

### **A brief overview of some historical details of the city of Oak Ridge, part 3**

Continuing the look at a brief summary history of the city of Oak Ridge, we now look at the beginning of the Manhattan Project here in East Tennessee and the construction of a city from farmland and small communities. In November 1942, construction of Oak Ridge began with the first shovel full of dirt coming right between Pyatt's place and Tadlock's farm, as foretold by John Hendrix, the Prophet of Oak Ridge.

This beginning of construction is described in "From near wilderness to 'Atomic City'- evolution of a community," the 25<sup>th</sup> anniversary commemorative publication, "The Oak Ridge Community," subtitled "Evolution from near wilderness to the birthplace of atomic energy and 'the youngest world city.'"

On page five of the commemorative publication is found, "Ground was broken in several places, the first for the building that was to become the headquarters for the entire S-1 Project, or Manhattan Engineer District as the Army called it. Construction for this building, pushed seven days a week, began on November 22, 1942 and was completed the following March 15.

"During this period a town site was beginning to take shape around the constructions sites. Plywood "hutments" were put up to shelter the transient construction workers, stores were constructed and opened, and the Guest House (in 1967, The Alexander Motor Inn) where visitors and newcomers could stay for as little as \$1.50 a night, was erected.

"By mid-1943 the area was burgeoning. Population was quickly rising by tens of thousands. Construction had begun at three plant areas, and outlying hutments and trailer camps supplemented the housing strung out along the four-lane, but as yet unpaved, turnpike. As the town grew, three major business areas developed: Jackson Square on the east was the first in operation, Middletown served a myriad of trailer dwellers, and Grove Center was built up around an original wood-frame house that became the local American Legion Post."

Also included in the introduction of this article is the following: "The history that was made at Oak Ridge, Tennessee, in the 1940's is known throughout the world. In the quiet, green group of valleys, relatively isolated between the Cumberland and Great Smoky Mountains, a race took place that may never again be matched for sheer drama or meaning to the world."

The introduction continued, "Both Nazi and Allied scientists knew something about the potential power of the atom, and wartime intelligence indicated that the enemy was ahead in transforming it into a weapon of war. Here, working with skill, in secrecy, and under almost unbelievable pressures, a handful of dedicated men – who knew what was going on – guided thousands – who did not- in turning out desperately needed materials for the first atomic bomb. That mission was completed, World War II ended, and the nuclear age began."

The introduction concluded, "Less well known is the story of the community that made the extraordinary evolution from near wilderness to 'atomic city' possible – the scientists, engineers, administrators, workers, soldiers, and 'everyday' people who lived in this fantastic place in the 40's and laid the foundation for the Oak Ridge of today."

I fear we in Oak Ridge are in danger of losing perspective on the magnitude of scientific, industrial and cultural uniqueness of Oak Ridge. A mixture of people from many walks of life and even more locations in the nation, even the world, came to Oak Ridge for single solitary mission that many of them did not fully understand. They just knew it was important to the nation and the world and it was something that could help stop the awful killing that was World War II. We can't really imagine what it was like, those of us who were not alive during that pivotal time in history.

I am afraid we can't express the awe and astonishment. We are too close to the thing (our history) to appreciate it. It often takes strangers coming into our midst to make us realize what a jewel of a heritage Oak Ridge has and the unique nature of our history.

Recently, I had the privilege of participating in a workshop that involved representatives from across our nation where the visiting participants had never toured Oak Ridge. I was given a few hours the evening before the workshop to introduce them to Oak Ridge. We toured the American Museum of Science and Energy, the Y-12 History Center, Building 9731, the Graphite Reactor, K-25 and drove through Oak Ridge. Then we had dinner at AMSE. The workshop was held at the Cumberland Room in the Oak Ridge National Laboratory's Visitor Center complex.

To a person, these individuals expressed amazement at the stories they were told. They viewed with intense interest the World War II Manhattan Project equipment, machines and buildings they visited. They asked numerous questions and were enthralled by the information they learned that was new, fresh and exciting.

We may take all this for granted, if we are not careful. They sure did not. As impressed as they were, they still only got to see a brief introduction to our heritage. They did not get to meet any of our Manhattan Project workers such as the "girls of Atomic City" described in Denise Kiernan's book.

However, one of the workshop participants had invited Denise to speak to a large audience and sign her book at their facility out west. Remember, she is getting to audiences we cannot reach! She is telling our story through many of the workers who actually lived the experience.

More about the amazing early history of the city of Oak Ridge in coming articles.