

A brief overview of some historical details of the city of Oak Ridge, part 5

Continuing the look at a brief summary history of the city of Oak Ridge, *Now It Can Be Told* by General Leslie R. Groves, Appendix V, page 424 states, "Oak Ridge, or the Clinton Engineer Works, was located in Anderson and Roane counties in Tennessee. It consisted of industrial plants, their supporting facilities and the town of Oak Ridge."

Groves continued, "The installation occupied a rectangular-shaped Government reservation, ninety-three square miles in area. Its workers were concentrated chiefly in Oak Ridge, which attained a peak population of about 75,000 during the summer of 1945. A maximum employment of 82,000 was reached in May, 1945. Thereafter both population and employment declined steadily until, by the end of 1946, they were down to 42,000 and 28,000 respectively."

Regarding the relative significance of Oak Ridge, Groves indicated, "In the course of our work, Oak Ridge grew to be Tennessee's fifth [largest] city by population, and the Clinton Engineer Works became the second largest consumer of TVA power. The area's motor transportation system was the largest in the Southeastern United States. Because it was a closed military area, we had to provide all the normal community, municipal and other government services."

The manner in which General Groves and his Manhattan Engineer District provided for these city services was also a unique and creative arrangement. He said, "After considerable discussion and study, Nichols [Colonel Kenneth D. Nichols – second in command to General Groves and the person who ran the day-to-day activities of the entire Manhattan Project from right here in Oak Ridge!] and I decided to bring in an outside managing operator and asked the Turner Construction Company to take over the job."

The town's architectural planning was handled entirely by Skidmore, Owings and Merrill, except for its utility systems, which were designed by Stone and Webster. By the early summer of 1943, General Groves saw that managing the operation of a city even as small as Oak Ridge in those early months was both complex and time consuming. Groves decided it was not satisfactory for the military to handle that job and that it would take up too much of Colonel Nichols' time and energy.

The scope of responsibilities included the operation of services such as the "laundry and cafeterias; the transportation, water, sewage, electrical and heating systems; the nonmedical features of the hospitals, the schools; the public safety forces; and the housing, both individual family types and dormitories," according to Groves as found on page 425 of his *Now It Can Be Told*.

The Turner Construction Company, being experienced in managing complex situations, formed the "Roane Anderson Company" expressly to manage this quickly growing small city being planted in hurried fashion in this primarily rural area in East Tennessee. The landscape was being altered and these valleys were being permanently changed into industrial sites. The south side of Black Oak Ridge and upper East Fork Valley was being completely changed into a city with residential areas, stores, churches and theaters.

The New World, by Richard G. Hewlett and Oscar E. Anderson, Jr., has a chapter 5 titled "City in the wilderness" beginning on page 116. After setting the stage by mentioning the selection of the site by General Groves, the account states, "...local residents abandoned their churches, homes, schools, and roads, as the Army quickly acquired the entire area as a military reservation."

The five country roads that served the area were immediately seen as inadequate. The narrow roadways were widened and soon four-lane highways took their place in some cases and entirely new roads began to be seen as the residential and commercial areas were built.

The main administration building, known as "The Castle," was completed on March 15, 1943, having had construction start on November 22, 1942. Of course, it was located right between Pyatt's Place and Tadlock's Farm according to John Hendrix's prophecy...

The structure was called a "rambling edifice" in *The New World* and was seen as a fortress on top of the rise in the ground there; however, it was actually a barracks type wooden building. It served first as the Clinton Engineer Works' headquarters and later Colonel Nichols, after replacing Colonel Marshall as District Engineer, moved the headquarters for the entire Manhattan District from New York City to Oak Ridge. There he managed the day-to-day administrative activities of the entire Manhattan Project.

In this same "Castle" Colonel Robert C. Blair and his town planning staff, according to *The New World*, page 118, "could look out during the spring of 1943 on a forest of half-completed structures arising from a sea of mud. Clustered around the turnpike at the bottom of the valley were fourteen new dormitories. Beyond, on the lower slopes of the ridge, the town business center, later called Jackson Square, was taking form."

"Around the two-block area were the post office, supermarkets, drugstores, shops, movie theater, central cafeteria, and laundry. Higher on the slope were the guest house and the site for the high school. Festooned on the ridge both east and west of the town center were the cement homes and apartments for more than 3,000 families.

"A few to the east nestled among the shade trees of prewar Tennessee, but by far the majority of the new homes were unceremoniously wedged on the scarred contours of the ridge. In the low area on the opposite side of the turnpike were temporary housing facilities for construction laborers.

"Almost 5,000 workers lived in the boxlike prefabricated hutments of plywood grouped around central washhouses and mess halls. Federal housing agencies gathered more than 1,000 trailers from all parts of the United States for supplemental housing.

Next we will explore how the Roane Anderson Company accomplished the task of managing the rapidly expanding "city in the wilderness."