

## **Y-12 and the Great Smoky Mountains National Park – a grand partnership**

Since 1996, hundreds of Y-12 employees and their friends and family as well as many Oak Ridge National Laboratory employees, family and friends have routinely spent a Saturday in the mountains in support of Y-12's Help the Smokies program. The teams have worked at least one Saturday a year and sometimes more to improve picnic areas and campsites, including making sites more accessible to those with disabilities. Improvements include constructing a shelter and greenhouse, installing tent pads and replacing tables, grills and fire rings.

This volunteer effort has enabled the park to make the needed improvements to the campsites and picnic areas that would otherwise have been much more difficult to do. Each year \$5,000 has been provided to help procure the needed materials and often 25 – 30 or more volunteers have gathered in the beauty of the Smokies to make significant improvements to the park.

When I think of the Help the Smokies project, Bob Presley comes immediately to mind. Bob was among those who were there when the project first started in 1996. There were several others, some of whom are still actively involved and who still look forward to the annual workdays.

Gordon Fee was the president of Lockheed Martin Energy Systems at the time the project was initiated. He was supportive of the interaction with the Great Smoky Mountain National Park. He was also instrumental in helping the park service locate space here in Oak Ridge (at the Y-12 site at first) to store several historical artifacts for the park service.

Over the years, most of the picnic areas and campsites in the Smokies have been refurbished by Y-12's Help the Smokies team of volunteers. While this has been primarily a Y-12 initiative, it began before the contracts were separated and the Oak Ridge National Laboratory and other Oak Ridge folks who became aware of it have pitched in from time to time to help. After the fun of working in the park, it is easy to convince volunteers to return on the next annual work day.

Lunch has been provided at each work day, and the camaraderie grows during that wholesome meal. Most of the work day is spent in smaller groups tackling one campsite or picnic table site after another to lay timbers and pour and spread gravel beneath the picnic tables.

One of my favorite memories of Bob Presley is seeing him drive one of the park service's "mule" vehicles, a small all-wheel-drive vehicle with a small dump bed on it. He would drive that green "mule" from the gravel pile to the picnic site and attempt to get the vehicle as close as possible to the spot where the gravel needed to be spread before dumping the load.

This often entailed driving over stumps, up inclines and across timbers. None of which was smooth riding. Bob would hang on to the steering wheel and pour the gas to that "mule" and jump the obstacles in his way. He invariably got the gravel to the spot he wanted regardless of the obstacles.

Bob's wife, Louise, was always there as well. She led the lunch preparations along with others who chipped in to help. Often there was barbecue, and other times we had sandwiches or chicken and even hamburgers on occasion. Regardless, those of us working thought the meals were excellent.

Have you ever noticed how much better food tastes in the outdoors after exerting yourself either in exercise, walking, running or working? It is one of life's little pleasures that creates meaningful and lasting memories. Bob and Louise succeeded in creating many such memories.

The Great Smoky Mountains National Park officials recently recognized Y-12's Help the Smokies program team members for volunteering more than 10,000 hours of service to the park. Y-12 is one of only 11 individuals or groups to receive the recognition. A plaque honoring Y-12's stewardship will be on permanent display at park headquarters near the Sugarlands Visitor Center just outside Gatlinburg.

The team's latest honor is one of several National Park Service awards Y-12 has received over the years for its volunteer work in the park. In 2008, the Y-12 Help the Smokies team received a prestigious Department of the Interior Take Pride in America® National Award.

There is a carved wooden bear that greets visitors to the Y-12 Visitor Center just beside the Y-12 History Center in the New Hope Center. It was presented to the team by the Friends of the Smokies on November 1, 2000. It is a proud reminder of the joy that comes from partnering with our park.

There is also a framed photograph Cosby Creek that hangs above the carved bear. A plaque on the photo honors 15 Years of Help the Smokies (1996 – 2011) and celebrates the partnership between Y-12 and the Great Smoky Mountains National Park. This photo serves to remind us of the beauty of the park.

As many of you realize, we in Oak Ridge may soon have a site of the Manhattan Project National Historical Park located here. Y-12 will participate in that as will the Oak Ridge National Laboratory and the Horizon Center at the East Tennessee Technological Park (K-25 site). The centerpiece for the park will be located in the city of Oak Ridge and the American Museum of Science and Energy will likely play a role in that as well.

I have asked some of the volunteers who have been with the Help the Smokies program most if not all of the years of its existence to send me comments from their experiences working on the project. If any of you readers have been involved, I would appreciate getting your comments as well. A follow-up article will include this input from people who have enjoyed the experience. Send your comments by email to: [smithdr@y12.doe.gov](mailto:smithdr@y12.doe.gov) or call me at 865-576-7781.