

Bobby Lyon: A class act

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Carolyn Krause brings us this *Historically Speaking* column. Carolyn, who previously was the editor of the Oak Ridge National Laboratory's *ORNL Review* for 25 years, brings a wealth of experience to her research and writing. I am so grateful that she has agreed to supply input for this weekly column on occasion. Enjoy this installment where she brings us the story of Bobby Lyon.

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A classy lady who loved her family, friends, and community. A vivacious woman with a sparkling wit. An eloquent writer and challenging conversationalist.

A foodie and gourmet cook who enjoyed holding dinner parties. The first editor of the Oak Ridge National Laboratory's 46-year-old research magazine, the *ORNL Review*.

These were among the phrases that almost 100 people heard on Aug. 24 when they attended an informal celebration of the life of Barbara "Bobby" Kennedy Lyon. Many more of her friends would have attended had Bobby not outlived them; she was 95 when she died in July. **She had nine grandchildren and five great-grandchildren.**

Bobby was my favorite supervisor at ORNL. Starting in May 1975 I was delighted to work with her as a science writer on the magazine, which was launched in 1967 by the revered ORNL director, Alvin Weinberg. She was editor of the research magazine for 16 years and I took over as editor in 1983 shortly after she retired.

I was blessed to share an office with her during my seven-year "apprenticeship." I was amazed at how quickly Bobby could complete a *New York Times* crossword puzzle at lunchtime in our office. She told me she was a champion swimmer in amateur adult competitions. "If I wore all my medals while swimming in the pool, I would sink and drown," she quipped.

She said her father, a newspaper owner and editor in Albion, Mich., liked to make soup. One of his favorite soup vegetables was the leek, which is related to the onion. When giving out a soup recipe, he would say, "First, take a leek..."

Bobby had a real appreciation for the importance of human connections. She met her future husband Richard (Stoke) Lyon at the University of Chicago, where she majored in English with a minor in philosophy. There he earned a Ph.D. degree in chemistry.

Stoke's father was a friend of Arthur Holly Compton, a Nobel Prize winner and leader of the Manhattan Project's Metallurgical Laboratory at the university. Compton suggested that Stoke interview for a job at the Met Lab. Eugene Wigner, a future Nobel Prize winner and Oak Ridge lab research director, interviewed Stoke for a war-related job.

Stoke was hired. He was happy because he avoided the draft yet could do research that contributed to the war effort. He learned that the goal of the secret work in Chicago was to create an atomic bomb that used fuel that underwent nuclear fission. The Lyon family was transferred to Oak Ridge in January 1945. Bobby knew nothing about the work Stoke was doing until the first atomic bomb was dropped August 6, 1945.

Getting sufficient food, especially meat, into their cements house was a challenge that first year. Stoke's father again came to the rescue because he was also a friend of Oscar Meyer, who agreed to send the young Lyons wieners, liverwurst, and a little boneless ham in monthly care packages. Now, it was Bobby's turn to keep a secret from her neighbors.

Here are some other revelations about Bobby's life based on an oral history interview she had with Steve Stow and my own recollections. Her parents called her Bobby because they wanted her to be a boy they had already named Robert. She called her birth as a girl a "trick" on her parents, with whom she was not close. However, she was close to her older sister, who raised her.

Because washed-out ravines lined the sides of the roads in “primitive” Oak Ridge, she once had to rescue her two-year-old son Ken, who almost died when he got stuck in the mud at the bottom of a ravine formed by a flash flood. (Ken died of cancer in February 2012.)

Bobby was wobbly during the rescue because she had just given birth to her second son Rick in May 1945. The Lyons had ignored the requirement to buy a car before having a baby. Because the red box on the power pole in front of their house was labeled Emergency, Bobby assumed she could summon a vehicle to take her to the hospital. “What I didn’t take into account was the neighborhood. Everybody who was a neighbor was a friend. The man next door very kindly drove me to the hospital when the time came.”

On August 6, 1945, Bobby called Stoke at work in ORNL’s Reactor Division to tell him she heard on the radio that “Hiroshima was vaporized.” He laughed and she cried. She was appalled to be associated with such a shocking destruction of people, their homes, and their city. But then she realized that the imminent capitulation of Japan signified the end of World War II and the deprivations so many families had endured.

When the boys were in school, she became a political activist. “I was on the board of every organization there was in town. I did everything I could to get out of the house.”

She became active in Women for World Government after hearing a talk in Oak Ridge by Norman Cousins, the famous editor of the *Saturday Review*. He stated that the explosion of the two atomic bombs meant that a world federation of countries was needed to prevent an arms race that would end world civilization.

Bobby played Eleanor of Aquitaine in the *Lion in Winter* and acted in other plays at the Oak Ridge Playhouse. She taught herself Braille so she could label recordings of technical books read for Oak Ridge’s Recording for the Blind. She was on the Oak Ridge Civic Music Association board.

Her best friends included Alvin Weinberg’s wife Marge and Gen Stoughton, wife of Ray Stoughton, an ORNL scientist and co-discoverer of uranium-233 with Glenn Seaborg at Berkeley. Weinberg instigated her hiring in 1966 to work in public information at ORNL. She loved her job as the first editor of the ORNL Review. She called her career at ORNL the best years of her life.

Bobby enjoyed interviewing the men doing most of the research at the lab. “These are the people I only saw at Christmas, so it felt like Christmas every day.” She loved the interactions, the changes, the discoveries. “I was like a spider in the center of a web. If anything was going on, the web would shake, and I’d race out to see what was going on.”

After Stoke got a pilot’s license, Bobby would ride in the small plane he flew. She feared he might have a heart attack while piloting the plane, so she took flying lessons to learn how to land it. In 1984 on a very hot day, Stoke suffered a fatal heart attack while he and Bobby were scuba diving off the coast of Hawaii.

He was taken to the boat where numerous people futilely performed CPR on him. Bobby rubbed sunscreen lotion on the backs of Stoke’s would-be rescuers. She was always a class act.

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Thanks Carolyn! The relationship between Carolyn and Bobby was obviously something special and unique. By her skill she has given us insight into Bobby’s life that we would never have otherwise known. Those of you who knew Bobby personally will surely appreciate this column - thanks to Carolyn’s keen perceptions and exceptional writing ability.



A younger Bobby Lyon



Bobby in her later years