



The beginning of a 60 plus year experience

by Wheeler McGregor Jr.



On July 9, 1951, Frankie and I boarded the Dixie Flyer in Tullahoma at 9 p.m. The porter helped us with our bags and took us to our seats. Some of the compartments already had the

Pullman beds prepared and were curtained in black. Other passengers seemed aloof and were either reading or nodding. This was the beginning of an adventure – many, really – for two small-town Tennesseans. With whistles blowing at every crossroads, we sped off to Nashville. Soon after leaving Nashville, the porter started making up bunks and people disappeared into the black holes. He asked if we were ready for our beds to be made. Of course we said yes; we were ignorant of the procedure and totally in his hands. He suggested we might want to put our pajamas on in the bathroom area while he made our beds. When we got back, the bunks were made and we guessed right for our location, since they all looked alike. We took a look at that upper bunk and opted to both hunker into the lower one. The other passengers must have been annoyed at the giggles of these two amateurs.

We were too excited to sleep and opened the shade to watch the towns go by. Mostly it was dark, except for moonlit farm buildings since this was before the days of the glaring sentry lights. We stopped only once before Evansville, Clarksville I guess.

At Evansville the train split; some cars to St. Louis, others to Chicago. There was a lot of banging around. Finally, we were off to St. Louis across boring country and we slept until dawn. We heard bustling around us and waited until it quieted down to open our curtain and venture to the bathroom to freshen up and change into our Sunday clothes. We returned to our compartment which had been returned to a sitting area. The smell of coffee and bacon wafted in from the dining car adjoining ours and we wandered in not knowing how much this would cost us on our very limited budget. The seemingly chief waiter seated us and asked to see our ticket; he proceeded to tell us that breakfast was provided. Wow! Hot, light biscuits with butter and peach preserves were served with hot coffee and ice water in crystal clear goblets. We ordered scrambled eggs with ham. The eggs were very soft and fresh and the country ham red and tender with red eye gravy on the side. The grits I was barely familiar with but they went well with the gravy. After this we went back to our seats and watched as we came into East St. Louis and to the mighty Mississippi for the first time. We clanged into the station and were met by Frankie's Aunt Sylvia and husband Gene.

But what brought us to this point? Frankie and I were married in September 1948 (she was 18, I was 19) and went off to Knoxville where I entered the University of Tennessee to seek a degree in engineering physics. Don't ask me why that particular

course of study. My education protocol is another story for another article. Never mind the economic struggles either – that’s another story. After three years, the degree was imminent and I started looking for a job. Jobs in engineering and science were scarce in 1951 with a wave of GIs flooding the market with engineering graduates. But, I got an offer from the Oak Ridge National Laboratory to go to work in the K-25 gaseous diffusion plant in the controls department. I suspected the offer came probably because I had taken Professor John Trimmer’s course in “Response of Physical Systems.” He had designed much of the delicate control loops the K-25 process and I had used him as a reference. I wasn’t too thrilled with this offer, but it was for a civil service GS5 position at \$3,400 a year and I needed a job. So I mailed in my acceptance. I had hoped for a research position in a more physics related area, such as the Y-12 nuclear area where I could further my education.

A couple of days later, I saw a small poster that some recruiters from the Arnold Research Organization (ARO) were going to be on campus interviewing engineers to work at a test facility they were building outside Tullahoma. I was curious and so I signed up for the interview. There was a Col. Taylor from the Air Force and some fellow from ARO, Inc. (I forget his name, tall guy, 50ish). They acted interested in my infrared work with Dr. Alvin Nielsen on infrared molecular spectroscopy. (I found out later these guys probably didn’t even know what infrared meant, but were just looking for a connection. Their orders were to find bright people and hire them). They

offered me \$3,600 per year on the spot. Tullahoma was a lot closer to home (McMinnville). I said OK and we filled out some papers and I retreated from the Oak Ridge job. That is how we came to be on that train to St. Louis. That was the home of ARO, Inc. at the time.

I began at once, of course, to try to find out what I had gotten myself into. According to Col. Taylor and the literature I was given, the Arnold Engineering Development Center was a big deal. Why had I not heard of it? Of course, the “three states of Tennessee” didn’t recognize each other in those days (still don’t) and the Knoxville papers had not made it known to the public that big dealings were happening at Tullahoma. The Nashville papers had covered it well and I caught up a bit by talking to friends in Middle Tennessee. But, final exams were upon us and graduation plans and moving our things to McMinnville left little time for research on my future with ARO. I would just follow my nose as always and see where this led.

The newspapers and Nashville television were aglow with the visit of President Harry Truman to dedicate the Arnold Engineering Development Center on June 25, 1951. I wanted to be present at that dedication. Maps were published and instructions given in the *Tennessean* on attending. Frankie and I took my Dad’s ’41 Chevy and thought we knew how to get to AEDC, but we took a wrong turn somewhere around Hawkersmith’s Nursery and wound up stuck in the mud. It was too late when I got out. Besides, I was too muddy to appear at such a gathering. We headed back to McMinnville and witnessed

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the re-run of the proceedings on television. This left me still with little knowledge of what I had signed up for.

Now, back to St. Louis. I had detailed instructions from ARO, Inc. on where and when to report in downtown St. Louis Monday morning, July 11, 1951. Frankie's aunt's apartment was on the streetcar line which stopped at the corner where the Sverdrup and Parcel's design facilities were located – the seventh and eighth floors above

a large department store. I arrived and was directed through a maze of drawing boards to a conference room where the orientation would take place. I met a bunch of fellow recruits – about 40 of them. Among them were John Ralph, Harry Diekers, Bud Austen, Jim Cunningham, Lee Burns and Herman Collier. My memory gets a little fuzzy here. We were exposed to lots of stuff by several people whom I don't remember at all. Most of the material was in aerodynamics which I wasn't familiar with and I just stored it for the future. The organization stuff I figured I'd better remember. There was the United States Air Force (then a young branch of the armed services), ARO, Inc., and the designers of AEDC, Sverdrup and Parcel, Inc., the parent company of ARO. That last part was, I could tell, a bit ticklish. I would learn a lot about that relationship later.

After two weeks, most of us were assigned to spend the next year in a training

capacity somewhere. We were grouped by twos and my partner was Lee Burns, an electrical engineer from the University of Arizona. I would get to know and appreciate Lee and still do. We were assigned to Wright-Patterson Air Force Base in Dayton, Ohio. "Well, better than NASA Ames, California," I thought. Most guys had their own cars, but I didn't. Two plane tickets to Dayton, Ohio, and a reservation at a hotel for five days was my allotment. My money



Local residents braved Tennessee's June heat to attend the June 25, 1951 dedication of AEDC.

was running low, but I didn't know that I should have asked for

an advance. We had not been paid yet – "at the end of three weeks," they said.

My biggest problem was to convince Frankie to fly with me to Dayton – another adventure and first. In the end, she said OK and on Saturday, Gene and Sylvia took us to the St. Louis airport and we boarded a two-engine DC3 Eastern Airlines airplane for Dayton. All I can say is – white knuckles and all – we arrived at Dayton's airport 20 miles north of town and took the bus to the hotel. By Monday, we had located an apartment on the bus line north of town and were assured I could get to the air base by bus. I will leave this episode here. I still had not been paid.

Next installment – Wright Patterson AFB, a 10-month experience.