

***John Hendrix – Eyewitness to his death, provided by Ed Westcott – part 1***  
(As published in *The Oak Ridger's Historically Speaking* column on May 2, 2006)

John Hendrix - eyewitness to his death: provided by Ed Westcott

The following story is taken from handwritten notes made by Ed Westcott in 1965. I have retained Ed's first person account and have edited it only where more recent history has shown additional information and for clarity.  
– Ray Smith

By November 1942 work was nearing completion on army camps, air bases, dams and enemy internment camps in seven southern states where I photographed many areas for site selection and construction progress reports for the US Corps of Engineers. I was one of the last of the ten cameramen to leave the Nashville District office of the Corps of Engineers and the only one to accept a transfer with the engineers. Having a choice of a project in Alaska or a new job starting near Knoxville that would take a predicted five years to complete, I selected Knoxville. Remembering the stories of Sam McGhee from Tennessee and how he froze to death while blinded with the midnight sun helped me make up my mind to join the Manhattan Engineer District, known then as the Clinton Engineer Works, Oak Ridge, Tennessee.

No one suspected that the sole purpose of the Manhattan Project was entirely meant to produce the Atomic Bomb. My photography covered every conceivable type one could think of. It covered the range from climbing around steel structures to photographing surgery for doctors of the medical corps who manned the government hospital. Everything in the city and the sites was operated by the government and with a workforce of 120,000 workers photography played an important role although it was highly restricted and none other than official cameramen were allowed to possess cameras on the 59,000 acre reservation. Even what seemed to be the simplest photograph had to be screened by Army intelligence and public relations officers before they were determined cleared for publication.

Through working closely with the public relations office and the government weekly newspaper The Oak Ridge Journal, Sgt. Richard (Dick) B. Gehman, Associate Editor, got wind of a yarn told by old timers of the communities of Scarboro, Robertsville and Elza, small communities that were located in the area that came to be Oak Ridge. He passed it on to me and I started on the story of John Hendrix – The Prophet sometime in mid 1944. This was a full year before the plutonium “gadget” atomic bomb was tested in the New Mexico desert and before the news announced by President Truman that the uranium for the first atomic bomb used in warfare and dropped on Hiroshima, Japan was produced in Oak Ridge.

The lid was placed on Dick's story and my photographs because intelligence wanted to prevent any attention to be attracted to the concentration of industry in Oak Ridge. However, a story featuring John Hendrix, written by Joe Oakes, was eventually published in The Oak Ridge Journal on November 2, 1944. (That story will be published in a coming issue of *Historically Speaking* – Ray Smith)

For the past 21 years John Hendrix has haunted me and has become more a reality rather than a legend. The old timers that are left will tell of their parents telling the story of Uncle John. I have talked to a dozen or more but not until June 1965 have I ever met a man that actually knew Uncle John.

On June 9, 1965, my two youngest sons, Bill (14) and John (7), and I took our oldest son, Jim, to Lenoir City, located about 25 miles south of Oak Ridge. It was Jim's first day on duty as a radio announcer for a new broadcast station there. Before returning to Oak Ridge we drove toward Loudon to stop at a drive-in restaurant for lunch. We noticed an old gentleman standing in front of the drive-in watching our car as we parked. We spoke to him and shortly he came to the car and explained he had been down on the railroad tracks to pick some wild berries for a pie and found they were not ripe yet. He said he liked the real wild berries and he found there were wilder on the tracks than anywhere. Explaining to us eh was not begging but was old and shouldn't be walking on a busy highway to Loudon. If we didn't mind him riding with us he would be grateful.

I explained we were not going to Loudon but back to Lenoir City. He asked if we lived in Lenoir City and I said, “No, we lived in Oak Ridge.”

“Oh, yes,” he said, “I used to live there before it was Oak Ridge.”

I asked him where did he live there?

***John Hendrix – Eyewitness to his death, provided by Ed Westcott – part 1***  
(As published in *The Oak Ridger's Historically Speaking* column on May 2, 2006)

He said, "Well, you know where the Y-12 Plant is?" pointing in that direction.

"Well, I lived on a hill east of there."

I said, "On Pine Ridge?"

He said, "Yes, on Pine Ridge just up the ridge from Bear Creek Valley where the Y-12 Plant is now."

I said, "Well, you have probably heard the story of John Hendrix, the Prophet?"

Well, Clay Seals' mouth started quivering, his voice trembled with fast shorts bursts of breath as he said, "Yes, I knew John...John Hendrix. We called him Uncle John. I logged with him and further more, I'll have you know that I was in the room with him when he died. Nobody but Perry Raby and his wife, Paralee, and I saw him take his last breath. Uncle John gave that farm to Perry Raby to take care of him till death. John died with pneumonia fever. He must have been 55 or 60 years old" (actually John Hendrix was 49 years old when he died, likely of tuberculosis – Ray Smith).

Seals said he could remember as if it were yesterday how John would tell his predictions of the future. He said, "A many a time after we had hauled logs to the John Dover saw mill Uncle John would tell the fellers,

'My name is Levi Tuffi, the tuffest man that ever breathed a breath of fresh air. I clum a thorn tree with no pants on, walked a barbed wire fence with no shoes on, I squoze a she-bear till his brains were all on the ground. Now, if you ever want to know where I live, I live on Tuff Street, the further you go down the tuffer it gets and I live in the very last house.' (Recalled by William Westcott as being what Clay Seals told the kids in the car with their father, Ed Westcott)

**John Hendrix – Eyewitness to his death, provided by Ed Westcott – part 1**  
(As published in *The Oak Ridger's Historically Speaking* column on May 2, 2006)



Photo by Ed Westcott: Clay Seals who knew John Hendrix and was present when he died