

Bill Wilcox – The transformation and second birth of Oak Ridge, Part 4

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, “But most citizens watched the hospital fight from a distance, learning to hula-hoop that year and spending the fall watching Jackie Pope lead his fantastic football Wildcats to win the regular season, the region, then the state championship, and they were later declared the national champions.

“Also the city had puffed up their pride when visited by Queen Frederika of Greece and Princess Sophia, Pearl Buck the author, Sen. Lyndon Johnson (big affair at Davis Brothers cafeteria), and enjoyed a return visit from former ORNL Director Eugene Wigner, now a Fermi and Nobel Prize winner.

“The year was scarred by two awful events. Oak Ridge’s first (so far only) nuclear criticality accident [occurred] at Y-12 on June 16, 1958, that exposed eight workers to severe radiation. Thankfully all recovered.

“The second tragedy was in the early hours of Sunday, October 5th, when three dynamite blasts rocked Clinton High School, the result of racial tensions. Within hours, Oak Ridge played good neighbor by inviting the school to hold classes at our closed down Linden school, and the Oak Ridge High School band welcomed their buses on Monday when they arrived at Linden.

“1958 was the year when we citizens really started taking incorporation seriously. Now that we all owned homes, the city became important. The ownership of the hospital involved us all in that voting and discussions.

“On top of those, there began a major push by the League of Women Voters with their ‘Citizens for Incorporation’ efforts using their new ‘INKY’ logo. Fred Ford’s announcement to the public was affirming—100% of the 3,526 single-family units had been sold.

“Then Oak Ridge Operations Manager Sam Sapirie, in a civic club talk, iced the cake by announcing the AEC would be giving sizable financial aid to the city and it was his opinion that we could incorporate without a rise in taxes. So the big referendum went ahead on May 5, 1959, and this one finally affirmed all that Ford and the AEC had worked so long and hard for since 1947—there was a grand turnout of Ridgers voting 5,552 to incorporate, only 395 against. This was a ratio of 14:1.

“The first official city council was elected June 2, 1959, along with the first official board of education. The city accepted the streets and roads right away, and first set up a zoning commission to develop land use plans.

“To get their share of state funds, the schools were transferred to the city on January 1, 1960, instead of waiting to June. And the most important meeting of the last half of the year was in December when Mayor Al Bissell and E. A. Wende sat down and inked the first Financial Assistance Agreement to the city from the USAEC.

"That they both knew then how historic a moment that signing the first financial assistance document was is shown by the fact that they bought a very special desk pen for the signing and later put an engraved plate on it commemorating that notable occasion, December 5, 1959. It is now on display in the Oak Ridge Public Library lobby display cases.

"Fred Ford and his staff spent the first half of 1960 drawing up all the deeds, inventories, and paper for the things to be given to the city. The total value of the municipal service, educational, and utility services given to the city on June 1, 1960, was \$28,306,609 plus the \$3,561,746 given to the Methodists.

"The AEC's original cost (acquisition, no depreciation) of what it had spent on new housing and all municipal systems and property (but not the hospital) was about \$84.5 million (about \$670 million in 2009 dollars). What a gift!

"Mayor Bissell started planning a big celebration, not for the June 1 handover of all the deeds because that was a Wednesday, but for Saturday, June 4, 1960, and a BIG celebration it was. It started with a parade, nicely symbolic in that it started from the Federal Building, the "Castle on the Hill," and wound up on Blankenship Field.

"Tennessee Governor Buford Ellington was the featured speaker, joined by Senators Estes Kefauver and Al Gore, Sr., Representative Howard Baker, AEC Chairman John McCone, and Carbide's Clark Center. The *Oak Ridger* reported that many speakers thanked the USAEC, and the mayor made a big point of saying this was only the first of what he certainly hoped would be an annual celebration of our independence.

"It was the birth of the city, the start of a new era. Fred and his right-hand man through the years Fred Peitzsch (for the last years serving as city manager) afterward spent a year or so tying up loose ends, helping the new government, and writing his grand history, which the Oak Ridge Heritage and Preservation Association has reprinted, *A City is Born*.

"The reason for our reprinting is that the originals are so scarce, we believe only 18 copies were ever handed out. Why? I think it's because Ford included so much detail about the names and the actions of the townspeople, the arguments through those 13 years that Fred's bosses thought it might not be best to broadcast all of that.

"It is clear from the great detail that Fred and Fred kept detailed diaries or journals and excellent financial records. The appendix has detailed tables of the operating expenses through the years for the schools, hospital, municipal services, etc. But now, none of the protagonists are still with us, and the history and insights as to who did what, when and why, are very important and fascinating parts of how our city came to be what it is today.

"We owe so much to the USAEC leaders during this tempestuous decade that saw the transformation of our Secret City into the new city born on June 1, 1960. Happy 50th, Oak Ridge."

Bill Wilcox, Oak Ridge City Historian

What a great speech! My friend, Bill Wilcox, we lost a GIANT when he passed.