

A brief overview of some historical details of the city of Oak Ridge, part 8

Continuing the look at a brief summary history of the city of Oak Ridge, the gates are opened on March 19, 1949, the Cold War grows and the efforts to normalize and incorporate the city evolve.

The gate opening ceremony was a huge event for the young city of Oak Ridge. The Atomic Energy Commission had started the transition by changing the manner in which the Roane Anderson Company provided services from one of handling everything to subcontracting more and more of the city services. By July 1951 the Management Services Inc., under the leadership of Lyle Worrell, only had a staff of 150.

As early as June 1948, Oak Ridge Operations Manager John C. Franklin announced that opening the gates of Oak Ridge would be a good step in normalization of the city. He felt the security of the government installations could be maintained by building new fences near each facility and constructing guard houses on the roads to the plants from the city, rather than keep the entire city enclosed as it had been since 1943.

Interestingly enough, a poll in the local newspaper, The Oak Ridge Times, which only published for a short period in 1948, indicated the majority of city residents liked things just the way they were. This had to be a tumultuous time for Oak Ridgers.

In a City Council meeting, four days after Franklin's announcement, some 200 citizens showed up and voted ten to one AGAINST opening the city. And we think we have controversy today. Imagine dealing with that kind of resistance from the public, but, the Atomic Energy Commission continued with plans to open the city.

The three new gatehouses that remain today were constructed on the roads leading to the three sites in late 1948 and early 1949. Two of these historic structures, located on Scarboro Road and Oak Ridge Turnpike, have been nicely preserved by the Department of Energy and the third, located on Bethel Valley Road has been painted, but the interior remains in need of restoration.

The two restored buildings each have excellent selections of Ed Westcott black and white historic images of the Manhattan Project era in Oak Ridge. They also contain period furniture and are often used for small meetings.

What John C. Franklin also realized was that the cost to the government to maintain the support to the citizens living in Oak Ridge at the same level as during the Manhattan Project was not practical. Yet, the citizens had come to feel all those amenities were part of their compensation package for living and working here. This was never stated as such; it was just something that became a common perception.

The first thing the Atomic Energy Commission did to begin their "normalization" was to appoint an advisory city council and a city manager. These changes were met with resistance at every turn.

Realizing the high level of resistance to change they faced, the AEC management wisely decided to engage a huge number of individuals on various committees to plan the actual gate opening ceremony.

Many changes occurred in 1949. One of the most visible was the change in the newspaper. The Oak Ridger became the name of the newspaper in January 1949. The newspaper played a key role in the

promotion of the city opening by printing large pictures of the individuals who were leading the various gate opening planning committees and by constant reminders that the event-filled day was approaching.

Fredrick "Fred" W. Ford, who was referred to as director of Community Affairs and also as city manager, took the lead as the AEC's person "in charge" of the town. Len Z. Dolan had been selected in 1947 as the first city manager picked by the newly formed AEC, but Ford was the one in the position when the gates opened in 1949. He performed admirably in this most challenging role.

The first announcement, that set the date of the "gate opening" as March 19, 1949, was made on January 28, 1949. The Oak Ridger continued to provide constant promotion of the event by highlighting the various committees and their assigned tasks. The newspaper gave encouragement by naming the members along with photos of the leaders in various planning roles.

The Program Committee went to work immediately lining up prestigious potential speakers. They ultimately succeeded in securing the Honorable Alben W. Barkley, vice president of the United States. Several other political figures and celebrities attended the event, including the chairman of the AEC, David Lilienthal. TIME, LIFE and NEWSWEEK all covered the event.

President Truman, although invited, did not attend. Senator Estes Kefauver helped get Governor Browning to attend.

The major highlight of the day was the actual opening of the gates using an electrical pulse to ignite the magnesium coated ribbon. The electrical pulse came from the Graphite Reactor at the Oak Ridge National Laboratory. The parade soon followed and other events were held throughout the day which was filled with speeches at every venue.

Much of the information for this retelling of the historic gate opening occasion comes from Bill Wilcox's work in *The Opening of the Gates to the Secret City*. The level of detail captured by Bill is a treasure he has left us in many forms. As I have said, "We have lost a GIANT" and he will surely be missed.