

Herbert Dodd looks back, Part 1

By: D. Ray Smith | *Historically Speaking* | The Oak Ridger | April 17, 2007

This Historically Speaking column comes from the hand-written text of one of Herbert Dodd's speeches about early Oak Ridge schools titled "43 & Me." The beautiful, even, and graciously flowing handwriting was that of Helen Catron, retired school teacher. She transcribed the speech in longhand for Principal Dodd. You can imagine my surprise and delight to find the 13-page speech on yellow notebook paper — perfectly preserved — with the following hand-written note on the back of the carefully folded speech, "Mr. Smith, I found this copy of Mr. Dodd's 'Early Oak Ridge Schools' speech and thought you might be interested. — H. Catron, retired teacher."

Wow, what a joy to read for the first time. I hope you get as much enjoyment from reading his thoughts as I did.

Interview

While attending University of Tennessee Graduate School in the summer of '43, my major professor in school administration arranged for me to have an interview with Dr. (Alden) Blankenship. Following the interview and conference with some of the UT people who knew me best, and with the Tennessee State Department of Education people who had supervised my work as a Middle Tennessee elementary school supervisor, "Dr. B." set up an appointment with me to come for a visit with him.

I drove from UT via Clinton and was met at Elza Gate by Retired Sgt. Dempsey in a government car. He drove me to the 'Castle on the Hill.' Dr. B. had a desk but no secretary. While talking with me, Dr. B. decided that he would write my contract for 10 months at a salary of \$1,900, I believe it was. He said that he would contact me when I was to arrive on the job in Oak Ridge. Since I was single, he said he would have his dorm room transferred to me when his house (a "C" to be constructed on Farragut Road) was completed. By that time, I had returned to my home in Martin and West Tennessee. Every few days Western Union would give me a call.



Herbert R. Dodd was the first Oak Ridge school principal hired in 1943 by Alden Blankenship

Arrival in Oak Ridge

When I arrived in Oak Ridge, I found that I was the first principal and was assigned to a desk in Town Hall which was located where Nations Bank at Jackson Square is now located. It was a totally new experience with no students, no teachers, and no building, but surrounded by blue prints. I had had elementary teaching experience and had worked as an elementary principal and as an elementary supervisor, but was the youngest of the principals. After Dr. B. had worked with me awhile, he asked me how I would feel about helping each elementary school get set up and opened and take the one opening in February or March, since I had had experience as an elementary supervisor. I told him I thought I would learn by so doing.

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By that time he had asked me to be responsible for naming the elementary schools so I had asked the other elementary principals then on the job to go to each school site to help me decide on appropriate names. Since mail had begun arriving addressed to Oak Ridge High School, Dr. B. decided to let that be the name of the high school. That being a rather corny name to me, we decided on tree names for the first elementary schools, Elm Grove, Pine Valley and Cedar Hill.

Recruiting

Dr. B. himself had been visited at Columbia University by Oak Ridge's top military man and given less than four hours to decide if he would take the superintendency of Oak Ridge with no teachers, no buildings, no books. To help keep good working relations with neighboring school systems, very few teachers were recruited from Anderson County — but many from Columbia university, George Peabody, Kentucky, Alabama, Mississippi, etc. My hand-picked Cedar Hill staff came from Alaska, California, University of Chicago, etc. Families with school-age children arrived so rapidly principals had to keep adding additional teachers every few days.

Chauffeur's License

Early on Dr. B. asked me to take the government driver's test so I could drive a government vehicle assigned to the schools. When I went for the test, I was asked to use one of their cars. I decided on a Chevy since my car was a Chevy. It was in such poor shape that I started jerking as I was driving up Kentucky Avenue, so I gave it enough gas to stop the jerking and by so doing was given a reprimand for breaking the speed limit. I had only one other mark down for backing out into the road in East Village, but sitting by the military soldier giving the test kept me in an unrelaxed condition.

Dr. B. had me hold the first meeting of elementary teachers in the theater which is the Playhouse. Paul Antony, Elm Grove's first principal, and I rented a mail box in Jackson Square Post Office and since the Oak Ridge Schools had no box and the Post Office had run out of larger boxes, Dr. 'B' asked if he could have all the school mail delivered to Box Q, our box. In sorting out my mail one weekend, I ran across Dr. B.'s draft card! Eventually we just turned over our big box to Dr. B. for the Oak Ridge schools, and only a few years ago did the schools give up Box Q.

From the beginning I had three pairs of overshoes; one under my desk, one in my car, and one pair under my dorm bed.

Bus rides were free even to Knoxville. One weekend night I took the bus back to Oak Ridge from the Empire Building in Knoxville in a trailer bus with a potbellied stove in the middle and long benches to sit on down each side, much like church benches. For those Knoxville trips most people had a special pair of shoes they kept for Knoxville free of mud.

Social Activities

All the fellows living in my dormitory kept me busy introducing them to teachers at dances held in the Recreation Hall over the present shop The Epicurean, near the Soup Kitchen. The plumbers and professionals had their eyes on Helen Ruth Bass, cousin of former Pine Valley druggist Bill Bass. She was an awfully pretty brunette from West Tennessee. Their other favorite was the bleached blonde physical education teacher from Pine Valley who drove a convertible.

Community Chorus met at Chapel on the Hill and used a former player piano, which is what most pianos were at that time.

Tennis court weekend dance music via Bill Pollock floated in the dormitory windows until about midnight.

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Update on Daily Living

Before I had time to get the bed well-worn at my M-1 dormitory it was converted to a women's dormitory and I was transferred to an East Village dormitory about where Glenwood Baptist Church is now located. I rode the Army bus down each night to get in touch with my toothbrush.

One day a group of us working in Town Hall decided to go together for lunch at Townsite cafeteria, located in the block where Village Restaurant is now located. As we left on the boardwalk one secretary, "the Widow McGuire," as I referred to her, decided to take a shortcut by leaving the boardwalk and walking in the clay by the Fire Station located where Roe Insurance is now located. As she took a giant step, the black patent high heeled pump she was wearing stuck in the mud and she was unable to retrieve it until a fireman saw her predicament. He came out and took her up in his arms and reached back and recovered her lost shoe. He deposited both on the boardwalk. The following summer when several of us got food poisoning at Central Cafeteria, I named it Ptomaine Tavern.

Chaufferettes

Females called "chaufferettes" used to drive government cars. Dr. B.'s favorite was a driver named Bonnie. He had her come to drive us to the hutment area and while there decided we should eat our lunch in the hutment canteen. Everyone was eating in a hard hat. Our only eating utensil was a spoon, and the food reminded me of that served at the military induction center at Fort Oglethorpe, crude and all running together. Guess you may have seen a hutment photo. They are square crude huts with a wide area of screen near the top.

At the Henry family reunion of my wife's family in Blount County, a nurse from North Carolina came over to talk with me when she found out I was from Oak Ridge. We exchanged a few stories of our experiences. This is my favorite.

She was called early one morning to visit a very sick man in a hutment. Normally, the men came to the nursing station, but due to his condition, she was asked to visit him in the hutment. As she opened the screen door, she said she could see that his face was quite red, so she put her hand on his forehead and knew that he had a high temperature. Next, she threw back his cover and there under the blanket he had a woman with him even though he was really ill. I wasn't able to top that one!