

General Groves: A "Bully" with Considerable Influence

(As published in The Oak Ridger's Historically Speaking column on December 10, 2012)

Thanks to Carolyn Krause for yet another excellent article drawing on Oak Ridge Oral Histories. This time she brings us insights into General Leslie R. Groves, the person placed in charge of the Manhattan Project, using quotes and comments to bring us a variety of impressions of General Groves.

Enjoy a fresh look at the leader of the nation's efforts that ended World War II by reading what follows written by Carolyn Krause.

Seventy years ago in the Oak Ridge area, some 3,000 people, including 1,000 families, were forced to abandon their homes and farms. On Sept. 19, 1942, during his first visit to Black Oak Ridge, Brigadier General Leslie R. Groves approved the purchase by the federal government of a 59,000-acre tract. He ordered U.S. Army engineers to condemn every farm on the land, displacing all the residents. It was a land grab, a government takeover.

According to the "Expedient Evictions" section of Dick Smyser's book *Oak Ridge 1942-1992: A Commemorative Portrait*, the residents were told that they "must pack up their families' belongings, livestock, and farm equipment and leave quickly, given no hint of the reason for their ousting. Many of these families were bitter. Their bitterness was intensified by the difficulty they encountered finding new homes and the paltry sums [\$50 an acre] they were paid by the government for their property."

From 1942 through 1945, some 100,000 people led by General Groves transformed the nation's defense capabilities, as well as three landscapes in Tennessee, New Mexico and Washington.

As officer in the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, Groves oversaw the construction of the Pentagon in Washington, D.C., and directed the Manhattan Project, which developed the atomic bomb during World War II. The nuclear fuel for the war-ending uranium and plutonium bombs came from the two newly built "secret cities" of Oak Ridge and Hanford, WA. The scientists and engineers in the third secret city—Los Alamos, N.M.—were responsible for the design and construction of the atomic bombs that were later exploded over Japan.

The son of a Presbyterian chaplain in the U.S. Army, Groves graduated fourth in his class at the U.S. Military Academy at West Point. He gained a reputation "as a doer, a driver, and stickler for duty."

In his 2010 book, *The Last Reunion*, Oak Ridge High School graduate and noted sportswriter Jay Searcy called General Groves a bully. "Although he was never an Oak Ridger, General Leslie Groves, director of the Manhattan Project, spent much of his time in the city, commuting from Washington on the train with his secretary and a briefcase stuffed with paperwork."

Searcy goes on to say, "He slept at the Guest House [later called the Alexander Inn], the Elza House and, on occasion, some said, in the maternity ward of the Oak Ridge Hospital with a guard posted at the door. He made it a point to hide from the public and dash from place to place in an unmarked staff car driven by Elmer Brummitt, whose family had 40 acres of farmland in Lupton [Emory] Valley before the government took it over."

Searcy quoted one critic of Groves, who called him "a conceited, impatient, rude, ruthless, impetuous, intimidating, know-it-all egomaniac." According to Searcy, Lieutenant Colonel Kenneth Nichols, in charge of the Oak Ridge operation under Groves, said after the war that "Groves was the biggest son of a bitch I ever met in my life but also one of the most capable individuals. He had an ego second to none. He had tireless energy and absolute confidence in his decisions.

"I hated his guts and so did everybody else but he had a form of understanding. President Franklin D. Roosevelt thought his credentials were just right. He promised him a promotion to Brigadier General, appointed him director of the Manhattan Project, and made it the top priority of

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the war. Groves would have to handle scores of brilliant scientists, many of whom were equally egotistical and arrogant. Roosevelt needed a bully."

In an Oak Ridge National Laboratory oral history interview, the late Chris Keim was asked about his encounters with Groves. Keim replied, "When we were operating the pilot plant during the uranium days, General Groves would sometimes ask us what we were doing. We'd show him our logbook."

"And, he would say, 'I have to make a decision by 8:00 tomorrow morning whether to use the new equipment that you are working on, or use the equipment that is established in the calutron buildings—the isotope production buildings.' And, he would ask for our opinion. 'If we were making a decision, we would stay with the old equipment,' we said. He made that decision the next morning. And, he gave us credit for helping him make the decision."

City Historian Bill Wilcox said that Groves introduced the concept of "compartmentalization" to ensure secrecy in the Manhattan Project. The U.S. government did not want the Germans and Japanese to know about the American atomic bomb work. Compartmentalization, said Wilcox, "was a new idea that's been used ever since by different kinds of intelligence services."

When residents drove out of Oak Ridge during the 1940s, they would read billboard messages such as "What you have seen here, what you did here, when you leave here, let it stay here." "People were told only what they needed to know to do the job," Wilcox said. "And the hundreds of young people that came were told just the least amount."

As director of the Manhattan Project, Groves' accomplishments were considerable. According to Wikipedia, "He directed the enormous construction effort, made critical decisions on the various methods of isotope separation, acquired raw materials, directed the collection of military intelligence on the German nuclear energy project, and helped select the cities in Japan that were chosen as targets."

In fact, according to the 1994 book "The First Nuclear Era" by the late Alvin Weinberg, director of Oak Ridge National Laboratory from 1955 to 1973, Groves himself picked Aug. 9, 1945, as the date for the detonation of the second, war-ending atomic bomb over Nagasaki, Japan.

On that day 74,000 lives were lost and 74,000 people were injured in Nagasaki. Many more Japanese were displaced from their homes, just like the residents of Black Oak Ridge almost three years earlier. But World War II ended soon thereafter, avoiding a land invasion of Japan and saving the lives of millions of Americans and Japanese.

There you have Carolyn's perspective of General Groves using comments by people who knew him or knew of his Manhattan Project. I am convinced that without General Groves and his drive, intensity and dedication to success, the Manhattan Project as we know it might well have never existed. Like the ultimate praise for his leadership provided by Major General Kenneth D. Nichols (Colonel at the time of the Manhattan Project), I believe General Groves was an example of the right person for the job!

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General Leslie R. Groves shown at Y-12 with Alpha 1 and Alpha 2 buildings in the background - does anyone know the men with Groves? Ed Westcott reports that Robert P. Patterson, Secretary of War is standing to Groves' right and Tennessee Governor Jim Nance McCord is on his left. This photograph was made after September 21, 1945, as that is when Secretary of War Henry Stimson resigned and Patterson was appointed as his successor.

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General Groves plans his next action on a map - Ed Westcott tells that when taking this photo General Groves decided to look at a spot on the map other than what Ed suggested... where do you think he is looking?