

## **THE TRANSFORMATION AND SECOND BIRTH OF OAK RIDGE**

### **“Independence Day” June 4, 1960**

William J. (Bill) Wilcox Jr., Oak Ridge City Historian

Retired Technical Director for the Oak Ridge Y-12 & K-25 Plants

[During the Manhattan Project (from May 25, 1943) a Jr. Chemist, Tennessee Eastman Corp., Y-12 Plant]

Talk for the Oak Ridge Heritage & Preservation Assoc., May 13, 2010

For the 50<sup>th</sup> Birthday of Oak Ridge, June 4, 2010

This is the story of how the USAEC transformed the wartime built, temporary “Secret City” of Oak Ridge into one Oak Ridgers were willing to take over from the government. The transformation took a period of 13 long years, from 1948 until 1960, with our second birth starting May 5, 1959 when Ridgers voted 14:1 to incorporate. The transformation was finally consummated when we took over ownership of everything, “cutting the cord” completely on June 1, 1960. As we celebrate today in June of 2010, we remember the events that occurred in our city fifty years ago.

Also in June 2010, the “Secret City Festival” will once again celebrate our wartime boomtown. When first conceived in late 1942, General Groves asked Stone & Webster to build a nice little town of 13,000, but thanks to large increases by the Los Alamos physicists in the amount of U-235 needed for a bomb (and thus the size of Y-12 and its staff, the town size swelled in late 1943 to a new target 44,000 and then again in late 1944 to 61,000. That brought on a real housing crises which the Army met by bringing in thousands of flattops, trailers, barracks, TDUs (temporary dwelling units) and hutments. Happily for the AEC’s peacetime takeover in 1947, employment had dropped sharply from the Army’s peak of 75,000 to some 30,000 by late ’47, but they still had formidable problems dealing with the temporary character of the city, now with many unoccupied quarters.

They didn’t fumble around long. Their first evaluations in 1947 under ORO’s new civilian Manager John Franklin showed big operating cost deficits in most departments. The government was providing a much classier level of service at far lower dollar returns than cities our size all over the country. But we spoiled professionals considered these as part of

our compensation package for having had to move from homes all over the country to this farmland, and protested loudly at any proposed cuts or loss.

Without even waiting for an overall plan, the AEC started getting rid of what they could: returning most for Oak Ridge's future, two years before AEC Chairman Lillienthal came to town in 1949 to tell of the 5,000 trailers they had borrowed, and just demolishing the 4,000 hutments and about 40 of the cheap, S-type dorms. They also asked for advice on a Master Plan us that Oak Ridge did, in fact, have a future. The AEC boss announced we were to be the center of the nation's uranium enrichment business (K-25) and that big expansions in that business were in view. He also said that ORNL was to be a major research center, and that plans were being made for eventual home sales. He could say nothing about Y-12 – they had lost their wartime mission to a more successful K-25, and it would be 1950 before their new weapons mission would come alive.

For their Master Plan, the AEC went to three experts- [1] the same Skidmore Owings & Merrill that did such a fine job on the original town, [2] TVA (the new AEC leaders had visited the TVA aging and well settled town of Norris and were much impressed), and [3] the Corps of Engineers.

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, because so much of the shape of the Oak Ridge of today was created under his direction.

In the summer of 1948, the AEC really stirred up a fuss when ORO Manager John Franklin announced they were going to open the gates to the public the next year. A town meeting held two weeks later to discuss it ended up with a vote taken--152 voted no, don't open the

gates and 17 said ok. It was a clue as to how tough a sell they had before them. That '48 year had started off badly with the AEC announcing that ORNL's "reactor development work" would all be moved to University of Chicago "Argonne NL." 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. Happier news in town that year came with ORCMA 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. 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 Hwy 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 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 underway. 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-dorms. Jeanie and I had been living in an H-type dorm 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. There was a lot going on!

In 1950, 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 also 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.

To my mind, one of the smart strategic moves the local AEC 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 TDU (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 cemestos 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 cemestos town of ranch styles.

And around town, people were improving their cemestos ranches 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 one Spring column lauding the McKie Alexander's beautiful azaleas at their home on Dixie Lane. The major AEC addition of immediate use and value was finished in the fall of '51, 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 wartime, 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 was a new Illinois Avenue connecting the turnpike to that road. Also that year they

connected New York Ave 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 underway.

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 (DAR'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 April 1 however told a different story- 1120 voting for incorporating, 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

6 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 of others to 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.

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 cements with hopes to **buy** some day then add space on to it.
- [4] **Build** a new home on a leased lot like the Keyes, Brookshires & Overmans did.
- [5] **Move** to one of the new subdivisions like West Hills over in Knoxville.
- [6] for the Wilcoxes, continue to rent a Garden Apartment.

'54 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 were now needing three bedrooms. In March, Fred Ford & 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 Penny’s as an anchor. It all opened to great fanfare in October, '55 with silver-haired J. C. Penney himself coming to open it. It opened with 30 businesses, and by 1961 there were 80.

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

mandate directing Oak Ridge to be the first in Tennessee to integrate. Our ORHS and Robertsville were the first in TN 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 4 pages of fine print. They ranged from \$2,275 to \$12,475. My 3 bedroom, 2 bath F house up on New York was listed as at 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. 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 homes sales took place and by July, 4,000 homes had been sold of the 4,360 offered. Fred Ford reported that some 200 were bought and re-sold 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 '57 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 US

City with the fewest number of home owners 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, [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.

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 Bros.), 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 at Y-12 on June 16 that exposed 5 operators to severe radiation. Thankfully all recovered. The second tragedy was in the early hours of Sunday October 5<sup>th</sup> 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 ORHS band welcomed their busses on Monday when they arrived at Linden.

1958 was the year when we citizens really started taking incorporation seriously. Now that many of us 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 ORO 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. 14:1. The first official City Council was elected June 2, along with the first official Board of Education. The City accepted the Streets and Roads plan 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 the next January 1 instead of waiting until 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.

Proof they both understood that the signing of the first financial assistance document was an historic moment 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 (2010) 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 was \$28,306,609 plus the \$3,561,746 given to the Methodists. The AEC’s original cost (acquisition, no depreciation) of what they had spent on new housing and all municipal systems and property (but not the hospital) was about \$84.5 million (\$~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 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., Rep 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 thru 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 the grand history, which ORHPA 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. 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 a new city born on June 1, 1960. Happy 50<sup>th</sup>, Oak Ridge.

\*\*\*

This telling of the 13-year transformation of the City and its citizens, was derived primarily from these sources:

1. Fred W. Ford and Fred Peitzsch, "A City is Born, The History of Oak Ridge, Tennessee." Oak Ridge Operations, USAEC, June 1961. 307 pages. Reprinted 2009 by the ORHPA, available from them.
2. Its Appendix, PD-01319, (available from USDOE Information Center.)
3. "Celebrate Oak Ridge, A Chronology 1942-1998." Celebrate 2000 Publication, the Oak Ridger, 2000.