

Robert J. Dunbar – the first person assigned to the project and first resident of Oak Ridge

(As published in The Oak Ridger's Historically Speaking column on July 11, 2006)

As mentioned last week, this article on Robert J. Dunbar is a more complete telling of his story. His perspective on his involvement in the selection of the site was inserted in the previous article about the events leading up to the selection of the present Oak Ridge site for the Manhattan Project. I have retained that aspect of his story in this article also for completeness. As also mentioned earlier, John Clark provided the research material for this article on Robert Dunbar. You might be interested to know that a future Historically Speaking article will explore more fully the historically documented evidence for the official selection decision. However, the perspective of Robert Dunbar is just too good to pass over without sharing it even if the documented evidence does not wholly support his thoughts that he was first to suggest the Elza site – he obviously thought that was the case.

Someone has to be the first person assigned to a project and often that person is unknown or overlooked by the seemingly more important people who might be placed in positions of greater authority or responsibility. This story is one told through the words of the first local person assigned by the U. S. Corps of Engineers in the fall of 1942 to a project that just might be coming to Tennessee. He was uniquely qualified to be the first person assigned such a task and turned out to be well suited to the opportunity.

The research materials I had to work with on this story is a speech given by Robert J. Dunbar titled "Reminiscence" and begins with a quote "The world is a stage and we are all actors on it." Robert then states, "I find myself in an unfamiliar role today, I trust I will not be too amateurish." And regarding his introduction, Robert quotes from General McArthur, "I cannot tell you how greatly embarrassed I am at the compliments that have been showered on me today – after a lapse of sufficient time to be swayed neither by sentiment or emotion, your opinion of my services, I feel does me too much honor." Seems like Robert might just be a bit overwhelmed by the attention he is getting, huh.

He then went on to say, "Compliments come in various ways. A short time ago, I met a man who said that in 1943 he was coming into Knoxville on a Southern train. During the shaving hour in the smoker the discussion was about Oak Ridge. After all had hazarded their guesses, and quiet had come, a man who sat in the corner said, 'I have no idea what is going on out there, however, there is a man by the name of Chambers out there so I know it is not peanuts.' You all have made what Oak Ridge is and are entering into this celebration because of a big job well done. Know full well we were not trafficking in peanuts."

Robert Dunbar began his transition to the reason for the speech by telling the following short story, "During a tornado a man floated to earth in a tangle of canvas. An old farmer ran over to him and said, 'You have your nerve coming down in a parachute in this storm.' The man looked up and said, 'I didn't come down in a parachute, I went up in a tent.' That is somewhat my status at the moment. I have been asked to review the hunt for a location of this site." It would seem that he felt like he was caught up in a wind when the simple task was given him to locate a site for some war project turned into the Manhattan Project!

On Sunday evening, June 28, 1942, Robert Dunbar was called by Theodore Parker, Chief Engineer of the Tennessee Valley Authority, and asked to accompany a group the next day over the East Tennessee area and give them any information they requested. It was very unclear as to who they were or what they wanted.

The next day he met the group, headed by Colonel James C. Marshall (who was later to be promoted to General and spent the war in the Pacific. At the time of this speech by Dunbar he was Director of Minnesota State Highway Department). Also a member of the group was Lt. Colonel Kenneth Nichols (who was later to be promoted to first Colonel and then Major and who was General Groves' right-hand man actually running the day to day activities of the entire Manhattan Project from Oak Ridge).

Nichols was not actually present the first day Dunbar toured the group because he had to go home and get his uniform. This bit of irony allowed Robert Dunbar to always hold it over Nichols that he was senior to him by one day. Robert said, "He and I twit over who is senior. I claim one day."

Another person in the group was Captain R. G. Blair who by the time Dunbar was speaking was a manager for the Atomic Energy Commission at Aiken, South Carolina. It was for Captain Blair that Blair Gate, one of the seven

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original gates to Oak Ridge, was named, according to Dunbar (Bill Sergeant tells quite another story – see the actual reason for this name in a future Historically Speaking article – hint it was named for a local community, not Colonel Blair!). Others in that group were two Stone and Webster men. According to Dunbar, Stone and Webster laid out and built the first 3,000 houses in Oak Ridge, the community center and built Y-12. He said that a “Mrs. C” picked the designs for the houses.

Dunbar said his desk pad indicates that General Groves was first here in April, 1943. However, General Groves records in his book “Now It can be Told” that on September 23, 1942 he left a most important meeting early on the very day he was promoted to Brigadier General and openly began to take charge of the Manhattan Engineer District to visit the proposed production site in Tennessee so the land acquisition could proceed. That would have been September 24, 1942. Dunbar does not mention this tour so likely Marshall took Groves alone.

Dunbar describes in detail how, from his perspective, the selection of the Manhattan Project site that is now the Oak Ridge Reservation took place (In a future Historically Speaking article I will cite the documented historical evidence that will show Dunbar was mistaken and that others had already toured the area and recommended to Marshall the “Elza site” – but that is another story). Dunbar states that he and the group studied maps on that Monday morning June 29, 1942 they first took a trip down the south side of the Tennessee River toward Cleveland. Later, they returned to the north side of the Tennessee to Watts Bar where they ate a late evening meal at the camp where the third stream unit was being installed there. He commented to Marshall and the group that there was plenty of power that would be ready for them although he really had no idea what it was they wanted.

Dunbar says, “Later I got up my nerve and asked Marshall privately just what do you want? He outlined roughly 100 square miles, hills, building area, and not too far from a city. With this in mind, I slept over it. I had been well over Tennessee and Kentucky in my work with the TVA, a part of which was the listing of possible sites for future steam plants. Among the sites was one near Wheat and also near Elza.”

“The next morning, I asked, does this have to be on the Tennessee River? I then suggested this area. Colonel Marshall was impressed, so we came out, crossed over Solway Bridge and on to Oliver Springs, thence to Harriman where we had lunch and returned and crossed over through the Wheat area into Bethel Valley by devious routes, ended up near the present Jackson center. As I had gone as far as I knew, we all got out and stood in the middle of the road (traffic was not a problem) and looked around. There was no further explanation or comments so the tentative recommendation was silently made right there.”

“The next nine months, I supplied all sorts of information to the Manhattan District and Stone and Webster (rivers, railroads, power, geology and foundation information), I was very fortunate, the head geologist of TVA was a native of Wheat and graduated from Yale. In some of his undergraduate studies we had thoroughly mapped this region and had colored profiles unusually clear. Moneymaker is well known through Formosa and South America even though he is probably unknown in Wheat.”

Dunbar goes on to describe how the X-10 site was selected. He states that happened in the spring of 1943. The DuPont people had been told to see him. On their first visit they were trying to see how to get water from wells in Bethel Valley. They had been used to drilling and getting water and seemed not to understand why Dunbar called Moneymaker and asked where the water table was. Moneymaker bluntly told Dunbar to tell the DuPont folks to “go to the river.” And thus the Clinch River became the primary source of water for the site.

Dunbar speaks highly of the DuPont people he interacted with. He indicates that some of them helped start the United Church. He says that in October 1942 he made it a point to advise a “high church” man there were things going on out here and to have a well-qualified man ready to meet with them. Nothing happened and months later I was told that he had asked a state politician who said that it was just a demolition range. A year later that same “high church” man came to Dunbar for help. Dunbar said, “I was fully occupied so I said too little too late. Maybe it is the Lord’s way, not mine, because Oak Ridge surely can be proud of its churches and laymen. If the folks live up to their creed, this will be a wonderful city.”

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He did not like the way people talked about the mud in Oak Ridge. He said, "One must not overlook comments on the 'Mud.' This has become a sort of legend and this always irked me. Last month an official of a milk company told me about their trucks being in mud 18 inches deep. You well know no milk truck can go far in mud. Last week in an obituary notice I read, 'He worked in Oak Ridge in Mud Days.' I came to the conclusion that the talk came from those off sidewalks of New York or from California where it does not rain. Surely not from midwest corn. I suggest the Chamber of Commerce kill the mud legend."

"Boardwalks were a mark of Oak Ridge. They started one rainy day when a summer shower, that often occurs, came at lunch hour and girls wended their way back to the castle in bare feet. We had people in training and had carpenters and handymen idly waiting to take over operation. They asked if they might build some walks from scrap lumber. These idle men had walks ready at the worst places before quitting time. You are all familiar with how they crept over the hills of Oak Ridge."

Another subject Dunbar mentioned was very early transportation. Security declared there would be no private cars permitted in the operation areas. Transfer and check gates were built into the community center. It was up to the operators to get people from town to work. Buses were in short supply so several obsolete buses were picked up where they could be found. These buses were used to transport people for training and interviews and later from homes to the operation areas. All transportation was free. Then Roane-Anderson came in and Dunbar was told to transfer busses and men to them. He thought this was a bit high-handed and went to Roane-Anderson to explain that these drivers were on Tennessee Eastman's payroll and maybe would not like a transfer. It was agreed that transfer would be at their desire.

Once when Dunbar was leaving Knoxville by late train he decided to ride a bus from Oak Ridge to Knoxville. At about nine o'clock he found himself on a trailer bus with seats along the sides and lots of standing room. There were three workmen and one woman on the bus with him. To his surprise the bus went through Clinton where all the men got off. The driver looked at the woman and then at Dunbar. He took the woman up into the cab, turned the lights out and Dunbar road to Knoxville in the rain in the huge trailer all by himself in a ride he long remembered.

Finally Robert Dunbar gives a lot of credit to Dick Burritt for hiring many good candidates for specific work here. He tells some unusual stories about how specific individuals came to be hired and how some were turned away because of suspicions that were created when Burritt interviewed them. He mentioned people hired who came from Alaska, Virginia, Kentucky and one who had helped design the locks in the Panama Canal. There was even one person who was born in Canada, educated at Carnegie Tech, had 20 years experience in steel mills who in early life worked in mines in Mexico where he picked up some bullets crawling through a window. Dunbar said that one day when this fellow walked into a magnetic field area at Y-12 he learned after 30 years that the bullets were attracted by magnets!

Once when Burritt had returned from a meeting in Washington where he had been assured that he could get anyone qualified by experience Dunbar was asked to find a name of someone from the northern industrial area so a hiring procedure could be established. He said, "I phoned and got the name of a fellow just called in the draft, Burritt got him and he still works in Oak Ridge. He may not even know that he was a guinea pig. Burritt then said, 'get me a fellow out of the Navy.' I did that and he married and still lives in East Tennessee and now has his own business."

He also credited Burritt with being the one who hired all the women operators for the Calutrons at Y-12. Most of them high school graduates and some wives of men who were overseas in the war. Dunbar saw it all as a jigsaw puzzle in which pieces from all sorts of puzzles are shuffled and put together so as to make a new and unfamiliar picture.

Robert Dunbar moved into this area of East Tennessee in 1934, learned the lay of the land sufficient to know his way around, became a key element in a major decision without even knowing he was preparing for it and played

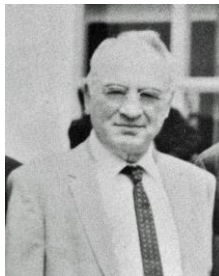
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a key role in the most significant industrial project in the history of the world. Just a local man who happened to know the right piece of land well and who realized what was needed without really knowing what was going to be done there.

So, Robert J. Dunbar was the first person officially assigned to the project that became the Clinton Engineer Works portion of the Manhattan Project and thus was the first resident of what is now Oak Ridge. He is the one individual who most accurately can be given credit for actually selecting the area of approximately 59,000 acres that became the city of Oak Ridge and sites of Y-12, X-10 and K-25.

In addition to providing the research material for this article John Clark recalls fondly his acquaintance with Robert J. Dunbar.



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