Leona (Woods) Marshall Libby's Experience Provides Insights into Hanford's History

These past couple months I gathered a fair amount of research materials on Leona (Woods) Marshall Libby and her experience working on the Manhattan Project. It was this role as a scientist in Enrico Fermi's team that brought her to Hanford as a young mother in the summer of 1944. From Marshall Libby's perspective, Anna King's story details the tense events that transpired around the time of the B Reactor's initial test run. To accompany this, I would like to add a few more words on Marshall Libby's experience at Hanford and how it serves as a window into this historical moment. While she did not stay long at Hanford, the recollections Marshall Libby later recorded provide insight into the Hanford project's connection to the environment, its tight security, and its compartmentalized labor structure.

Her record reveals that Hanford's project affected both humans and the natural environment at Hanford. In her book *The Uranium People,* Marshall Libby described the Hanford site in 1944-45 as a "desert of gray sand and gravel…the home of rabbits, grey coyotes, and large black magpies." She argued that the site's recent construction worsened desert sandstorms, writing: "Local storms were caused by tearing up the desert floor for roads, and construction sites were suffocating. Wind-blown sand covered faces, hair, and hands and got into eyes and teeth." Marshall Libby also made note of the importance that the site placed on Pacific salmon, remarking that "[e]very care was taken to preserve the health of the Columbia River salmon" and continued to describe how the site operated a fish laboratory and issued daily reports on the well-being of their test subjects. Perhaps without the same care, the site's guards were "shooting a monthly quota of coyotes" at the request of "the medical staff" who would then examine the carcasses' thyroids for radioactivity.[1]

Marshall Libby's experience also illustrates the tight security and compartmentalization in effect at Hanford in 1944. In one instance, she and the famed scientist Fermi wandered into

the desert to eat lunch, only to be faced at gunpoint by a security guard and subsequently escorted away from the restricted area. Upon Marshall Libby and Fermi's return to the camp, guards searched them and they later received a fine. Marshall Libby recounted how flocking geese triggered false radar alarms, leading to unsuccessful searches for potential enemy targets.[2]

Another story reflects both Marshall Libby's feisty personality and sense of humor. It revolves around her response to the compartmentalization that required all Hanford workers to follow the proper chain of command and only address their immediate superiors. This particularly irked Marshall Libby who wrote that "[i]t was a new experience to be required to remain aware of who should speak to whom." After being reprimanded, she found a way to get back at the protocol. When "a bunch of brass" approached her one day and asked if she could "compute something or other," Marshall Libby "refused to give them the report" that contained the answer. Instead, she told them that she would pass the report along her chain of command, "and then if the right people were in communication, it would be transferred sideways to them." The group gathered at her office might have thought Marshall Libby was joking, but found that "they couldn't budge [her]."[3]

While Marshall Libby's moment in Hanford was short, her memory provides valuable insights for readers interested in learning more about Hanford's role during wartime. Hanford's history is both fascinating and complex. It spans decades and involves various people who were and are connected to the site in a multitude of ways. Marshall Libby's story represents just one of many that offer windows into better understanding both the time period, and Hanford's place in it. I encourage those who would like to know more about Hanford's history to explore some of the stories in the Daughters of Hanford exhibit as well as some of the works listed for further reading. As one who is interested in continuing to research Hanford's environmental history, or

in other words, its dynamic relationship to both humans and the natural environment, I look forward to uncovering more experiences and stories that help to narrate this chapter in both Washington State's and the nation's history.

[746 words]

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[1] Leona Marshall Libby, *The Uranium People* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1979), 166-67, 168, 174.
[2] Ibid., 168, 174-75.
[3] Ibid., 179. For more on compartmentalization see Peter Bacon Hales, *Atomic Spaces: Living on the Manhattan Project* (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1997), 115-154.