

A brief overview of some historical details of the city of Oak Ridge, part 1

Over the past few weeks, as a result of requests to provide input to documentary films being created, I have been focused on some elements of the history of Oak Ridge government facilities from a summary standpoint. This resulted in a series of articles that featured a brief summary of the history of Oak Ridge with the focus on the Oak Ridge National Laboratory, Oak Ridge Associated Universities, K-25 Gaseous Diffusion Plant (now East Tennessee Technology Park) and the Y-12 National Security Complex. These articles said little about the city, a necessary part of the project.

I would now like to take a short look, by no means a complete or exhaustive look, but merely a summary glance at the history of the city. Oak Ridge is a relative newcomer to East Tennessee, being only 70 years old. English settlement began in these valleys some 250 years ago, at least, and native peoples have lived along these rivers and streams at least for centuries, and likely much longer. So, our history here is truly brief. Remember too, it was not intended as a permanent settlement, at least not in the beginning.

As you know, the story of how this area of East Tennessee was chosen is best told as a local legend citing Senator McKellar's insight into politics and his comment to President Roosevelt agreeing to hide the funds for the Manhattan Project and asking "Just where in Tennessee are you going to put that 'thang'?" I tell this story often and was delighted when interviewing Senator Howard Baker, Jr. to hear him tell it as well. It is also refreshing to see Senator Alexander use the story often.

So, the decision to create Oak Ridge and where to locate it may have been somewhat arbitrary. Yet there seems to be evidence that some months had gone by during 1942 when several trips to this area and several discussions may well have evaluated the lay of the land and better understood the potential of the area than has been credited thus far.

It is true, however, that Tennessee Governor Prentice Cooper was NOT consulted and did not know of the decision to locate the Manhattan Project's first site in East Tennessee until it was made and already an accomplished fact. This may seem odd now, but given the urgency and need for secrecy as well as the rapid movement by General Groves, it might be more understandable.

General Groves tells of the incident in his book, *Now It Can Be Told*, on page 26, "It became necessary to have a Presidential proclamation issued, setting up certain restriction on this area...because of the nature of our operations, I did not consider it wise to give it any wider circulation than was absolutely necessary."

Groves went on to say, "For that reason, I told Colonel Marshall that it should be brought to the personal attention of the Chief Executive of the state, Governor Cooper, before it became known to anyone else."

Then the unthinkable happened, Groves said, "Unfortunately, I did not discuss the way in which this should be done, since I assumed Marshall would handle the matter personally. As it turned out, I should have, for Marshall, who was most adept at dealing with high public officials, because of other pressing matters, did not see the Governor himself, but sent another officer in his stead to perform this delicate task."

Finally Groves concludes the episode by saying that in his opinion, "To the Governor this was a serious breach of protocol, and it was compounded by the facts that the emissary was not a senior officer and that it was his first experience in such matters. The Governor must have been somewhat displeased in the first place by having such a large installation placed in Tennessee without his having been consulted or informed when the matter was under consideration."

I was told recently by a direct descendent of Prentice Cooper that as governor Cooper was not informed of the selection of land in East Tennessee by the Federal government for a special project. The person validated that when Cooper did learn of it, he accused the federal government of stealing the land. Governor Cooper is said to have angrily torn up the notice and to have thrown it in a trash can.

Knoxville residents also did not know of the "project" other than seeing an increased movement of people and things in that area just north and west of the city. The Andrew Johnson Hotel served for a short time as a sort of central location for travelers going to that area, which was quickly filling with all kinds of people from all over the nation, strangers to East Tennessee. But soon all things associated with the project were moved inside the gates erected on the main entrance roads and treated as secret information.

The area was largely wooded with farms in the fertile river and stream valley floors. The land consisted of ninety-four square miles ranging from the Elza community on the northeast to the old pre-Civil War Gallaher homestead on the Clinch River to the southwest and following the Clinch River on the east, south and west boundaries. The north boundary was simply the north side of Black Oak Ridge.

To be continued...