

Bill Wilcox – The transformation and second birth of Oak Ridge, Part 1

Bill Wilcox, who was the Oak Ridge city historian, until his passing on September 2, 2013, gave a speech on June 4, 2010, entitled *The Transformation and Second Birth of Oak Ridge “Independence Day,” June 4, 1960*, in honor of the city of Oak Ridge’s incorporation on June 2, 1960. Bill’s personal recollection and use of key primary resources such as *A City is Born*, *The History of Oak Ridge, Tennessee*, and *A Report to the Atomic Energy Commission on the Master Plan, Oak Ridge, Tennessee*, make this speech worthy of note. I plan to draw heavily on Bill’s speech in this series in response to his request that it be published.

Bill begins in 1947 when the Atomic Energy Commission first took responsibility for what was until then the Clinton Engineer Works and included the city of Oak Ridge.

“For a year starting in 1947, they tried a city manager type government under Len Z. Dolan, Y-12’s head of Maintenance, Safety, and Security (my Jeanie was his secretary at Y-12). But that arrangement didn’t work, and the AEC went back to the Army’s community affairs director system in the fall of 1948, putting Frederick W. Ford in as head. Fred remained the top AEC man for Oak Ridge, supervising the entire 13-year transformation period; we owe him a huge thank you and a plaque or something more in his honor somewhere in town, fittingly in our Municipal Building; so much of the shape of the Oak Ridge of today was created under his direction.”

Bill then brings to light an uproar caused by planning to open the gates, something most residents opposed. “In the summer of 1948, the AEC really stirred up a fuss when Oak Ridge Operations manager John Franklin announced they were going to open the gates to the public the next year, and a town meeting held two weeks later to discuss it ended up with a vote taken: 152 voted No, don’t open them; 17 said Okay.”

This was a huge transition for the closed city, and the comfort the residents felt was not going to be allowed to change without some time passing and strong feelings expressed. Bill continued, “It was a clue as to how tough a sell they had before them. That 1948 year had started off badly with the AEC announcing that ORNL’s ‘reactor development work’ would all be moved to University of Chicago’s Argonne National Laboratory.”

It is important to note here that the Oak Ridge National Laboratory only gained that status and name in March 1948. There was a huge political fight to even get a national laboratory located in the South, much less in an essentially rural section of East Tennessee not even near a major city (I am convinced that Knoxville did not merit that standing in the minds of the northern and western politicians of the time).

Bill said, “It was a huge blow to ORNL morale, but AEC said they would have strong research programs in chemistry, physics, biology, health physics, and isotope development using the graphite reactor.”

As only Bill could do, he then transitioned to another aspect of city life, the cultural one of music. “Happier news in town that year came with the Oak Ridge Civic Music Association bringing Isaac Stern to town for a notable concert and the Trapp Family singers later that year to star in the *Sound of Music* for another.”

Bill continued, “And later that year, in what today we would applaud as a fine ‘greening’ move, the AEC surprisingly bought and planted over two million pine trees on their many acres of unused farm land. You can easily spot them all along Highway 58 west of town, down toward K-25, especially lots of them planted too close together now revealed by the new construction to widen 58 into what will now likely become ‘the Orange Route.’”

“1949 saw our new newspaper, *The Oak Ridger*, started up in January; then in March the gates opened so everyone could come in. Despite our moaning and groaning about losing our ‘gated community,’ we all

got caught up in the excitement and ended up welcoming the world to our town and to our new American Museum of Atomic Energy.

“Then later in 1949 the physical transformation quietly started with a lot of major construction projects for our benefit getting under way. Interestingly it was all done without any real input from we Oak Ridgers. Of course we would have had 16 different opinions on how to build what where!

“The first to be finished was a brand new, permanent elementary school. The *Oak Ridger* carried the story of the opening of Willowbrook School for 525 pupils, and, a big surprise, it was the first part of a planned westward shift in the center of the town’s population. It would serve a new subdivision then being built called the Garden Apartments. The Gamble Valley community (later Scarboro) was also to be improved by opening seven new permanent dormitories, later to be turned into apartments.

“1950 saw many major continued changes in the town, part of the overall plan. In the spring the solidly built, three-story Garden Apartments, opened on the hillside that during the war was covered with S-dormitories. Jeanie and I had been living in an H-type dormitory out in the Jefferson area converted into apartments and jumped to go see and then move in as the first tenants of the fine building at the top of Villanova Road. We were amazed by the poured concrete solid floors covered with handsome black tile and block partition walls. We had always lived in wartime wood. These buildings all over the hill provided 450 modern two-bedroom apartments, soon all filled up with baby boomers.

“That summer of ’50 saw, big surprise to us all, an even larger, brand new neighborhood of separate homes called Woodland being started with 145 permanent homes and 92 duplexes opened to new home owners. An expansion later added even more new housing, for a total of 485 housing units for families in Woodland and 286 in Gamble Valley.

“And of course then Woodland needed its own elementary school so that too was finished in the fall of ’50 for 550 pupils. Whoops, the population soared in Woodland, so did the number of children, so a new addition had to be added right away to take care of 180 more pupils. Oak Ridge was beginning to look very different indeed, and its people began moving all around town.

“Lots was going on in ’50 besides the building programs. The Korean War broke out, and five Oak Ridge National Guard units were called up for service in Korea under Lt. Col. Wm. T. Sergeant. The half-billion-dollar Paducah plant was finished and staffed largely by Oak Ridge supervisors.

“A major new study was arranged by the AEC Headquarters called the Scurry Panel, headed by a Dallas lawyer, to study the feasibility of disposing of land and homes in all three of the wartime cities (also Los Alamos and Richland) and turning their municipal governments over to their residents. This Scurry Report was to become the action plan for steering us into incorporation and for providing the Congressional legislation. Its findings were widely publicized and discussed, generally favorably all over town because there were no firm dates yet.”

More of Bill’s speech to follow.