

An Oak Ridge Veterans' Day

D. Ray Smith | *Historically Speaking* | The Oak Ridger | December 18, 2007

On Sunday, November 11, 2007, Veteran's Day, a classic group of speakers and a large audience gathered in the American Museum of Science and Energy's auditorium to celebrate that special day in unique Oak Ridge fashion. Colleen Black and Bill Wilcox "veterans" of the Manhattan Project, gave their stories as first person accounts of their experiences in the early years of Oak Ridge.

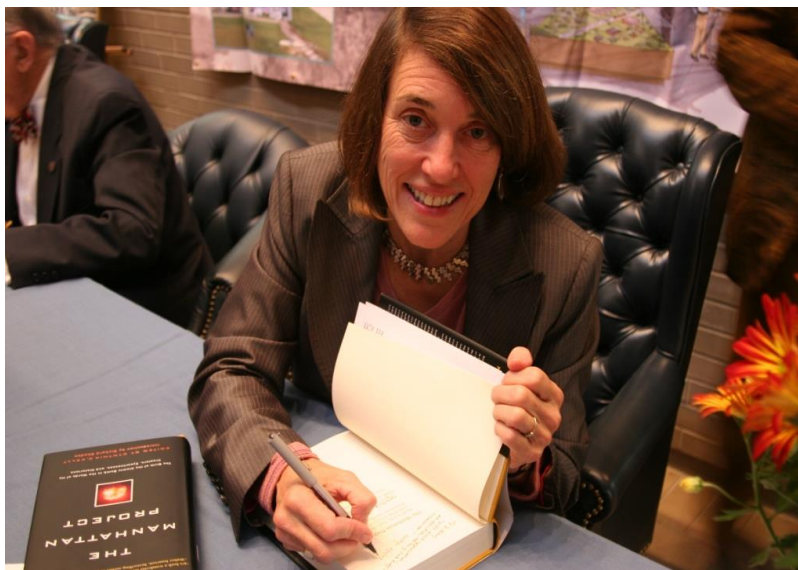
Bill Wilcox's opening statements in his talk, although coming last in the program, really served to firmly establish the overall patriotic tone for the day: "The freedoms we enjoy today we owe to the brave heroes who bore arms to defend and serve our country. We pause in our busy lives to remember and honor those who so served and sacrificed for us all over the globe in past wars, thinking especially of those who are serving in harm's way today.

"It is fitting that we also remember and honor those who served in uniform for three long years in the Manhattan Project - that remarkable effort which saved hundreds of thousands of lives of Allied soldiers and millions of Japanese lives by bringing that awful war to a quicker end. Here in Oak Ridge Col. Nichols says he had a core group of some 300 regular army plus many other reserve officers directing operations going on all over the country, aided by 275 WACS (Women's Army Corps) in uniform and in addition about 1500 army enlisted men, also all in uniform, all technically trained and pulled from the ranks all over the country to come help do the technical work. These were the Special Engineer Detachment (the SED). And the Navy helped too, sending about 60 technically trained naval officers.

"Then too today we remember the thousands of civilians who labored as front-line soldiers without uniforms in a pioneering and desperate effort to unleash the power of the nucleus to help win the war. To all those who served our beloved country in uniform and out, we salute and give thanks for their patriotic service.

Cindy Kelly, President of the Atomic Heritage Foundation opened the program and Jane Miller, Mayor Pro Tem of the city of Oak Ridge welcomed the speakers and audience to this most unusual Veteran's Day program. Cindy announced the publication of the Anthology, *Manhattan Project, The Birth of the Atomic Bomb in the Words of Its Creators, Eyewitnesses, and Historians*.

This book is a valuable addition to the existing reference material on the Manhattan Project and makes excellent use of first-person accounts, oral histories, contemporary documents and commentary by leading historians and political leaders. It also contains contributions by two of Oak Ridge's finest – Bill Wilcox and Colleen Black.



Cindy Kelly, President of Atomic Heritage Foundation, signs *The Manhattan Project*

Cindy Kelly, in her introduction to the book, states, "Over 125,000 people, most in their 20s and 30s, worked on the top-secret Manhattan Project. Through a variety of selections, the book portrays life in the Manhattan Project with its youthful exuberance and unrelenting intensity. From university professors to a high school girl, members of the newly created special Engineer Detachment to construction laborers of

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all sorts, people worked around-the-clock, living in 'alphabet' houses, make-shift construction camps, barracks, and trailers."

She concludes by looking to the future, "Over the next decade, you may be able to visit one or more national historical park sites for the Manhattan Project and tour some of the once top-secret facilities that changed the course of world history." Oak Ridge was a major player in the Manhattan Project and we should work hard to assure that the Heritage Tourism that results from ever increasing interest in World War II and the Manhattan Project is a major emphasis of our city's economic development activities.

To miss that primary element in our history is to miss something that is uniquely ours. Yet, it is only of value if we truly embrace our heritage and promote it effectively. We MUST work as a team and not as independent elements. We MUST focus on our strength as a SECRET CITY of the Manhattan Project.

Nowhere else is there such a legacy. Not in Los Alamos (only \$74 million spent in the Manhattan Project war years), nor in Hanford, where the plutonium for Fat Man originated (\$390 million). Here in Oak Ridge, we spent \$1.1 billion – making us THE primary Manhattan Project site. Let's strive to utilize our unique heritage to full advantage by including Heritage Tourism as a key strategy! The recent Heritage Tourism Implementation Plan created by Akins Crisp Public Strategies for the Oak Ridge Convention and Visitors Bureau gives excellent guidance on the practical steps we need to take. Let's fully implement that plan!

Then let's move on to even greater things such as supporting regional Heritage Tourism with our neighboring cities of Clinton, Norris, Lake City, Harriman, Kingston and even Knoxville. We can be a part of a cooperative effort patterned after the successful efforts of Sevierville, Pigeon Forge, Gatlinburg and The Great Smoky Mountains. While the scope of our potential is much smaller, it can be a very worthwhile economic development strategy.

I am continually frustrated by the focus of the Manhattan Project effort tending to be on Los Alamos. I don't want to take anything away from them, but when Atlantic Productions filmed a segment of the "Lost Worlds" series for the History Channel, I was pleased to be able to allow them access to Y-12's Beta 3 Calutrons and thus to influence the proper perspective of almost the full show being focused on Oak Ridge.

Now back to the Veteran's Day program. Those of us who were in the audience were treated first to a reading of Colleen's *Ode to Life Behind the Fence*, originally written as a poem by Colleen and her husband, Clifford, for a reunion of the Special Engineer Detachment stationed at Oak Ridge. The reunion was held in 1970 and marked the group's 25th anniversary. Here is the full poem:

Ode to Life Behind the Fence

*"We're fighting the war in a secret city.
It's crowded. It's muddy. And it ain't pretty.
We're fenced in – in barracks, a hut or a dorm.
Army life here is not exactly the norm.*

*"Oak Ridge, Tennessee is the city. It's not on any map.
We can't give you directions. We don't want to take the rap.
Nearby residents will not say.
Nor the workers who commute every day.
"We're secret. Security is tight.
Guards on horseback patrol at night.
MPs guard the seven gates and search cars too.
No cameras, firearms or fire water get through.*

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*"We're fenced in behind barbed wire, and by the way,
We're paid the usual Army pay.
No, GI calisthenics must we do.
And ID badges must be worn in plain view.*

*"We work with civilians, helping each other.
Our mission is secret. Can't even tell mother.
The mail is late. The laundry's lost.
Meat is rationed. No steaks at any cost.*

*"We chow down three times a day, but not the usual army mess.
We eat in cafeterias with civilians, no less.
We slosh through the mud to get anywhere.
And we have mud on our feet clear up to our hair.*

*"It's hot. Buses are crowded. Some workers smell.
'Don't open the windows,' the women all yell.
'Or you will be covered in dust head to toe,
And we're out of soap to add to our woe.'*

*"We work in shifts. We do what it takes.
Making whatever our plant makes.
We're special GIs. The chosen few.
Selected for knowledge and high IQ.*

*"We work hard all day, and play hard all night.
But don't worry, we never get tight.
The project is dry. No liquor allowed.
But that doesn't seem to bother this crowd.*

*"We head for our PX. It isn't far.
And settle for a beer at the Casablanca Bar.
Or go to the Rec Hall for dancing or ping-pong.
Or maybe join the girls for a sing-a-long.*

*"We love this life, the work, the softball games.
The girls here are pretty and wear badges with their names.
We love the tennis court dances. Bowling. The spirit.
"We're happy behind the fence. We do not fear it.
We attend church each Sunday at the Chapel-on-the-Hill.
It's for all dominations, with different hours to fill.
Many GI weddings take place here. So sweet.
Brides in white dresses with muddy boots on their feet.*

*"Whatever we're making...shhh. We're making it well.
And someday we'll be able to tell...
How we built something that helped win World War II.
And I hope everyone will be proud of us too.*

Colleen's sparkling delivery was enjoyed by the audience and she succeeded in taking us back with her to the times many remembered. Her poem contained insightful ideas and many familiar details for the

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other “veterans” in the audience. She was much appreciated for her delivery, her spontaneity and her candor in telling the story of her experience living in Oak Ridge and working at K-25 to leak test pipes for which she had no idea as to what they were to be used for or where they were to go. Yet, she did her job to the best of her ability as she knew she was helping in the war effort.

Next, we will look at Bill Wilcox’s experiences during the Manhattan Project as a young chemist working at Y-12 and living in Oak Ridge.



Colleen Black reads her poem, *Ode to Life Behind the Fence*