

A brief overview of some historical details of the city of Oak Ridge, part 4

Continuing the look at a brief summary history of the city of Oak Ridge, *The New World* by Richard Hewlett and Oscar Anderson describes a “city in the wilderness” beginning on page 116. After setting the stage by mentioning the selection of the site by General Groves, the account states, “...local residents abandoned their churches, homes, schools, and roads, as the Army quickly acquired the entire area as a military reservation.”

In *City Behind a Fence, Oak Ridge, Tennessee 1942-1946*, by Charles W. Johnson and Charles O. Jackson, the authors attempt to find an analogous situation to the building of Oak Ridge and concluded that “no analogy was in fact adequate, nor did there exist any meaningful historical precedent for the Oak Ridge experience.”

While they stated that the term “frontier town” or “frontier community” was close and they quote a resident of early Oak Ridge as saying, “somehow there is a touch of the Klondike about the place and the people,” there really is nothing that compares to what happened in Bear Creek Valley, East Fork Valley and Bethel Valley in rural East Tennessee starting in November 1942. It was simply without precedent in world history.

The early planning for development of a townsite was given to Stone and Webster Engineering Corporation, who was also contracted to construct the Y-12 electromagnetic separation plant. This plant was to be located in Bear Creek Valley just across Pine Ridge from where the city was to be laid out on the southeastern side of Black Oak Ridge and in the northeast portion of East Fork Valley.

However, the design proved to lack any creativity or to consider the lay of the land in its design and thus was rejected by Wilber Kelly, principle engineer for the Army Corps of Engineers who was asked to look at the plans by the District Engineer, Colonel James C. Marshall and his staff. Kelly quickly saw the lack of originality and forethought for the design as problematic. He recommended replacing Stone and Webster, allowing them to concentrate on the building of Y-12, and recommended looking for a firm more experienced in laying out a townsite.

Based upon Kelly’s recommendation, the Manhattan Engineer District officials requested help from the John B. Pierce Foundation of New York, who led them to the Boston Architectural firm of Skidmore, Owings and Merrill. After much discussion about the site, the location of which was kept secret at the frustration of the planners attempting to design the basic city layout using only a few aerial photographs and topographical maps with all designations removed, a train trip was finally planned, where they would learn their destination only after boarding the train in New York City.

Clearing of the land began as early as October 1942. Of necessity, this removed much of the ground cover and produced the seemingly never-ending source of the infamous “Mud” that was a sticky mess when it became wet. Boardwalks were quickly added but the “Mud” is something that will be recollected by anyone who lived in Oak Ridge during the Manhattan Project war years.

The projected size of the town increased several times during the course of construction. Beginning with a modest 3,000 single family houses, 14 dormitories and three apartment buildings, the town intended to house some 13,000 residents.

The houses, constructed mainly of fiberboard with cement-asbestos bonded on each side (cemesto), were the featured center pieces in constructing the community with the goal to attract the best minds to the project. That required planning communities, schools, churches and many other amenities not normally found in “frontier towns” of the past. But the Clinton Engineer Works (later Oak Ridge) went well beyond anything the government had ever done before.

There were also approximately 20 stores planned along with a guest house (hotel located near the center of the shopping districts, now known as Jackson Square, then Townsite.) This "Guest House" is now in the process of being renovated as a Senior Living Center and will have the same exterior appearance it did when first constructed.

Soon the Tennessee Eastman Company estimated increased employment at the Y-12 Electromagnetic Separation Plant from 4,000 to 13,500 by January 1944. Y-12 would employ 22,482 by August 1945.

The X-10 Graphite Reactor and the K-25 Gaseous Diffusion Plant also increased employment to highs of 1,500 at X-10 and 11,000 at K-25. The supporting town had to be expanded in scope with each new projection of employment. The estimate of 13,000 was raised to 42,000 and then again in 1944 the estimate was raised to 66,000 people. Ultimately, Oak Ridge had a peak population of 75,000 in May 1945.

This number was maintained through the rest of the war and began to reduce when the Y-12 calutrons were being shut down. The 22,000 plus employees were ultimately reduced to closer to 1,500 before employment began to again climb. This increase was a result of Y-12 gaining a new mission to produce the uranium metal parts for additional atomic bombs required to support the already emerging Cold War.

The population stabilized at approximately 30,000 and has recently again reached that number after being closer to 27,000 for many years. More on the early history of the city of Oak Ridge in coming installments.