallgrass prairie and is home to deer, elk, coyote, turtles, snakes, hawks, falcons, waterfowl and other birds. Three creek basins, ponds and wetlands are part of the refuge. Rock Creek is in the northwest area, Woman Creek flows in the south central area, and Walnut Creek is in the north central/northeast section). The refuge is adjacent to open space land on the west, north and east sides. The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service's current top priorities for the new refuge are weed control and pest management, to prevent habitat degradation.

A Friends of the Refuge group is forming to help with this new refuge. Interested citizens and groups met June 20 in Westminster to begin organizing.

NEW MUSEUM COMMITTEES CREATED

At the recommendation of Jim Bert, board member and executive director of the Hotel de Paris Museum in Georgetown, several new museum committees were created recently.

The new **Financial and Fund-Raising Committee** has met for breakfast June 26, July 24 and Aug. 14 at the Eggshell in Arvada. The chair is Ann Lockhart.

The new **Education, Programs and Exhibits Committee** met first on Aug. 9 at Panera Bread, 104th and Highway 36, led by co-chairs LeRoy Moore, Ph.D., and Duane Hunter. New members are Mark Stevens, Robert Quillin and Shirley Garcia.

Anyone interested in serving on these or the Collections, Goverance and Planning or Marketing Committees should contact Ann Lockhart at ajldenver@aol.com.

QUOTE

"I think it's a bloody miracle that one of these eggs has not gotten loose in the last 30 years. The subject of control over nuclear weapons is so awful a problem that there aren't any real solutions to them, and you can't relax about it at all."

William E. Colby, Director
Central Intelligence Agency
1991

Citizens Advisory Board donates final check of its 13-year operation

The former president of the Rocky Flats Citizens Advisory Board, Jerry DePooter, surprised museum board president Ann Lockhart with a check for $2,676 at its meeting June 11, before the CAB closed down its 13-year operation.

The nonprofit Rocky Flats CAB operated from October 1993 to June 2006. Community interests represented on the Board included academia, Rocky Flats neighbors, businesses, Rocky Flats workers, local governments, environmental and peace groups, and technical specialists. A total of 83 persons served on the Board for varying amounts of time during its operation. The Board forwarded 117 consensus recommendations to the U.S. Department of Energy and the regulators (the Colorado Department of Public Health and Environment and the U.S. Environmental Protection

Agency) and other interested parties on policy and technical issues and decisions on cleanup, waste management and associated activities related to the Rocky Flats Environmental Technology site.

The Board was funded entirely through a grant from the U.S. Department of Energy. The Board also was part of the Environmental Management Site Specific Advisory Board (EM SSAB), a national organization of local advisory boards at other Department of Energy nuclear weapons manufacturing facilities across the country. The EM SSAB and each of the local advisory boards were official Federal Advisory Committees to the Department of Energy.

MUSEUM OFFICIALS REACH OUT TO KEY GROUPS

Museum Board president and vice-president Ann Lockhart and Kim Grant, respectively, are attending the Energy Communities Alliance Historic Preservation Peer Exchange meeting Aug. 23-24 in Washington D.C. to discuss efforts to save Cold War history. They will be among the presenters. They have also met with other local individuals and groups over the summer.

They met with Steve Berendzen, director of the Rocky Mountain Arsenal Wildlife Refuge and the new Rocky Flats National Wildlife Refuge, and staff member Amy Thornburg on June 15, to discuss working together. Berendzen gave them a close-up view of the new buffalo herd moved from Montana to the Arsenal in April. Berendzen and Thornburg came to the museum board meeting July 11 to brief members on the refuge.

They met Carolyn Boller of U.S. Representative Mark Udall's Office on July 20 to discuss his support of the museum effort. They made a presentation to the Rocky Flats Committee of the Jefferson County League of Women Voters in Lakewood July 30 and answered questions. On Aug. 1, they met with staff from the Lutheran Medical Center Community Foundation to discuss the foundation's programs which help small nonprofits.

Lockhart met with former Jefferson County Commissioner Gary Laura June 29 to discuss the museum. Laura said, "The museum needs to happen." Lockhart got fund-raising tips Aug. 20 from Jim Walthers, executive director of the National Atomic Museum in Albuquerque. Walthers has been raising money for a new building on a 12-acre site near Sandia National Laboratories. Construction will begin in September.

BOARD MEMBER BIO: Bob Nelson

Bob Nelson, a former member of the Golden City Council, worked for Dow Chemical at Rocky Flats from May 1963 to May 1966. He's retired from Coors Brewing Co. where he had been a mechanical engineer. He now works part-time in the Jefferson County Coroner's Office. As a Korean War vet, he believes that the only reason the Chinese did not push us off the peninsula is the fact that the U.S. had the Bomb, and they did not. He thinks it's important to preserve this part of our history.

Nelson began attending the museum's meetings more than two years ago and was elected to the board in July 2003. He serves on the Collections Committee and would like to help with public speaking and being a host when the museum opens. "I have lots of time and tools (mechanical and woodworking) and the desire to see this museum get up and running," he says. He would like to create a museum that depicts the Cold War era of this country's history. "The story should be told and preserved in as many areas as possible. Rocky Flats was a very important contributor to this part of our nation's history," he said.

His hobbies are political affiliations, snowshoeing, gardening and exercising. He spent 20 years with the Golden Volunteer Fire Department and 20 years with the National Ski Patrol.

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Meetings/Events

Tues., Aug. 28, 8 a.m. Oral History Committee, The Egg and I, Baseline and Broadway, Boulder.

Wed., Aug. 29, 10 a.m. Museum website meeting, Pablo's Coffee Shop, southwest corner of E. 6th Ave. and Washington St., Denver.

Thurs., Aug. 30, 11:30 a.m. Executive Committee, Table Mountain Inn, Golden.

Wed., Sept. 5, 3:45 p.m. Education, Programs and Exhibit Committee meeting at Peaberry Coffee in the Safeway at Wadsworth and 100th Ave.

Wed., Sept. 5, 5 p.m. Rocky Flats Cold War Museum board of directors meeting at 11025 Dover St., Ste.1000, Westminster (northeast of 108th Ave. and Wadsworth Blvd.

Tues., Sept. 11, 7:30 a.m., Financial and Fund-Raising Committee, Eggshell, Old Wadsworth & Ralston Rd., Arvada.

Oral History: Shirley Garcia

The challenges of integrating women into production jobs

This interview was recorded Jan. 19, 2001 by Dorothy Ciarlo, Ph.D., for the Maria Rogers Oral History Program, Boulder Public Library. Shirley Garcia was interviewed a second time on Nov. 14, 2003.

SUMMARY:

Shirley Garcia was born in El Paso, Texas, in December, 1951. She married her high school sweetheart. They moved to Denver when her husband was transferred, working for a retail store. They have two children. He began working at Rocky Flats in 1981 and suggested she apply. She worked at Rocky Flats from July 1982-1997. She now works for the City and County of Broomfield, Public Works, Environmental Services Division. Here are excerpts from the first interview in 2001.

REAL ESTATE WAIVER

…the house we bought was in Countryside—So when we signed the papers…we had to sign a waiver that we knew we lived by Rocky Flats.…we had never heard of Rocky Flats…we asked the real estate agent what Rocky Flats was…and he said, well, you really don't have to worry about it, it's a production facility…we didn't know they were bomb parts.

JOB INTERVIEW

…when Jack Weaver interviewed me, the one question he did ask, I remember to this day, he didn't ask much about my educational background or my work ethics, he asked me if I would mind showering with other women, or if it would be embarrassing for me to have to get undressed in front of other people…I assumed he meant around other women, come to find it was – women and men. So that was an awakening for me. I actually started in July of 1982…Rocky Flats was going through a transition where it was mainly a male-dominated work force. There were very few women out there. They were very hard on us women.

I think…Equal Opportunity…forced them to hire a certain…percentage of minorities and women…most of the men…looked at it as if we were taking jobs away from men that needed to support their families…I had never been around a lot of men that cussed a lot or that were very abrasive, and it's something to get used to, but you couldn't let them know that it bothered you, because they would do it even more. So it was really hard...the first time I actually was assigned a position to work on a line was in Building 371 on PM shift...the crew leader said he would not work with any blankety-blank woman...

THE WORK

(Ciarlo: Can you describe what the work was?) …in 371, we had big, huge furnaces and you would…load the salt and plutonium into them, it was electrical refining…we actually made the button…A button is basically the trigger on your atomic bomb that actually is fissionable. When you have enough heat generated on it and you have the ignition source, that's what actually will ignite and make your atomic bomb…the process lines were all engineered and made for men…so the few ladies that worked there that were short—and I'm very short!—would have to have ladders or foot stools….

…We actually would melt the plutonium…we had to bring out what was called the crucible… you're working in the gloves, they are cumbersome…you're trying to reach in, open up this furnace, and pull out this crucible that weighs around fifty pounds…

…once you proved yourself as a worker, they ended up respecting you, and they didn't mind working with you at the end. As a matter of fact, they would ask to work with you…We had all kinds of women out there in the beginning, we had women that made it harder for us, who wouldn't pull their share of the weight, and use it as an excuse because they were women…

BUILDIING 71: THE HELLHOLE

… But coming from 371, which is a clean, beautiful, nice building, going to 71, which was called…the Hellhole. But it turns out that was one of the best buildings on site. Because everyone that worked in that building-– it just became a true family. They would do anything for you. We had a lot of contamination down there, a lot of people were contaminated, and that's one of the buildings that we worked in that it seems over the years a lot of people have passed away from cancers or different things…. back even when I started in 1982, the contamination for the radiation was easily detectable because of the instruments we had. If there was airborne contamination, our alarms would go off.

I think the thing that concerns me the most…were the chemicals that we used. We would have acid spills that would fill up whole rooms. And we would go in and have to clean them up, with respirators, so you're inhaling all these fumes, toxic fumes. We were always working with Freon, different solvents….A lot of the acids, especially in 71, were used in the processes…to either break down the plutonium so that we could recover it, so we always had acid, the building being so old, we were always having leaks. So if we had an acid spill, we'd take caustic and go through it on the ground, and clean up with Chem-Wipes, which are basically large paper towels…we worked a lot with solvents, we were always cleaning stuff…we used ceramic cups or rods. We had to clean those by hand with Freon, and Freon is a carcinogenic—now we know. We had no protection, but again, it wasn't Rocky Flats' fault, because back then the whole industry wasn't aware of the hazards that we had with chemicals…the radiation people were aware of, because you always had alarms that could tell you.

(Ciarlo: As you look back on it, does it worry you about your own health?) …I worked…with Freon where you would pour it in to a pan to clean these crucibles, without any gloves, without any protection. And Freon makes you feel like you're high—in this small room…the next day when I woke up I had a horrible rash on both my arms…But I never went to Medical because…I didn't want to cause any problems or say anything because I figured, well, the men aren't happy that I'm here anyway. I don't want them to think I'm just a big crybaby….

…the one good thing about Rocky Flats is, you had to have an annual physical. …And I actually had BE [beryllium] show up in my blood, as being sensitive to it… And that's the only place that I think I could have been impacted by BE … that's when a lot of people got sick from berylliosis.

GETTING CONTAMINATED

…when I started, you only had one contamination room…when I left…by then they had already made de-con rooms…for women and for men.

…in Building 771…there was a tank, a high-level tank, and they had Raschig rings…filled with boron, so that the contents of the tanks don't go critical…because of all the acid that goes through these tanks, end up eventually eating the glass. So every so many years, you had to go in, drain the tank, and physically…remove all these rings…it's very time-consuming, you're in supplied air, and for women, you're lifting 5-gallon buckets of glass, and it's very heavy. You had to build these…plastic tents…to contain all the contamination. And they would put air movers on, which sucked in the air, so that the contamination wouldn't be released…

But that one Saturday…we ran into problems….we lost it because one of the guys…cut the rope down where our air mover was …the people that had paper coveralls on, the contamination adhered to our skin….by 11 o'clock…the whole room got contaminated.…we all got contaminated really, really bad. We had one de-con room. And I was the only lady! So naturally the guys went in, they took their turn while I waited. But it turned out I was the most contaminated person…So I waited and waited until they came out, and then I went in, not realizing how contaminated I was…going into the shower, the contamination that was in my hair washed all the way down on my body, which was the worst thing I could have done. And normally you always take cold showers so you don't open the pores on your skin so the contamination does not go into your skin…I had lukewarm water…

So about an hour, hour and a half passed, and I was still 'crapped up,' so…the EMTs came and took care of me…they literally will take a bristle brush and they will scrub you…they took Whisk first, to see if it would come off with a soapy solution, and it didn't come off; then they actually took Clorox, but it wasn't diluted. And I had found out after the fact that they're not supposed to use pure Chlorox--they scrubbed me down with that.

(Ciarlo: It must have been very painful.) Well, it hurt, but they still did it, but you know you're contaminated, and you want it taken off. And they did this for approximately eight hours off and on…. And I was down to just my panties, and I was scared…he kept checking me, kept sending me in and out of the shower, and then he was checking me on my backside, and he said, Shirley, "You're still real hot." But I didn't want to take my panties off in front of him…there's a point where I told him, 'I can't, I need a lady technician'…a lady technician was coming on the PM shift, so they finally sent her up...I don't think anyone realized the extent of my contamination, in between my toes, everywhere….that night, we got home…around ten o'clock at night. I was crying…tired from being in and out of the shower, and I was just raw. And when I came home, my husband, says, "Well, honey, if you want to feel better, why don't you take a shower?" He was being sincere (Laughs) And then I really just started bawling and crying, because I had been in the shower all day long. I think that's the one time in my life that I said, "I don't want to go back there."

…the next day I woke up, I had scabs from my neck all the way down my back and my arms… and when I went in to Medical the next day…they only had one little tube of this balm for my scabs…Me and my friends basically scabbed over pretty bad, and that's when I actually realized that they're not supposed to use straight Clorox…But I went back…we felt bad for our co-workers that had to go back in and clean up the room. And that's 71—you always wanted to protect your workers, your friends, your family…

(Ciarlo: Was your job title chemical operator?) Yeah, from 1982 to 1989. then…in '89 was the shutdown because of the Tiger Team… they came out…and looked at all the safety issues,… we were short-handed a lot of the time, so they would…say, we're short-handed, come work this line, which you knew nothing at all about, and then everyone would go to lunch and leave you there alone. So to this day, I say I'm surprised we never had a criticality out there… that was one of the scariest things I remember, working on lines, thinking, what if something happens…something could always go wrong…I learned that I had to speak up…

MONITORING BADGES

And I had a problem once….'84, or '85, we were working with fluorides…everyone I was working with was getting pulled off the job, because the exposures were too high, and mine wasn't, mine kept coming back 0. And I didn't think anything about it…I had a wonderful foreman…Norm Wessell…after 6 months they kept pulling these people off because their exposures were too high, and I was the only one kept staying….So after 6 months, my foreman…says, there's something wrong…he took me up to Dosimetry, to…sit down with the manager…they came back with the same response, they weren't sure, they were going to look into it. But someone…called my foreman the next day…what had happened, they had never put in those little things that count [radiation], on the badge…It was never reading anything….we couldn't understand how it went on for six months, because every month you would turn in your badge.

So I actually filed a safety concern, I don't know what I was exposed to….my foreman backed me and he fought for me a lot…They actually gave me a letter saying during this time period they don't know what I was exposed to, so they came up with a number…they gave me the minimal amount of exposure that anyone had in [Building] 71. And my boss kept going up there…he said that this isn't right…They ended up compromising…So I ended up having an average exposure for this time period….they ended up pulling me out of the area because of my exposure…to get me out of the hot area…I think if you talked to a lot of other people, you'll find a lot of them didn't have confidence even when we were told what our exposures were…After that, they actually went in and changed a lot of the things in the system.

Like I said, I feel lucky--it was the worst of times, it was the best of times. I would get up and I would look forward to going to work…I'd say it's just like a country club, we all come to this special place that hardly anyone's allowed to go

(laughs), we wear white outfits, wear gloves….But you knew what the hazards were, and you were aware of them all the time. You had to always be on guard…

…we always had to have a sense of humor, so that we wouldn't take things so seriously because of the stressful nature of what we were doing…We played practical jokes on each other…when I first went to work out there, they always told you, if you have a criticality, you're going to see a blue flash…I went to…throw out some trash, and they had put a flashlight in the trashcan with…blue Saran wrap…so when I opened up the trashcan I saw this blue light! [laughs]…you had to have a way to relieve the tension…

(Ciarlo: But how did it feel to you when you thought about what the ultimate product was?) Uhhh—that's an interesting question because if you actually think about what happened in Japan, then it's very sad and—to actually think about what the ramifications…I don't think you really could and be doing what you do. I also had a sister…She would call me, "Are you still working at that awful place?" …I think—again, speaking for myself,…if you actually thought about what you were doing, I don't think you really could work out there. You know, a lot of people believe you were doing it for the nation, or we wouldn't have freedom…

...When I left Rocky Flats, I was working 60 hours a week…had 32 people under my department, and I was just getting burned out…this job in Broomfield came up…environmental, that's what I love, I love waste issues. I'm one of the few crazy people that love their job. I love to read the regulations…I think my boss told me that 127 people were applying to get this job…she interviewed just 7…I said…how much of this job is going to involve working with Rocky Flats? And she said, probably around 50% of your time…luckily I did get hired.

(Ciarlo: Now, your work for the City of Broomfield then is in the Department of—what is your job title?) The Department of Public Works, and I'm in the Environmental Services Division…now all my time is spent reviewing Rocky Flats [Superfund cleanup] documents…Right now it all comes down to cost…there's just not enough money to get it done. I'm afraid if we don't have a good enough clean-up now, we're not going to get another chance. This is our one-and-only chance. In the past, with the government, if you messed up, they would throw more money at you, and go do it again. This is not going to be the case this time. We're going to have one shot and one shot only….

NUNS & MICE STORIES

…I was there when the nuns came on-site…it was a serious incident, but it was funny. It was ironic because they got on-site…they flashed a… package of cigarettes, what the guards told us, and they couldn't catch them. So you would hear on the PA "last seen so-and-so", and everyone was laughing because we had all these guards on site, and they couldn't capture two nuns!

…I can tell you [Building] 71 had mice…the mice would drink water out of the bottom of the glove boxes…and the water was highly contaminated, so they would run across the floor and contaminate the floor. You could track where the mice were, so we were always able to catch mice...

BEST & WORST THINGS ABOUT THE JOB

Other than the people being like family, I think that was the best thing—the closeness that we had there…it was the best of times, and it was the worst of times. The worst thing? The time that I got contaminated. And there was another time where I had serious problems with one of the managers….he actually had been filed on…about 27 times for sexual harassment and discrimination…But I think…God took care of me, because everything finally came out, the truth…

Read/hear the Rocky Flats oral histories at www.bplcarnegie.org/oralhistory. Click on Special Collections, and then click on Rocky Flats.

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See **www.rockyflatscoldwarmuseum.org**

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