

Bill Wilcox – The transformation and second birth of Oak Ridge, Part 3

As we continue to examine the transition of the city of Oak Ridge in the late 1950s toward incorporation, the speech Bill Wilcox, who was the Oak Ridge city historian until his passing on September 2, 2013, gave on Jun 4, 2010, *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, sheds light on the events transforming the city.

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.

Bill’s speech continues, “The options that summer were (1) move to West Village and buy a Title 9 home on a leased lot (trees will grow); (2) move to East Village next year and rent a Title 8 home in the woods; (3) stay in your cemesto with hopes to buy some day and then add space onto it; (4) build a new home on a leased lot like the Keyes, Brookshires, and Overmans did; (5) move to one of the new subdivisions like West Hills over in K-ville; or (6) for the Wilcoxes, continue to rent a Garden Apartment.

“1954 saw Paul Ebert playing the villain in his first ‘mellerdrammer,’ starting a much loved Oak Ridge Playhouse summer tradition.

“The first of 1955 saw the completion of the 500 new homes in East Village, in the woods on the nice winding original streets. Jeanie and I went out to look and snapped up one of the first, as we now needed three bedrooms.

“In March, Fred Ford and AEC wooed and won Guilford Glazer, a Knoxville industrialist, to agree to build the new center city business district, which he named “Downtown.” It rose from a mud flat to be a very attractive center of commerce in a “L-shaped“ array, with JCPenny’s as an anchor. It all opened to great fanfare in October 1955 with silver-haired J. C. Penny himself coming to open it. It opened with 30 businesses, and by 1961 there were 80.

“That same summer President Eisenhower signed the official Oak Ridge Disposition Act, which, providing for the sale of the homes, was to prove our emancipation. It surely would have taken the top story for the year except for the integration story.

“The Atomic Energy Commission Headquarters issued a mandate directing Oak Ridge to be the first in Tennessee to integrate. Our Oak Ridge High School and Robertsville were the first in Tennessee to comply with the Supreme Court ruling outlawing segregation.

“Integration here went smoothly, the *Oak Ridger* reported, partly due to Principal Tom Dunigan’s calming speech to his ORHS first assembly in September. But rather than quoting that, let me quote another of his efforts. Tom, who was my fine next-door neighbor for 50 years, got a call a few days later, ‘There’s trouble in the gym.’

“When he got there, he found several blacks had shown up for the first basketball practice and the whites were staging a ‘sit-down’ in protest. Tom called the whites off to the side and said, ‘Look, I realize this is a new and uncomfortable situation for all of you, but you’re here to play basketball. Now you either can get out there and play, or else turn in your uniforms tomorrow.’ Practice went on as normal.

"1956 saw home sales begin at last. In May the *Oak Ridger* printed the sales prices for 4,490 homes of 27 different types, in four pages of fine print. They ranged from \$2,275 to \$12,475. My three-bedroom, two-bath F house up on New York was listed as a little over \$8,000.

"But all prices were discounted if you had been renting, from 15 to 25%. My price came down to \$6,000, including the 0.5-acre lot. I jumped at it. By the end of 1956, 723 homes had been purchased. Dot Decamp wrote in *Celebrate Oak Ridge* that sirloin steak that year was 69 cents a pound, a new Plymouth cost \$1,595, and that Ridgers were happily humming tunes from *My Fair Lady*.

"In 1957 the most home sales took place; by July, 4,000 homes had been sold of the 4,360 offered. Fred Ford reported that some 200 were bought and resold for nice profits. AEC arranged for the election of the first advisory school board in order to get some citizens familiar with that coming chore, and the last two major new buildings the AEC was to build were begun, namely a \$3M replacement state of the art hospital and a fine new municipal building in the town center near the shopping mall.

"That 1957 year also saw the Playhouse buying the old Center Theatre in Jackson Square for its new home. And when Dot Senn wrote up the year for *Celebrate Oak Ridge*, she ran across an historic tidbit that maybe ought to be in Guinness Book: Oak Ridge reversed itself in 1957 from starting the year as the U.S. city with the fewest number of homeowners to being the highest of all cities in percent of home ownership at the end!

"Fred Ford spent a lot of time in 1958 with the hospital wars many of us vividly recall; the community finally getting aroused over one of the government's great Christmas presents! The issue was who would get to own and operate this fine new facility.

"The three final contenders were (1) the "doctors" who had run it for the past 10 years and who successfully lobbied Congress for the new building, (2) a group representing the city to be, and (3) the Methodist Church. The *Oak Ridger* was full of the debates that led up to two referenda, with the Methodists winning each, but not by much.

"In fact the first referendum showed the Methodists with 35% of the vote, the current hospital board with 33%, and the city group with 32%. Hard feelings over the debates and claims kept that ownership issue sadly festering for another decade among small groups.

More of Bill's speech to follow.