

Wisconsin Veterans Museum
Research Center

Transcript of an
Oral History Interview with
Dale Jennerjohn
Mechanical Engineer, Army, World War II

2006

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Jennerjohn, Dale J., (b. 1922), Oral History Interview, 2006.

User Copy: 1 sound cassette (ca. 32 min.); analog, 1 7/8 ips, mono.

Master Copy: 1 sound cassette (ca. 32 min.); analog, 1 7/8 ips, mono.

Transcript: 0.1 linear ft. (1 folder)

Military Papers: 0.1 linear ft. (1 folder)

Abstract:

Dale J. Jennerjohn, a Madison, Wisconsin resident, discusses serving as a mechanical engineer in the Army and working with the Manhattan Project during World War II. Jennerjohn describes growing up in Milwaukee during the Great Depression, where his parents converted the old Hanson's Soap Flake mansion into a boarding house. Jennerjohn attended Saint Rose Catholic grade school and West Division High School, graduating in 1940. He mentions that, unlike many of his peers who enlisted in the Reserves at the beginning of World War II, Jennerjohn "waited for the draft" and went to college. He attended the Milwaukee School of Engineering for two years then transferred to the University of Wisconsin-Madison. Jennerjohn tells the story of his unusual induction into the Army. In June 1944, he graduated from college and went to Milwaukee to be inducted. Weeks before, Jennerjohn had received a letter from General Leslie Groves of the Manhattan Project inviting him to work in Los Alamos (New Mexico); however, the letter got lost at Jennerjohn's fraternity house. His fraternity brother found the letter and went to extreme lengths to deliver it to Jennerjohn, but he had already been sworn into the Army by the time the letter caught up to him. Jennerjohn touches upon his basic training in California. He was then assigned to a special project at Ohio State University helping a Colonel Bish develop an anti-mine weapon. Jennerjohn suggests he did not like this project or the Colonel much. After visiting an engineer friend involved in the Manhattan Project in Oak Ridge (Tennessee), Jennerjohn wrote a letter to Washington D.C. and was reassigned to the atomic bomb project in Los Alamos in June 1945. Jennerjohn discusses his work in the engineering drafting house at Los Alamos. He drew diagrams of the atomic bomb but also had to put together bombs based on his drawings. He describes witnessing the first test of the atomic bomb in the desert from a shelter fifteen to twenty miles away. He characterizes the test as "very successful, and very loud, and very impressive." Jennerjohn was still a soldier at this time, and he mentions that General Groves insisted all soldiers at Los Alamos continue to march and do physical training. Jennerjohn comments that the civilian scientists thought this was a waste of time and convinced General Groves that the Army engineers did not need to do the exercises. Jennerjohn frequently addresses the secrecy surrounding the nuclear project, explaining that nobody knew how many atomic bombs were being built, that his mail was censored, and that the young Army engineers were not supposed to socialize with university women in Santa Fe. He tells of being reprimanded for visiting and receiving telegrams from women from Santa Fe, which he implies was part of the Army's attempt to keep the nuclear program in Los Alamos a secret. Jennerjohn comments that once the atomic bomb was built, drafting became less important. He did some electrical drawings and "historical" drawings illustrating the process of building the bomb. Jennerjohn tells how he

and a buddy volunteered for an assignment in the woods in New Mexico and ended up having to paint one of the atomic bombs olive drab. Jennerjohn states he later learned that only two atomic bombs had been built, which meant he had painted the bomb that was dropped on Nagasaki. Jennerjohn comments that before arriving in Los Alamos, he had no idea what the atomic bomb project was all about and that even his fellow engineers in Oak Ridge were uninformed. Jennerjohn describes his social interactions with the nuclear scientists in Los Alamos. He states that Oppenheimer, Niels Bohr, and other “top-notch” scientists worked in the office across the hall from him. He mentions a few scientists formed a piano quartet and describes meeting the scientists’ European wives at a local restaurant. Jennerjohn reveals that an accident involving nuclear energy occurred in one of the labs, killing a man who had been his neighbor in the living quarters there. Jennerjohn states he was in the Army for a year and a half. After the war ended, he continued to work with the nuclear program, which was taken over by the University of California. In September 1946, he returned to the University of Wisconsin and got a Master’s in Engineering. Jennerjohn states he decided against becoming a professor and instead worked for the Wisconsin State Board of Health. For this job, Jennerjohn helped create or improve hospitals and nursing homes in small towns in Wisconsin. Finally, Jennerjohn touches upon the controversy surrounding the atomic bomb. He reveals two of his bosses at Los Alamos-- a professor and Oppenheimer’s brother-- were both labeled Communists during the McCarthy era. He also admits that articles in *Life* and *Time Magazine* made him wary for many years of telling people about his role in the Manhattan Project. Jennerjohn states that he “didn’t have any hard feeling” for or against the bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki at the time. Jennerjohn also feels that if it hadn’t been for General Groves’ letter and the atomic bomb project, he would have been sent to “more serious times” in Europe in 1944.

Biographical Sketch:

Jennerjohn (b. 1922) was born in Milwaukee, Wisconsin. He graduated from high school in 1940 and attended the Milwaukee School of Engineering for two years before transferring to the University of Wisconsin-Madison. In 1944, he was drafted into the Army; however, he was invited by General Groves to join the Manhattan Project in Los Alamos in 1945. Jennerjohn was a draftsman for the atomic bomb and painted the bomb that would eventually be dropped on Nagasaki. After the war, he continued to work for the nuclear program until 1946, when he returned to UW-Madison to get his Master’s in Engineering. Afterwards, Jennerjohn joined the Wisconsin State Board of Health, Hospital Division and helped start many small hospitals in rural Wisconsin. He also worked to improve nursing homes, retiring from the Board of Health in 1984 at age 62.

Interviewed by John K. Driscoll, Wisconsin Veterans Museum Volunteer, 2006.

Transcribed by John K. Driscoll, Wisconsin Veterans Museum Volunteer, 2007.

Transcript edited and abstract written by Darcy I. Gervasio, 2010.

Interview Transcript:

John: This is John Driscoll, and today is September 19, 2006, and this is an oral history interview with Dale Jennerjohn, and we are doing the interview at Dale's home in Shorewood Hills. Dale, thank you so much for agreeing to the interview. And why don't we start at the very beginning? When and where were you born?

Dale: I was born in Milwaukee, on December 9, 1922.

John: 1922. Okay. And, early life and family?

Dale: Well, my dad had a grocery store on Cliburn Street.

John: Oh, yeah.

Dale: And the folks had bought Hanson's Soap Flake mansion, and anybody, old timers from Milwaukee, they all know what Hanson's Soap Flake was. And we rented it out in the Depression mostly to relatives who lost their homes on account of the Depression.

John: Okay.

Dale: Eventually, I went to a Catholic grade school, St. Rose's, went to West Division High School. Graduated in 1940. And then I went for two years to the university, School of Engineering in Milwaukee. For the first two years, and for the second two years I went to Madison. In '42, '43, and '44.

John: Okay.

Dale: And graduated in June of '44. I was waiting--I did not join the Reserves, and most of the guys who had joined the Reserves were all called up, in the service. But I did not. I waited for the draft. I was waiting to go to Milwaukee after I graduated with a civil engineering degree. Then, I didn't realize it, but I had received a letter from General Groves, of the Manhattan Project. And it fell on the floor of the fraternity house.

John: Oh.

Dale: It got blown under the bench. So I went in to Milwaukee. And it was found by a fraternity brother of mine, who didn't know my address. He sent it to his mother from Milwaukee. She came personally to my house. My brother apparently picked it up and went down to the induction station, and I was already sworn in. And I, of course, could have not gone in. But I think it was okay that I did go in.

John: Yeah. Let me back up just a little. Your fraternity. What fraternity?

Dale: Theta Chi.

John: Okay.

Dale: And, let's see, then, so I got the letter, and so I handed it to a sergeant. You know how that goes when you are in the service.

John: Oh, yes.

Dale: And I thought I would disappear, but I pretty much did. And, so then they sent me to basic training, in California. I was trying to find the camp, or fort. It was half-way between San Francisco and L. A. And, of course, we almost always went to San Francisco. It was much more interesting.

John: Yes. Let me back up again. How did you, how did the general get your name? Did you know him?

Dale: I have no idea. A very good question. The only way I could figure out was one of my professors, who was a pretty good friend of mine over the long run, might have. I don't know. There were a couple of guys from Milwaukee, as well. I've got the list of who was in the group that went to Los Alamos. And anyway, then, where was I?

John: Basic training.

Dale: Basic training. And then I went to Ohio State University. That is where they sent all the guys in our group. And that was in November, of '44. And then they sent me off to a project which was run by a Colonel Bish. Bitch, is what we called him.

John: I can imagine.

Dale: And it was a project that was not related to the atomic bomb project. And what he did was, he had a long aluminum, oh, about eight feet long and four feet wide. Like the wall board you set up, or plaster board. Only, it was wavy. And then he put two of them together and they formed tunnels. And you filled them with powder. And he was going to blow them across a field, across a mine field, so that they would blast. The only problem with it, they weren't controlled. And they would turn around and come back. So I got out of there by going, I went to visit a guy that I knew from Ohio State, and he was at Oak Ridge. And I wasn't too far. I was in Virginia somewhere, can't remember exactly where it was. But, anyway,

and the sergeant down there said, “What the hell are you doing here?”—you know—“You are supposed to...” So I wrote a note to Washington and, boy, I got sent to the atomic bomb project in Los Alamos. Real quick.

John: Okay. Now, at that time, did you know there was an atomic bomb project?

Dale: No, I did not know that. The guys at Oak Ridge didn't say, didn't tell me anything about it. Naturally. They were simply, they were getting a lot of stuff coming in, but they never seen anything going out. At Oak Ridge, they were developing the nuclear process, part of it. But, anyway, then I was sent to Los Alamos. And, I think it was in June of '45. And that is kind of late. Well, they wanted a volunteer. We were in the engineering drafting house. We did a lot of drafting, most of which you would have to put together, you'd have to know, it wasn't just the picture of a bomb. You couldn't just draw that. No, no. But, all kinds of things. And so, then we went, we volunteered to go to the test in the desert.

John: Okay.

Dale: And I got another buddy, you know how you latch onto somebody. So we both volunteered for that. And so, without knowing too much about this, we were supposedly fifteen or twenty miles away. I get closer every year, when I talk about it. But the guys, the big-wigs, were all six miles away. Sheltered. It was very successful, and very loud, and very impressive.

John: I'll bet.

Dale: So, then, by that time, drafting wasn't so important any more, because it was pretty well over with, the bomb. Then there was another time they asked for volunteers, so the two of us, us two guys, were out in the middle of a huge pine forest, in the mountains of New Mexico, painting the atomic bomb.

John: Oh.

Dale: Painting a bomb. And, I said, “Well, it's probably one of many, you know.” Well, just about a year ago, a friend of mine, who knew I was out there, had got a book, which I should really maybe have kept, instead of returning it back to the library. But there was a point in there which said there were only two bombs ever made. This was a gal who was very close, she was kind of a secretary there. And was helpful to, what is his name, the big gun? Well, anyway, she was kind of a secretary, but she wrote this book. And she said there were just two bombs made. So we knew that was the bomb that we used on Nagasaki. So that was, finally, I found that out. You never knew how many they made. Nobody ever learned.

John: Oh, wow.

Dale: So, so we painted it from a bilious green, to an olive drab.

John: Okay.

Dale: The Army, you know.

John: Wow.

Dale: And that was, of course, was after the first one had been dropped on Hiroshima. So.

John: They dropped the first one on my birthday.

Dale: Is that right?

John: August 6, yeah. I was nine years old, I think.

Dale: Well, I was a little older. So, then we, another buddy, the three of us, volunteered to do some more drawings. And these were very unusual. They were drawings of the history of the process of how they developed the bomb.

John: Okay.

Dale: These were all electronic drawings. You could look at a hundred of them and you wouldn't know anything. You know what I mean? Just, just historical. So, we did that. And across the hall were Oppenheimer, and Niels Bohr, probably, I can't remember all the names. But all the guys that were top-notch. And they were reviewing all their formulas. And they had blackboards just loaded with formulas. And I took advanced math, to a degree, but I got lost. Finally I had to quite trying to figure out what the hell. You know, pretty soon it was all numbers and not numbers, but letters. You know. It just got so complex. But, anyway, that is what they were doing. And then, at noon, they would go out at lunch, and they would be pitching pennies.

John: Pitching pennies?

Dale: And they would be arguing about who won, and how close they were, and all this. That was something I really enjoyed knowing about. And then in September of '46, the University of California took over. Well, they really were running it. They were running it, anyway. The University of California. Surprisingly, the liberal college. Running the atomic bomb project that they were. There were probably

scientists there. And so, let's see, and then I worked there, I supposed I worked until September of '46. And then I came back here and got a master's degree in engineering.

John: Okay. Here, at Madison?

Dale: Yes. I've got my correspondence to remind me of all that, But this is a list of all the guys that were in the Army that were at that. Two or three guys from Wisconsin. A couple from Milwaukee. One from Wauwatosa. I don't think I ever knew any of those guys, though. It may be that they were assigned to a different part of the project than I was.

John: Okay. Yeah, here is Milwaukee. Oh, Milwaukee, Dale Jennerjohn, certainly.

Dale: Yeah. There is a Jack Ruder. And one more, Dierksmire, Anthony Dierksmire, from Milwaukee.

John: I see. Wow, that is quite a document.

Dale: Yeah. Now, that is funny. I just didn't know those guys. I didn't know them.

John: That's quite a listing.

Dale: But we were all in the Army, and this General Groves, who ran this project, insisted that we go out and do exercises, and march around. Finally, the scientists said, "The hell with that. These guys are either engineers or scientists, and they are not going to be doing exercises or close order drill, and all that." And they got Groves to let us be. It is sort of interesting to meet these people.

John: Certainly.

Dale: They were very talented. Some were great, there was one guy was a great piano player. And they had a quartet. And I used to have lunch over at the, this was a boys hotel, or a boys ranch, or something. But this was a two-story log cabin, with typical rooms around the whole second floor, and each room was like a hotel. Real pretty log cabin. And in the basement was a place you could have dinner or lunch. And a couple of times I went, and these women were foreign women, these scientists wives. From Europe. Oh, my God. They would put a square of sugar in their tea. And, you know, their hair was, and those baggy dresses. So, it was an experience. And then one day, an accident happened. A lot of people weren't supposed to be there. Somebody was putting together, and this created a flash, not a flash, but an energy thing. That killed the guy that dropped it. He was our next door neighbor in our dorm, not our dorm, we had private rooms by that time.

- John: Wow.
- Dale: We had a regular dorm for a while, and then we got private rooms. But anyway, we were civilians then.
- John: You were discharged?
- Dale: Yeah. And I went back and worked as a civilian. So, anyway, I was in the Army one year, six months, and twenty-five days. So that was not very long. But we did a lot of stuff.
- John: Yeah. The experience. What was the reaction, yours and the fellows with you, when you heard that the bomb had been dropped? Did you more or less expect that?
- Dale: Well, I don't know. I think we expected it. I don't know. I don't remember that we were surprised. But then, we had no way of knowing that they were thinking about that. That was not part of what we were there for. You know what I mean?
- John: Yeah. Wow. That is interesting. I remember my dad telling me about it. And, of course, the question was, "What the heck is an atom bomb?" Nobody had any idea what that was all about.
- Dale: That is what others said, too. And I said, "Now, you aren't supposed to say anything." Well, not only that, but our mail was read, incoming mail and outgoing mail. And we met some girls, I met some gals I knew from Wisconsin, the University when I was there, in Santa Fe. We weren't supposed to mingle with Santa Fe people. We could go to Albuquerque. And so we did, we went to Albuquerque. A couple of times we went to Santa Fe and ran into those gals. Well, then, the dummies wrote us a telegram, or something, to cancel our date for Saturday. Well, you know, they didn't want a couple of guys, you know how that goes. And so they sent this telegram and we got into trouble because, and this was after the bomb was dropped. Oh, then they came and chewed us out. You know how that is in the service.
- John: Yeah. What is your feeling about it? You know, you talk to so many people today and they think that was the start of the nuclear age, and yet you talk to other people and they say, no, that was the end of World War II. The same event had two different things. What was your feeling on it?
- Dale: Well, I didn't have any hard feeling about it.

John: Yeah. Sure.

Dale: I was agog with all the abilities. You know, sometimes you feel like you're not very bright. You know.

John: With all the people like that, I can imagine. Yeah. I've talked to so many veterans, many of whom had fought in Europe. And then, when that war ended, they went to the Pacific. And they were training and getting ready for the invasion of the Home Islands. And that is their attitude entirely. Hey, the bomb, if it hadn't been for the bomb, we would have had to invade. We would have taken a million casualties. Yeah. That is interesting. Then, what did you do afterward? You came back to Madison?

Dale: Yeah, I came back.

John: Got your master's?

Dale: Got a master's degree.

John: Okay, and then what?

Dale: Oh, then I had a chance to get a doctorate. And Jerry Rollick (?) was a professor that was my friend, kind of. And he, a little bit late, but I signed up for the doctorate. And then I got a chance to go to the State Board of Health, and worked in Madison. I figured if I got a doctorate, I'd have to teach somewhere. And I wouldn't be able to teach at Wisconsin. They would prefer you to teach elsewhere in some other universities. They wouldn't want me to have a degree from Wisconsin, bachelor's degree, master's degree, and then doctorate, and then teach there. Because that wouldn't be broad enough. So, I said, I didn't want to teach anyway. The kids probably know more about it than I would know. So, today, that is probably truer than ever.

John: Yeah. Yeah.

Dale: But anyway, so then I decided to go to the State Board of Health. In the Hospital Division. And that started out as Federal aid to rural hospitals so that the doctors in the rural community will stay there. In other words, provide decent hospitals in the small towns to the doctors who probably had a clinic in their home, and a few beds upstairs, in case of emergencies. And stuff like that. Well, so we did that. And started a lot of hospitals. We had to make the plan. My boss was a real great guy, and he made a plan every year. So many hospitals in this community. And, of course, other communities that wanted on the list were always wanting us to come out. They wanted hospitals, too. No, we couldn't do that.

John: I've never heard of this. That is something.

Dale: Well, they did that and all those small hospitals are now tied up with the big ones. Like Marshfield, and the big Milwaukee hospitals, and the Madison hospitals. And Eau Claire, and La Crosse. All those big hospitals, all these tied up with these small towns, and it is really working out just fine.

John: Yeah. Okay.

Dale: Oh, and then we got into nursing homes. And then we got into trouble.

John: Oh, yea?

Dale: Oh, God. All these governors, they make a big issue out of poor conditions in the nursing homes. And we had a couple nurses who wanted things done right away. Everybody should be kicked out after, well, you couldn't kick out a lot of these little old ladies who were running a nursing home. You know, where are they going to go, these people? At that time, there weren't any other places to go.

John: That's true.

Dale: Now, it's pretty well. So, that is what we did.

John: I'll be darned. That is interesting.

Dale: I worked there a long time.

John: When did you retire?

Dale: Twenty years ago. I was sixty-two. Twenty-two years ago.

John: Okay. Great. Let me ask you a question. You were a young man, and your whole future was ahead of you. And the war happened. And then you got pulled out of life and sent off somewhere. What did you feel about that?

Dale: Well, I know I was in a group, when I just got in the service, that if it wasn't for the atomic bomb thing, that letter from the general, I would have gone with that group to one of the more serious times in Europe.

John: Yeah. Yeah.

Dale: Because that was June, July of '44. So that I am sure of. But I didn't know any of

those guys. And I assumed that is what probably happened with that group. But, then, they had to have some kind of training.

John: Do you stay in touch with any of the fellows you were with?

Dale: No, I lost touch with most everyone. Madison is kind of a busy area. And we have been members of the Black Hawk since 1961.

John: Oh, that is a beautiful place.

Dale: It was \$285 a year.

John: Oh, wow.

Dale: Well, that didn't last too long. It was not a big club then, compared to Maple Bluff. But now it is a big club and very expensive. And we are still members. Expensive. My wife always worked. She was an occupational therapist, and she taught at the school. And then she became a volunteer director at the hospital.

John: Oh, okay.

Dale: It was a paid job. She worked half time. Supposedly, she worked three-quarter time, instead of half. And when she was supposed to work three-quarter time, she worked full time. And when she worked full time, she worked double time. She is that kind of a person.

John: That's great. What a remarkable story. That is really, to have actually painted the atomic bomb.

Dale: I am a member of the Gyro Club. Bunch of guys and we have lunch every Monday at the Avenue Bar. And they said, "Don't put that in your obit. Somebody would come out and maybe want to kill your daughter." So I won't put it in.

John: I'm going to flip this over.

[End of Side A of Tape 1.]

John: In your civilian life afterwards, did you ever tell people about the work you did?

Dale: I was pretty quiet about these things, you know. Well, then I got *Life* magazine, and the whole damned thing was in there. And, you know, that was ridiculous.

John: I remember that cover. The cover of *Life* magazine.

Dale: So that was the reason for my caution.

John: That's a remarkable story. Wow. Okay, well, listen, I'll take this, and I'll give it to the, in fact I've got to get down there this morning, to the archives. I am going to shut this off. If you think of anything else, I'll turn it back on. Oh, go ahead. One of your bosses was Oppenheimer's brother?

Dale: Yeah. And, at a certain level. I'm not sure what the levels were. You know. But then there was another professor, or whatever he was. He was a guy that I wondered about, anyway. And I was reading *Time* magazine, and they called him a communist, of course. And that was an issue, of course.

John: Oh, yes.

Dale: Well, Oppenheimer's brother, too.

John: Okay.

Dale: That was an issue. So here they accuse this guy. I don't think I ever saw them. But they were supposedly on the charts, with McCarthy. Our bosses.

John: I have a friend who just retired. Well, a while back. He is a physicist here at Madison. And his family, his family is strange. His dad was a union organizer, back in the twenties. When that was a somewhat dangerous job to have. But he had some communist, I think he joined the communist party, or something. He wasn't an active flag-waving member, but he had an association. And, of course, Bob being a physicist, he had to have clearances. And he always had a heck of a time getting his clearance with this family history thing, because that would come up like a, pardon the pun, like a red flag.

Dale: Who was this guy?

John: Bob March.

Dale: Was he at the atom bomb project?

John: No. Bob is younger. Bob is my age. Okay.

[End of Interview]