

William Jenkins “Bill” Wilcox Jr. – Oak Ridge Historian

(As published in *The Oak Ridger's Historically Speaking* column on February 7, 2006)

My friend, Bill Wilcox – what a great honor it is to begin a new history column in *The Oak Ridger* featuring the history of the epitome of role models for a historian. As a result of recent articles I have written about Jack Case and the desire of both Richard Esposito, publisher, and Darrell Richardson, editor, to have more history published in *The Oak Ridger*, I have been given an opportunity to try my hand at a regular column in our local daily newspaper. I sure hope I am worthy of their trust.

While I will write about such historic elements of our city as the Alexander Inn (The Guest House) and the building at 55 Jefferson Avenue and may even try to tell the history of such institutions as The Children's Museum and the American Museum of Science and Energy, I truly want to focus most of the columns on individuals who have contributed to Oak Ridge's history. Obviously, Dick Smyser, Gene Joyce, Ed Westcott and others come immediately to mind. I solicit your input on individuals you would like to see featured (e-mail draysmith@comcast.net).

However, I see this column as a forum whereby some of the local individuals who may have gone unrecognized in the past might just be included here and their story told for us all to enjoy. The Oak Ridge Heritage and Preservation Association's *60 Heritage Honorees* created at Oak Ridge's 60th anniversary is an excellent starting point for identifying such individuals. Thanks to the efforts of several ORHPA members led by Bobbie Martin, there is a great deal of information available to build upon.

Let's start with Bill. Born January 26, 1923 in Harrisburg, Pennsylvania, Bill attended Raub Elementary School in Allentown, Pennsylvania from 1929 to 1935 and graduated from Allentown High School in 1939. He then went to college at Washington and Lee University in Lexington, Virginia graduating in 1943.

Immediately out of college, he joined the Manhattan Project in Rochester, New York as a Chemist. As soon as the first chemistry building was finished at Y-12, he came to Oak Ridge. His career began by working in the Y-12 chemistry labs as a Chemist in the Refining Oxide Department, Beta Chemistry Division at Y-12 in support of the electromagnetic separation process in the Calutrons purifying the half-enriched product from the Alpha Calutrons so it could be fed into the Beta Calutrons that turned out the highly pure Uranium 235 for the first atomic bomb. Bill worked in Building 9203 and then Building 9206, both of which were chemical processing facilities. Remember that Y-12 peaked with 1152 Calutrons in nine huge buildings and had 22,400 people working just to turn out something over 140 pounds of the precious Uranium 235. This material was so scarce and hard to obtain that every possible measure was taken to assure that NONE of the material was lost.

After the war effort Bill worked as a Process Control Laboratory Head, then as a Research Chemist at Y-12 before transferring to K-25 in 1949 to assist the Research and Development Director. In 1954 Bill became the head of the Physics Department and served there for 12 years. In 1966 he was promoted to the R&D Division Superintendent and held that position for three years. In 1969 he undertook a unique assignment to become the Technical Director for both the K-25 and Y-12 Plants. Before retiring Bill served as Technical Assistant to the President of Union Carbide Nuclear Division, for five years. For six years after retirement, Bill worked as an independent management consultant providing assistance to the three DOE plants in Oak Ridge and the Paducah plant as well as many other organizations through his most effective style of facilitating strategic planning for both large and small organizations.

In later years, Bill has taken on the role of lecturer extraordinaire. If you have never attended a presentation by Bill to see his facial expressions, his arm waving, his enthusiastic and demonstrative style, then you have truly missed an exceptional and memorable experience. He is immortalized by his performance in *Secret City: The Oak Ridge Story – The War Years*, a 90-minute DVD produced by Keith McDaniel and co-produced by David Bradshaw and myself. We think the huge success of this film is due largely to Bill's exquisite performance.

Bill is the author of numerous “white papers” such as, “*A Plan for Preserving the Manhattan Project Heritage of Oak Ridge*,” in March 2003. In August 2001 he published a history of the Y-12 Plant – available at the American Museum of Science and Energy Discovery Shop as is the DVD mentioned above. He has assisted in the History Channel's Modern Marvels documentary “*Manhattan Project*” and has spoken often to numerous audiences on “*Why Did the Manhattan Project Succeed?*” and even more often on “*The Role of Oak Ridge in the Manhattan Project*.”

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One of Bill's most impressive accomplishments is his help with the *Secret City Commemorative Walk*, a gift to the City from the Oak Ridge Rotary Club and since being dedicated June 2005 has become a central location for anyone desiring to know the history of Oak Ridge during the Manhattan Project and the time that Oak Ridge truly was a “secret city.” Bill's dedication speech given to a huge audience in the parking lot of the library served not only to set the stage for the scope of the endeavor to create the walk but also to cite the importance of recognizing the world-changing events that took place here in the “secret city” and the people who actually accomplished the seemingly impossible and forever set the world on a new and exciting course of discovery and application of atomic energy.

His latest passion is the historic K-25 “U” Building (largest building – 44 acres - under one roof *in the entire world* at the time of its construction) at the K-25 Site – known now as the Heritage Center of the East Tennessee Technology Park. With the demolition of the majority of the World War II Manhattan Project structures at the former Gaseous Diffusion Plant, Bill has championed an approach that will save a significant portion of the history of the tremendous work done at the “K-25 Plant” for over 40 years. A visual concept of what was once the largest building in the world will be available to the public through creative and selective demolition activities that will keep the basement inner wall and perimeter of the original building as well as preserving the North End building with example authentic diffusion equipment for the realistic experience of the visiting public. While the details are still being worked out, Bill has tirelessly contributed specific and minutely described explicit instructions as to what will be required to obtain the goal of a tourist destination at the K-25 Heritage Center that will sustain itself and provide income for the city for years to come.

His latest “white paper” and PowerPoint presentation, *Saving K-25: Why Save It, What to Save, and for Whom?* is a work of art and a tremendous asset to those who are attempting to understand how to transition from a culture of demolition only to one of determining what key facilities to save and how to assure the structures being preserved for the future are truly the right ones to put the money and effort into. The payback **MUST** be there and heritage tourism is a key element in the overall picture of the future with regard to historic preservation. Bill understands this!

In addition to being a long time member of the Oak Ridge Rotary Club, Bill also is a member of the Oak Ridge Heritage & Preservation Association, A Founder and Advisory Board member of the Coalition of Oak Ridge Retired Employees, has been on the boards of the Methodist Medical Center, Aid for Distressed Families in Appalachian Counties, St. Stephen's Episcopal Church, Citizens for National Security and is presently actively supporting the Oak Ridge Heritage Tourism Implementation Task Force.

Bill married Eugenia “Jeanie” Holder August 17, 1946, having met her here in Oak Ridge. They have three children, Kitty, Bill, and Martha, and have lived in an “F” house on New York Avenue since 1956. Before becoming addicted to Oak Ridge history in recent years, his interests were George Washington's Life Portraits which many groups in town have heard about, family history, work with his church, and his neglected – he complains – lake house on Watts Bar.

See why I am so proud to begin this new endeavor with Bill Wilcox as the first installment of the column to promote better understanding and appreciation of our short but significant history! I look forward to the opportunity to write about our mutual interest in the history in Oak Ridge and would very much like to do so as you would like to see it presented. Please let me know what you would like to see included in future columns. You may contact me via e-mail at draysmith@comcast.net or by phone at 482-4224.

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Bill Wilcox and his trademark “Bow Tie”



Bill Wilcox Speaking on the history of Oak Ridge