

Before Y-12

This is the second in a series of articles on the unique history of Y-12.

Before there was an "Oak Ridge" or a "Y-12" there were several communities that occupied the approximately 59,000 acres that was to become the present day Oak Ridge Reservation. The primary communities were Robertsville, Wheat, Scarboro, New Bethel, New Hope and Elza.

Robertsville was located in the center of what is now Oak Ridge. Wheat was located just east of today's East Tennessee Technology Park Heritage Center – previously the K-25 Gaseous Diffusion Plant site. Scarboro was located at the junction of Bethel Valley Road and Scarboro Road where the Oak Ridge Associated Universities' South Campus is located.

The Scarboro School building is still used by ORAU as an office building. New Bethel was located just east of the X-10 Graphite Reactor, now the Oak Ridge National Laboratory. New Hope was located just east of the Y-12 Plant, now known as the Y-12 National Security Complex. Elza was a train stop just east of present day Oak Ridge and was used as the shipping address for many of the thousands of Manhattan Project shipments of materials by railroad.

These several communities contained some 3,000 people living on approximately 1,000 farms. Every acre of the 59,000 acres taken for the war effort was owned by someone. These farmers were compelled to leave on extremely short notice and most were not able to relocate to farms as good as the ones they were forced to vacate. Even though the government paid the area residents for each building and every acre, the amounts paid were substantially below what was required to replace the lost acreage and homes.

Many of the displaced family members found work at the project and thus were able to improve their livelihood through a source of higher wages than surrounding areas paid. Some of the displaced families had previously been displaced from the northern portion of Anderson County when the Tennessee Valley Authority built its first dam, Norris Dam. This dam figured favorably in the decision to locate the Manhattan Project just downstream.

Other considerations that helped determine the selection were the general distance inland so as to be safer from attack, the ridges and valleys lay so as to allow these unique and unproven industrial sites to be located in the valleys with the ridges to help contain any major incident, the rather large labor force in nearby Knoxville, and the relatively sparse population and rural nature of the land. By the time General Groves was named to head the Manhattan Project, the site had already been looked at a number of times. He immediately made it official, as he felt the project needed a plant site to take on the real feel of a tangible working project.

There is another story about the method of selection. It's told that Senator Kenneth D. McKellar, a Tennessee senator, was asked by President Roosevelt if he could help keep a large amount of money hidden from sight in his senate budget so the funds could be used for the war effort without anyone knowing of the amount or the use of the funds. Senator McKellar is said to have responded, "Yes, Mr. President, I can do that for you. Just where in Tennessee you gonna put that thang?"

Another McKellar story is the one told by Lester Fox, patriarch of the Fox family auto dealerships. In the fall of 1942, Lester was going to school at Oliver Springs High School. He and his buddy were skipping school and playing the pinball machine. They had finished and were walking down the road as they passed the telephone office. The telephone operator leaned out the door and said, "Lester, go get the principal. He's got an important phone call." Now, Lester is skipping school! But he and his buddy did as they were told and went to the principal's office. The principal went and took the call and upon returning to the school called all the students together in an assembly. He told them, "I have just gotten a phone call from Senator McKellar and he wants me to tell you to go home and tell your parents that the war effort is going to need your land. You

will have to find another place to live.” Lester swears that is how the farmers and those living in this area first learned of the pending take over of their homes and land.

Soon notices were being found on the doors of people’s houses. One lady was returning from the funeral where she had just buried her mother when she found the notice to vacate the home before Thanksgiving. Some of the larger land owners felt they were not being treated fairly and tried to take the issue to court but found no relief there. The government needed the land and was going to take it regardless.

So, there was much change in this area in the fall and winter of 1942 and spring of 1943. The people who had made their homes in these valleys for years moved out in weeks. They sacrificed their homes to help win the war. Even those who felt the price was too little for land their families had worked for years eventually came to see the changes as necessary steps to help their nation win a terrible war.

Photo caption - Anderson...:The New Hope Community was located in Bear Creek Valley at the junction of Scarboro Road and Bear Creek Road

Photo caption – Church...: The New Hope Baptist Church was the center of community activities