

**THE DEPARTMENT OF ENERGY ORAL HISTORY
PRESENTATION PROGRAM**

OAK RIDGE, TENNESSEE

AN INTERVIEW WITH ROBERT G. KEIL

FOR THE

**OAK RIDGE NATIONAL LABORATORY
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INTERVIEWED BY

STEPHEN H. STOW

AND

MARILYN Z. MCLAUGHLIN (ASSISTANT)

OAK RIDGE, TENNESSEE

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**TRANSCRIPT BY
BRIAN VARNER**

STOW: Today, we're talking with Bob Keil. Bob came to Oak Ridge in the late 1950s. He was elected president of the Atomic Trades and Labor Council (ATLC) at ORNL and served in that capacity for several years. He has a lot of interesting stories to tell about the history of the ATLC, the interactions between management and the bargaining unit, and other things.

[The ATLC, which is affiliated with the Metal Trades Department of the AFL-CIO, consists of 13 international unions and 14 local unions. In 2012, the ATLC represented approximately 2100 members at Oak Ridge National Laboratory and the Y-12 National Security Complex.]

Bob, thanks for joining us today. I look forward to hearing a little bit about your recollections of the earlier days of the Laboratory. Tell me, where are you from, originally?

KEIL: I'm originally from Illinois. I grew up on a farm near Quincy, Illinois.

STOW: Well, how'd you end up in Oak Ridge, Tennessee, then?

KEIL: Sort of by happenstance. Right after I got out of high school, I joined the Illinois National Guard and went into service and was a Korean War veteran.

STOW: Yes.

KEIL: And, after I came back, I got commissioned and was supposed to go to work for the State of Illinois as a maintenance supervisor. I went to Aberdeen Proving Grounds to get my officer's requirements in, before taking a job...

STOW: Yes.

KEIL: ...And after I completed that training, the colonel I served under, when I was on active duty, and the one in the National Guard that I was going to work under for the state, got in a disagreement on who I was going to work for. As a result, I didn't have a job at the time. And, my wife's folks lived here in Oak Ridge, and he was a welder at the Y-12 Plant.

STOW: Okay.

KEIL: So, we came here to visit, and he asked me why I didn't try to get on an apprenticeship program here. So, I interviewed and was accepted. And, that's how I got here to begin with.

STOW: (laughs) And, that was in what year?

KEIL: 1958.

STOW: '58 ... So, you got in an apprenticeship program. Was this over at Y-12?

KEIL: No, here at ORNL.

STOW: It was at ORNL at that point. Okay. And, who were you working for at that point? Do you remember who any of your supervisors were?

KEIL: The department superintendent was Earl Lonandarfor, and Bob Farnham was the one who interviewed me.

STOW: Okay. Did you have any anticipation or any thought at that point that you'd spend your life and your career here?

KEIL: No, like a lot of people, I guess, I thought ... well, I'll learn a trade that would be good to have and I'll move on. I never had any intention of staying here. In fact, the city of Oak Ridge wasn't that appealing to me when I first visited here, because none of the improvements had been made.

STOW: Sure. Well, what is it that kept you here for all those many years?

KEIL: All the research and technology going on at the Lab were intriguing to me. It seemed like an exciting place. And I enjoyed being a machinist.

STOW: Well, those were pretty important years - the late '50s and the '60s. That's when Alvin Weinberg was director of the Lab.

KEIL: Right. We were doing a lot of fabrication of reactor components at that time, and I know the first one of those I saw in operation was exciting to see.

STOW: Yes. So, what craft were you proficient in?

KEIL: Machinist.

STOW: As a machinist, did you do anything else? I mean, machinists did just machining, right?

KEIL: Right.

STOW: And, carpenters did just carpentry, and so on ...

KEIL: Correct.

STOW: ... no crossing over.

KEIL: No.

STOW: Okay. Why did you pick machining as a craft to get into?

KEIL: There again, it was somewhat happenstance. During my military training, they mixed my orders up. I was supposed to go to the automotive maintenance school at the Proving Ground. Instead, I got training from service section officers, and that covered machining.

STOW: I see.

KEIL: And so, I had a basic knowledge of what it was about. At the time they interviewed me, machinists and electricians had to make a higher mechanical aptitude score than the other craft workers. Elmo Wolfe, the person interviewing me, said, "I think you would be better suited for machining than some of the others. It will present a challenge that you'd like." And so, I followed his recommendation.

STOW: Well, that sounds like a good recommendation. You said that, in those early days, you were working on reactor parts, and so on?

KEIL: Right.

STOW: Did you know what you were doing? I don't mean from a machinist standpoint, but as far as the big picture goes, did you realize the importance of what you were building?

KEIL: Yes. It was amusing, though. When I first hired in, I was one of the first people that hired in under an L clearance. Everybody was Q cleared at that time. And, my foreman sent me with an engineer over to one of the reactors, and he was explaining in detail what he was doing. And then he looked down and asked, "What does that yellow badge mean?" And, I said, "That means I haven't got a Q clearance yet -- I'm a limited clearance."

STOW: (laughs)

KEIL: And, he immediately hushed up. (laughs)

STOW: Well, did having an L clearance present a problem to you anywhere along the line?

KEIL: No, that was just until I got a Q. So it was short term.

STOW: Okay. Was it routine for people such as you to be told what engineers were doing and to be shown the big picture?

KEIL: Sometimes, and other times, no. Probably the one program that I worked on that was the most secretive involved parts for the gas centrifuge projects at K-25.

STOW: Yes.

KEIL: And, I knew the parts went to that program, but they didn't discuss much about the program in detail.

STOW: You eventually rose to be president of the union here.

KEIL: Right.

STOW: What other jobs had you held up to 1979 you were elected president of the local ATLC union.

KEIL: I was elected a shop steward. The chief steward of the machinists lived in Knoxville, and he didn't like to come back to Oak Ridge to attend ATLC meetings.

STOW: Yes.

KEIL: So, he made me a delegate in his stead, and that's how I first got involved with the Atomic Trades and Labor Council. I had an interest in the apprenticeship. After going through it myself, Norman Beeler appointed me to fill a vacancy when some individual left before completing his term. And so, that was the first position of power I ever held in the ATLC. Then the next election that came up in '66 or '67...

STOW: Yes.

KEIL: ... And, I was elected job bid officer for the Atomic Trades and Labor Council.

STOW: Okay.

KEIL: And, in the meantime, I had become chief steward of the machinists, also. And, I stayed in that position until 1975, I believe. And then, I was elected recording secretary for the ATLC. And, I stayed in that role until P. W. Hensley, who was president of the ATLC then, went to the Metal Trades Department of the AF of L.

STOW: Yes.

KEIL: And so, Norman Beeler moved up to president, and I moved up to vice president. And then, I remained vice president until '79, when I was elected president. I served almost 14 years till '93, when I retired.

STOW: What does it take? You say you were elected president of the local union. In those days, did you run against somebody else who was also seeking the presidency?

KEIL: Sometimes we were opposed, and sometimes we weren't. The ATLC is made up of a delegate body. Each affiliated local union has a minimum of two delegates; the union can have more delegates as its membership increases. Machinists had, at that time, I think, eight delegates. But, as I recall, there was a total of about forty-three delegates who voted for officers. And so, I had to get a majority of that vote in order to be elected.

STOW: All right. And, did you win by a pretty good margin?

KEIL: Most of the time. Yes, I think three votes were the most I ever had against me.

STOW: Okay. Let's talk a little bit about the ATLC, now that we're on that subject. Are you familiar with the union structure before you came here in the late '50s?

KEIL: Yes.

STOW: Carry us back, if you will, and explain to us how unions got started here, if you have any knowledge of that.

KEIL: Okay. Well, I think to really understand it, you have to look at what the national scene was [with respect to] unions at that time.

STOW: Okay.

KEIL: There were two major entities representing crafts workers and other laborers: the American Federation of Labor (AF of L) and the Congress of Industrial Organizations (CIO). The AF of L was a craft-oriented union.

STOW: Okay.

KEIL: Each worker belonged to the union for his craft. The machinists belonged to the machinists' union, the electricians to the electricians' union, the carpenters to the carpenters' union, etc. The Congress of Industrial Organizations represented laborers in different industries, such as rubber workers, miners, and chemical workers.

STOW: And, this was back in what ... the 1930s and 1940s?

KEIL: Yes. So, when they organized the workers here, the ATLC was under the AFof L ...

STOW: Okay.

KEIL: In reading some of the documentation, I think there were something like eight unions at ORNL originally that started it. The ORNL workers organized in 1946, and the K-25 workers organized in 1948.

STOW: All right.

KEIL: And, Union Carbide was the contractor at K-25, but Monsanto was the contractor at ORNL.

STOW: Yes.

KEIL: Workers at most of Carbide's plants were represented by the Oil, Chemical and Atomic Workers (OCAW), which was a natural fit for people in a chemical company.

STOW: Okay.

KEIL: Chemical unions, for the most part, represented the laborers in Carbide's plants. And, so, the K-25 workers were under OCAW. And, I found in my office one time some seventy-eight rpm records...

STOW: Yes.

KEIL: ... One record carried the voice of Joe Eilor, who was a machinist here at the Lab and the third local ATLC union president. He had made this recording, and it was playing during the organizing drive at K-25.

STOW: Oh, yes?

KEIL: And, it was interesting to listen to, because he was talking about the value of being in a craft union and how ORNL was organized that way.

STOW: Yes.

KEIL: And then, the Y-12 workforce wasn't organized until 1951, when the contractor was changed from Tennessee Eastman to Carbide, I believe. And, then the Y-2 workers were added to the local unions of the Atomic Trades and Labor Council. And, from that point on, the local ATLC unions represented workers at Y-12 and K-25, as well as ORNL.

STOW: So, ORNL workers didn't get organized in that sense until '46, after the war...?

KEIL: Correct.

STOW: I thought the Lab had unions here during the war years. Are you familiar at all with that?

KEIL: They may have. I don't know. But, I know one of the reasons for Metal Trades councils was that the AFL-CIO didn't want to deal with all the separate contracts of every craft union.

STOW: Yes.

KEIL: So, as I read it, I think the government pretty much insisted on dealing with one entity.

STOW: Sure.

KEIL: So, that was the reason for the councils.

STOW: What was the situation at other atomic energy sites? Do you have any knowledge of that?

KEIL: Yes. They all had Metal Trades councils, too. Hanford had one, as did the weapons plants at Amarillo (Texas) and Los Alamos. The only exception was at Rocky Flats, which originally had a Metal Trades council but then changed to the union that represents steel workers.

STOW: Why would they go to the steel workers? Any idea?

KEIL: I don't know the details on that.

STOW: How many of the hourly workers were members of the union in those early days? Do you recall?

KEIL: I don't know exactly. I would say, ninety-something percent. Most of them were ...

STOW: More than ninety percent. Has that changed over the years? Did that change during your tenure here?

KEIL: It's hard to get exact figures on that, but it stayed pretty much the same.

STOW: Let's talk a little bit about the years when you were president of the union here. What were your feelings at being the president of the union here? That's a pretty prestigious position.

KEIL: Well, I didn't think about it from the prestige standpoint. I did [think about it] from the responsibility standpoint. And, it was exciting because there was a new challenge every day.

STOW: What were some of those challenges that you faced? What was the biggest challenge you faced during those years?

KEIL: Well, negotiating contracts was one. When I first started out, I had to deal with the Carter wage guidelines, which made it difficult in my first contract negotiations. I had to work within the wage reopener clause [which allows reconsideration of wages only if the consumer price index surpasses a particular point or other economic factors change rapidly].

STOW: Yes.

KEIL: And, Union Carbide was tough to negotiate with. The [representatives of management] would meet with you across the table, in the initial stages, but they always insisted on having a mediation service involved.

STOW: A third party?

KEIL: Right. I didn't like that. I preferred to talk face-to-face with the people I was negotiating with.

STOW: Yes.

KEIL: And, that's one change that we accomplished over time with Martin Marietta. We sat down and talked to one another across the table.

STOW: Okay.

KEIL: I think open communications between the two parties always makes for a better situation.

STOW: Sure. Yes.

KEIL: And, pretty much on both parties' part, starting from the early days, negotiations evolved from an adversarial relationship to better communications later.

STOW: So, negotiating contracts would be one of your greatest frustrations.

KEIL: Yes.

STOW: Were there layoffs during your years as president?

KEIL: Yes. And, that was the most frustrating thing for me, because, if young people [were being let go], you felt for them, from the standpoint that they had financial obligations to meet and little children [to support]. And, they would [expect] you to try to find them jobs. And, it was impossible to do that for the numbers that came along later.

STOW: Yes.

KEIL: And, by the same token, for older [people who] had worked at one craft all their life, it was a traumatic experience for them to leave their jobs and try to seek new employment after many years.

STOW: Sure. At least, in those years, Union Carbide and Martin Marietta ran all three plants, so we could move people around...

KEIL: Right. That helped a lot.

STOW: What about any strikes? Were there any?

KEIL: Well, there were several strikes over the years. The two that I was personally involved in were in 1981 and 1987.

STOW: Okay. How did those come about, and what part did you play in getting them resolved?

KEIL: In 1981, most of our contracts had been settled by our members on a financial basis. But, there had been a lot of gripes and a lot of problems encountered with language and things that we thought needed to be changed in the basic contract.

STOW: Okay.

KEIL: And so, that was primarily the reason we struck in 1981 -- to bring about some language changes in the contract -- not just money alone.

STOW: How long did that strike last?

KEIL: Ten weeks, I believe.

STOW: That was a long one then.

KEIL: And, in 1987, the strike was over the Craft Maintenance Work Agreement, in which the company wanted us to cross craft lines [e.g., machinists and electricians were expected to learn and do each others' jobs]. And, that was the main reason for that strike.

STOW: In 1981, ORNL was under Union Carbide, and, I guess in '87, we were under Martin Marietta.

KEIL: Correct.

STOW: Did you see significant differences in the management of Carbide versus that of Martin Marietta? You mentioned a moment ago that you got to do some face-to-face negotiating with Martin Marietta, but what other changes were there?

KEIL: Martin Marietta managers -- from my perspective, at least -- were just easier to talk with.

STOW: Is that right?

KEIL : At all levels, than Union Carbide was. As I said, the union leaders and Union Carbide seemed to have a far more adversarial relationship. And then, initially, I had a lot of problems with Martin Marietta too, in the '87 strike, (laughs). But, after Clyde Hopkins became president of Martin Marietta Energy Systems, we jointly agreed to have mediation service come in on labor-management training. And that broke down a lot of the barriers that existed between the two parties. And, I think both sides started to understand the other one better.

STOW: Okay.

KEIL: We didn't always agree on everything, but at least we understood where each party was coming from, and some of the challenges each side was facing and the problems they had. And, we had several retreats with management and union people.

STOW: Okay.

KEIL: And, that's probably, you know, one of the things I'm more proud of, because there's been labor-management peace ever since then.

STOW: Okay. I want to ask you in a moment some of the things that you're most pleased about, but concerning these negotiations, it wasn't just you going up against Martin Marietta. There had to be other people involved, from the union side. And, who were some of those people, and do you recall whom you were dealing with from the Martin Marietta side?

KEIL: Well, initially, the man in Labor Relations was Burnett. But, later, Mack Wilson came in as vice president.

STOW: Okay, yes.

KEIL: And, he was a man of his word and a good person to deal with.

STOW: Mack Wilson. Was he over Y-12 also?

KEIL: Right. But, he was the negotiator in all the contracts that Martin Marietta had with the local unions. But, for Union Carbide we were somewhat of an anomaly, because most of their unions were CIO-type unions. And, Martin Marietta was similar. Most of their contracts had been with the autoworkers and the aerospace industry workers. Some contracts were with the machinists. So, they were used to bargaining with a higher echelon of the autoworkers. The only thing that was negotiated locally was a labor-management issue peculiar to a particular plant.

STOW: Okay.

KEIL: But, the basic wage structure was negotiated at the top levels. So, that was different for them too.

STOW: Looking back over your years as president of the union here, what do you think were your greatest accomplishments? And, what are you most proud of?

KEIL: Gaining equality and parity for the hourly workers.

STOW: And, explain what you mean by that, Bob.

KEIL: The salaried people had better insurance coverage. And as an example, we had a three-day waiting period before we ever could draw insurance when we were sick.

STOW: Okay.

KEIL: And, for a person to lose three-fifths of his paycheck in a week was tough. Plus, it presented other problems too. If a worker had the flu, he felt like he couldn't afford to lose the time off, so he'd come to work and give it to everybody else. There also was a provision that if a worker was out approximately ten days, then he'd go back and pick up the three-day's pay.

STOW: So, if you're out eight or nine days, then you might as well go ten...

KEIL: Yes, so really, it was costing the company money, because a lot of people couldn't afford that loss of three days' pay. So, if they could find a doctor to keep them certified out ten days, they naturally would.

STOW: Where did that rule ever come from?

KEIL: It came in with Union Carbide in the first contract.

STOW: I'll be darned.

KEIL: Monsanto had better benefits than Carbide. And, they had strict corporate policies. One of the things our membership, in general, never could understand was that they wanted a cost-of-living clause

STOW: Yes.

KEIL: The Union Carbide Corporation did not have a cost-of-living clause. And, in fact, the union in one plant Carbide took over in California was paid a dollar an hour to take it out of the contract. So, you can see how obstinate they were on that. And so, locally you know, that would always come up as a proposal from local unions, but they would have probably given up the operation of the plants at that time, rather than yield on that particular issue.

STOW: I understand. So, you say you're most proud of getting equity for the hourly workers. Do give some more examples there.

KEIL: Yes, there were other things, like military pay. If I, as an hourly worker, went on military leave, the management made up the difference in pay, whereas the salaried employees drew their full pay here and their military pay.

STOW: Okay.

KEIL: And, at one time, the salaried employees drew insurance plus their salary when they were sick.

STOW: Yes.

KEIL: We couldn't take a fragmented vacation. We had to take a whole week at a time, initially.

STOW: My goodness.

KEIL: And, gradually, we got that down to a couple days. And, there was no such thing as personal time off. But, by the time I left, we'd equalized benefits in all the payrolls.

STOW: I guess we just take our benefits for granted today.

KEIL: We had to punch in time clocks, too, when I came here. We don't do that anymore.

STOW: Okay. Looking back over your career, you've dealt with a lot of important and influential individuals with Carbide and Martin Marietta. Does anybody come to mind who has really influenced you in some way, or that you have very high regard for?

KEIL: I have a high regard for Clyde Hopkins. I doubt that any place other than Oak Ridge government plants had a better relationship between top management and top union leadership than existed between the two of us.

STOW: Well, he's a fine man and he has a very good reputation.

KEIL: He sure is.

STOW: Anybody else come to mind?

KEIL: For the most part, I enjoyed dealing with all of them. Due to the longevity of my position, at one point, I knew the plant managers of all the plants and a lot of DOE people. That was a change that came about while I was president, too. They, at one time, pretty much had the attitude that it was none of our business what they did. And, I had a good rapport with Joe LaGrone, [manager of DOE's Oak Ridge Operations in the 1980s], particularly on health and safety. Joe, Clyde, and I established a tripartite Health and Safety Committee, which was a first among even DOE installations.

STOW: Oh, is that right? Okay. As a matter of fact, I'd wanted to ask you something about health and safety, because, you know, in today's environment, that's a number one issue.

KEIL: Right.

STOW: Was there a lot of emphasis put on health and safety during the earlier years in the union?

KEIL: Not when I first came here. I guess that was one of the things I took up, too, as a union officer. I was concerned about some areas of health and safety, not only from the company's standpoint, but from our standpoint. I felt that we weren't being as aware as we should be of a lot of things.

STOW: Can you give us some examples of places where we had to increase our awareness or where you may have had some impact?

KEIL: We questioned some of the chemical operators' safety procedures. And, of course, we had [to deal with the issue of worker exposures to] mercury at Y-12, where we had epidemiology studies done over there. And a congressional committee [came to Oak Ridge in 1983 to investigate the government's handling of mercury.]

STOW: Right. That was during the early '80s or mid-'80s.

KEIL: And, I think not only just the practices themselves, but communications improved a lot. For example, we had people out there that were given a drug after an exposure.

STOW: Yes.

KEIL: My point was that they ought to know what the side effects of that drug were and how it worked and everything else ahead of time.

STOW: Yes.

KEIL: It should not be offered to you in a traumatic situation, and then ask you whether you want it or not.

STOW: True. True. ORNL has run surveys in an attempt to understand a little bit more about where problems exist in the work environment. And the surveys have shown that the bargaining unit employees really want a lot more communication out of Laboratory management.

KEIL: Right.

STOW: And, as a matter of fact, of all the employee groups here at the Lab today, it's the hourly employees that scream the loudest about needing better communication. Can you reflect on that back when you were president?

KEIL: Yes. I can't remember what office I was in at the time, but I know when Herman Postma first became director of the Lab, he asked me what the union felt the management ought to do. And, that was one of the things I suggested to him -- talk to the hourly people and explain the mission. I thought the people would be interested and a lot more energized about their work if they knew what it was they were working toward.

STOW: Sure.

KEIL: And so, he scheduled meetings and talked with all the hourly employees at that time.

STOW: Yes.

KEIL: They never had any meetings subsequent to that time, but I think it was a great move, because we got a lot of feedback from the employees, who said they enjoyed that.

STOW: What got you started in the union? I understand it [has] something to do with a health and safety issue.

KEIL: Well, I was assigned to Building 2525, the Machine Shop at the Lab. All its windows and doors were closed. You couldn't open them. The offices were all air-conditioned, but the shop had no air conditioning. It supposedly had a ventilation system and floor fans. But, we were cutting a lot of stainless steel at that time, making reactor components, and using a sulfur-based oil. And, smoke would roll off these machined parts, and the fans were just batting it back and forth.

STOW: Yes.

KEIL: It was getting as hot as 110 to 115 degrees in the west end of the shop. And, some people were getting overcome with heat. I advised them to go to the Medical Department and ask that [their illness be classified as] an occupational injury, because it was [a consequence of] their work environment. And, I set out, as a

goal, to get that building air-conditioned. I was actually filling in for the chief steward, who was on vacation, I think. And so, I stirred up a pretty good stink, and ACE came in with monitors for checking the temperature in the building and everything. Prior to that incident, management had been adamant that what little ventilation we had was adequate.

STOW: Yes.

KEIL: But, to make a long story short -- after a few weeks -- the management announced that money had been appropriated to air condition that building.

STOW: Is that right?

KEIL: And so, that's what I think really started me on the way [to becoming a union leader], because the people I represented thought, "Well, he can get things done."

STOW: I'll be darned. (laughter)

KEIL: And, that incident led to my position as chief steward of the machinists and probably my rise in the union.

STOW: Well, you know, there's a history of air conditioning in some of those buildings -- or lack of air conditioning. This goes back before your time, but back during the war years, some of the buildings around here -- I don't know if it was the same building or not -- were just as hot and unventilated as could be...

KEIL: It was terrible.

STOW: ... And, they tried to get air conditioning in there then. Now, air conditioning in the '40s was pretty rare, to say the least. And, General Leslie Groves, who ran the Manhattan Project, adamantly refused any air conditioning. He said, "That's a luxury that people just cannot have down there." And so, they eventually put in some big fans to move air around, and Groves would not even acknowledge that those things would cool the place down. He continued to call them "heaters."

KEIL: (laughs)

STOW: And, he said, "as a side product to the heating, they may cool things down a little bit." So, he established in those early days of 1944 and 1945, the Lab position of no air conditioning. So, at least you broke a long tradition there, didn't you?

KEIL: Well, there was air conditioning, like in the 4500 complex here, and there were some shops where you could open the windows.

STOW: Yes.

KEIL: And, that combined with fans, the work environment was at least bearable. But that particular building, 2525, was sealed up, and they wouldn't let you open the doors, and the windows wouldn't open. So, you were confined in a box, and it was pretty frustrating for each worker to look up and see your foreman behind a plate-glass window, sitting there in an air-conditioned office and watching you out there doing manual work in 100-plus degree temperatures.

STOW: Well, congratulations on getting that broken and started.

KEIL: (laughs) Thank you.

STOW: As you look back over your career here, Bob, is there anything that you would change -- do a little bit differently, do a little bit better -- if you had the opportunity again?

KEIL: Probably not. I never look back. I look forward (laughs).

STOW: Well, okay. I won't get you looking back any more then. (laughter) Anything else you think we need to chat about while we're here today?

KEIL: That pretty much sums up the experience, I think.

STOW: Well, it's been a good interview. I've enjoyed chatting with you. Thanks very much.

KEIL: Yes.

-----**END OF INTERVIEW**-----