

How was Oak Ridge selected for the Manhattan Project – the “REAL” story

(As published in The Oak Ridger's Historically Speaking column on July 5, 2006)

As part of the Secret City Festival, Robert S. (Stan) Norris, author of *Racing for the Bomb* spoke on General Groves at the 1:00 PM session in the American Museum of Science and Energy “K-25: A Monumental Achievement.” While his talk focused on General Groves and the Manhattan Project, he did talk in some specifics about Oak Ridge and especially K-25.

Norris' most interesting discussion of General Groves was a treat to hear and his research is extensive. His book is full of exacting details and is heavily footnoted. It is a most helpful resource to historians interested in the Manhattan Project era. I have used it extensively. He proceeded to review the known facts about the extent of General Groves expanding scope of responsibility and the “triple A” rating he obtained for the Manhattan Project. I particularly enjoyed his story of how General Groves got that rating.

It seems he wrote the letter assigning the rating to the Manhattan Project, addressed it to himself and then proceeded to take it to the official who would have to approve that designation. The official at first refused to sign the letter. Groves said, “That’s fine. I will just recommend to the president that the Manhattan Project be abandoned as the triple A rating cannot be obtained and without that rating it will never succeed. The official insisted that he wanted to sign the letter right away. That gave General Groves a blank check and he used that leverage to good advantage through out the project.

After the formal talk, Norris answered several questions from the audience. One such question regarded what factual documentation existed about exactly what steps were taken to select this exact site for the Manhattan Project. I was pleased to hear him graciously refuse to debunk the Senator McKellar story that I use on tours. I state that the story is told that President Roosevelt knew he was going to need to spend a lot of money on the Manhattan Project and because of Senator McKellar's position in the senate as chair of a committee charged with managing a very large budget the president told the senator that he needed to use a large sum of money for the war effort but could not let the specific reason the money was being used become public knowledge. He then asked Senator McKellar if he could help him with that. The Senator from Tennessee is said to have replied, “Yes, Mr. President, I can do that for you – just where in Tennessee are you going to put that thing?” I like that story – obviously!

Of course there is the other Senator McKellar story in which I place complete trust because Lester Fox, patriarch of our own local Fox automobile dealerships, told me the story and was personally involved. Lester and a friend were skipping school and playing a pinball machine. They had used all the money they had and were walking down the street in Oliver Springs past the telephone office. The telephone operator stuck her head out the door and yelled at Lester saying, “Lester, you got to go get the principal. He has an important phone call!” Now, Lester was skipping school – but he and his friend went to the principal's office anyway and told him that he had an important phone call. The principal went to the telephone office and upon returning to the school immediately called all the students into an assembly in the gym. There he told them, “I have just gotten an important phone call from Senator McKellar telling me to ask you students to tell your parents that their land is going to be needed for the war effort.” It was not long until the official notices began to arrive. Lester says this is exactly how the first word came to this area that the farmers were going to have to move and I believe him. So, just how much did the senator know and when did he know it? I am confident he knew nothing about the details of the Manhattan Project, but I am not convinced he knew nothing about the selection of the site.

Might it be that such a thing as the selection of the Oak Ridge site could be seen differently from different perspectives? I wonder if the historical research of documented evidence might be too limited a method to rely upon. The stories that abound about historic events often convey more truth than they are often times credited with containing. Just because they are stories often causes the classic historic research to resist including them. Not me. I love a good story and often try to include them in the historic narrative because I believe they add to the overall historic perspective.

Now, let me tell you another story about the selection of the Oak Ridge site. This one came to me contained in a speech written by Robert J. Dunbar and was provided by John Clark.

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Robert Dunbar tells it this way. On Sunday evening, June 28, 1942, he 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 Captain 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 original gates to Oak Ridge, was named, according to Dunbar. 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 the selection of the Manhattan Project site that is now the Oak Ridge Reservation took place. He 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.”

Now what do you think? The events described by Robert Dunbar happened months before General Groves was assigned to the Manhattan Project. Do you suppose that either Marshall, who had the project for several months before Groves, or Nichols who had been involved in discussions about the project for months with Marshall, might have spoken with Groves about this spot in East Tennessee that Robert Dunbar showed to the special group in June 29, 1942?

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The full story of Robert J. Dunbar will be included in a future Historically Speaking article, but I could not resist lifting this key bit of history to illustrate how we often miss the details of exactly how things happen unless we have the stories told by the actual participants.

Such are the oral histories being collected about the history of Oak Ridge right now. If you have stories that you want to live on, please – PLEASE – seek out the oral history programs and volunteer a bit of your time to capture the stories for future reference. Without the stories of the people actually involved, historians are left to guess and often must rely on sketchy information at best.



Senator Kenneth Douglas McKellar – Tennessee Representative and Senator 1917 – 1953 who lived 1869 - 1957