

Secret City memories of Floyd Shook, Part 2

By: D. Ray Smith | *Historically Speaking* | The Oak Ridger | March 27, 2007



Floyd Shook proudly makes beautiful music on his pride and joy, his Hammond organ

Last week we introduced Floyd Shook and began his memories of early years in Oak Ridge. There are two items from last week's column that I need to correct. First, Floyd and I had a good laugh over my mistake placing him in Georgia. Of course, Auburn is in Alabama! Second, I cut short his employment history with the DOE plants. In addition to working at Y-12, Floyd also worked at K-25 and held various positions of increasing responsibility at both sites during his 28 years with the plants. He did retire from Y-12 in 1981.

Floyd loves music and he still plays a Hammond organ that is his pride and joy. I enjoyed listening to him play several tunes when we talked in his home about this column. Floyd is truly an accomplished musician.

What follows was submitted during the 60th anniversary of Oak Ridge. Periodically, I plan to include other submittals from that anniversary collection of memories in *Historically Speaking*.

Now let's continue with Floyd's memories:

"While waiting for our house to be built and my wife and daughter still in Alabama, I spent time from job responsibilities playing on the beautiful grand piano in the Jackson Square Recreation Hall. My residence at that time was an East Village dormitory. I made several friends, people who would come by the hall to listen. Two who came often were Ruas McCauley and an Army captain friend of his. Music has been my hobby since around age 5.

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"One weekend a large orchestra came to play for a dance at the Recreation Hall. Their piano player did not show up. Some people who had heard me told the band leader to ask me to sit in with them. He did and I filled in for the regular piano player. Fortunately for me I had some experience as I had my own Dixieland Band in Alabama.

"Another interesting thing to me was that music was loved very much during the early '40s. It was a period of uncertainty and stressful at times. This was especially so to those of us who did not know what was going on here. Music soothes the mind of those under stress. It heals the heart and even tames the most violent of beasts.

"The government purchased full console Hammond organs and placed one in each church, including our historic Chapel on the Hill. An outstanding organ and piano player and close friend of my family, Grace Dobyms, and I were lucky enough to have keys to the Chapel on the Hill. We were assigned times to practice (thanks to Grace!) and on the big Hammond is where I learned to play an electronic organ.

"We went on to play together for a number of years. I organized a musical trio and quartet. Grace played the Hammond in our quartet. One of our best remembered performances was made at the Oak Ridge High School for the Lions Club. My friend, Harry Carper, helped coordinate this event which lasted three nights. "Our first radio station was WATO. It went on the air February 1, 1948. The initial broadcast was made on Sunday in the Oak Ridge High School Auditorium.

"The first radio tower of WATO was located near the Woodland area. Believe it or not, music and announcing started coming through electric stoves, surface units and people's bridgework in their mouths. Imagine Big Band music via stove units and gold fillings! The tower was subsequently relocated in the extreme eastern area of the city.

"The Shook family first saw 'ball lightning' when living in our first house on Orange Lane. One night a terrible thunderstorm crossed Oak Ridge. The lightning was close to the ground and very frightening. All at once, seemingly coming out of space, a large ball of this rare lightning rolled across the kitchen counter. It moved over the stove area and surface units, and just as suddenly as it had appeared, the ball disintegrated. No burns, no damage, just a slight popping noise. I have never seen anything like that since!

"Directly across the street from our Orange Lane house lived a small boy named Jay Bowles. His father was Clyde Bowles, an engineer at Y-12. Jay was still in diapers but was difficult for his parents to keep him in tow. Many times, in warm weather, we've seen Jay's little diapered rear end slide out over the window sill. Dropping to the ground, he would jump up and out in the neighborhood he would go.

"At times he would go into somebody's house as we didn't lock doors — remember? One time, he came into our house while Mrs. Shook was away for a short time. Jay tracked mud all through the house, then plugged up the electric iron my wife had left off to cool. Fortunately, Mrs. Shook came back and unplugged the iron before Jay set the house on fire. Jay grew up in Oak Ridge to be a fine young man. He became an outstanding announcer for WATO.

"We had many young kids on our lane, which was the end of the milk man's delivery route. One day he dumped out some large blocks of ice to melt. Mrs. Shook decided why not make a large hand-cranked freezer of ice cream for the kids. When the cream was ready she contacted all the little ones she could and they had lots of fun. Some had never seen ice cream made this way. One little boy named Peter from New York looked at the freezer and said, 'What a silly place to keep ice cream.' He was willing and did eat it, though.

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"Some pets were permitted in the city, such as dogs, cats, etc. Our daughter, Glenda, when we moved into our new house on Orange Lane, brought an unusual pet to the town. It was a little white duck given to her by an Alabama cotton buyer. We constructed a pen out of chicken wire for her pet and placed it on our yard right near the edge of the woods.

"The neighborhood kids enjoyed seeing and playing with the duck, but fun was to be short lived. One night a wild animal, probably a fox or weasel, caught the duck's head through the wire and bit off its head. Our daughter was saddened by this happening. She had named the duck Benny after its donor and she said a prayer to God asking him to put Benny's head back on. It was a sad time for a while.

"Our town did not have a lot of fires, but one did occur during the earlier days. It was the city's central cafeteria. In its first opening season, it became known as a food poisoning emporium. Although there were never any deaths from eating there, lots of people got very sick due to poor refrigeration and /or the lack of ice.

"One night the central cafeteria caught on fire, making a huge blaze and attracting many of us to the Jackson Square site. It burned to the ground, taking some other business with it. A big loss!

"We also remember when the first ice cream was on sale to the town residents at a small Jackson Square site. Mrs. Shook was near this location when someone came along and said, 'They've got ice cream for sale down the street.' She thought the daughter should have an ice cream cone, so they rushed there for a treat.

"There are many more memories that come to my mind which time will not permit me to relate in detail. However, here are a few brief ones:

- The 24-hour construction that went on to build the plant facilities and the residential units. Some units were up in 30 minutes.
- The rains came especially in the fall and winter of 1943, 1944 and 1945. Mud, mud everywhere it seemed. Women lost their shoes in mud, while men tried to recover them when help was needed.
- War Ration Books were required. When our family members saw a line forming near a shopping site, we got in it, asking no questions. It was quickly known that some item of food or clothing in a short supply was now for sale. Nylon hose and meat were examples that were highly desired.
- The vast number of hutments and trailers visible in the town.
- How soon building permits became required, even to add awnings over windows.
- The presentation of the Army-Navy 'E' awards on Sept. 29, 1945, to the men and women of the various contractors for 'Excellence in War Production.' Colonel K. D. Nichols was Master of Ceremonies; General Leslie Groves made the presentation of the Army-Navy 'E' Flag to management and Tennessee Eastman Corporation's Lee Warren made the acceptance address. Commodore William S. Parsons made the presentation of the award pins to contractor employees. The playing of 'Taps' and 'Star Spangled Banner' then ended the program.
- Gen. Leslie Groves, officer in charge of the atomic bomb project, made a special speech to all the employees who worked in the 'Castle on the Hill.' This wooden structure building had seven wings and stood on the site now occupied by the DOE Federal Building. (Note from Ray: The administration building, as it was officially known, was the first structure begun on Nov. 22, 1942, when the Manhattan Project took over the land that was to become Oak Ridge.)

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- The surrender of Japan because of atomic bomb attacks on two of its large cities brought an end to the very costly war. The people of Oak Ridge had a jubilant, joyful and triumphant celebration in historic Jackson Square. Extras of The Knoxville Journal with bold letters on headlines stating the long-hoped-for word, "VICTORY," sold for \$1 each.

- In 1942, a young man was interviewed and hired by Gen. Leslie Groves in Washington. This city and our nation should never forget this new hire's outstanding contributions in telling the history of the Manhattan Project and Oak Ridge through the lenses of his cameras. That young man was the government's top photographer for the massive project — James 'Ed' Westcott. He lives in Oak Ridge and was recognized a few years ago with a huge 80th birthday celebration by the Oak Ridge Heritage & Preservation Association on Jan. 19, 2002, at the Midtown Community Center (former Wildcat Den and Senior Center). I was honored to provide music on my Roland keyboard for this big party. Ed's son's own rock band also played to honor their father. Honoring Ed on this occasion was a huge success. Friends and co-workers coming from as far away as Florida. I salute this brilliant photographer, as a friend of mine and thousands of others. Ed is indeed a professional of extreme talent and is still 'clicking his lens.'

"In summary, it has been a joy to contribute in some small way my memories of early days in our wonderful city long hidden in the beautiful hills of East Tennessee. All residents and friends connected to the early World War II years owe a debt of gratitude to the entire staff of the Oak Ridge Heritage & Preservation Association for their efforts to preserve this town's historic sights and memories.