

A brief overview of some historical details of the city of Oak Ridge, part 6

Continuing the look at a brief summary history of the city of Oak Ridge, a reader, Jane Shelton, Oak Ridge resident and historic preservationist, provided insight into the cement houses and other details of Oak Ridge's very early years. I want to share some of that with you.

Jane says, "The cement house debuted at the New York World's Fair." It seems it was a venture of the "Celotex company and the Pierce Foundation" as determined by Jane's research.

Jane went on to say, "Colonel James C. Marshall had seen the worker housing around the Martin Aircraft company in Baltimore, MD, and felt something on that order would be appropriate for the new community. That is what led him to the Pierce Foundation and Skidmore, Owings and Merrill. Colonel Marshall is the one who said they would build a village. You must remember these were very special people who were coming here of their own free will and could also leave of their own free will. Colonel Marshall recognized that fact."

According to Jane's research, Skidmore, Owings, and Merrill were contacted in December 1942 when two gentlemen arrived at their New York office without an appointment. The topographic maps they had did not divulge the actual location, only the relative elevation and general lay of the land. The two men requested Skidmore, Owings and Merrill to present a model of the proposed development as quickly as possible within the next 24 hours.

The design presented was the now familiar neighborhood, shopping, schools, and town center. Jane found that the design included locating the bigger buildings on more level land, a mix of sizes to fit the contours up, over, and around the hills. Jane said, "The original design had only three neighborhoods but as the population swelled, neighborhoods were added like beads on a string."

Now let's look at the management of the "City in the wilderness" as *The New World* labeled the Oak Ridge city portion of the Clinton Engineer Works. A key individual in this process was Lyle D. Worrel. But the story starts earlier than his major involvement in a leadership role in July 1951 when he was chosen to head up the newly formed Management Services, Inc.

In the fall of 1943, the Roane-Anderson Company was formed by the Turner Construction Company, at General Groves' request, to manage the newly created "war-time city" quickly being constructed in the "wilderness" of East Tennessee. Worrel was working for Long Construction Company of Kansas City on a joint venture with Turner Construction Company to build the Pratt Whitney Aircraft Engine plant in Kansas City.

Worrel had handled industrial relations, union negotiations, personnel and employment on field jobs for Long Construction Company since 1939. He was involved in rebuilding Fort Riley, Kansas, construction of the Tulsa Aircraft Assembly Plant and building Camp Gruber in Oklahoma. It was while he was working on the joint venture with Turner Construction Company that Turner representatives offered him a job in East Tennessee, seemingly unlike any of his previous large construction projects. This one was to join a team that would manage a government city just being built. It was "war work" and they needed him there.

He was uneasy with the request after being involved in these large scale construction projects to now be asked to become a part of a team to manage a small city in Appalachia. He did not see how that could be nearly as interesting as his previous work.

However, a newspaper column (the clipping I have is not dated, but was printed in the *Oak Ridge Journal* which was published from 1943 until 1948) states, "By the time he had been here twenty-four hours, however, he changed his mind – here apparently was the biggest challenge he had met so far. Worrel

was in charge of employment, office services and some of the operations as the company grew from the 500 employees it had when he arrived (November 1943) until its January 1945 peak of 10,500."

A side note about the names for the local Oak Ridge newspapers. There have been four newspapers in Oak Ridge's history. Their names have been: *The Oak Ridge Journal* (September 4, 1943 – May 27, 1948); *The Oak Ridge Times* (June 6, 1948 – June 22, 1948); *The Oak Ridge Mail* (September 10, 1948 – January 27, 1949); and *The Oak Ridger* (January 20, 1949 to present). The brief weekly publication, *The Oak Ridge Mail*, was published by "AT-UR Service" owned by James C. Aldrich as a free publication.

One of the first mimeographed issues of the *Oak Ridge Journal* contained the following list of complaints as recorded in *The New World* on pages 118 and 119, "Yes, we know it's muddy... Coal has not been delivered... The grocer runs out of butter and milk... Your laundry gets lost...The post office is too small... There are not enough bowling alleys... Your house leaks... The water was cold... The telephones are always busy... The dance hall is crowded... The guest house is full... Employees are inexperienced... The roads are dusty... You would have planned it differently." The letter went on to assure the readers that some improvements would be made by the Roane-Anderson Company, the new organization formed by the Turner Construction Company specifically to manage the town.

There will be more about Lyle D. Worrel in the next article in the series.