

Bill Wilcox – The transformation and second birth of Oak Ridge, Part 2

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, “To my mind, one of the smart strategic moves the local Atomic Energy Commission made was to start very early (back in 1949) to offer to sell land to church groups so that they could build churches. It meant many leading people sending down roots in the city they hoped would come. The first with a building they could worship in was St Mary’s Catholic Church, and many followed in the next few years.

“In 1951 AEC’s building programs kept contractors busy all over town. The *Oak Ridger* reported in March that the AEC’s program to rehabilitate the exterior and the interiors of 504 TDUs (temporary dwelling units) had been finished “to extend their life 20 more years.” Then in August they finished building 50 permanent homes in the historic cemestros part of town on lots where they had crammed extra flattop homes when the housing squeeze of 1944/45 occurred.

“I recall how surprised we were at the appearance of these new invaders of the alphabet housing areas; they were modern, two-story homes that looked weird in our cemestros town of ranch styles.

“And around town, people were improving their cemesto ranchers and planting yards and gardens even though they did not own them yet. The *Oak Ridger* gardening columnist praised people all over town for their fine efforts in 1951, including in one spring column lauding McKie Alexander’s beautiful azaleas in the yard of their home on Dixie Lane.

“The major AEC addition of immediate use and value was finished in the fall of 1951, a brand new and permanent Oak Ridge High School was opened to fall classes. It was a centerpiece of the planned shift to the new center city concept, a change from the old war-time, wooden-frame building to a modern brick building that even had the latest fad in classroom designs, the round buildings!

“Jefferson Junior High became the new tenant of the old ORHS building at Jackson Square. The new ORHS in 1951 cost \$2,910,514 including its huge 59.51 acre campus—in 2009 dollars that would be \$23.8 million.

“In 1952, the spectacular new scene for Ridgers was the completion of 350 walk-up Brick Apartments and 100 row homes deliberately planned as a buffer zone between the new Woodland neighborhood and the planned central shopping area. The streets had been changed to accent and serve the new central city shopping district.

“Two new outside connector avenues had been built. Lafayette Avenue on the east side now connected the Turnpike to Kerr Hollow Road giving a new route out of town to Knoxville. On the west side a new Illinois Avenue connected the turnpike to that road.

“Also that year they connected New York Avenue directly to the Turnpike, whereas during the war it curved all around onto Vermont and tied into the turnpike at Vermont Gateway. Then they put in two

close-in, brand new thruways to serve the new shopping area—Tulane Avenue on the west and Rutgers Avenue on the East. The transforming of the city was really developing.

“1952 was a busy year. In addition to all the above, AEC rehab programs were completed, extending the life to a 20-year target on 212 more TDUs and on 500 duplexes. Ridgers were changing a very little—they voted Republican for the first time, but only by a hairsbreadth, giving Eisenhower 100 more votes than Adlai Stevenson. And wouldn't you know, Anderson County after a couple of “wet” years voted itself “dry” again over the overwhelming “wet” vote of Oak Ridge.

“On a happier note, *Oak Ridger* editor Dick Smyser's wife Mary wrote the 1952 year-end reprise for the paper, picking as her three favorite feature stories of the past year: [1] the one about three-year-old Jimmy Baker who had been whistling tunes since he was eight months old, [2] one about a barber in town who offered pick-up and delivery service for youngsters needing a haircut, and [3] the story of Sophie Brady, a Ridger who that year won the Daughters of the American Revolution's Good Citizenship Prize despite the fact that she was not an American citizen.

“1953 saw the advisory Town Council under Waldo Cohn's strongly liberal leadership press for a vote on incorporating triggered by the favorable responses to the Scurry Panel findings. Fred Ford surely agreed; the AEC had done so much already to make the town more permanent.

“The referendum on incorporation they held on April 1, however, told a different story—1120 voting for incorporating and 4,584 against! That's 4:1 against. These Oak Ridgers!

“Waldo had earlier the same year also talked his council into passing a resolution to AEC to desegregate the schools, so he was way ‘ahead’ of the public on both issues and suffered from these positions to the extent that the next year there was a recall election to boot him out of office. The recall vote was 3,356 to oust, 2,061 to keep, just 250 less than the 2/3 needed to oust, so he kept his seat on council, but resigned as its chair.

“AEC plowed ahead, working without much interest from the community to frame legislation for Congress to enable the disposal of the city and bring on its real birth. It was to be another six years.

“In 1954, construction projects were still going on. Robertsville School was added to and renovated, and all its temporary facilities discarded. Dreams of immediate home ownership blossomed when the AEC announced the construction of 400 new, easy to buy Title 9 homes in West Village—out along the turnpike west of Louisiana.

“Jeanie and I went along with hundreds to run look at the first sample homes. Radiant heating in the ceiling was a new idea, but of little interest this sweltering year, it being record setting hot here from May to October.

More of Bill's speech to follow.