

John Rice Irwin before Oak Ridge, Part 2

D. Ray Smith | *Historically Speaking* | The Oak Ridger | October 2, 2007

Last week we enjoyed the poignant letter from John Rice Irwin's mother written to her "mama" when she learned her family would have to give up their home to make way for the Manhattan Project. This week we get to experience that traumatic event in the life of a young six-year-old John Rice Irwin.

John Rice has titled the document he provided at my request "Before Oak Ridge — The People Who Gave up Their Homes for the Future of Oak Ridge, by John Rice Irwin, who, along with his extended family and their neighbors, was moved in 1942 from his home to make room for the Manhattan Project."



Even the dogs seemed to sense that this was the first day of school for John Rice Irwin (left) and his brother, David. They attended Robertsville School during the first grade, and were transferred to Scarbrough School after the new building there was completed. (Although John Rice was one year older than David, their mother started them in first grade together.)

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I have read numerous accounts of the early Oak Ridge days and the deprivation that accompanied the first workers who came to help build the city. They were living in tents and makeshift shelters in primitive conditions, and plagued by unpaved streets and walks and the ever-present mud. Everyone talked about the mud — shoe-top high, they said. There were other deprivations with regard to transportation,

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municipal services, and everything that goes with a “built-overnight town” that went from zero population to a city of some 75,000 of people in a matter of months.

But I recall very few written accounts of the tribulations of those “natives” who were removed from their ancestral homes to accommodate the influx of newcomers. Incredibly short and curt notices, sometimes only 14 days in advance, were relayed to the residents. One such notice from the government, addressed to Parlee Raby and dated Nov. 11, 1942, stated simply: “The War Department intends to take possession of your farm Dec. 1, 1942. It will be necessary for you to move, not later than that date.” Note that the time limit for her to move was only 19 days.

Prices mandated for their homes and land was a pittance of the replacement costs. The price of land immediately accelerated in the surrounding area due to the sudden and dramatic increase in demand. None of the people being displaced wanted to move very far — hence, the compensation they received for the farms, taken for “the project,” would often purchase only about half the acreage they formerly owned.

Adding to their woes was the fact that few trucks were available for moving their chattels. Additionally, gas and tires were strictly rationed, and the scant ration stamps were issued only to those who owned cars or trucks. There were no provisions to acquire additional fuel that I’m aware of, and the government offered no assistance in locating and acquiring new land and housing.

The project required some 59,000 acres, encompassing several small communities in parts of Anderson and Roane counties. Those who owned a plot of land often had little money. I remember one of our neighbors who lived in the area telling me of a time when her mother asked her father to walk down to Nash Copeland’s store to purchase a few staple items — salt, baking soda, and dried soup (or pinto) beans. Her father replied (somewhat embarrassed and humiliated) that a dollar bill was all the money in the world that he had.

The family owned a little house and a few acres of steep and rough farm land. They didn’t own a car or truck, so where were they to go, and how would they get there? Neither the family nor their close neighbors had a truck, and even if they could borrow or hire one, they had no “ration card” for gasoline. But somehow they managed to find and purchase a piece of land near Andersonville. The only son went off to war, but they worked and saved and eventually they became productive, even prosperous, citizens and community leaders.

Others were not so fortunate, and found it difficult or impossible to pay for the little farms they purchased. I remember going with my father, Uncle Morrell, and brother, David, into some remote area adjacent to the project.

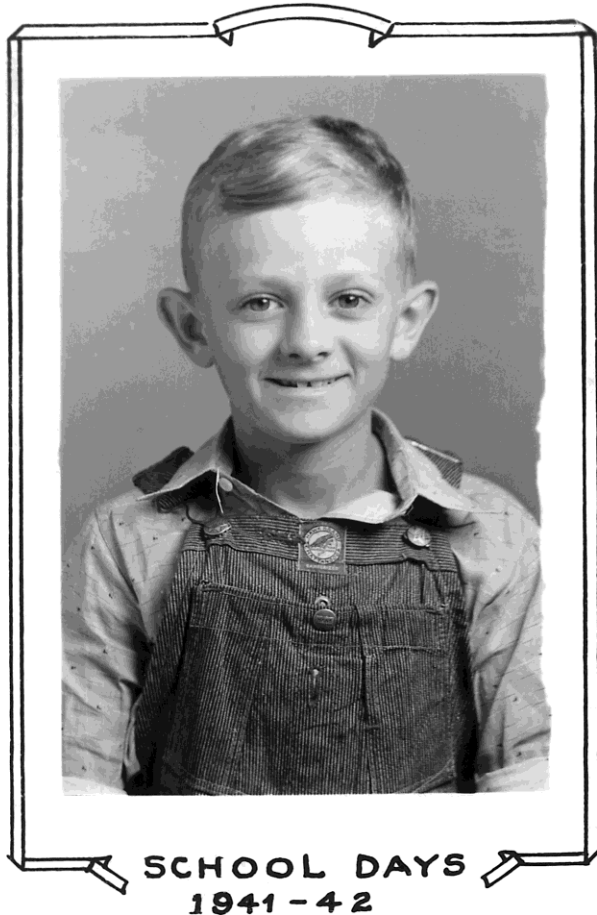
We passed a man plowing his field with a spirited mule, and the plowman was having a hard time keeping up. The field was filled with clods, I remember, and it was covered with small stones. And I still remember, after 65 years, the casual, fleeting remark made by my Uncle Morrell: “That feller bought that old rough farm, mostly on credit, and he’s about to lose it to the bank. They say he works night and day, and so do his wife — and their children, who don’t go to school. He’s trying his best to save every penny and pay the bank.” It was then that I noticed the ragged but determined farmer wore no shoes. “He goes barefooted — the whole family does, so they can keep the bank payments up, and maybe hold on to those few hillside acres.” I’ve often wondered what the future held for these poor, determined souls.

And others had similar stories. Andy and Lyddy White and their large family lived in a little “board and batten” house on our place, and Andy was the sole breadwinner, working as a handy man and at various odd jobs in the community.

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He had converted an old car into a little makeshift truck, and he had saved enough gas ration coupons to move the family. But the tires were long since worn past any semblance of treads, exposing the white under-threading. Somewhere, in a nearby dump, Andy found some large worn-out truck tires, much too big for the wheels of his little vehicle. But he brought them home nevertheless and put them over his old tires — a funny-looking improvisation that caused much noise and flopping, but it stopped the wear on his old tires.



This Scarbrough School photo of John Rice Irwin was taken when he was starting the 6th grade. He was proud of his “striped overalls.”

By happenstance, I was present when Andy and Lydia left their humble cabin, located in an old field at the foot of a ridge. Bedsteads, old chairs, baskets, cooking pots, and other household goods were piled high and tied on top of the hybrid contraption and on the cab as well. Other extraneous items were tied and wired to both the front and back bumpers, and a little two-wheel trailer of Andy's own making was attached.

The trailer, too, was loaded with garden tools, mowing scythes, their little black cook stove, and eight or nine children — and Andy's brother, old blind Doc, holding on to the stove.

I stood there waving back at the pack of my playmates, wondering where they were going and if I'd ever see them again. Lydia's people, the Pickles, came from somewhere down in Roane County, I remembered hearing them say. Maybe they were going to stay at Granny Pickle's until they could find a little farm on which to sharecrop.

Nash Copeland, the popular proprietor of Copeland's country store where we “traded,” knew the community and its people well — and he knew their plight better, perhaps, than

anyone. He often told the story of an old “widow woman” who lived alone up on the ridge near Cassidy's peach orchard. She had a tiny abode, which she called a shack, and a little “scrap of land,” but she was happy and content there. She had a cow which supplied her with milk and butter, and she raised her own foodstuffs in her well-kept little garden. The property was considered almost worthless by the appraisers, and the purchase price they put on it was negligible, not even enough to pay for a truck and labor to move her meager possessions (Nash knew the exact amount and quoted it often). The elderly lady vowed that she would never move, but of course she, like all her neighbors, was forced to vacate her home.

The trauma and anguish among the people who were ordered to move was most intense, and those feelings were especially enhanced because they were given such a short notice without even a hint of the reasons for the mass exodus. But years later, when it became obvious that the purpose of “the project”

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and all the consternation it caused was to help win the war, then they understood and felt, I think, proud to have been a part of the war effort.

For my family, it was the second time in 10 years that they'd been forced to move for a public project. When the Tennessee Valley Authority took lands in the early 1930s for Norris Dam, my family was forced to give up the Big Valley farms and lands their ancestors had settled in the late 1700s.

When they left the Oak Ridge area in 1942, many of my relatives relocated to the Norris-Andersonville area, in another section of Big Valley. I recall they later said that they were glad to be closer to their ancestral homes — and, as my father said, “We got electric lights and we got closer to our kinfolks, and it turned out to be the best thing that ever happened to us.”



One chore each evening was to “find the cows” in the far-off hills of the farm and drive them home for milking. John Rice Irwin (left) and his brother David singled out one of the herd—Old Fillchurn, they called her—and taught her to let them ride her back to the barn. Shown in the background are stacks of wheat awaiting the arrival of Jack Rather’s threshing machine.

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Now, wasn't that a grand story and one that sheds a lot of light on the experience of those who had to move from their homes to make way for the Manhattan Project. While things can never return to what they were, it is good to recall the memories of youth and to know the experiences that shape our lives.

I hope you have enjoyed the time spent with John Rice. I count him a dear friend and appreciate so much his willing openness and frank expression of the feelings he recalls from his youth.

If you have not had the chance to visit the Y-12 New Hope Center's Y-12 History Exhibit Hall and view the short video, I hope you will do so in the very near future. It is open to the public without any restrictions from 8 a.m. to 5 p.m. Monday through Thursday. Please come see the Y-12 historic artifacts on exhibit, view the video featuring John Rice Irwin and others, and say hello to me — y'all come now, you hear!