

Floyd Shook and his Secret City memories

By: D. Ray Smith | *Historically Speaking* | The Oak Ridger | March 20, 2007

From time to time, I want to feature individuals in *Historically Speaking*. This column will tell the story of one of the early Oak Ridgers who has continued to live here and enjoy the various phases of his life among his friends and family.

Floyd Shook's health is not as good as it has been and he is a bit limited in his mobility, but he still plays some really fine music on his beautiful Hammond organ. He also recalls fondly his interview for "Secret City: The Oak Ridge Story — The War Years" with Keith McDaniel.

Floyd K. Shook came to Oak Ridge in October 1943 from Cullman, Ala. He was born Aug. 16, 1916, in Dennis, Miss., and he attended schools and graduated as valedictorian from high school in Berry, Ala., in 1935.

He received six months of training at Auburn in field supervision, auditing and specialized investigation work. As an undergraduate, he obtained credit in industrial engineering and management, quality control and computer technology.

Floyd married Lorene B. Shook on May 8, 1936, also from Cullman, Ala. She was a housewife during the war, and later she worked for A&P Tea Co., a grocery store in Oak Ridge.

For approximately 25 years, Lorene was a salesperson and needlework instructor for The Knitting Nook.

The couple had one daughter, Glenda Lorraine Shook, who was born Jan. 16, 1937. She attended Cedar Hill and Oak Ridge High School.

She has now retired from The Kingsport Press in Kingsport, Tenn. She lost her husband to a stroke in March of last year.

Floyd was working at the Georgia Department of Agriculture in the Auburn office, when he was approached by a recruiter from the Manhattan Project in the summer of 1943. Floyd lived first in a dormitory in East Village, and he then moved his family into an "A" house at 114 Orange Lane.

When his parents would visit in 1944 and 1945, his mother would sit on the front porch with her back to a steep grade of yard downhill because of her fear of heights. They moved into an L-2 Apartment at 394 W. Outer Drive; and, finally, he moved to a "B" house at 101 Underwood Road.

He purchased this house when resident units went up for sale.

Floyd played tennis a lot, but music was his hobby — especially the electric organs. He was a deacon and then an elder in area Church of Christ congregations in Oak Ridge. He was a song director in three congregations, and he also taught gospel singing throughout the area.

Floyd worked for Tennessee Eastman from October 1943 until March 1946. When Union Carbide took over the operations of the Oak Ridge sites, several people were replaced and Floyd was among the number who had to find other jobs.



Floyd K. Shook as he appeared in *Secret City: The Oak Ridge Story — The War Years* documentary film

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He tells of his supervisor, Frank Hopkins, providing help in finding him another job. With one phone call, Floyd was given a job at the Oak Ridge Housing Company where he worked from March 1946 until May 1947.

Then, from March 1947 until May 1949, Floyd sold Electrolux vacuum cleaners while working part time for Roane Anderson. Floyd won the top salesman honor and was rewarded with a trip for him and his wife to New York City. They stayed in the Waldorf Astoria, where Floyd says they had the best food he ever ate. They also attended a show where The Three Sons played.

He still recalls fondly that trip to the “big city.”

Next, Floyd worked for the Atomic Energy Commission from May 1949 until July 1953. He was in the finance department and traveled a lot. He left that job for a job at Y-12 to “get off the road.”

In August 1953, he hired in at Y-12 as a technical reports analyst and worked there until December 1981 when he retired. Recently, I saw a photograph of Floyd when he worked in safety at Y-12 included in a file of memorabilia brought to me by Kay Steed, Jack Case’s secretary, when she was being interviewed for a video we are making for the Jack Case Center’s grand opening later this year.

She was naming all the people in the photograph and included Floyd Shook, Safety Department, in the list of people in the photo with Jack Case. I did not recognize Floyd, he was really young looking!

Here are some of Floyd’s memories:

“There was practically no crime in Oak Ridge during the war years of the ‘40s. Our military forces were in control of the city behind a protective fence. FBI agents were present in the plants. We never knew if the employee nearest to you was an undercover FBI agent. What the plants were doing was the best kept secret the world has ever known. It was REAL security, so fine tuned that even residents felt no fear of leaving their houses unlocked even when they left the houses to shop or for other reasons.

“One incident I recall is where employees of two of the plants were escorted from their work locations by the FBI and were not heard of again. One of these men was at the Y-12 cafeteria eating lunch when an FBI agent interrupted him to take him away. He was not even permitted to go back to his office to clean out his desk; I was asked to do that. I was shocked beyond belief. This man was my supervisor. These two men were visiting beer joints and bars at night and were guilty of loose tongues revealing some job-related information that might have been classified or confidential.

“Even snakes were not allowed in the plant restricted areas. One employee made the mistake of bringing a large snake (in a burlap bag) into the plant personnel and employment building at the Y-12 Plant. (This was Building 9704-2, which the Administration Building recently demolished as the last “H”-shaped Manhattan Project structure in Oak Ridge — Ray). Plant Security was called and the guards came and removed the snake from the floor where the man had dumped it from his burlap bag. He was immediately discharged.

“People were recruited from all over the United States. Every trade was needed in the gigantic job facing the Manhattan District. As everyone knows now, the race with Germany to develop and deliver the atom bomb had to be won by our country. It was, and this nation should ever be thankful for the leadership that came from such men as Gen. Leslie Groves, Col. K. D. Nichols, and all the talent from thousands of others who gave their best to save this nation from tyranny.

“In the war years, military personnel directed traffic within the fenced city. One fellow we called ‘Shorty’ stood on a special built box. Dressed neatly in his uniform with white-gloved hands, Shorty directed traffic

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in movements nothing short of perfection. It was a real show to watch him perform. My mother from Alabama was fascinated by his precise and flowing movements.

"During the Tennessee Eastman days, government vehicles came to our homes and took us to the hospital when we were ill. How thankful I am to this day for this service. In January 1944, a car came and took me to the hospital. I was completely exhausted from seven days of long hours working around the clock. The flu bug hit me and the diagnosis was influenza with spinal meningitis infection. My spine was tapped for fluid but I was fortunate to have the top Army doctor to treat me, Dr. Mears.

"Most housing units were heated with coal furnaces, with the coal bin doors facing the street. Our coal was delivered by government trucks and the dust where the coal was dumped into our bins was something we would like to forget. Mrs. Shook kept the coal wet down, which helped a lot. Some of us converted to oil as the systems became available.

"Board walks were constructed in the city winding through the beautiful wooded areas to historic Jackson Square or other shopping and recreation spots. These walking trails were very fascinating, especially to our young children. Soon, the rats started infesting the board walks, and the rodents got bigger and bigger ... similar to what is known as 'Wharf Rats.' If you could run one down and saddle it, you might have been able to ride the furry fellow down to Jackson Square from the Outer Drive area. Eventually, the wooden walks had to be removed, burned, and the rats destroyed.

"Up until the end of World War II, the average of the city's population was the youngest of any city in the United States. A large number of us were in our early 20s. We were a close-knit group, regardless of job status or religious affiliation."

Next week we will conclude Floyd Shook's memories of the early years in Oak Ridge.