Luzell Johnson’s Oral History Interview

Luzell Johnson was an African American man who worked in the secret city of Hanford in Washington, one of the sites of the Manhattan Project. In this oral history interview, he reflects on what brought him to Hanford and his experiences there.

For the full interview and an audio recording of the oral history interview, visit the Manhattan Project Voices website at http://manhattanprojectvoices.org/oral-histories/luzell-johnsons-interview.


I was working in Mobile, Alabama, at a creosote plant, 35 cents an hour. I heard about the job out at Hanford, you could get tires and gas to come out here, from Du Pont. I was classified 1-A in the draft. By the time I got to Hanford in the spring of ’44, I had my draft call, and I went to the office and they got me a deferment.

I knew something about concrete work, and I became a cement finisher. After the laborers poured it, we finished it. Before that, the laborers had dug it out and leveled, the next crew was the pouring crew, next was us. We worked with trowels, 12-inch trowels and 18-inch trowels. I made $1.75 an hour, six days a week, eight hours.

I lived in the barracks, they was segregated, blacks from whites. There were quite a few blacks working out there, laborers, lots of them in the concrete department, and quite a few in the mess halls, cooks and waitresses. The barracks was kinda exciting. I didn't drink. My roommate drank, and he gambled. I was disturbed all through the night.

And, every weekend, there was somebody coming through with goods, through the barracks, you understand that? Prostitutes. They would start at the head of the barracks, put a girl in a room. They would come through and ask, room by room if we was interested. They got $10. Since we worked six days, usually they come through on Sundays.

There weren’t no restriction on gambling. Shooting craps was the main thing. Professionals ran the games. I imagine they had card games too, but they was kinda private. With craps, anyone could come in. My roommate would run a game some night, and I would go somewhere else. I didn't run into much racism at Hanford. Everybody was working together, and everybody was eating together at the mess halls. White and colored could go in together and eat. I didn't go to the beer halls, I didn't drink beer, so I didn't have no experience with that.

Everybody played baseball together, the teams was black and white. I played baseball, there was pretty good ball players from all over the country. Like on Memorial Day some big team from back East would come out and play the best Hanford players. The professionals usually won. I played center field, not regularly. The manager would play maybe me this week and some-body else next week. The catchers and the pitchers and the first baseman and shortstop were regular, all the others traded off.
When my wife came out, she lived in a room in one of the old farm-houses on the reservation. I had saved $700, and we drove around and found a trailer at the trailer camp for $600 and some dollars. We bought it, and moved in. Hanford was a big town, like. Everything was there. Banks, drug stores, grocery stores. We went to the stores and went back to the trailer and my wife cooked. After she started cooking, I hardly ate in the mess halls.

I was a little surprised when the bombs were dropped. When I got back to Alabama, they knew more about Hanford than I did. That's what you all was making, they said, something to kill people. That shocked me.

They laid us off after construction was finished, and give us certificates for tires and stamps for gas so we could go back where we come from. I went back to Alabama. I didn't do anything there because the pay scale was what it was when I left, 35 cents an hour. The same as I was making when I left Mobile. They said I could have my old job back at the creosote plant, but I decided to come back out here, where I was getting $1.75.
Willie Daniels’s Oral History Interview

Willie Daniels came to Hanford from Texas. He was recruited by Du Pont to work pouring concrete. He recalls life for African Americans at Hanford and the reasons why he decided to move to Hanford.

For more information and additional oral histories, visit the Manhattan Project Voices website at http://manhattanprojectvoices.org/oral-histories/willie-danielss-interview.


My home was in Kildare, Texas. I grew up there, went to high school in Jefferession, to college in Prairie View, a segregated school. I took general education, and taught school for about four years in Texas. That was during the Depression, and man when you came out of school you had to scuffle and scuffle hard to get a job. Trouble was you only got paid for six or seven months teaching school in those days but you got to live 12 months a year. I worked anywhere I could.

I went to Texarkana and worked at the creosote plant and from there I worked up and down the railroad, loading ties. At Texarkana, I was working at a concrete plant, making $33.33 a week, that was good money then, working as a common laborer. I worked there a couple of years, and when I left there I heard about this job in McAlester, Oklahoma, in about ’42, a naval air station. That job kinda went down, and we heard about this job in Washington state.

I had an uncle who come out here, and he wrote back and said they was paying a dollar a hour. I say, "What?" My brother say "A dollar an hour?" I say to my brother, "You going?" My brother was working on the railroad. He say, "I don’t know. Them jobs don’t last long."

I say, "Man, I’m going, you do what you want. I got enough money for you to go." We got together, my brother, Vanis, myself and another boy. We came out to Hanford, in the late summer of ’43. We went to work on Labor Day.

We came by bus, we paid our way. Du Pont was shipping some people, but we paid our way. Oh man, that bus broke down in the desert somewhere, and we sat a long while. We finally got to Umatilla, and we was looking at the country and we come around that road to Pasco alongside the river and that bus was leaning and it looked like that bus was going to jump over into that Columbia River. I know that man driving was looking at us back there, I imagine he was having fun looking as us so frightened.

I was so glad when we got to Pasco. We got off the bus at the station and looked around. I asked "Where that job is?" and nobody told us anything, so I went back to the bus station and said, "Lady, where's that big job going up around here." She say, "It's out at Hanford." I say, "Where's Hanford?" She says, "Sixty miles out. You go on the bus. One just left and the next one goes after midnight." I asked "Where do the colored people live around here?" She said, "Over across the track." We went across the track, and looked down the main street. We saw one or two houses. I said "Let's go back."

I went back to the station and said, "Lady, when people come in, going out to Hanford, where do they usually stay until the bus runs?" She said, "Well, Du Pont's got a place up there by the railroad station." We went up to the place, and an old colored gentleman was in there. I said we wanted to stay the night until the bus goes. He said, "Did Du Pont send you?" I said, "No," and he said, "Well, I can't let you stay." "Look," he said, "If you stay here and Du Pont didn't send you, that gets my job, if they find out. I'll let you stay, but be quiet about it." We lay down because we was tired. Along about two o'clock in the
morning, this train came in from Chicago, loaded with fellows. The next morning, we got with those men and went to breakfast and didn't have to pay. We followed them around, and signed up to go out to Hanford on the bus. We went on out, no charges, and we got there and there was an old boy from home. I knew him from when I sold men's clothing. He says, "Hey, boy, did you bring your samples?" I say, 'Yeah, I got em.' 'Well,' he say, 'Make me a suit.'
They told us we would have to stay in tents that night. But I saw some barracks was finished but nobody was living in them. We got a blanket and slept in the new barracks in beds. The next morning there was so much wind and so much dust, everything was plowed up, you could write your name on our luggage.

We got signed up, and went to work for E.I. Du Pont. Our first day of work, we made $19.20, my brother and I together. They sent us to work on postholes, and we got some overtime. "Gee," my brother said, "$19.20 is more than I bring home in a month." I say to him, "I told you to come off that railroad.'
The barracks were segregated. Lots of black people were out there, in construction, and lots more were just out there, not doing nothing. We would go to work and come back and some guy had been there ransacking our room. Once we came back to the barracks, and there were some guys in there scuffling. This guy had another one down, beating him, kicking him with steel-toe shoes, stomping him. He said, "I'll teach you to go in a room and take stuff, I'll bet you won't go in another one." In the barracks, there was drinking and fighting, and carrying on. Oh, man. There'd be gambling in the washrooms, and playing cards. Some of them were professional gamblers, out there to get all the money. I didn't mingle with that bunch, not at all.
No. 5 mess hall was where most of the colored people ate. Some whites ate there and some coloreds ate up in No. 2 mess hall. Generally, they ate separately. The food was good, and plenty of it. Long as you raise your hand up, they would bring you more.

I remember at Christmas, '43, some guys got to fighting in the messhall. Some guy with big of dark shades on, he was jumping on this little guy, and another guy was running from him, and this guy jumped up on a table and stepping from one table to another, trying to hit people, and everybody was running. He got close to where my uncle and I were, and I said I'm going to get that guy off that table, he don't have no business there. He got to the table next to us and threw a cup at the wall and almost hit my wife. I said I know I am going to get him off now, if he hits that little woman over there, I know what will happen to him. They'll take him to the cemetery and me to Walla Walla, cause I'm gonna eat him up. I had a jackknife, I still have it. It was sharp enough to shave a cat running. I used to trim carpet with it before I got into construction. You weren't supposed to carry a jack knife in your pocket, but I said this is a tool. In a few minutes, the security guards came and got him.
In those days, we worked about 12 hours a day, sometimes we worked more. Besides that, I was selling stuff, like toilet goods and I was working at that for Lucky Heart, cosmetics, perfume, hair dressing, powders. I was doing that on the side, some weeks I made as much at that as I did on the job. I was getting about $50 a week on the job, sometimes as much as $70 a week, with overtime. I was also selling men's clothing for Stonefield Corp. out of Chicago, and for W Z. Gibson clothing company. I was selling men's shirts and ladies clothes, those Fashion Frocks. At night, when we come in for dinner, I'd get my little bag and go to the mess hall and recreation rooms and get some sales. Oh, yeah.

Where I was working was up at various places, pouring concrete flooring where they stored the trucks. We pushed wheel barrows through there and put matting down. Some of those guys didn't know how to push a wheel barrow. Boy, they was in trouble. That was hard work, yes, it was. I worked common labor when I wasn't in concrete. We worked at 2-East. My brother and I poured the first mud [concrete]
there, and spread it out of the mixer truck. I also worked at the 100 Areas, all three of the reactors. My brother helped haul and unload the bricks that built that smokestack at 300 Area.

I knew what I was doing when it came to spreading mud. I spread the first load of mud at 100-F. They call concrete mud because it looks like mud. They hauled the mud in trucks, from a mixing plant at Hanford. When the buildings got high, they pumped mud through steel pipes. I worked high up, sometimes. They called that "pump-crete."

I thought working conditions was fair. We didn't have no cruel supervisors. I remember two of the guys in our crew, they'd get to telling tales, and everybody in our crew, including the supervisors, would stand there laughing. The supervisors would say, "Okay, boys, stop lying, and let's go to work." I remember Wyatt Durette, a white fella who was Du Pont's concrete super-visor. He used to get on a big box, one of those big of shipping boxes, and say, "All right, boys, I want you to go out and do a good job. Say, if you see a nail sticking up somewhere, take your time and bend it down because we don't want nobody hurt here. You got all your hands, fingers and toes, and we want you to keep 'em that way," I remember he would get on that big crate on a Monday morning. We got friends and brothers over yonder fighting and we want to do a good job here, he'd say. Sure, I remember Durette. Only one time I remember any racial problem at Hanford. We was working on postholes and drains at the trailer camp. We had to pull a water line. I forgot his name now, but this white carpenter called one of our boys by name and the boy said "Yes."

And this carpenter said if you was back in Mississippi now, you would say "Yes, sir!" The boy said back to him, "But you ain't IN Mississippi now."

A lot of blacks worked in concrete. They didn't mind getting in that mud. We wore rubber boots, hard hats, slicker pants, gloves, to keep the concrete from messin' your clothes. We wore those steel-toed shoes. Durette always said "Be safe."

In the barracks, when I wasn't working, we'd play whist or dominoes. I didn't have a lot of spare time. I went to Kennewick once, Pasco once, I would go to Yakima because that was where my wife was when she first came. I was a church member, but out at Hanford they had one little house for a colored church, an old farmhouse. I understand some of the preachers got to fightin' and squabblin' over something. I never went to church while I was out there, unless I would go when I was in Yakima. On Sundays, during the summer sometimes I watched baseball games. Whites and blacks played on the same teams. Some of the guys would go swimming. I never attempted to go swimming because they said that Columbia River don't give up the dead. No, sir.

None of us knew what we was doing. Durette tell us if anyone ask what you are doing, tell 'em you working. It was way along in the game when they told us we was building that bomb that was dropped on wherever it was, Nagasaki. I say "Is that right?" If we all would have known what we was doing, some of us would have been frightened and left. I would have stayed. I figured if it was safe for somebody else, it was safe for me.

I left Hanford the latter part of '44, when the job was kinda playing light. I went home to Texas, and I had more money than I ever had in my life. I was down there in Texas in '44, for Thanksgiving, and I took out my friends and told them to get what they want, this was my bill. I was spending money with both hands. At Christmas we went to see my wife's people in Alabama. After we stayed home for a while, I
bought some hogs, some cows, put some wire around our pasture at Kildare. Said, well, I guess we'll be here a while. But I got to thinking and told my wife, why don't we go back where we can make some money. It's all going out, none coming in. She ask, 'Where we goin'? I say, 'Well, there's a shipyard in Vancouver, Washington.'