

“An Adventure in Democratic Administration” in Oak Ridge Schools

(As published in The Oak Ridger's Historically Speaking column on November 28, 2006)

Dr. Alden H. Blankenship and R. Mildred Kidd authored a marvelous document containing 227 pages filled with details of an amazing experiment in an equally amazing place in time. They date the period as 1944 – 1948. The place is noted in their sub-title as “*Four Years of Educational Pioneering in the Schools of Oak Ridge, Tennessee.*”

You will recall that Chuck Carringer was among the first people I contacted regarding the history of Oak Ridge schools when Pat Postma suggested the topic. Chuck sent me to the school administration building saying he thought there might be some historical information there. Oak Ridge School Superintendent Tom Bailey provided several items for my use. Among the items he provided was a copy of the above manuscript. We have since located the original (on onion skin paper!) Gail Ward has it filed away at the school administration building for safe keeping!

Can't you just see me the evening I got that document! No sleep that night! I read the entire document and was amazed at the school staff interviews included, at the detailed descriptions of the “workshops,” at the candid discussion of the issues faced by Blankenship when he first arrived in Oak Ridge and finally at the awesome accomplishments in spite of the severe handicaps faced.

The unique circumstances of the Manhattan Project and a school system built from scratch made for an unusually intriguing tale. Blankenship and Kidd told a most enthralling story and were obviously acutely aware of the rare opportunities afforded them at this place and time. It could not have happened elsewhere and would not have been possible under conditions other than the intense atmosphere of the race to the bomb in Oak Ridge.

The document starts off as follows, “On August 6, 1945, a small city meeting among the hills of Tennessee became news. The startling announcement of what had happened at Hiroshima, Japan, was the world's first knowledge of the two-year-old Oak Ridge, Tennessee. Visiting journalists featured the town as an achievement of dramatic proportions. Here, almost overnight, a city “grew up” through all the stages from pioneering in the mud to taking pride in paved streets and well kept lawns.”

They went on to say, “The Smyth Report, the work of the Atomic Energy Commission, and other sources have informed the public of the purpose that created Oak Ridge, but there has been no attempt to give a full account of how the educational needs of such a community were met.”

Then they got right to the point they wanted to make, “The school staff, we believe, has made an effective contribution to the life of the Oak Ridge Community. Challenged by the opportunity to build a school system where good educational practices could take root unhampered by the limitations usually imposed by custom and tradition, they found the experience both stimulating and worthwhile.”

Wow, do you see what is happening? Something unusual, unique and of paramount importance has happened with regard to education here in Oak Ridge and these two individuals recognize they are a part of something tremendous. They desire to document the process and results of the Oak Ridge experience in creating from scratch a school system “unhampered by limitations...” and they are obviously excited that they are the benefactors of such a creative opportunity. They wish to tell others so the experience and excellent results can be appreciated and replicated elsewhere.

They continue by saying, “Staff members have contributed freely from their experiences. Over one hundred responded to the invitation to participate in the writing of materials. Groups' suggestions were offered by the faculties of most of the schools. The story is just another link in the chain of cooperative effort that characterized the whole undertaking.”

Finally, the Preface concludes with, “The authors have tried to weave these contributions and other materials into an organization that interprets the philosophy upon which the program was built.” They then express their thanks to those who helped make the publication possible. This is indicative of the inclusiveness that permeates all that Blankenship does at Oak Ridge. His “*Adventure in Democratic Administration*” provides a tremendous beginning

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to the schools administrative process that continues to this day the early pattern of inclusiveness of students, staff, parents and the community.

In Chapter 1, the authors cite the true beginning as “a hot sultry morning in July 1943” in the office of field relations and placement at Teachers College, Columbia University where a tall, distinguished-looking Army Captain arrived to keep his appointment with an educator who was a little puzzled by the Army's interest in a Superintendent of Schools.”

However, Blankenship was soon to learn why the Army's interest when the interview opened with the request that “everything be regarded as confidential military information.” When the Captain was sure the educator clearly understood the importance of secrecy, he began to tell of “a new city in the making – a city of such importance that the rest of the world must know nothing of its existence until top military authorities were ready to reveal it.”

The Captain continued by saying, “Highly skilled craftsmen, scientists and engineers must be enlisted for the work to be done there. Such people would not come unless assured that a sound educational system would be provided for their children.”

What might well have been the most significant factor in Blankenship's decision to come to this “new city” being developed from “farm land and rolling hills” could well have been the stated intent that “Army officials recognized the need for skillful, well-prepared teachers, and would agree to a reasonable salary schedule. They would delegate to the school superintendent the responsibility for planning the educational program, in no way dictating what should be taught or how it should be organized. The schools must be good, however, to meet the demands of the residents who would come from all parts of the United States. Army officials were anxious to find a superintendent who knew the essentials of a good schools system and its function in the community.”

The challenge of getting schools open by October 1943 so they could run a full term of nine months must have seemed almost insurmountable to Blankenship when he was told that the school buildings, the equipment and supplies, the personnel and the necessary books must all be completed or procured in ninety days! Yet, he was obviously a person who enjoyed a challenge.

The Captain ended the interview with two questions. The first was, “Can you do the job?” and second, “Will you give me an answer by four o'clock this afternoon?” So Blankenship considered all aspects of what the Captain had told him. He deliberated the full time allotted to him.

One reason he gave for accepting the challenge was the “possibilities the situation offered that captured the imagination.” He stated that, “He saw an opportunity to live in a matter of months through two centuries of change from rugged pioneering to modern city life.”

Blankenship saw a unique opportunity. He stated, “In such a situation it might be possible to make schools real community centers. The program could surely be planned to meet the actual needs of the children. There would be no sacred customs or traditions barring ones way. In spite of the existing shortage of teachers, a system of merit would be established with no political strings attached. Recruiting personnel from all parts of the nation to fit into community of as cosmopolitan a make-up as this promised to be quite an adventure in itself.”

Isn't it amazing the insight Dr. Blankenship grasped from such a brief interview. He immediately jumped at the opportunity. He quickly changed all his plans to meet this personal challenge head on. That his family supported him was obvious. At the appointed deadline of four o'clock, “the decision was in the affirmative,” stated Blankenship.

On July 12, 1943, Dr. Blankenship arrived in Oak Ridge. Immediately he began the process of hiring staff and teachers while at the same time assuring that buildings were constructed and equipment and supplies procured. He obviously had lots of help from the Army, but still this was a tremendous task. Blankenship speaks first of his appreciation for the “real contribution” of Peabody College of Nashville by locating a most efficient secretary for the superintendent. She served as an office manager, receptionist and “welcoming committee” to newcomers.

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She proved to be one of the most important single contributors of any staff member to the success of the Oak Ridge schools, according to Dr. Blankenship.

The beginning of the collaborative management system that came to be called simply the “workshop” approach is described by a simple observation, “The arrival of the high school principal, four elementary principals and the guidance director early in September was the signal for the beginning of cooperative planning.” The principals wanted the teachers to participate also. A plan to pay teachers for 200 working days instead of the normal 180 days recognized the value of involvement in decisions by those required to implement the decisions. This proved a key strategy.

The first meeting of the staff consisted of 70 people who met in the Center Theater at Townsite (Jackson Square) where the basics of what faced them was discussed. From the beginnings of the meeting devoted to getting to know one another to the fine points of the requirements of the State of Tennessee, all aspects of their new challenge was openly and concisely communicated. The afternoon was spent touring the various construction sites and the unfinished buildings.

The next day, protracted “building specific” meetings were held where plans were created for registering children on Friday, October 1, 1943. On the specified Friday morning the staff members assigned to the three school buildings that were to be used first set up shop for registering students. The clang of hammers, the roar of bulldozers and the clattering of plumbers and painters could be heard at each site.

The unassigned staff members assisted in the registration process for the two elementary schools. The high school staff consisted of twenty people and successfully enrolled all 87 students. There were 150 students at Elm Grove School and 400 students at Robertsville School. A total of 637 students were enrolled and began attending school on Monday, October 4, 1943.

An interesting side note is that according to the memory of people personally involved in the beginning of the Girl Scouts in Oak Ridge, Pine Valley School also was in operation during October 1943. However, Herbert Dodd, in his *Pioneering in the Oak Ridge Schools*, states on page two that he was asked by Dr. Blankenship to “help set up and open each elementary school and take Cedar Hill when it was completed and opened in February or March.” Dodd agreed and stated that he assisted Elm Grove and Robertsville to open in October and Pine Valley “around Thanksgiving.”

Joyce Maienschein, co-author of *And The Fence Came Down* is helping me try and reconcile this difference. She quotes Elsie Novy, a young teacher at the time, as stating during a staff meeting at Pine Valley School on October 15, 1943, that “Girl Scouts – something most girls already know and love” in response to a question posed by the principal, “How can we help these children adjust to this chaos?”

Elsie Novy Adkins also recalled for Joyce the call General Groves made to FBI headquarters in Washington, D.C. to gain agreement that Girl Scouts could be started in Oak Ridge. With certain restrictions all agreed it was a good idea and the first meeting was announced by Miss Novy to be November 2, 1942, at Pine Valley School.

Next we will come back to the “Workshops” approach to administration of the newly forming school system – a wholly collaborative management system that was developed on the fly yet was so successful that much of the basic philosophy is retained even today in the administration of Oak Ridge Schools. We will also soon look at the history of the current Oak Ridge Public Schools Education Foundation.

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Gail Ward of the Oak Ridge Schools Superintendent's office looks at the original manuscript of Blankenship and Kidd's "An Adventure in Democratic Administration" – an important Oak Ridge Schools historic artifact!