

UT gets involved at Oak Ridge

In 1947, the Atomic Energy Commission took over Oak Ridge from the Manhattan Project's General Groves and Colonel Nichols. The struggle to maintain the momentum built up winning World War II and to keep the scientific brain trust at the Clinton Laboratories built during that amazing world changing period was in full swing.

A small number of scientists were hard at work here in Oak Ridge attempting to capitalize on what has been called "an accident of the second world war" that placed a major scientific research laboratory in the backyard of the University of Tennessee. They would succeed beyond their wildest dreams.

As early as September 1945, a scientific collaboration was formed between the university and the laboratory. Martin D. Whitaker, director of Clinton Laboratories and Warren C. Johnson, director of the Clinton Laboratories Chemical division, were more than a little concerned about the large number of young, capable scientific staff members who wished to return to the universities from which they had been pulled for the war effort. They desired to complete their degrees and advanced degrees.

These individuals had not been given a choice about coming to Oak Ridge. They had been pressed into service to win the war. Now that the war was over, they naturally were ready to return home. This was not good for the laboratory and flew in the face of the desire some of the leaders had to create a national laboratory here.

To offset this drain, Whitaker and Johnson arranged a meeting with University of Tennessee's Dean Fred C. Smith and Professor Kenneth L. Hertel, head of the UT physics department. Agreement was reached at the meeting to establish a branch of the UT Graduate School at Clinton Laboratories where young scientists could attend a graduate program in physics or chemistry.

By October 1945 the program was in place and many of the young scientists did indeed enroll and stayed at the laboratory. Having achieved this milestone of stemming the flow of talent away from the laboratory, a few key leaders then set about creating national laboratory status for the Clinton Laboratories.

The University of Chicago announced the establishment of a joint institute of nuclear studies in collaboration with Argonne Laboratory. This caused some of the professors at the University of Tennessee to ask if something similar could be developed between UT and the Clinton Laboratories.

Two draft proposals were created. One of the proposals was prepared by William G. Pollard, who had just returned from the University of Columbia where he had been assigned to war research. The other proposal came from Robert M. Boarts of UT's chemical engineering department.

Both proposals were presented to UT President James D. Hoskins. He was convinced of the importance of moving in the direction indicated by both proposals, a collaborative effort with the Clinton Laboratories. Hoskins appointed Kenneth L. Hertel, head of the UT physics department to lead a special committee that included both Pollard and Boarts.

On August 6, 1945, when the first atomic bomb ever used in warfare using uranium 235 from Y-12 was dropped on Hiroshima, the world first learned the United States had harnessed the atom. While there was still a lot to be learned to make this discovery something beneficial to mankind, the potential was immediately apparent to physics departments in all major universities.

It was soon apparent to the UT leadership that what was being undertaken was too large for one university to do alone. This led to discussions with General Leslie Groves and Vannevar Bush. Bush suggested a collaboration of the universities located in the south.

Ultimately, the University of Tennessee led the efforts to bring together ten universities of the south to attend a "Conference on Research Opportunities in the Southeast" held on December 5, 1945, in the Knoxville Andrew Johnson Hotel.

The University of Tennessee, Clinton Laboratories and the Manhattan District established a method of cooperation among universities that was similar to other such initiatives being developed simultaneously in other parts of the nation. The leadership of Columbia University was concerned because the war time laboratory located there was being moved to the K-25 site in Oak Ridge.

This led some in the northeast, afraid there would not be a Manhattan District laboratory there, to try to establish new research facilities there and actually attempted to convince the Manhattan District to move the Clinton Laboratories to New York City. This was resisted by General Groves. It also caused a great deal of concern in Oak Ridge and delayed the formation of the Oak Ridge Institute for Nuclear Studies (ORINS) by several months.

Yet the efforts of a few key individuals at UT and Clinton Laboratories never wavered in their attempt to bring attention to the need for a national laboratory in Oak Ridge. They kept the pressure on the political system.

Next we will examine the results of this struggle and the steps taken to form ORINS and ultimately Oak Ridge Associated Universities.