

Living with the Bomb

A daughter of the Manhattan Project remembers.

By Christy Klim

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Recently, when I was doing household chores, I heard the name “Oppenheimer” coming from the TV. I froze in my tracks. Thanks to a movie, people were paying attention to the issue that has haunted my whole life. My father, Richard C. Wilson, was an engineer on the Manhattan Project in Oak Ridge, Tennessee from 1944–1946. It had a profound effect on his life, and although I was not even born then, his work on the atomic bomb had a deep impact on my life as well.

My father was in college at the start of WWII, but after graduating from the Carnegie Institute of Technology (now Carnegie Mellon), he expected to be drafted at any time. In an unpublished memoir, he describes a train trip he took to California for what he thought would be a last fling before going to war. After “sharing an excess of gin with some Marine veterans,” he got off briefly in Kansas City to find some food and heard his name paged on the loudspeaker system.

“I reported to the ticket agent who had a telegram from Dad saying that I was instructed to report to New York City on Monday morning (this was Thursday) if I wanted to obtain this technical assignment when called up by the Army,” he wrote. “Suffice to say I was on the next train East, and did arrive in New York as specified.”

After training at Columbia University, he worked for Manhattan Project subcontractors in Pennsylvania before being assigned to Oak Ridge. There, he wrote, he “was assigned to the test-construction liaison group of the K-25 gaseous diffusion plant for producing enriched Uranium-235 ... Generally I worked from 3 p.m. to about 1 or 2 a.m. for four days, then had either one or two shifts off.” In his free time he played jazz trombone in the dance band, sang in a church choir, and learned to love the Great Smoky Mountains.



Engineers at the Oak Ridge K-25 gaseous diffusion plant in 1945; the writer's father, Richard C. Wilson, is seated at the far right. The plant enriched the uranium used in the first atomic bombs. | Photo: Courtesy of Bentley Historical Library

The work was highly compartmentalized, but gradually, the purpose of the project became clear. He began attending lectures on the future of atomic weapons, and became convinced of the need for a world law to control their use. His concern about international conflict and nuclear war led him to join the World Federalist Movement and pass on a chance to participate in the postwar bomb tests on Bikini Atoll. Instead, he returned to grad school for a degree in mechanical engineering.

My parents met while my father was working for Westinghouse in Jackson, Michigan. They married in 1949, celebrating with a hiking trip in the Smoky Mountains. Both stayed involved in World Federalists and also a group called Moral Re-Armament. My brother was born in 1950, and I followed in 1951.

The World Federalist meetings continued after we moved to Ann Arbor in 1956, when my father joined the U-M engineering department. From my child's perspective, they seemed like a lot of fun: the adults were friendly, and I enjoyed the snacks I snuck from the trays my mother put out for the guests.

My father was eager to see evidence that nuclear power could be beneficial, so on vacations we visited nearby nuclear power plants. But in civil-defense drills at school, we would “duck and cover” under our desks, or line up on the floor in the halls with our hands over our heads to prepare for an atomic attack. At home, my mother turned our laundry room into the family fallout shelter, with cans of Sterno and lots of canned goods, and aluminum foil to put over the windows to keep out the radiation.

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When I discovered Ann Arbor's student bookstores, I was drawn to books about nuclear war. In a slim volume called *Let There Be a World!*, I pored over graphic photographs of the destruction of Hiroshima and Nagasaki.

When I began to question my father about his role in developing the bomb, he sometimes gave the standard explanation that it was necessary in order to end the war. Much later, I realized how much he struggled to come to terms with the implications himself.

Though my dad was sometimes ambivalent about the issue, I was not. At fifteen, when most of my peers were more concerned about schoolwork and dates, I was attending ban-the-bomb demonstrations. I later marched against uranium mining in the Black Hills of South Dakota, demonstrated against nuclear power with the Clamshell Alliance in Seabrook, New Hampshire, and was a regular at peace marches in Ann Arbor, Ypsilanti, Washington D.C., and Chicago.

At St. Joseph Catholic Church in Ypsilanti, I was privileged to attend a speech by peace activist Fr. Daniel Berrigan that also featured a talk by one of the *Hibakusha*—a survivor of the atomic bombing of Japan. At the annual remembrances of Hiroshima on August 6, I treasured the folded cranes and floating peace lanterns. The bomb was in the background of my life choices. My first nursing job was in an urban burn unit, where I saw in real life the suffering caused by thermal burns like those endured by some of its victims. I spent most of my career caring for war veterans in VA hospitals.

My father mentored many foreign students. He was on the board of the Ecumenical Campus Center for many years, and he and my mother often hosted international students at our home. He never stopped believing in the importance of international understanding, supporting the UN, the World Federalists, and the ACLU.

He was a person of great intelligence, integrity, and generosity. It has often made me sad that those qualities were put to use on such a morally troubling project. Clearly he felt that, too. He suffered from dementia toward the end of his life. But on August 6 of his last year, at age ninety-five, he startled his caregiver with a lucid discussion of the hazards of atomic weapons.

After he passed away, I cleared my father's recent reading material from his bedside table. Among the items: the United Nations Charter on Nuclear Disarmament.