

# Center for Oak Ridge Oral Histories - an archive of unique stories

(As published in The Oak Ridger's Historically Speaking column on January 7, 2013)

The telling of one's story is a personal thing and only the one experiencing the perceived reality can convey that perception. Oral Histories provide an excellent medium whereby these singular stories can be captured. COROH serves as Oak Ridge's central storehouse for these one-of-a-kind stories.

Oral Histories on video enhance the experience for the researcher in that they get to see the actual person telling the story. The expressions and other visual clues to the person's character are helpful additions to the oral history tradition.

The resulting archive of oral histories being recorded, collected from earlier recordings (audio only), or linked to other archives, and all of this being placed online, is a treasure trove for researchers. The link to COROH is: <http://cdm16107.contentdm.oclc.org/cdm/landingpage/collection/p15388coll1> and the Facebook page is located at: <http://www.facebook.com/CenterforOakRidgeOralHistory>.

COROH has created the forum and the mechanism to capture these real experiences. I asked Jordan Reed, the young lady who is the COROH Clerk to write something for *Historically Speaking*. Here is what Jordan has to say about COROH:

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Seventy years. That is a life-time for most, even longer for others. Those that have been around that long have seen everything from the changes in styles and fashion to the effects of global warming. Many saw the development of countries around the world, while others saw the local changes, right here, within the East Tennessee hills.

In 1942, Oak Ridge made its mark on American history. People flocked from all across the United States as well as from around the region. Several left the area out of anger and disgust at the Army's forcefulness, but even more came in, thanks to the government's creation of thousands of jobs in a scientific field that was new to many. Over the past seventy years, it has taken all types of people to build and grow Oak Ridge to what it is today.

Michigan native, Ed Kirstowsky recalled, "Coming from the city, this town was pretty (laughing) pretty distant. The mud -- they had thrown us all together here. Well, one thing, they put us in a fenced-in area here; you had to have a badge to get in and a badge to get out, and -- there were just so many people here. And there -- most of them -- a good share of them were single. And it was quite a job for the government to handle them." This story like many others is just one example of what the Center for Oak Ridge Oral History is working to preserve.

Those that have stayed here from that initial influx of people have quite a story to tell. People like Ken Bernander, Cecilia Klemiski, Fred Vaslow, and countless others changed the world with their work at Oak Ridge National Laboratory, Y-12, and K-25.

Mr. Bernander, a retired long time employee of Y-12, came to Oak Ridge in 1944, and has remained ever since. After traveling to New York and Washington D.C. for work with the Manhattan Project, Ms. Klemiski arrived in Oak Ridge in 1943, and got the chance to work closely with General Groves.

With the nation having three "Secret" Cities (Oak Ridge; Los Alamos, New Mexico; and Hanford, Washington), Mr. Vaslow not only had the chance to work here in Oak Ridge starting in 1946, he also had quite a unique experience in Los Alamos during the Manhattan Project.

There are many people today living in Oak Ridge and its surrounding areas that have been here since before Oak Ridge was first developed. Some of these individuals were young and learned to embrace the change in their communities, while others were older and may still hold a grudge against the government today.

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Those with this perspective include James Brennan, sisters Colleen Black and Jo Ellen Iacovino, brothers David and John Rice Irwin, and Don Watson. Each of these individuals provides detailed stories of schooling, farming, and observing the changes the Army made to their homes.

While the stories of the beginning of Oak Ridge are important, the stories of those who arrived more recently (1950's to present) are just as important in understanding how Oak Ridge came to be the City we know today. Thousands of people played a part in making this "Secret City", and those listed are just a few examples of the over 200 individuals who have talked to the Center for Oak Ridge Oral History.

The Center for Oak Ridge Oral History is a Department of Energy funded initiative to capture the story of Oak Ridge. Through interviews, COROH is talking with anyone who played a part, or has something to share about working, living, growing up in Oak Ridge.

COROH is working to create an all-encompassing view of what Oak Ridge was like, especially during the Manhattan Project era into the 1950's. However, at this time, COROH is considering anyone willing to contribute.

Housewives, plant workers, laborers, and children - anyone is welcome to contact the Center for Oak Ridge Oral History about more information and to sign up to contribute. Please call Kathy McNeilly or Jordan Reed at the Oak Ridge Public Library at (865) 425-3455, or visit the [COROH web site](#) for more information.

There are at least 70 years of history that needs to be captured, and everyone is a part of it.

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Thanks Jordan for giving *Historically Speaking* readers insights into COROH and what Oak Ridge's oral histories can do to help keep our history alive for the coming generations. Your dedication to oral history and your continuing contributions to the ongoing program are much appreciated.

I am pleased to participate in the Steering Committee for COROH along with other interested volunteers and to help Kathy McNeilly as she guides the COROH efforts along with her staff. Credit must be given to Steve Stow for his pivotal role while on the DOE Site Specific Advisory Board for having the insight to promote the idea of forming COROH. Of course, Steve did not begin there, he has been involved in oral history efforts for years as has other members of the steering group.

COROH Steering Committee participants include: Oak Ridge Public Library; City of Oak Ridge; American Museum of Science & Energy; Children's Museum of Oak Ridge; Oak Ridge Heritage & Preservation Association; University of Tennessee, Center for the Study of War and Society; United States Department of Energy, Oak Ridge Office; United States Department of Energy, Office of Scientific and Technical Information; National Nuclear Security Administration; Tennessee State Library & Archives; Tennessee Valley Authority, Oak Ridge Site Specific Advisory Board; and Oak Ridge community members.

All of you readers have a story to tell and you are the best person to tell your story. Or if you have parents or grandparents with connections to early Oak Ridge, encourage them to tell their story to COROH and capture it and the sooner the better. Call Kathy or Jordan right away!

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Jordan Reed presents a talk on COROH to the *Secret City in the Tennessee Hills: From Dogpatch to Nuclear Power* held last September at the National Archives in Atlanta