Office of Legacy Management
RFS RETIREES VISIT

Oral History Project
Interview of Murph Widdowfield
October 6, 2022
Interviewer: Taylour Whelan

(music)

Taylour Whelan: This is an oral history interview, conducted on October 6, 2022, by the [U.S.] Department of Energy Office of Legacy Management, in conjunction with the Rocky Flats retiree tour that occurred yesterday, October 5th, 2022. My name is Taylour Whelan, T-A-Y-L-O-U-R W-H-E-L-A-N, and I will be conducting this interview. To start, could you please tell me your full name and spell it for me?

Murph Widdowfield: My full name is Arthur Samuel Widdowfield. My nickname is Murph, M-U-R-P-H. That's 'cause I was born so close to the good St. Patrick on March the 18th, and my father's boss was from Shannon, Ireland, and he said, "You can't be a good ol' Welshman." He's "You gotta be a good Irishman." And so I've been [00:01:00] Murph all my life because of that. And my last name is spelled W-I-D-D-O-W-F-I-E-L-D.

Taylour Whelan: Thank you. To begin, could you tell me what your positions were at the plant and how you got started working there?

Murph Widdowfield: Well, I was never an employee of Rocky Flats or any of its contractors. I was a contractor myself, and I did a lot of repair work and maintenance on high-temperature equipment for the plant. I maintained the steam plant and Building 443. I maintained some other — uh — furnace equipment, and — um — incinerators, things of that nature. As an outside contractor.

Taylour Whelan: And how did you get started working at Rocky Flats as an outside contractor?

Murph Widdowfield: My first time I went out to Rocky Flats, I was a laborer for a contracting company, and that was in 1957. And I — um — went out to help, well, to carry materials in, basically — uh — repair the boilers in Building 43. That was before it became 443.

Taylour Whelan: And as a contractor, you had a unique experience, not being employed by the plant, so could you talk a little bit about your experience as a contractor?

Murph Widdowfield: Yeah, you always had an, a problem clearing security, and — um — taking materials in. They always had to go through your truck and see what you were taking in, and basically why they almost decided to count the firebrick and stuff like that that we were repairing the boiler with. Um — they had to know how much we carried in. They had to know how much we had left over and carried out. Um — other than the security, why, it was, it was an easy place to work. Um — we knew mo, we got to know most of the — uh — plant operators and stuff like that, and so if we needed things like a water tap or somethin' like that, why, boy, they'd get it for us in a heartbeat. They were very good to work with.

Taylour Whelan: What was it like interacting with the other employees who were employed by Rocky Flats?

Murph Widdowfield: Uh — like I say, it was very good. Um, uh — the other employees — uh — tried to help us as much as they could — uh — to be sure that we had place for disposal of materials, to be sure that we had everything — uh — taken care of and could do the job most efficiently and get them back on the line and operating again.

Taylour Whelan: How long did you work at the plant for?

Murph Widdowfield: Off and on. Uh — I worked at the plant, the first job, like I say, was 1957, and — uh — then I went into the military shortly after that and didn't see the plant again until about 1963 or '64. And — um — then I was in every year, probably at least once a year, sometimes twice, to — uh — maintain and repair equipment. Um — other than that, why, I was not on plant site all the time. I worked in a lot of, — um — other operations — uh — mining, mining operations — uh — copper, zinc, molybdenum — uh — all kinds of different things. And — um — also — uh — worked in all the uranium operations in the western United States. Uh — the uranium — uh — oxide furnaces, I maintained all of those for all the different uranium sites that were mining and milling uranium. That's my biggest background in nuclear was the uranium mines. Out at Rocky Flats, I very rarely ever saw anything that had anything to do with nuclear, because it wasn't my side of the thing.

Taylour Whelan: Did you have the secrecy working there that the other employees experienced? Were you allowed to talk much about your work at the plant?

Murph Widdowfield: No, I had a secrecy clearance with the Army, and they didn't need anything greater than that.

Taylour Whelan: What did your family and friends think you were doing at the — at the plant, if you were not really allowed to talk about it very much?

Murph Widdowfield: Well — uh — I was allowed to talk about it, because I wasn't — um — dealing with — uh — top-secret areas or clearances, and, of course, my people that I brought in to, to do a lot of the work — uh — knew as much about it as I did. So it was not a problem talking back and forth with them. Um, uh — one lady office that I had — uh — she ran everything, includin' me, and — uh — she had to know — um — all of the job costing and everything like that so that she knew how to bill it. And — uh — she did all of that, so she had to know. And there was no reason for me to not — um — give them that information, and if my wife wanted to know what I've done today, I, I did happen to work out at Rocky Flats. Um — I went to high school with a young man and — uh — ran around ... I knew his dad worked out at Rocky Flats, but I had no idea who his dad, or what his dad did. Turns out he was head of security. Um — so, on that end of it, I knew that there was not much talk going around, but I was not a part of that. I didn't have that problem.

Taylour Whelan: Can you describe how an ordinary day would go for you while working at the plant?

Murph Widdowfield: Can I describe what?

Taylour Whelan: An ordinary day while working …

Murph Widdowfield: Can I describe an ordinary day? Well, the work that we did — uh — was, was fairly dirty work. Uh — you had to get inside of the boilers. You had to tear out refractory and so forth that had been — uh — inside. That's what keeps the heat inside the boiler and stuff. But — uh — it gets dirty. It gets sooty. It gets ... It depends on whether they're firing on gas or whether they're firing on, on number six bunker C oil. The bunker C oil is very dirty, and — um — sometimes, why, it takes weeks for the gas to be able to burn off a lot of that soot and everything, so you'd come out dirty. You'd go home, take a shower, and get cleaned up. Um — but a normal day — uh — was almost like any other project. We did a lot of work for Public Service Company and people like that and their boilers — um — and it was similar to that. Uh — we had, it was nothing special to us. Uh — we just re, maintained the boilers and maintained other stuff. We built all of the — uh — off-gas system for the — uh — inc, the incinerator that supposedly was operating when the FBI — uh — decided to raid, and I did ask — uh — Jon Lipsky, the head FBI agent, "How do you raid a plant with that type of security?" And he said, "Murph," he said, "you make arrangements at least three-to-four months ahead of time. Otherwise, there'd have been a lot of dead men, and they'd have all been mine," he said. Uh — so a normal day was just — uh — a day of dirty work and sweat and, and workin' hard, that's all.

Taylour Whelan: What was the process for getting onto the plant and going through security?

Murph Widdowfield: All right — um — that I — uh — I can remember I'd go to the main gate, either east or west, either one — uh — normally the west gate — um — because that was the only gate up until 1968, somethin' like that. Uh — but you'd go to the gate and drive up to the gate, and the guards would want to see your ID. They'd wanna know what your business was on the plant. And so we'd show them our, our sheet of paper that had our contract number and everything on 'em, and tell 'em where we're going, which building, and they would — uh — look over the vehicle to see if there was anything that could be determined to be detrimental to the plant. And then they would — uh — allow me to go on through, and they would usually hand me a little map and say, "Here's the building you're going to. Here's the route we want you to take to get there." And we'd park in the building's parking lot near the, as close to the building as we could, because some of the materials that we had to take in and out were, were very heavy. The boxes of — um — plastic refractory, for instance, were only 12 by 12 by 12, but they weighed a hundred pounds per box, and — um — so we'd try to get as close as we could to, to do the work.

Taylour Whelan: So were you aware of the work that was going on at Rocky Flats at the time?

Murph Widdowfield: I was aware that Rocky Flats was a nuclear weapons plant. Um — I knew what every other neighbor knew — uh — that they were making refractory tri, or that they were making nuclear triggers. Um — the, other than that, I really had no idea what was going on inside that plant.

Taylour Whelan: What were some of the most memorable aspects of working at Rocky Flats?

Murph Widdowfield: I think the security problems, and — uh — things of that nature were the normal — uh — aspect that we had a problem with, simply because we were just not used to having that as a problem going into most of the operations that we went into around the country. Why, we didn't have that problem, so that was different. Other than that, why, it was just like any other job we had.

Taylour Whelan: How did you get involved with the Rocky Flats Cold War Museum?

Murph Widdowfield: Well, I was retired. I was looking for things to do. I'm not a person to sit down and do nothing. Uh — I worked for 18 years out at the National Western Stock Show as a volunteer. I volunteered for the Red Cross during — um — the hurricane that hit New Orleans, on their main — uh — call center. I've worked, I've volunteered with a lot of things. I'm kinda dumb that way, because I really enjoy doing things and working, and I can't just sit down and do nothing. So I happened to notice in the paper that there was an open seat on the Rocky Flats Stewardship Council, which is a council that — um — made up of all of the surrounding cities and counties, and it's the method by which Department of Energy — um — keeps the cities and everyone up to date as to what they're doing with water quality and monitoring the old site and so forth. And I thought, you know, that would be interesting for me. I've been out there. I worked out there a little bit. I know very little about it, but I know some. And — um — so I applied for that position and was voted on by the cities. So I became a member of the stewardship council, and I spent a couple of years on the stewardship council as an everyday citizen. And the museum has a seat on the stewardship council, and two of the ladies who were — um — the people who were designated by the museum to be on that council were Shirley Garcia and [Ann] — uh, uh — [Lanford]. And — uh — they came and said, "Would you be interested in getting onto the board of directors of the museum?" And I thought, 'Well, I volunteer for everything else, I may as well volunteer for that.' (laughs) So I volunteered for the museum board, and I was elected onto the board. And I — uh — stayed on the board and became the treasurer, and then I became the secretary. And the next thing I knew, why, I was the president of the board. And — um — I keep asking to get 'em to find a new president, but they keep sayin', "No, Murph, you're it," so I am still the president of the Rocky Flats Cold War Museum.

Taylour Whelan: Could you talk a little bit about the work that the museum does?

Murph Widdowfield: The museum tries to collect all of the memorabilia — um — everything from silly, little badges that say something about Rocky Flats — um — 'I'm having a meltdown,' — um — to things that are important to Rocky Flats, and we have a fairly good size collection. Um — Rocky Flats, during the closure, began to accumulate things that had no contamination, had never been in service, and came out of places like the warehouses, came out of — um — visitors center, came out of — um — offices, things of that nature, and began to collect them, and decided, 'Gee, we have to do something with this.' And Department of Energy didn't seem to have the will or the want to put together anything for the public, so they gave us, they've helped to form us and then gave us all of this material. And in 2001, the Rocky Flats Cold War Museum was incorporated. And we have been the — um — the place to deposit anything of that nature ever since. And we still today get phone calls from people who say, 'Gee, I — um — when I left the plant, I had this in my possession, and I don't really want it. I don't know what to do with it. Um — would the museum like it?' Well, my attitude is the museum will accept anything relevant to Rocky Flats. That's what a museum should do. And so my answer has always been 'yes.' Uh — for instance, I had a man call me one day, and he said, "I was the official spokesperson for Rocky Flats." And he said, "When they began to close up, and we were getting finished up," he said, "I knew that all of my information, all of my stuff I had collected over the years — uh — to give official accounts, were gonna be thrown in the dump." And he said, "I started takin' stuff home." And he said, "Right at the moment, I have a basement full of stuff that I have accumulated over the years." And — uh — he said, "I now have cancer." And he said, "They tell me I'm not gonna live too awfully long. What should I do with this?" I said, "Would you like me to come get it? Because it should never be thrown away." And he said, "Well, yeah." He said, "I — uh — need to go through it a little bit to try to get it a little organized and be sure that there's nothing in there that shouldn't be in there." He said, "Then I'll call ya, and," he said, "We'll

make arrangements, and you can take it to the storage area." I said, "Okay." Three weeks later, I found his obituary in the paper, and a week after his service, his wife called me and said, "I have a little note here from my husband that says I should call you." And she said, "I need to get rid of this stuff because I'm gonna sell the house and move down to Canyon City with my daughter." So we made arrangements. It's now sittin' in my storage. And — um — I haven't had time to go through it, look at it, or anything, and neither did he. Um — it will need to be declassified to be sure of what's in there, and we have made contact with the declassification department of Department of Energy to be sure that that gets done. In the meantime, it's sittin' in my storage because they don't have enough people to go through it yet. And — um — on the other hand, why — uh — they also have a lot of our stuff that we couldn't find a place to store, and they said, 'We'll store it.' So we moved it all over there, and they'll go through it, and whatever we do with it, they'll finally give us a letter saying it's all declassified. I'm sorry, that was a longwinded story. (laughs)

Taylour Whelan: That's great, thank you. Uh — do you have any objects in particular that you find interesting, that you've been able to see, out of the collection?

Murph Widdowfield: Yes, we have quite a few interesting, very interesting, objects. Some of the objects that we have are — um — a lot of the stuff that was exclusive to Rocky Flats. Um — monitoring equipment, to monitor radiation, and monitor it if it, you happen to get any on your clothing or your body. Um — we have a lot of monitoring equipment. We have, and that's all declassified. Uh — we have all kinds of just interesting objects and pieces, photographs. We have photographs, thousands of photographs. And — um — those are all very interesting. We have a lot of objects that came from the protests side of — uh — Rocky Flats, and Rocky Flats was one of the most protested sites in the United States. Uh — they had protests out there that were — uh — two and three thousand people at a time — uh — protesting mostly war, but also protesting the fact that Rocky Flats was building the pits for the nuclear weapons, and they, course, didn't want the nuclear weapons. On the other hand, I spent three years in Germany in the Army shortly after the war, and, ya know, after the war, the United States pulled almost all of its soldiers and troops and equipment out of Europe, sent 'em home to mama. They'd been fightin' and everything. The Russians did not do that. The Russians not only left their entire armies — um — east of the borders that were agreed upon — um — but they increased them. And Joseph Stalin had a thought in his mind that if he owned all of Europe, why, it wouldn't be long, and he could have a communist world. There was only one big thing standing in his way, and that was the United States of America and our allies. And he felt that he needed to do something about that. And in 1949, when Russia ignited a nuclear weapon, he declared himself a nuclear power now also, and we had to do something to take over that nuclear thought in his mind. And I, very honestly, believe that his thought for the United States had nothing to do with fighting us; it had to do with nuclear annihilation. And he wished to annihilate the United States so that we could not stand in his way of world dominance. And Rocky Flats was born, and Rocky Flats stepped in and could produce more weapons, faster than the Russians. And I honestly believe that that's what kept the Russians from trying to annihilate the United States. That's the whole reason you and I are standing here. I honestly believe that.

Taylour Whelan: What are some of the responsibilities you have as president of the board of the museum?

Murph Widdowfield: Um — what are the, what pos ...

Taylour Whelan: What are the responsibilities you have as president of the board of the museum?

Murph Widdowfield: The responsibilities that I have as the board president are to, number one, try to keep the board intact and keep it operating. Um — we have some real problems with that, because most of our board are getting older. We have already lost two of our members of our board — uh — that have passed away. And we're not getting a dime's worth younger. I'm 85 years old, and I don't really need to fight the problems that we're having. And the problems that we're having is raising money, and that's part of the president's responsibility is to try to raise the money needed — um — to support the storage of all this equipment and also to eventually have a museum. And I have tried to get grants. I have tried to get money. I have tried to get support from everyone involved, especially, and some that are not involved. I have talked to private organizations, such as the Anschutz Corporation's — um, uh — organization that hands out money. I can't — uh — I just lost my memory on that one. But anyway, I've tried — uh — Coors. Coors supplied a lot of materials to Rocky Flats. Coors had a very nice, and probably one of the best stainless steel machine shops and fabrication shops in the United States, because they built all their own brewing kettles and everything. And they built a lot of equipment that went out to Rocky Flats. They built a lot of the glove boxes. They built tanks, especially tanks — uh — that — uh — that received and stored — uh — contaminated materials. Um — I went to them. I went to the state of Colorado. I went to the Colorado Historical Commission. I went to History Colorado, the museum. I went to Department of Energy. I wrote to — uh — Mr. Melendez — uh — and his predecessor before him, trying to get the backing from Department of Energy. Um — I tried [U.S.] Department of Interior. I tried working with — uh — the park — um — people, because they have the Manhattan Park. I tried everything that I could think of to gain the money to build a museum, a small one. I'm not talking about a big thing; I'm talking about something ... And when we first started doing this, we were talkin' about two to three million dollars. Today, you're talkin' about eight to ten million dollars. Um — and could not get any backing. Um — we have also — um — we have organizations that we have worked with that have helped us to supply — uh — enough money to make, meet the storage cost, and this COVID pandemic — uh — cut almost all of that money off. Um — those of us on the board have been taking care of the value of storing the materials since then. We've been able to raise a little bit of money here and there, but it's been tough. And right at the moment, why, we just plain don't have the money — um — to meet the storage. Uh — Department of Energy took over one of our two storage lockers, and — um — pays for their, for that storage, but we have a second locker that we still supply, and we cannot even finance that. We're having a terrible time. And so we have to figure out what to do with this. I have set up a meeting next week to include the governor's office, History Colorado, Department of Energy, Department of Interior, everybody that I can think of that would have a thumb or a finger in this, and ask them where do we go from here. History Colorado has a problem because they have two storage warehouses, plus their museum downtown, and they're all crammed to the ceiling. They have no place to take our larger objects. Uh — they gave us a grant two months ago for dollars to pay for the storage — um — for two months. That's all. And during that two months, they would like to come to the storage locker, and they would like to go through as much of it as they can, which they can't go through much, because of the weight of the, of the stuff that has to be moved. Some of that stuff weighs in at four or five thousand pounds, and they can't get to it, a lot of it. But they would like to take all of our small items only. Well, that's robbery. All they're doin' is taking over something that is too small. On the other hand, History Colorado has 19 items on their list that belong to Rocky Flats, and out of the 19 items, 17 are from the protest side. They have a pair of glove box gloves, and they have one other item that actually came from Rocky Flats, and they would like to have more. I asked 'em why. I said, "You planning to make 'em a display? Are you planning on telling the people what happened at Rocky Flats?" 'Well, we don't know anything about it.' I said,

"That's why you need the museum. You need us because we have the background and the knowledge to tell you what happened, how it happened, and why did they even select the site, why is it here in Colorado." Uh — most of the protestors would like to have never had it in Colorado. I have right here one of, a copy of the original Project Apple, and Project Apple was the selection of the site. And it started off with — um — some representatives from Dow Chemical. Uh — DOE determined that Dow Chemical had the chemistry background, the manufacturing background, the engineering background to build and operate the site. Um — so in 1951 — um — on New Year's Eve, a group of six individuals from Dow Chemical's — um — executive group were cleared quickly. They jumped on a train, and they went down to — uh — Santa Fe, New Mexico, and were taken on a tour of the Los Alamos facilities that had made the two nuclear weapons that were used in Japan, to show them what it was they had to make. They went back to Midland, Michigan, to Dow's main office, and they put together a plan within three days. They signed contracts within three days to build a plant. They didn't even know where or anything, but the criteria for that. And I have the criteria; I'd like to read it to you, if you'd like me to. But this is the — um — the people who went down to — uh — Los Alamos was: Les Richards; Charles Nelson; Dr. M. E. Putnam, who was the executive vice president of Dow; Dr. John Grebe; Dr. Norman Wright; and Dr. Lome Matheson. At Los Alamos, they were escorted by Dr. Eric Jette, Ed Walko, Bill Bright. Ed Walko and Bill Bright later went to work for Dow Chemical, at Rocky Flats. And on — uh — January the 18th of 1951, a contract was signed to do this. Three days later, they hired the Austin Company to — um — to do research on the site, where it would be, what would best accum — uh — handle the site, and what would best serve — um — to build it.

Um — the site-selection criteria was to determine "The most suitable location and site. The measure of evaluation was the extent to which the site-selection criteria were satisfied. The site-selection criteria, as established and approved by the Santa Fe Operation Office and the Dow Chemical company, were location. The site shall lie within these general boundaries: west of the Mississippi River; north of Texas, but include the panhandle area; south of the northern boundary of Colorado; and east of Utah. Generally, this includes Nebraska, Kansas, Oklahoma, Missouri, Arkansas, Colorado, and the Texas Panhandle. The site area shall contain a square two miles on each side, presently owned or controlled by the government, if possible. The central square mile of the site area shall be reasonably level and suitable for building construction. The supporting population: the edge of the site shall be not less than five miles, nor more than 25 miles, from a community of at least 25,000 population. Isolation: clearing of the site area shall require a minimum displacement of homes or other private properties. Attractive environs: to retain the skilled personnel who will have to move to this region, it is important that the living conditions and community facilities be good; that the climate be attractive; and that the environs provide a variety of recreational opportunities. The climate: a dry, moderate climate is preferred to facilitate the use of evaporative cooling, a lot less expensive than air conditioning. Rail transportation: a spur at the site is desirable, but not essential. The site shall be within 10 miles of a mainline railroad. Highway transportation: shall be near a good main highway. Air transportation: it is preferred that the nearby community of 25,000 or more have an airport served by major east/west and north/south airlines. Also, it is desirable that a larger Army airfield be between 10 and 50 miles from the site. Power: approximately 12,000 kW from a dependable alternate source. Water: one million gallons per day normal use, with negligible process use. Fuel: heating of buildings only; can be gas, oil, or coal. Sewage: normal plant wastes. Drainage: normal. Site shall be above possible flood levels."

That's the whole criteria for finding it, and if you look at Rocky Flats, Rocky Flats was the number two site on their map. They selected six sites in the Denver area. Um — after selecting Colorado as the area, because of its humidity and its — um — environs and everything of that nature, they determined that Denver was better than Colorado Springs or Pueblo. Where in Denver? They selected six sites. Uh — one of 'em was the number one site in their mind, and that was the site north of Rocky Mountain Arsenal. And — um — it had everything that met the criteria, except for two things. Uh — one was population. They were building a few houses up in there at that point; they would had to have displaced a lot of people. Uh — number two, the water and everything had to come through Rocky Mountain Arsenal. That was their water source. And that was not a dependable source, highly dependable source, because Rocky Mountain Arsenal used so much water. But other than that, it had rail, it had highway, it was close to — um — both — uh — Lowry Air Force Base and Stapleton airfield. There was one big problem with it: it's all loam soil, and when the wind would blow, the dust would really kick up, and they were afraid they would get that dust into their intake systems for both their — um — air conditioning and for their process-air uses. And the number two site that they selected was Rocky Flats. And what they actually selected was the corner of Rocky Flats where the wind farm is right now, the big windmills. But that had a problem, because the — um — mineral deposits underneath it were owned by other people, and they had — um — mostly coal, and those, if they had to buy the property, they would have to buy out those mineral rights, and that was gonna get very expensive. So they determined to move south approximately one mile, and that was Church Ranch. And they would on, not displace any homes, to speak of, at that time, only the ranch — uh — a lot of the ranch portion. And so they determined to do that. And they made an offer to — uh — Marcus Church for the land, and they offered him $18 per acre, and Marcus Church said no way. He wasn't selling his ranch for $18 per acre. So they ended up — um — taking the land through the — um, uh — government's ability to take it. Marcus Church went to court with 'em, everything, and tried to stop 'em, but at that point they were already building buildings, and he couldn't stop 'em. The first building that was ever constructed on that property was the guard shack at the west entrance — um — and it was just that. It was a shack. But — uh — at any rate, why, that's how they got there. And part of it had to do with University of Colorado was at Boulder, right up the road. School of Mines was right down the road, at Golden. And there were already government facilities which they could tap for scientific knowledge and so forth in the Boulder area, especially with NCAR [National Center for Atmospheric Research] and — um — a lot of those. But they also felt they had taught, talked to Stapleton airfield, and they felt that the wind direction came from the southeast, because that was where Stapleton recorded most of their wind directions was from the southeast. And they didn't realize that Rocky Flats — um — had a wind problem that came from the northwest and the west, which was toward Denver, and they didn't know that. They were thinking they were blowing any kind of air away from Denver. Now, I know that's longwinded. What else did you ... (laughs)

Taylour Whelan: Did you want to share any of the other materials you brought along with you?

Murph Widdowfield: Well, I brought — um — I brought this copy of the original, there's only six copies of this, and — um — we have three of those six copies, but I brought it — uh — just to read that, mainly that criteria out of it. Other than that, I brought — uh — my information that — um — that I have that has to do with — um, uh — the history of Rocky Flats. A lot of it I have already talked about. Um — the nuclear weapons in those days were very crude, and when I say very crude — uh — the bomb that was dropped on Hiroshima — um — was a highly enriched uranium bomb. It was not a plutonium bomb at all. And the amazing thing to me about that bomb is that only 4.6 percent of it actually exploded. The rest of it was blown apart so rapidly by

the initial explosion that it never had a chance to be anything except the fireball that went up above it. Um — the — uh — that was called the "Little Boy." The "Fat Man" was dropped on Nagasaki, which, by the way, was the secondary target. That was not their primary target. Um — and it — um, uh — the primary target was clouded over, and they couldn't get the bomb sites on it, so they went to the secondary target, which was Nagasaki. That bomb was a plutonium bomb, and it only produced six percent of its explosive capability, because the rest was blown apart so rapidly. Um — today, our nuclear weapons are much more efficient. Today, we can get 40 percent out of 'em. But — um — at any rate, a lot of that came from Rocky Flats, because they figured out how to do different things with the pits, and different things with the explosive power, in order to reduce the size, number one, and reduce the — um — or increase the yield, number two. And — um — there were a lot of other operations throughout the country that helped with that, but Rocky Flats did a lot of that in their laboratories and their research here.

Taylour Whelan: Why do you feel it's so important to share the history of Rocky Flats?

Murph Widdowfield: Well, there's a lot of misinformation about Rocky Flats. If — um — if I were to tell you a secret, the rest of everybody would wonder what I told you, and all sorts of things would go through their heads as to what I could have told you. And that's called secrecy. Well, Rocky Flats was a very secret operation. Um — the men and women who worked there could not even go home and tell their wives or their spouse — um — what they'd done that day, or how they did it. They couldn't tell 'em — uh — some of 'em went home and, and their wife or their spouse would ask 'em, 'Well, what'd you do today?' 'I made cookies.' And they couldn't even talk about their own job. Uh — if a man or a woman was working in the production line on the plutonium, with their hands in a glove box — um — when they passed that part that they were workin' on on to the next person, they couldn't know what the next person did to change that part, and they would — uh — as they became — um — longer employee, employed and moved up the ladder, they found out what that person was doing, but they couldn't know it, essentially. And even when they got up to the other end of the line, they couldn't know what happened to that part after it went outside of their box. Um — so the secrecy ... There were buildings out there that people who worked out there 20 years had no idea what happened in those other buildings. And — uh — the secrecy was dense. And — um — that creates a lot of rumor, both inside the plant, with employees. They had more rumor goin' on than you could believe, but outside the plant, the neighbors, the people around there, and, by the way, there were no neighborhoods at that point — uh — during the operations of the plant. There were never any neighborhoods around there. But — um — the neighbors who had farms or ranches near there — uh — all they had in their mind was rumor. 'My neighbor told me that they were doin' terrible things out at Rocky Flats.' And then you had people who came into the area to organize — um — protests, and, my golly, the rumor in their minds was amazing, that Rocky Flats was going to destroy the world. Some of them were antiwar. Some of them were anti-nuclear. Some of 'em were just plain anti the fact that the plant was there, and that it was secret, and they didn't know what was happening, so therefore it was a terrible place.

And — um — and we go out, and we give a lot of talks. We give a lot of classes for high school kids, for — um — colleges, for all kinds of groups — um — other museums: the Loveland Museum, we've been up there; we've been up to Longmont Museum; we've been up to — uh — we've been downtown to quite a few of the museums, giving talks. We've had — uh — groups go down to History Colorado — uh — for a weekend, set up tables, and answer people's questions. And we've gone to — um — Colorado Days, set up a tent. And, you

know, people come up to the t, to us, and talk to us about it, and they have some of the darnedest thoughts on their minds. They have heard the rumor of a tunnel between Rocky Flats and Lowry Air Force Base. Uh — do you know why there's no subway in Denver? Because Denver sits on a lot of gravel and sand, and it's very unstable under Denver. You're not gonna build a tunnel. And you try to talk to 'em about that. You try to talk to 'em about a lot of things. Uh — when the FBI raided — um — Rocky Flats in 1980 — uh — nine — uh — to — um — to prove that Rocky Flats was a terrible place, it was because the FBI agent in charge had been inundated with information from people who had no idea but had all these terrible thoughts of contamination. And there was very little contamination. If you talk to the employees, they were one big family, and they took very good care of each other. If they had a leak in a glove, they invented items to change out that glove while it was online and not produce any contamination in the room. We have some of those items in our museum. They have — um — they discovered and developed all kinds of ways of maintaining and taking care of themselves, and — um — they did it. And they had very few people at Rocky Flats that were highly educated nuclear physicists, people like that. There were very few. Ninety percent of the people out there came out of the labor pool in Colorado, in Denver metro area, and that's, includes all of these northern suburbs. Um — people came down as far as Fort Collins to work every day. Uh — they came in from eastern areas. Um — and a lot of the Rocky Flats employees did a lot of things — uh — for their communities. The communities in this area would not be half what they are today if it wasn't for Rocky Flats. The payroll helped their communities — um — to build good people and solid payrolls coming in. Taxes that they paid — um — to the communities — um — through food taxes, through state property taxes, for the people who lived in those communities. The plant itself did not have to pay taxes, it's a federal operation, but the communities all pay, received a lot. Um — a lot of, most of those communities were never — um — even formed until after Rocky Flats was in full operation. Northglenn/Thornton — uh — Westminster was formed, but they were incorporated after Rocky Flats was in operation. Uh — a lot of them did that. But the counties, Jefferson County, Boulder County, all profited overmuch from what came out of Rocky Flats. Rocky Flats made it a point to purchase as much of their stuff that they could purchase, for what they needed for their general operation from local organizations and local — um — companies and everything. Their firetrucks, they purchased them locally. They came from back East, but they bought 'em through the local distributors. They tried to do everything they could to be that part. They had some problems, please don't misunderstand me — um — and most of the contractors, that's what happened to Dow Chemical. They determined that — uh — that they could not put up with the fact that — uh — the AEC at that time, [U.S.] Atomic Energy [Commission] — uh — people wanted to bury stuff on the Flats property, and they would not allow that. And Dow, or the DOE people later on wanted to bury stuff. And they got into trouble with their contractors, and their contractors decided to bow out. Dow bowed out because of that. Rocky, Rockwell International was there for another 10 years, and — um — they basically bowed out because of that decision. Um — EG&G [Edgerton, Germeshausen, and Grier, Inc.] was there until they had the raid, and — um — and EG&G was there for the closure of the plant, and they tried their best to try to keep things operating correctly and not be contaminated. There's some contamination, but it's all being contained, and it's all being handled properly. Uh — the gal who took my place on the Rocky Flats Stewardship Council, when I went over into the museum side, lives right on the back fence, on the south fence, in Candelas, [Colorado], of Rocky Flats. And she said, "I love my home." She said, "I'm not afraid of it. I'm not worried about it. My next-door neighbor is a physicist who was a — um, uh — professor at [Colorado] School of Mines. He has checked everything." She's, "I'm happy." And I was talking to her on the phone one day, and she said, "Murph, I hear a really weird noise." She said, "I'll call you right back. I gotta figure out what this is." She says,

"Something's going on in my house." And I said, "Well, okay, call me back." She called back about 10 minutes later, and she said, "It wasn't in my house. It was an elk bugling over my back fence." And she said, "I'd never heard that before." She said, "I love my home." Anyway, slowly but surely, we're trying to get people to understand, now that it is an open operation, and there's very little today that is still secret about that plant, there's still some secrecy but not much, and we can tell people what actually happened within that plant, how it happened, why it happened, and the fact that it's the whole key, the fact that they built close to 70,000 triggers where the Russians could only build 32,000, it's the whole key as to why you and I can sit here and talk.

Taylour Whelan: To start — uh — concluding our interview, could you just give a little — um — could you explain how it felt yesterday to be back on the site?

Murph Widdowfield: It was wonderful. It really was. Um — I commend — uh — Andy Keim and his organization and his group. Uh — I tried to get them to do this for the last, well, since I've been president, which is now seven years, and I could never get — uh — anybody to talk to me about it or anything. And Andy, when he came in a couple of years ago — um — I chatted with him and told him that we really needed this. We're losing too many of the ex-employees. We lose — um — one or two every week, we're losing employees. Um — there was close to 9,000 employees when they closed up the plant. And they're all getting older. They're not dying from diseases contacted by the plant. Uh — some of 'em have picked up some diseases that are connected to the plant, but that's not what's killing them. What's killing them is age. Um — one of the ex-managers of the plant — um — became a volunteer for the museum, and — uh — he passed away. It's been two years ago. He was 103 years old, and you can't tell me that the plant is what's killing these people. Um — it has to do with age. It has to do with their own health. It has to do with how they maintain their own health, and what happens in their health. They can be 20 years old and die of cancer, and it may have nothing to do with Rocky Flats. It may have something to do with Rocky Flats; I'm not denying that fa, that thought. But for those people to be able to go out there and see what that site looks like today, every one of 'em came away, I talked to a few of 'em at the homesteader breakfast this morning, and every one of 'em said, 'You know, I didn't realize how beautiful that area was when I was working out there.' And it is beautiful. And I think Dow ha, or — um, uh — DOE has — um — done their job of keeping the area clear, and they spent $7 billion cleaning it up. There are places where they had to dig down 40 feet to get out, to get contamination out of there, out of the soil. Um — but they monitor it well. They operate it well. They have a good contractor, and they've changed that contractor three or four times now, but it's the same people, because the new contractor that comes in knows that these are the people that know the site, and know how to do it. So when they get laid off by the first contractor, they immediately hire 'em to come back as their employees. And that has done a very good thing for it, because — uh — and the pride. You could see the pride in those people's faces yesterday when they were talkin' about what they did and how they did it, and the buildings that they worked in, and, 'yeah, I remember this,' and 'I remember that.' The pride is absolutely wonderful to me. It's what keeps me goin'.

Taylour Whelan: Uh — thank you so much for sharing with us today, and thank you for your work with the Rocky Flats Cold War Museum. Um — that will conclude our interview.

Murph Widdowfield: Thank you very much for inviting me. I appreciate it.

Taylour Whelan: We appreciate you. Thank you.

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