

## **AEC and Oak Ridge High School**

Last week we noted that the Atomic Energy Commission proudly published the following milestones in 1964 in the *AEC Handbook on Oak Ridge Operations*:

1. The gates were opened to the public in 1949
2. Land first leased to residents in 1953 – opening the way for extensive construction
3. In 1956 the first property was sold to private owners
4. In 1959 Oak Ridgers voted to incorporate and establish their own municipal government

Another milestone that could have been included would have been:

Built a new High School in 1951

For that is just what happened. The Atomic Energy Commission spent \$3,000,000 to build a new state-of-the-art high school in Oak Ridge in a very central and special location. This was done at a time in Oak Ridge's history before the houses were available for purchase and before the city was incorporated.

In 1951, the gates were open to the public and Oak Ridge was becoming much like other cities. However, the AEC's presence was still strong in every way. The school was also to be used as a community facility, not just for school. The auditorium was especially designed to meet the needs of the emerging city.

Newspapers from Knoxville and Nashville covered the new High School's opening in September 1951. There was not a formal dedication held. There was an Open House held on September 4, 1951. Many Oak Ridgers got their first look at the new school at this open house.

The auditorium, built as a community use facility as well as a part of the high school, was first used at a graduation ceremony for the graduating class of 1951. The auditorium has continued to serve the community over the years and has retained its excellent acoustics.

A story is told of a lady who wanted to see the new high school in the late summer of 1951, before it was open. It seems she had found her way into the construction site and was standing on the stage of the as yet unfinished auditorium. She saw a worker there and mentioned to him that she wanted a tour of the facility and reminded him that she was the wife of a high level manager in one of the government plants.

Before the worker could respond, a voice spoke up from the very back of the auditorium stating, "Lady, I don't care who you are, you are NOT getting a tour until the school is open to the public." He had clearly heard every word she said, even though she was speaking softly.

Now, with the scheduled August 18, 2008 dedication of the newly completed \$55,000,000 renovation to that school originally built in 1951, we can reflect on the continuing importance placed on schools in Oak Ridge's history. It is a tradition that Oak Ridge is rightly proud to uphold.

The Atomic Energy Commission was just continuing something that General Groves and others initiated when they brought Alden Blankenship in here during the first few weeks of the Manhattan Project. Blankenship was hired as the first School Superintendent and instructed to hire the best teachers and pay them well, build schools in each neighborhood and equip them with top quality furnishing and to assure the Oak Ridge school system was a superior system that would meet the needs of the people being brought in to work on the project.

That idea of excellence in education has remained a mainstay of Oak Ridge over the years. The Atomic Energy Commission's \$3,000,000 effort to build a state of the art high school was termed by a Nashville newspaper as "Classes in Glass" because of the huge amount of glass used in the construction. Actually using glass for the walls was a more economical building practice, but I am not sure that was readily understood by the press or the general public.

Much as was done in 1951, this new 2008 version has many state-of-the-art ideas incorporated into the design and construction. It is also pleasing on the eye from outside as well as inside and is a much welcomed and well done addition to the center of our city. It fits well into the surrounding Civic Center, Oak Ridge Chamber of Commerce, Al Bissell Park with its International Friendship Bell and the Midtown Community Center.

Oak Ridge is a mixture of cultures, styles and traditions all melded into the unique Oak Ridge culture — a proud one that still holds education as a key strategy for the future. The Atomic Energy Commission was on target when they decided to build a new Oak Ridge High School in 1951. The community is on target in 2008 by having supported the renovation and upgrading of that school.

The history remains, AND the facility is one poised to take students and prepare them for the future in a manner that can make us all proud.

Way to go Oak Ridge High School!