

Happy Valley in Korea

(As published in *The Oak Ridger's Historically Speaking* column on October 10, 2007)

Here is another story from Bill Sergeant. I never cease to be amazed at the details Bill can recall of the early days of Oak Ridge. He is one of my most dedicated readers and often helps me see things about early Oak Ridge in a much more clear light.

He remembers when the original seven (nine actually) gates were up. He remembers gates that others do not even mention. He told me about two gates on roads leading north of Black Oak Ridge that were opened only to allow shift workers to enter and exit Oak Ridge.

Bill is the person who helped me to know the historical facts that the three "checking stations," one on Oak Ridge Turnpike, one on Scarboro Road and one on Bethel Valley Road, were built in 1948. The structures were first known as "Gate Houses." They were installed to be ready for the March 19, 1949 opening of the main road gates to the city of Oak Ridge and were intended to control access to the three government plant sites.

He also told me that the guard tower on the point of Pine Ridge just above the gap where East Fork Poplar Creek runs through the ridge was built at that same time. I found it interesting to learn that the three Gate Houses were only used officially from 1949 to 1953 when the fences were moved back closer to the three plants and the gate houses were no longer used.

In this latest story, Bill provides insight into the extent the memory of Oak Ridge and especially a small community known locally as "Happy Valley" meant to the troops fighting in the Korean War. I wish he had included more about his adventures during the Korean War, maybe another time we can encourage him to tell that story. Bill left Oak Ridge, where he was the leader of the security police force that protected all of the Oak Ridge reservation other than the specific plant sites, to lead troops into the Korean War. When that war was over, he returned to Oak Ridge. He retired as the director of the Department of Energy's Safeguards and Security organization.

Bill starts his story about Happy Valley by saying, "Little known and soon forgotten. There was once a 'West Oak Ridge.'

He continues, "Residents of the Clinton Engineer Works who were not workers required badges if 12 years of age. There were many such people, for example, non-employed wives and 12 years and older children. While the percentage of such people among Happy Valley non-worker residents was small because of the type of workers and lack of family housing, there still were some.

"Security badges identified the wearer as an Oak Ridge resident. Later in Oak Ridge history, the Manhattan Intelligence and Security Division decided that Happy valley non-worker residents should have badges different from the main city proper. Why, I don't know; the decision was made by the Intelligence and Security Division at the 'Castle on the Hill,' my job was to implement it. I believe they were a different color, perhaps 'red' to note their presence in the K-25 vicinity.

"The decision makers did not seem to want to use 'Happy Valley.' Too casual or unofficial sounding, I guess. So the official name was 'West Oak Ridge.' The new title died with the construct work in the area as the dormitories, hutments, commercial facilities ended occupancy and the structures removed. The name 'West Oak Ridge' was selected not earlier than 1945, dropped somewhat later.

"There were a lot of people living in 'Happy Valley' between May 1944 (when I arrived) and 1946. At its peak there were 15,000 people – more than Lenoir City, McMinnville and Sweetwater today and more than half of Oak Ridge today.

"I remember a theater and a bank. I once attended a movie at the theater as a lark. Construction workers were working on K-25, the Power House and S-50. The 'community' required much more 'policing' than the main oak Ridge. I remember one trailer murder. There was much rowdiness and drinking. The higher number of incidents may have been caused by the shift work, close housing, few facilities and even fewer amenities.

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Guard Headquarters, for what was known as the Roane Division was located in a dormitory type building used to house students back in Roane College and Wheat High School days in the Wheat community prior to the Manhattan Engineer District. Flannigan's Loop provided a road of sort through East Fork Ridge and Pine Ridge to Bethel valley where X-10 was located.

"In Korea, on the Central Front, the 194th Combat Battalion supported the front line troops with all kinds of bridges – foot, trucks and armored vehicles. The battalion also repaired dirt roads made damaged by heavy rain and laid and removed mine fields. The National Guard unit from Oak Ridge was composed of approximately 60% former Oak Ridgers augmented by draftees and reserves. Frequently, the Oak Ridge soldiers named work they did or areas where they served after Oak Ridge memories. One such memory used was 'Happy Valley.'

When the unit Bill describes above made up primarily of former Oak Ridgers, with him as their leader, chose a name for their work area in Korea, they chose the locally favored name, "Happy Valley." One reason may have been that the community, being a construction camp, had a reputation for having some very tough characters - I am speculating here, Bill did NOT say this! He did say that the security forces during the Manhattan Project were called to Happy Valley to deal with fights and other incidents way more frequently than to all of the rest of Oak Ridge.

Whatever the reason for choosing the construction camp at K-25, to name an area in Korea during the Korean War of 1950 - 1953, Happy Valley was chosen rather than the official name of "West Oak Ridge." They did also name a pass in the terrain after Oak Ridge as seen in the photo accompanying this story.

In addition to Happy Valley, with its hutments, trailers, barracks, school, a commercial center, theater, three recreation halls and other buildings, there were two other smaller construction camps. The Ford, Bacon & Davis camp was just west of Happy Valley and north of Happy Valley was yet another camp on Blair Road. Even with all these camps of construction workers living near the K-25 site, more than half the construction employees at K-25 traveled to work daily by buses, trucks or cars from surrounding communities.

I find it interesting to learn that the memory of Oak Ridge, and even Happy Valley, stuck with those troops in battle during the Korean War. Maybe it was just a way to recall memories of a place where they had enjoyed better times than those which they were enduring in Korea. Or, maybe it came from a sense of pride in what Oak Ridge had done for the world in helping end World War II. Maybe they were just proud of their home town and wanted to show that pride to other soldiers.

Whatever the root cause, naming a pass "Oak Ridge Pass" and naming a location "Happy Valley" tells a good story about Oak Ridgers who helped win yet another war, the Korean War! Thanks to Bill Sergeant for yet another excellent story of our Oak Ridge heritage.

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This sign evoking the memory of "Happy Valley" and Oak Ridge was erected in Korea during the Korean War by former Oak Ridgers under the leadership of Bill Sergeant

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Sprawling Happy Valley and other construction camps near K-25 are shown all around the construction site in this aerial photograph of the Manhattan Project K-25 site