

Y-12's first Open House—September 2–3, 1967, part 1

The first weekend in September in 1967, Labor Day, was a record setting weekend for the Y-12 Plant, The Oak Ridge National Laboratory, The K-25 Gaseous Diffusion Plant, The Agricultural Research Laboratory, Oak Ridge Associated Universities and for Oak Ridge. Thousands of people visited the government facilities in Oak Ridge for the first time and were provided “open house” experiences in many other locations in Oak Ridge.

On September 5, 1967, The Oak Ridger published the following: “The Oak Ridge National Laboratory reported 6,144 visitors, Y-12 had 6,594, K-25 3,700, and the Agricultural Research Laboratory almost 1,500. A total of 4,800 saw the play, ‘Ten Thousands Suns.’” Other open houses did not report visits, but it is obvious that Oak Ridge was full to the brim on that Labor Day weekend in 1967.

The article also indicated that the American Museum of Atomic Energy had “the best Sunday attendance in its history with 1,810 people visiting the exhibits. The three-day total at the museum was 4,070.” This museum, a mainstay of Heritage Tourism for Oak Ridge, opened in 1949 in a former Manhattan Project era cafeteria. It has continued to attract numerous visitors regularly and moved to its present location in 1975. The museum has been known as the American Museum of Science and Energy since 1978.

The 1967 historic event was designated as the Knoxville News-Sentinel’s “Trip of the Month” and was touted as “one of the most fully-reported events we have ever had and was a tremendous success” by Thomas Harvey, president-elect of the Oak Ridge Chamber of Commerce in 1967.

A “Welcome ‘Trippers’” brochure announced, “We are celebrating our 25th Anniversary and we are delighted that you can share in the occasion.” The upbeat document went on to express the “Open House” basis of the weekend. Special emphasis was placed on the open houses at the three major Atomic Energy Commission facilities, noting that this was the first time the public had been able to see the amazing facilities.

The rest of the pamphlet was devoted to short paragraphs introducing each Open House. They were Oak Ridge Gaseous Diffusion Plant (K-25); Computing Technology Center (located at K-25); M.A.N. Program Facilities (located at K-25); Y-12 Plant; Electronics Building (Y-12 Plant); Oak Ridge National Laboratory (ORNL); Graphite Reactor (ORNL); High Flux Isotope Reactor (ORNL); Radioisotope Packing and Control Laboratory (ORNL); Oak Ridge Research Reactor (ORNL); Oak Ridge Associated Universities (ORAU); American Museum of Atomic Energy; ORAU Special Training Division; UT-AEC Agricultural Research Laboratory; University of Tennessee Arboretum; Bull Run Steam Plant; Melton Hill Dam; Daniel Arthur Rehabilitation Center.

Gene Wells wrote a review of the Oak Ridge Open House event in the Knoxville News Sentinel on September 4, 1967, where he interviewed some visitors who had experienced the weekend. He found the visitors were excited to be in Oak Ridge. One family from Kentucky told Wells about being photographed by a Life Magazine photographer in front of the replica of “Little Boy” – the first atomic bomb dropped on Japan, near the American Museum of Atomic Energy.

“The Mighty Atom” was the subject of a special 21st Century telecast on Sunday, September 3, 1967, at 7:30 PM on Channel 10, WBIR-TV. This special program was introduced by the statement, “The energy released from a one inch cube of uranium could light the average home for 9,000 years – longer than recorded history.”

Walter Cronkite was the principle reporter for the program and the series was sponsored in the public interest by Union Carbide Corporation. The special was said to contain, “far-reaching projects in atomic research are reported such as nuclear medicine in the areas of diagnosis and treatment of cancer, power generators, including one the size of a baseball; and research to develop a ‘bottle’ of magnetic fields capable of withstanding a temperature hotter than the sun’s interior needed to unlock the potential of atomic fusion.”

On the special also was “the peaceful future of atomic energy was reported in interviews with leading atomic scientists, including Dr. Glenn T. Seaborg, Nobel Laureate, Chairman of the U. S. Atomic Energy Commission, and Dr. Alvin Weinberg, director, Oak Ridge National Laboratory operated by Union Carbide for the Atomic Energy Commission.” This was a tremendously interesting telecast that was delayed from its normal time to prime time.

A “special exclusive” edition of the Y-12 Bulletin was published that was used both for the handout to the visitors (the outside pages) at the Y-12 Open House and as a special six-page employee edition. It was packed full of history and functional information about Y-12. If you have a copy of this bulletin, you have a valuable collector’s item. It was dated, September 2-3, 1967.