

**200035 Interviewer:** Can you tell us who you are and ...?

**200044 Steve:** My name is Steve Depoe. I'm an Associate Professor of Communication in the Department of Communication at the University of Cincinnati. I've lived in Cincinnati for 15 years. I come from Kansas, originally. I am married and have three children that go to school in the Northwest local school district. I live about 7 miles from the Fernald site. My interest, academic interests have been in two areas. One is in environmental communication that asks the question, "How do people talk about environmental issues?" And my second interest over the years has been in the area of history. I'm very interested in the way that history factors into politicians' speeches and that kind of thing. I wrote my dissertation on Arthur Schlesinger, Jr., who is a liberal historian and was a speechwriter for John and Robert Kennedy. And I published a book based on that dissertation that looked at the way Schlesinger's ideas influenced Kennedy's speeches and that kind of thing. So I have long had an interest in history as well as the environment. So those are my two general interests. I started getting interested in the Fernald nuclear weapons site in 1994. The Fernald site has been in the news from time to time and at that point in 1994 I followed it just like a general reader of the Cincinnati Enquirer. I didn't follow it that closely. But in 1994, I got involved in a national project that was coordinated out of New Orleans, Louisiana, by Tulane University. And someone from Tulane called me and asked me if I would do some focus groups with some folks at Fernald. So, I got to meet a lot of the folks, current and former workers, residents, etc. And I got to read a lot of background material about Fernald, and I became more and more interested in the way the public was trying to get involved in clean up issues. So from 1994 then onward, I've been paying a lot more attention to Fernald issues both as someone that lives close to the site and then also as someone that studies environmental communication.

**200315 Interviewer:** Can you tell us then from there what, how your involvement changed and transpired of how you got involved with the Fernald Living History Project?

**200327 Steve:** Right, in 1994 and early 1995, working with this Tulane University group, we did some focus groups. And, one of the focus groups we did was with retired workers. So we spent two hours discussing old war stories with some of the former workers, and at that time, I sort of filed away in the back of my mind the idea that it would really be cool to do an oral history project out here at some point. Because there are a lot of interesting stories, both in terms of the work force telling stories and also residents. And so I just kind of put it on file for a while. And a couple of years later, a colleague of mine in my department, Jerry Jordan, and I went up to visit Ken Morgan who is the DOE Ohio field office public affairs manager. Jerry, my colleague, had arranged this meeting just to discuss with Ken Morgan just some ideas that where the University of Cincinnati might get involved with public affairs programming. And we were just sort of in that meeting with Ken, brainstorming possible projects. Jerry Jordan is interested in assessing public affairs programming, how effective are our public affairs speakers and so on. And, so we talked a little about that. And, just sort of out of the blue at that meeting, I raised this idea that I had been filing away for a couple of years, "Wouldn't it be interesting to do an oral history project out at the site?" So this was probably the Fall of 1996. And to be honest with you, Ken Morgan at that particular meeting showed a little more interest in assessing public affairs

programming than he did for a history project. But that was kind of the first place where it was aired or discussed with somebody else. Then ...

**200525 Interviewer:** Can you tell us what is an oral history project and why did you think that this might be a good idea for an oral history of the site?

**100533 Steve:** In general, the way I see an oral history project is where a local non-profit organization, or perhaps a university, takes some time to ask individuals associated with either an event or an organization or something to record their thoughts and ideas for posterity to be kept in sort of an archive, or a library, or what have you. There are, of course, a lot of oral history collections on a lot of different topics, everything from World War II, the Holocaust; a lot of companies have oral histories associated with them. Many oral history projects are primarily tape-recorded conversations, both in terms, because of cost issues and because of technology. At the time these were collected, audiotape was just the logical way to do them. I thought that it would, might be interesting to try to get some videotaped interviews with this Fernald project, but they don't have to be videotaped. The idea of getting a lot of people talking about the same event or organization or issue is the assumption that with any thing that happens, different people will have different perspectives or points of view or feelings or attitudes about that event. And, it's good for future research or for historians or just for the public in general to get access to a wide variety of viewpoints on things that happen. At least, that's my opinion. And, so an oral history project will record and preserve a variety of viewpoints so that later students, teachers, or interested folks can hear or watch those viewpoints and that can help them form their own opinion about whatever it is that is being discussed. So, that's usually why oral history collections are developed. It's because it is an interesting topic or issue that has a wide variety of viewpoints about it, and somebody wants to collect those viewpoints for future research or for educational purposes.

**200752 Interviewer:** But what was it about Fernald that you felt was important in terms of creating an oral history?

**200759 Steve:** I had a sort of personal interest because of that focus group with the retired workers because the stories they told were very interesting. But in that research project that I did with Tulane in 1994, it became clear that with the issues of Fernald production and clean-up, there was disagreement among various parties about what was going on and what had gone on in the past. I had talked to current workers, former workers, residents, members of the regulatory community, state and Ohio Environmental Protection Agency, and site officials. And they would each talk about a public meeting or a news story that had happened in the Enquirer and they would be giving different interpretations of the same thing. And those disagreements were also becoming part of the discussions in the public meetings themselves. As I started to do more and more research about Fernald, I would read a transcript of a public meeting, for example. And it was clear that there were divergent points of view on what type of clean up to implement, or how much money to spend on something, or was the DOE responsible for something that had happened in the past. And it seemed to me that if we could develop a way to get folks that have these viewpoints to share, in a larger sense, their, through a conversation that's recorded or videotaped, share their opinions, that would be valuable to help us understand why people hold

different points of view on something. So, it was, Fernald was a controversial issue, and I saw differences of opinion emerging in various things that I was starting to study. So I was hoping that capturing those viewpoints in an oral history project would be valuable.

**200952 Interviewer:** Can you put Fernald in terms of this oral history and documenting these different perspectives into a national context? What were some of the issues that you saw that were happening at Fernald that might have a national resonance with other groups or communities?

**201016 Steve:** Fernald as a production facility was part of a larger set of facilities and operations that is typically known as the nuclear weapons complex. Very familiar names such as Oak Ridge, Tennessee, and Los Alamos, New Mexico, those were the ones that most Americans, if they know anything about the nuclear weapons complex, would probably be familiar with. Fernald had a specific set of operations it was doing as part of that. But, in a larger sense, I think some of the things going on at Fernald, both within the site with its workforce and the relationship between the Fernald site and the surrounding community, I think there were some things happening here that were probably happening at a lot of other places. For example, from the inception of the Manhattan Project in the early 1940s in which the United States was sort of in a race against Germany and Japan to develop the atomic bomb, from the inception of the Manhattan Project through the decision by the Truman administration to develop a national production complex to build nuclear weapons, up through really the early 1990s, there was a culture of national security and secrecy that surrounded each of these facilities. Workers when they entered the site and were given some training or orientation were told that whatever went on within the site boundaries should not leave the property in terms of talking to family or friends or what have you. And I noticed, back again in 1994 when I was doing this first set of focus groups, I noticed with various groups, they handled that notion of secrecy and national security differently. Current and former workers still felt at times like they couldn't talk about things because they felt that whatever they had be oriented toward when they first started working there in terms of secrecy was still true. And so we would get to a point in the conversation, and they wouldn't talk about it anymore. On the other side, when we were talking to residents, they either were angry about the secrecy; or, they recognized the need for it, but felt that now, in the 1990s when we were doing these focus groups, that now it was no longer necessary. So, they had different viewpoints on that. So, since 1994 and in recent years as I have been doing a little bit more research on this, I found that there have been a couple of researchers that have developed articles and books that describe what they call a nuclear culture, which is a set of values and practices that are part of the work place and surrounding community at various nuclear weapons production facilities. Those authors have started to look for similarities in the way people think and act, whether they are living in Oak Ridge, Tennessee, or in Hanford, Washington, or in Fernald, Ohio. So, given that research that's starting to be developed, I think an interesting question to ask as we start to gather oral history interviews at Fernald is, "to what extent is Fernald unique, just because of where it sits in southwest Ohio and what it was doing in its mission as part of the nuclear weapons complex? And, to what extent is Fernald and the surrounding culture that was created over a 40-year period of secrecy, to what extent is that culture similar to other cultural communities that developed elsewhere in the United States." There have been some writers that have argued that it's not just the nuclear weapons complex

and surrounding communities that are impacted by atomic weapons production, but the entire country. The entire society was dominated by a Cold War orientation toward both foreign policy and also domestic affairs that was very strong. And so there might be elements of that as well that would be interesting to look for when we collected these histories. So, Fernald has some unique aspects, but I also think that it's part of a larger cultural movement that was dominated by the production of nuclear weapons. So, those have been some of the things that I've been interested in.

**201436 Interviewer:** Could, you, uh, alright, could you talk a little about how Fernald is unique in your research and what you feel or ...?

**201446 Steve:** Right, I mean, Fernald is a unique place in a number of respects. First of all, as a facility, it's fairly small. It sits on 1,000 acres, 1,000 plus acres. Some of the other sites are massive in terms of size and also in terms of the size of their workforce. That's one way in which it's unique. Another way that Fernald is unique is that it, Fernald, is located about 15 or 16 miles northwest of Cincinnati, Ohio; but Cincinnati, Ohio is not a company town for Fernald. In other words, Cincinnati, Ohio has a lot of other things going on, Procter & Gamble, a lot of different things. So, in this case, Fernald, the nuclear weapons facility, did not really shape the surrounding city to the extent that, let's say, Oak Ridge, Tennessee, for example. That town grew up all around that nuclear weapons facility and research lab. And so, Oak Ridge, Tennessee, the history of that city is very much connected to the site, a lot more strongly. The same is true in Los Alamos, New Mexico, where the town almost grows up around the site. But, here at Fernald, Fernald was placed, the site was placed in a fairly rural area, surrounded by farmland and a few small communities. But it isn't, Cincinnati is not a company town to the extent that some of these other places are. So I think that is a little bit of a difference as well. At the same time, there are a lot of similarities in terms of the way the workforce was oriented. They were told not to tell anyone what was going on. Fernald was part of a complex network of production tasks, and it was regionally based. So, in other words, for many, many years, just to give you an example, the person that was managing the Fernald operations was based in Oak Ridge, Tennessee. Because Oak Ridge was the regional headquarters of what was going on. So, if there was a problem up here in Ohio, someone from Oak Ridge had to come up and deal with it. So, I think that was true nationally as well. The production system, the nuclear weapons production system, was sort of fragmented and dispersed throughout the country. And so, that was done for a lot of reasons, but in part to enhance the national security aspect so that, you know, the entire nuclear weapons secret wasn't contained at any one location. So that was an interesting aspect of Fernald weapons production. I also think Fernald has been unique in the last decade or so in its ability to make some progress in making decisions about cleaning up the site and doing it with some level of public participation. I think more than at other sites. I think this was due in large part because the Fernald site itself was fairly small; and the environmental problems they had to deal with, while they are important and significant to the community, they are small in contrast to a couple of the other sites in the complex that have massive environmental and health issues that are very difficult to define and try to deal with. So, I think Fernald had a slightly more manageable set of environmental problems to deal with. And, through a combination of efforts of the community and the Department Of Energy and some

others, a public involvement process developed here that is probably a little bit better than some of the other sites. It's not perfect, but... So that makes Fernald somewhat unique.

**201822 Interviewer:** Do you want to talk a little bit about the public process, what happened here in terms of your perception of how it went from the Cold War mentality to an open process?

**201840 Steve:** Fernald in the mid-1980s, 1984/1985 timeframe, was one of the first sites where the public, via the news media and via some meetings, the public surrounding the site became aware of environmental and health issues. Through contamination of some local wells south of the site and through the release of some uranium dust through the failure of a dust collector on-site, and that became known to the media. And from the mid 80s to the early 90s, there was a very public sort of combat conflict between the Department of Energy, state and federal regulators, and the local community. In the mid- to late 1980s, the community was dealing with some problems. The Department of Energy was still operating under a veil of secrecy due to national security issues. In the mid 1980s, federal facilities, whether it be a military base or Department of Energy nuclear weapons facility or what have you, federal facilities were largely exempt from federal environmental laws. So, if a military base had some environmental problems, they were exempt from having to comply with federal laws, such as the Clean Water Act and whatever. So there was a real battle in terms of who can regulate the Department of Energy and tell them to clean up a certain area. And that battle was played out in the courts and also through a series of public meetings such that the surrounding community and the news media started to focus on Fernald as sort of a test case in the late 1980s of the extent to which the Department of Energy was creating massive environmental problems and the extent to which they would be held to any kind of regulatory regime to force the Department of Energy to clean things up. Some key things happened in the late 1980s and early 1990s, the US EPA decided to put the Fernald site on the National Priorities List. That's a list that is generated as part of CERCLA, that's a federal law that's often known as the Superfund law. It is a law that says that the federal government identifies the worst environmental hazards around the country and then funds those clean up efforts to a larger extent. So, when Fernald got placed on that list, it became eligible for both some funding to clean up and that also gave the US EPA some teeth in its ability to enforce federal law. That was an important step. In the early 1990s, the Department of Energy and the US EPA developed a consent agreement which paved the way for a federal law which mandated that federal facilities, the Department of Energy and the Department of Defense bases or facilities, had to comply with federal environmental laws. The Federal Facilities Compliance Act, 1991 or 1992, whatever year it was, was very important in allowing the US EPA to start enforcing federal environmental laws at these various facilities. And the third thing that happened was once the US EPA started getting into Fernald and some of the other facilities, the question then became not only who is going to regulate these facilities, but who is going to make decisions about how clean is clean. In other words, how much should ground, air, and water levels be cleaned up at these various facilities and to what extent should the public be involved in these discussions. The federal environmental law and policy area has some precedents here. In other words, some federal environmental laws allow for the public to get involved, either through hearings or public comments or what have you. In the early 1990s, a group was commissioned to study this issue in relationship to the Department of Energy. This group issued a report, it's called the Keystone Report, in the early 1990s. And the Keystone

Report says that public participation mechanisms within current environmental laws are insufficient to deal with the Department of Energy problems because the DOE problems are larger and require more public participation. What the Keystone report recommended was that the Department of Energy establish site-specific community advisory boards or panels to provide consensus-based recommendations to the Department of Energy on clean up actions at various sites. So in 1992, 1993, 1994, a group was convened here at Fernald, initially called the Fernald Citizens Task Force; now, it's called the Fernald Citizens Advisory Board. It was one of the first site-specific advisory boards within the nuclear weapons complex; now, there are 11. Some of them work better than others, but the Fernald Citizens Advisory Board has done a fairly good job of studying issues and issuing some recommendations to the Department of Energy, which they follow for the most part. So, the emergence of the Fernald Citizens Advisory Board is a key piece of the growing amount of public involvement at Fernald. The other piece besides the issuance of recommendations to create a site-specific advisory board and the formation of that at Fernald, the other thing I want to mention is the active citizen involvement and protest at the Fernald site that has happened really since about 1984. One local resident, Lisa Crawford, was told that her well was contaminated and a few months later a small group of residents got together and formed the Fernald Residents for Environmental Safety and Health or FRESH. That group has pushed for rigorous enforcement of environmental laws, for more openness and disclosure of information, and for more public involvement in all aspects of site activities; and that push has occurred over a 15-year period. FRESH celebrated their 15th anniversary in 1999. It's one of the more influential environmental activists groups in the country, really, in terms of its ability to influence what the Department of Energy was doing. Some members of FRESH are on the Citizens Advisory Board, some members are not; but that's another important piece of the public involvement picture at Fernald.

**202533 Interviewer:** Could you give some examples and talk about why public involvement has been important because I feel like we haven't really gotten...you'd talked about how the DOE says there wasn't enough, but tell us why it's important and, then, give us an example.

**202543 Steve:** When the Fernald Citizens Task Force, as it was originally called, was formed, they had a lot of possibilities, a lot of possible things that they could focus on. The chairperson of that Task Force, John Applegate, and the group decided to focus on just a few issues and to issue some recommendations to the Department of Energy, asking questions such as, "What should the clean up levels be, particularly with soil and groundwater? Should it be back to the way it was, or should it be back to a certain level with minimal risk to the public?" Or, whatever. The Task Force discussed those issues and came up with some recommendations that were reasonable, in other words, provided safety to the public, but also did so at a cost that was possible to be handled by the federal government. So, clean-up levels was an issue that the Task Force provided some recommendations on. And, the other issue that they tackled right off the bat was what should and should not be potential uses of this property when the site is actually cleaned up. Should this be open for residential property after the site is cleaned up, or heavy industrial, or commercial, or what have you. That issue of future site use is directly tied to clean-up level. Because if you are going to advocate that houses are to be built on this 1,000-acre area, then you need to have a higher clean up standard than if it is just going to be open fields or whatever. So, those two issues were issues that the Task Force issued some recommendations on. They

recommended the site never again be used for residential or heavy industrial. That it can only be used for sort of ecological, either a park or something like that, or very light industrial. And that recommendation was incorporated into the final Records of Decision involved with clean-up actions at the site. So that was a very influential public involvement example where the public actually had a say and what they said was going to happen actually got incorporated into clean-up actions. I think that is the best example.

**202802 Interviewer:** Well, You don't think that maybe some independent panel from Washington, D.C. or could have come up with a similar recommendation? I don't really under...I mean, and that's CAB [Citizens Advisory Board]. What about, I'm just talking generally, why is it important for citizens to be involved in these DOE complexes in terms of ...? What difference do they really make?

**202827 Steve:** One of the fundamental assumptions of environmental policy since the passage of the National Environmental Policy Act or NEPA in the late 1960s is that environmental issues are local, they impact local communities in, let's say, in a radius around a plant or what have you, and that the people that are adversely affected or potentially adversely affected by industrial production should have a say in the way those processes are cleaned up so that there is some level of comfort or satisfaction at some point in the future that the place is safe. And the best way to ensure that is to give those residents living right near the company or the site or whatever some ability to have some input into those decisions. In many cases, the public has information that helps, actually from a technical standpoint, it shows the scientists things that they hadn't thought of before; and also at least the theory is, that if you give the citizens the right to participate, they will feel more comfortable with the decision down the road. It will have more legitimacy. Even if you chose actually not to participate, the fact that you had an opportunity to participate gives more legitimacy to the process. Now it's not a perfect system. The environmental policies have often been criticized because it's very complicated for the public to get involved, and there is no insurance that what their comments are will actually be incorporated. But, the thought is that if you just have scientists or some think tank out somewhere coming up with solutions, even if they are pretty good solutions, in many cases, local communities living near hazardous waste sites, or whatever, will not accept those decisions because they did not have a role in making the decisions. So that is the theory at least.

**203016 Interviewer:** Could you give an example ... (Tape cut)