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Historic photos show a time before Hanford

By Annette Cary, Herald staff writer

[Gallery: Historical Hanford, White Bluffs photos](#)

The go-to man at Hanford for historic photos is Dan Ostergaard.

No one knows more about the 1.5 million Department of Energy negatives that chronicle the history of the Hanford nuclear reservation, most of them shot over the half-century from the early '40s to the early '90s.

When a Hanford worker wants to know more about a site scheduled for cleanup, Ostergaard starts his detective work, combing through the negative files arranged chronologically with scant labeling for shots that might give clues to how a building was constructed, when a burial ground was used or why a long-unused road was built.

But when members of the public want to see a photo, their options are few.

Hanford has 14,000 cubic feet of records considered so historically valuable that they're marked for permanent storage at the National Archives. But to date only four boxes have been turned over to the public archives because of issues related to lawsuits over past releases of radioactive materials at Hanford.

That, however, is about to change.

The Department of Energy recently got permission to start transferring more records to the National Archives, including negatives.

"The National Archives are very excited," said Gail Splett, the DOE Hanford records officer. "They get inquiries all the time and have little or nothing about Hanford."

Today the first batch of photos is posted at www.hanford.gov/photogallery.

DOE, working with Fluor Hanford and its subcontractor Lockheed Martin, will be transferring the negatives not considered a national security risk in batches to the National Archives and also posting them online.

The first group of photos, used as a test of the system, includes about 200 photos in a collection labeled "settlers."

Ostergaard, who for 35 years has worked for different DOE contractors in photo and imaging departments, most recently Lockheed Martin, has made a point of preserving them and collecting more.

But even he doesn't know where many of the photos came from since they weren't taken by government photographers as most of the rest of the DOE photos were. These predate World War II, when the government carved the Hanford nuclear reservation out of the desert.

They tell a story of the farms and small towns sacrificed for the Manhattan Project during World War II.

Any information known about the photos is included in the photo gallery posted by DOE.

But information is sketchy. Many photos provide no clue to their location, the occasion or the identity of the people who posed for them.

That's where Lockheed Martin is hoping the public can provide some help.

The Hanford website, where the photos are posted, includes e-mail links for people interested in contributing historical photos and for providing information about the photos already posted.

The public can browse through the gallery and download individual photos. If people lack high-resolution printing capabilities, they can download photos to disk and take them to a photo processing shop for a high-resolution print.

For those leery of computers, Lockheed has developed a rotating traveling display of photos using corporate money. It should be on display at the Federal Building on Jadwin Avenue in Richland this week, and people will be invited to leave information if they can identify photos.

The initial photos on display were shot before December 1942, when the Army Corps of Engineers picked about 586 square miles along the Columbia River as the site of a top secret defense project.

Officials planned to use it for the first large-scale production of plutonium for a new type of weapon, the atomic bomb. The site would produce the plutonium for the bomb dropped on Nagasaki, Japan, helping end World War II, and continue to produce plutonium through the Cold War. All the residents of the tiny towns of White Bluffs and Hanford were told that they must sell their land to the government within 30 days. It was needed for the war effort, although the government could not tell them why.

Little remains of those towns and surrounding ranches on the Hanford reservation -- some trees, the tiny White Bluffs bank building, the crumbling Hanford High School and strips of sidewalk hidden by brush and sage. But the photos in the Department of Energy files chronicle the life in towns and ranches sacrificed to patriotism.

Ostergaard believes some may be in the government collection because Annette Heriford once worked in the Hanford photo department. She was a young woman of about 21 when the government took over her family's prospering orchard between White Bluffs and Hanford and later would become an advocate for preserving the area's prewar history.

"Social life revolved around school, church and agricultural fairs, and almost all who have written about the Basin at this time have commented on the community closeness in the area," wrote historian Michele Gerber in a DOE history of Hanford.

That's certainly the picture presented by the settlers collection.

In one, 10 young men picnic along the Columbia River, sitting on rocks and the running board of a car while they share a meal.

"It shows the river shore as it used to be," Ostergaard said. He believes the picture likely was taken a few years before 1942 because he's picked out Walt Grisham as one of the young men.

Grisham enlisted in the Army Air Forces in 1942 and was waiting to be shipped overseas when he received a carefully worded letter from his parents.

The government had condemned their White Bluffs farm, with its vineyards, peach and apricot orchards, for the war effort. The government asked his parents not to harm troop morale by complaining or sounding bitter about the loss of their farm in letters to Grisham and his brothers serving in the military.

In an earlier photo, 15 members of Ed Craig's family pose in front of a row of young trees on his homestead near White Bluffs, presumably at a Sunday supper a few years after the turn of the century. Ostergaard identified that photo from Mary Powell Harris' book *Goodbye, White Bluffs*.

Some photos provide clues in landmarks that remain unchanged. In a photo labeled "planting grass Hanford 1911," five men walk a field with horse-drawn plows or bend to plant asparagus, then called "grass." In the distance is the notch of the saddle of Saddle Mountain.

Ostergaard also can pick out photos shot at the prosperous Weihl ranch on the Franklin County side of the Columbia River just across from the town that was then White Bluffs.

In one, three men pose high atop a windmill while a woman and small child sit demurely on the porch. It's evidently a special occasion, judging by the suit worn by one of the men on the windmill.

"I like the show-offiness of it," Ostergaard said.

In another, about 20 people in baggy swimming costumes and a dog gather for a swimming party on the banks of the Columbia at the ranch.

The settler photos are just the start of the project. Next Lockheed likely is to start work on posting many of the 8,702 negatives it calls the Dupont Collection -- those taken during the war years at Hanford of 1943-1945.

They'll show a very different part of the Mid-Columbia's and nation's history. Gone is the peaceful rural life, where neighbor knew neighbor.

After the farms were condemned, workers came from across the nation to live in dormitories, tents and the world's largest trailer park to work long hours to build the industrial complex that would produce plutonium.