

The Guest House (Alexander Inn)

(As published in *The Oak Ridger's Historically Speaking* column on February 14, 2006)

The historic marker standing just southwest of the front entrance to the Alexander Inn commemorates visitors to the Clinton Engineer Works such as J. Robert Oppenheimer, Enrico Fermi and Secretary of War Henry Stimson. The front lobby still has furniture reminiscent of an earlier time. The sign, though faded, still welcomes the visitor to the "Restaurant and City Club Lounge" and the front porch still looks inviting as it stands empty but affords an expansive view of the bustling city of Oak Ridge passing by below.

The historic Guest House is in a sad state of disrepair. Although there is recent evidence of attempts to prevent further damage through boarding up windows and trimming overgrown bushes, a lot of significant damage has already been done. The vandals who routinely entered and continually damaged this unique and historic icon of the Manhattan Project history ought to be ashamed of their behavior and utter disrespect for our unique history. The fragile nature of this property makes it dangerously close to being lost to us forever. The Tennessee Preservation Trust has listed the Alexander Inn as being one of the state's top 10 most endangered historic landmarks.

Joanne Gailar said of the Alexander Inn in an article published in *The Oak Ridger* in March 2002:

"It was there -- in 1945, during this Inn's first two of its seven years as the Guest House -- that I spent my first night in Oak Ridge. An immature bride of 20, having dwelt all my life in settled, 'old' New Orleans, how I wept when my husband told me that this was 'the most beautiful site' in the raw 'new' town that would be my home. If anyone had told me that, 20 years hence, I would come to love Oak Ridge as no other town in the world and regard the Guest House/Alexander Inn as a cherished symbol of its pioneer days, I would have laughed aloud.

"Not so my parents. From their first night at the Guest House in 1948 until their last, 21 years later, in the (then) Alexander, they delighted in the friendliness of the staff and the informal atmosphere -- so much so that even in 1959, when my husband and I had a large enough house to accommodate them, they preferred to stay there.

"In 1981, when my father came to spend his last five years with Norman and me, little wonder that he chose the Alexander as his favorite place for lunch. Still able to drive at 87, once a week he would don his felt hat in winter, his straw hat in summer, and indulge in the lavish buffet. 'Buffet?' I queried him, remembering how he referred to my company dinners as 'Joanne's cafeteria-style meals.' 'But Daddy, you don't like buffets,' I reminded him. 'No problem,' he explained, 'the waitresses bring it to the table for me.'

"My most heartwarming memory of the Alexander and these 'waitresses' dates back to the day Daddy forgot his wallet. 'Don't worry,' he reassured the one who had served him, 'I'll go right home and get it.' Before he could leave the table, all four waitresses assembled around him. 'That's not necessary, Mr. Stern,' announced their spokesperson, 'This time the meal's on us.'

"Other pleasant recollections are of lunching with friends in the Alexander's restaurant -- or with civic groups in its private dining room. And one of my oddest has to do with my mother's encounter with a stranger in the lounge. 'My husband has been wooed away by the prostitutes of Oak Ridge,' she lamented to my astonished parent. ('I didn't know that Oak Ridge had prostitutes,' Mother commented to me later.)

"My most recent visits to the Alexander occurred in the '90s, when I participated in two of the three Elderhostels on Oak Ridge, sponsored by the local Children's Museum. What an appropriate place, I thought, to describe Oak Ridge in her pioneer days.

Rather than focus on the facts about the Guest House at this time or add to the cry for its preservation (which is obviously the right thing to do), I have chosen to include Joanne's account of the joy her father experienced when visiting the Alexander Inn. We have a cultural treasure here in the Guest House/Alexander Inn and it is fast slipping from our grasp. That should not be. We should NOT allow this icon of early Oak Ridge history to pass

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from our midst – it must be restored to its former grandeur and once again become a center of activity in Oak Ridge.

Just a bit of history before we wrap up this article (I can't resist). The Guest House was constructed in the spring of 1943. The 44-room concrete block addition was added in 1949. It was renamed the "Alexander Inn" in 1950 for the New Jersey owner "McKie Alexander." The Kitchen, Dining Room and Lounge was added in 1950 and ushered in the "City Club" era. Merrill Boatman purchased the property in the late 1980's. The hotel was closed and has been vacant since sometime in the 1990's.

In a follow on to this introductory column to The Guest House/The Alexander Inn I will include more history of the fine old establishment and its storied legacy.



The Guest House and later Alexander Inn

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Main entrance



Sign showing "City Club Lounge"