

Ed Westcott – Oak Ridge Photographer Extraordinaire

(As published in *The Oak Ridger's Historically Speaking* column on February 21, 2006)

Lynn Freeny, present day official photographer for the Department of Energy, Oak Ridge Office proudly calls Ed Westcott his friend and fellow photographer. In honoring Ed by contributing to the book "*Through the Lens of Ed Westcott*" Lynn tells how he met Ed Westcott. It seems Lynn was a young photographer working at the Oak Ridge National Laboratory in the early 1980's when, because of the heavy workload, Ed Westcott was hired part-time to help in the darkroom. Lynn noted that the prints coming out were better than when he printed the same negatives. He wanted to know "Who is the person?" That is when he was introduced to our own renowned Manhattan Project photographer Ed Westcott. From that introduction Ed and Lynn formed a fast friendship. Lynn gives Ed credit for paving the way for other photographers in Oak Ridge. I might add that Ed set a standard of excellence that few have attained. His photographs are truly works of art!

Baldwin Lee, Professor of Art in the School of Art at the University of Tennessee, chronicled the early history of Ed in the same book mentioned above. Lee begins with Ed's assignment on December 15, 1942 as official Manhattan Project photographer at age 20. He then recalls Ed's early introduction to photography by his father Jamie Westcott who, after saving for year, purchased his son a German Foth Derby camera for \$25 in 1934 when Ed was 12 years old. Ed soon was in business for himself developing film for neighbors. Lee makes a point to say that Ed Westcott was not overly influenced by other photographers and that he often claims to have "just done the job" of producing the best possible photograph he could create.

Lee describes Ed Westcott's Manhattan Project photographs as images that "describe with precise accuracy the facts of his subjects, thereby satisfying the demands of his employers, and that they do so by capturing the qualities of wonder, amazement, surprise, delight, sorrow, humor, affection, knowledge, understanding, compassion, sympathy, respect, and gravity." He went on to say, "Ed Westcott's photographs transcend anonymity because they describe their subjects with grace and meaning." And finally he concludes this thought by reflecting that "Ed Westcott knows about grace and meaning; these are part of his being, an essential part of his beliefs and value system."

Ed was the 29th employee hired as part of the Manhattan Project team, working first for the United States Army Corps of Engineers and later for the Atomic Energy Commission and eventually the Department of Energy. In his role as the sole official photographer of the Manhattan Project photographer, Ed Westcott accepted a challenge of enormous responsibility. Without the photographic images he created, history would have lost the detail and understanding of the Manhattan Project as well as the other events Ed recorded for posterity through his photographic images and creative use of subjects to convey the essence of the message through the visual medium. His photographs need little to no captions to convey their central message.

Ed Westcott was born in Chattanooga on January 20, 1922. He moved to Nashville with his parents before he was a teenager. While still a teenager, he began working for the Corps of Engineers headquartered in Nashville. He photographed site selection and construction of military camps, airports, hydroelectric plants and dams in Tennessee and Kentucky. He even was dispatched on a secret mission to photograph a classified location in middle Tennessee that was intended to become a prisoner of war camp. As a result of the manner in which he handled this secret assignment and the impressive results of his early industrial and documentary photography, he was selected to transfer to a much more expansive and difficult assignment in East Tennessee to become a part of the little known but highly important Manhattan Project.

His assignment initially was to photograph construction of the Manhattan Project plants being designed and constructed to support the World War II effort by separating uranium 235 from the much more plentiful uranium 238. He alone was to document the government's efforts on the 59,000-acre site as well as the all aspects of the fenced-in city being constructed on Black Oak Ridge. X-10, Y-12, K-25 and eventually S-50 were the designations for the plants. All his photographs were classified.

However, when the first bomb was dropped on Hiroshima and a press release was prepared, Ed's photographs figured prominently in the communication effort and some eighteen of his images were quickly declassified and distributed worldwide for that news release. The first photographs taken by the damage assessment team at Hiroshima and Nagasaki were processed by Ed in his Oak Ridge photography laboratory.

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After the war ended and Oak Ridge was opened to the public, Ed continued as photographer for the Atomic Energy Commission in Oak Ridge and also covered assignments to AEC related projects in Kentucky, Ohio, Missouri, New Jersey, Puerto Rico and AEC headquarters in Washington, DC.

He transferred to AEC headquarters in Germantown, Maryland in 1966 where he photographed twenty-three nuclear reactors as the emphasis of the AEC was on encouraging nuclear power generation and other peaceful uses of atomic energy. He also accompanied AEC commissioners to the White House where he was able to photograph meetings with a number of presidents. Over his career Ed has photographed seven United States Presidents, including John F. Kennedy, Lyndon B. Johnson, Richard Nixon, Gerald Ford, Jimmy Carter, Ronald Reagan and George H. Bush.

Ed Westcott was likely the first US government photographer to be allowed to photograph an activity in the Soviet Embassy in Washington, DC. The occasion was when Dr. Glenn T. Seaborg, then Chairman of the Atomic Energy Commission, received a plaque from the Soviets.

Over fifteen thousand of the early historical negatives made by Ed are now archived in Washington, DC at the National Archives inside a climate-controlled environment for permanent archival storage. This valuable collection is recognized as THE record of the Manhattan Project and early AEC efforts in Oak Ridge and other locations. Without this vital record, future generations could not appreciate nor understand the tremendous accomplishments of the Manhattan Project or the other events memorialized through the lens of Ed Westcott!

Ed has generously provided access to his early photographs for publication in numerous publications throughout the world. Many displays in Oak Ridge such as the American Museum of Science and Energy and the excellent collection in the Children's Museum are examples of the high quality images being used to convey visual history lessons to heritage tourists interested in the Oak Ridge and the Manhattan Project history so richly portrayed in his photographs.

In 1977, Ed retired from the Department of Energy in Germantown, Maryland. He quickly returned to his hometown, our city that he has helped make world famous through his wonderful photographic images. Although officially retired, he has continued to work as special project consultant and photographer to the DOE's various missions in Oak Ridge.

Ed and his wife, Esther Seigenthaler Westcott (deceased), lived in Knoxville with son James E. Westcott, Jr. until housing was available in Oak Ridge. Their first home was an "A" house on Trevoise Lane; then another "A" house on East Tennessee Avenue where son David Westcott and daughter Emily Westcott (Hunnicut) were born; then a "C" house on Dewey Road where son William Westcott was born; and finally to a "D" house on Georgia Avenue where son John Westcott was born. Ed resides in the Georgia Avenue home today after an eleven-year excursion to Rockville, Maryland from 1966 to 1977.

Ed's family now resides as follows: James and Vickilynne live in Hermitage, Tennessee; William lives in Oak Ridge; Emily and Don Hunnicutt live in Oak Ridge; John and Danielle live in Oak Ridge and David and Anita live in Germantown, Maryland. He has nine grandchildren and ten great grandchildren.

Ed's call sign as a ham radio operator is W4UVS. He has been a ham radio operator since his early teens.

Although Ed suffered a stroke in 2003, he published his first book of early Oak Ridge photographs in 2005 titled "*Images of America Oak Ridge*." He has learned to sign his books with his left hand because of the residual effects of the stroke. He also finds time to participate in Oak Ridge events and although his speech is a bit halting, the sparkle is still strong in his eye and he is obviously still the optimistic individual who enjoys Oak Ridge immensely and is a favorite son of our city. We are blessed to have him among our most respected, loved and revered citizens.

The Oak Ridge Heritage and Preservation Association recently dedicated a book *Oak Ridge ~ Then & Now* containing many of his photographs to Ed. He is a member of the *Secret City: The Oak Ridge Story* Historical Advisory Council and has provided numerous photographs used in that documentary film.

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I have admired Ed Westcott for as long as I have been aware of his presence in Oak Ridge. Being an avid photographer myself, I look to him as someone I can learn from and have studied his images hoping to grasp the techniques he used. We have talked often of many things about Oak Ridge and I learn something new with each conversation.

A more modest and humble man, I have never met. A more talented and enthusiastic photographer whose dedication to excellence is unsurpassed, I have never seen. A better person to be held in high esteem by our city is not to be found. Thank you Ed Westcott for creating a great photographic collection that more than documents our history, it celebrates it.



2005 image of Ed with his Nikon camera – photo by Lynn Freeny

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