

## ***Education in Oak Ridge – Pre-Oak Ridge and Early-Oak Ridge Schools, part 2***

(as published in The Oak Ridger's Historically Speaking column on November 21, 2006)

### **Education in Oak Ridge – Pre-Oak Ridge and early-Oak Ridge schools (part two)**

Last week we looked at Wheat School and Robertsville School. This column will focus on the Scarboro School. The original wooden Scarboro School burned and was reconstructed of brick in 1939. It continues to be used today as Oak Ridge Associated Universities' South Campus.

For a number of years it was used as part of the Comparative Animal Research Laboratory, first operated by the University of Tennessee and later by ORAU. The animals exposed to the Trinity Test in New Mexico on July 16, 1945, were shipped here and monitored at CARL. The several barns associated with CARL have just been demolished in the past few months. However, the first use of the Scarboro School building after the Manhattan Project came to this area was as a school building.

Having been closed in 1942 along with all other schools in the area required by the Manhattan Project, Scarboro School was opened again in March 1944 and was used for white students. It was used from September 1946 to June 1949 as a black elementary school. According to Blankenship in *An Adventure in Democratic Administration*, Scarboro School was selected as the location for the Negro school when it became obvious that the black population, required by state law to be educated in separate schools, was in need of a school.

At first the younger black school children attended school at Scarboro School and the black high school students were bused to Knoxville as were other black high school students in Anderson County at the time. In June 1949 the black school was moved to Gamble Valley but retained the Scarboro name. The old Scarboro School was then no longer used as a school building.

In 1950 high school classes were added to Scarboro School (in the Gamble Valley location) and the students no longer were bused to Knoxville. According to an article by Barbara Hart in the January 21, 1974 Oak Ridger this was the first and only school in 1950 for black high school students in Anderson County. The Hart article continues by stating it was made possible by the efforts of a small group of prominent Oak Ridge citizens. More than 25 volunteers, most of them with advanced degrees, offered their teaching services. A total of 40 black students were enrolled that September.

You may also recall that 1950 was the year that Wynona McSwain of Clinton filed the first lawsuit seeking integration of Clinton High School in behalf of her daughter, Joheather McSwain. Progress in the education of black students had to be made in small steps as the official rule was "separate but equal." The McSwain lawsuit sought to show that while the approach was certainly "separate" it was surely not "equal." Oak Ridgers were seeking quality education for blacks within the constraints of the law.

Scarboro School (in Gamble Valley location) then graduated the first black high school students in an Anderson County school when it held the first "negro high school commencement" in May 1951. Graduating were Nancy Cooper, Ben Phipps and Willie Ann Southall.

Meanwhile a "new Oak Ridge High School" was being completed to be ready for students in September, 1951. However, the new auditorium was used in May 1951 for the graduation of 198 seniors. The cost to construct the new school was \$3,000,000.

That the years between 1950 and 1956 had continuing turmoil relative to the question of integration is apparent from many sources. Even after the 1955 integration of two Oak Ridge schools, Robertsville Junior High School and Oak Ridge High School, and the 1956 integration of Clinton High School as well as the 1957 integration in Little Rock, Arkansas, the nation continued to struggle. The following series of events in Oak Ridge during 1954 carry a most telling story

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regarding our town and both the forward thinking of our leaders and the difficult transition integration was for many.

According to an article in the January 21, 1974 Oak Ridger regarding activities in 1954, Kit Kuperstock states, "The February 8, 1954, recall election was triggered by Town Council Chairman Cohn introducing a resolution, which Council passed, that Oak Ridge schools should immediately integrate. Though 3356 Ridgers voted in favor of recall, with only 2061 supporting Cohn, this was still short of the two-thirds majority necessary and Cohn kept his seat. He chose to resign as Council chairman, however, and Cliff Brill was elected to replace him. Jerry George was elected vice-chairman."

Kuperstock continues, "Town Council appointed a committee, headed by K. Z. Morgan, to study segregation in Oak Ridge schools. The ultimate decision was that integration should be delayed until Tennessee determined guidelines for integrating all schools in the state." The next year, 1955, Oak Ridge became the first schools in Tennessee and the south to integrate.

On October 5, 1958 at 4:00 AM on a Sunday morning when Clinton High School was bombed by a local individual or individuals still to this day unidentified and thus never prosecuted, Oak Ridge immediately sprang to their neighbors rescue. Linden School had closed in 1955 and was thus available for use. On Thursday, October 9, 1958, the yellow school buses from Clinton pulled up to the scrubbed Linden School.

During the few days preceding this historic event, the Oak Ridge and Clinton communities had pitched in to clean and equip the closed down school and ready it for the students. Nearly 900 students walked between lines of the Oak Ridge school band members who welcomed the Clinton students to Oak Ridge by playing the Clinton High School anthem! Ellen Woodside reported this event in the January 21, 1974 issue of The Oak Ridger as she looked back on the significant events in the history of Oak Ridge.

It seems the integration of Oak Ridge schools one year ahead of the other area high schools created a number of difficult situations. For example, Willie Golden tells in *The Secret City: The Oak Ridge Story – 1945 – 2006* of his experiences when he was among the first black basketball players on Oak Ridge High School team. That first year he was not able to play in the away games. However in ensuing seasons, Oak Ridge refused to schedule games with schools that would not allow all Oak Ridge players to play.

From the very beginning of the history of education in Oak Ridge, excellence has been an integral part of all aspects of our schools. This has been true from the selection of the original teachers and administrators by Dr. Blankenship to the current staff and teachers. Academics has been the overarching strength of that excellence in student preparation and sports has been a strong suite after that first year.

Involving the students in meaningful ways has also been a large part of the success over the years. A strong and involved parents association, a willing and dedicated board of education, exceptional teachers, devoted staff and exemplary students over the years all contribute to the strong tradition that has come to be known as the Oak Ridge reputation for excellence. Our school system has been and continues to be recognized in many ways as truly outstanding.

The latest most visible example of Oak Ridge Schools excelling is noted in The Oak Ridger on Thursday, November 9, 2006 where Scott Molony, Steven Arcangeli and Scott Horton have placed among the top regional winners in the annual Siemens Competition in Math, Science and Technology. They won the New England Regional Finals and are headed for New York City on December 1 – 4, 2006, for the national finals competing for a \$100,000 grand prize!

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So, beginning with Dr. Blankenship and looking at a few of the changes along the way I hope this sketch of the history of education in Oak Ridge is bringing out some of the details of our excellent school system. There is much more that has not been touched.

Next I hope to write about the “workshop” concept introduced by Dr. Blankenship that has carried forth to the present day as a key strategy for excellence in education in our schools. Also I plan to look at the history of the Oak Ridge Public Schools Education Foundation. As always, your feedback is appreciated. Contact me at 482-4224 or [draysmith@comcast.net](mailto:draysmith@comcast.net).



The Scarboro School as it was constructed in 1939

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The Scarboro School building today as part of Oak Ridge Associated Universities' South Campus



Historic Marker for Scarboro Community