

1945 – Oak Ridge High School's Youth Council on the Atomic Crisis

(As published in The Oak Ridger's Historically Speaking column the week of May 15, 2007)

As promised in last week's *Historically Speaking* here is the account, written by Dee Chambliss, of 62 years ago in Oak Ridge when a unique and most unusual organization was formed at Oak Ridge High School:

"The time and place were perfect for an idea that a group of high school students and faculty advisors had in 1945. Speaking as 'the sons and daughters of the scientists,' they may well have had an effect, however small, on national policy regarding war and atomic energy.

"The 'idea' was called the Youth Council on the Atomic Crisis (YCAC).

"Consider: The atomic bomb had just ended WWII and big debates were building. Was The Bomb just another weapon, albeit a whopper, that would ultimately face neutralizing defenses, as all new weapons had in the past? Or was it something absolutely new, something that demanded new social and political concepts?

"That debate involved a parallel debate. Should the bomb, and everything atomic, be controlled – as weapons – by the military, or should atomic science, with its potential for energy and medicine, be controlled instead by civilians?

"If it was, indeed, to be regarding exclusively as a weapon, then it was paramount that we keep it as our private secret, preventing any enemy from having one of their own, many argued, and that meant absolutely that it could not be turned over to the civilians.

"It was as this ferment was beginning to boil, in December of 1945, that a group of high schoolers in an English class, presided over by a prescient instructor, Philip Kennedy, got into a discussion about the implications of atomic energy.

"The 1946 school annual reports that this was stimulated by Monsanto Chemical physicist Dr. Charles Coryell when he visited the class and described the good and bad potential of atomic energy. The students did research, aided by interested adult experts. Dr. Coryell was just one of many atomic scientists who served as resources.

"A quip at the time: the true measure of the power of the atom bomb was that it blasted scientists out of their ivory towers and into public affairs. The influential Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists first appeared in December of 1945.

"Based on what we learned and were told, we felt strongly about these issues. The students felt the atomic bomb wasn't just another weapon, that a new route to world peace was obligatory, and that atomic energy offered possibilities that could best be tapped under civilian control. As for the "secret" of the bomb, the one big secret was whether it would work, and now everyone knew. The rest was just engineering.

"So, we enthusiastically formed the YCAC.

"We spoke out in a Christmas editorial in the high school newspaper, the Oak Leaf. The school newspaper article said, in part, 'We, the students of the high school at Oak Ridge, Tennessee, believe that our Christmas service to the world should be to tell it what we think about the atomic bomb.

"The article further stated, 'To stop a war and save the lives of millions, our brothers and our fathers made

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this bomb. It served its purposes well. In finding out its secrets, they learned well its power for good and ill. While it remains unbridled, they fear this power. We share this fear.

"The article continued, 'We want to realize the promise of atomic power. To do this freely, we must end its threat. We are alarmed that this terrible menace has not been more generally recognized. The people must see it. We, the youth of America must help them to see it or we, with them, will be lost.

"The editorial ended with a plea that 'atomic energy will henceforth be used only for peaceful, constructive purposes.'

"We distributed copies to 'thought leaders' around the country. It apparently touched a nerve. The editorial was reprinted in the Philadelphia Record and dozens of other newspapers. A big-name broadcaster of that era, Robert St. John, featured it in his radio show.

"The YCAC also got the attention of author Norman Cousins, who had just published 'Modern Man Is Obsolete.' He was believed to have contributed money to the program.

"Letters for information on forming similar student groups came from 26 states, Canada, Australia and Holland.

"Then the group fired another salvo when military strategist Alexander de Seversky wrote an article in the Readers Digest expressing the 'just another weapon' thesis, saying the U.S., with its steel-reinforced buildings, could withstand an attack.

"The YCAC responded via 'An Open Letter' editorial in the Oak Leaf. It referenced observations of nuclear scientists who has visited Hiroshima, and said, in part, 'I do not believe our cities would be any more immune to destruction than were the Japanese cities and our people would certainly be just as dead.'

"It was reprinted and thousands of copies were sent to organizations and media around the country. Renowned atomic scientist Phillip Morrison addressed a YCAC forum in Oak Ridge and spontaneously produced a quote widely used afterward. Someone in the audience asked 'Is there a defense against the atomic bomb?' He surprised many by answering 'Yes.' Then he added, 'Peace.'

"'We, the People,' a top-rated radio program that was the equivalent in its day to '60 Minutes,' broadcast from Oak Ridge and interviewed YCAC members, among others.

"From the beginning, the mission of the YCAC was simply to spread the word about atomic energy and its implications for good and for ill. Some 170 students signed a pledge to learn about this subject and tell others.

"This was new stuff, and here was a receptive audience. Teachers around the country were especially responsive; they wanted the facts and they were interested in what sparked YCAC members as students, seeking models for their instructive efforts.

"The Philadelphia Record (now defunct) and the Intercultural Committee of the United Nations Council of Philadelphia sponsored appearances by members of the YCAC at a town hall forum and at high schools and churches in Philadelphia. The program was supported by the Association of Oak Ridge Scientists (very concerned about military control) and the Oak Ridge Jaycees, among others.

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"The first president of the YCAC was Joe Glasgow, also senior class president. G. W. Bailey was vice president. Committee chairmen included Bonnie Carter, Joyce Griggs Kirkland, Ida Saathoff, Carolyn Johnson and Richard Sawyer. Faculty advisers, in addition to Mr. Kennedy, included Nancy Talbert, Jeannette Sawyer, James Hatchett and Dallas Lancaster.

"The group making the first Philadelphia visit, which was to be followed by many such tours, included Joyce Griggs, Clare Doran, Mary Lane, Theoron Atkins, Richard Sawyer, Elmo Leslie – all class of 1946, and your writer, class of 47, editor of the Oak Leaf. I remember that I preached the Sunday sermon at Philadelphia's Christ Church, using John Donne's 'No Man Is an Island' quote as my text.

"The program continued in following years. I became president in my senior year and Leatha Fulkerson Stewart, 1948, followed as president. Many students were involved, including Richard Furney, Julia Manz, Joan Taylor Munger, Johnny Boggess Hammons and Mary Curtis Cumming.

"Members went out on tours to schools and teachers colleges. One eastern tour of 34 engagements in Pittsburgh, Atlantic City, Boston and New York City reached an estimated 25,000 adults and high school students in addition to those reached through the media.

"It was very heady stuff for teen-agers, going to big cities and meeting important people. We attended the Philadelphia Symphony and were taken backstage to meet conductor Eugene Ormandy. We also attended the musical 'Red Ball Express.'

"Where newspapers sponsored us, as in Philadelphia and Pittsburgh, we were followed by their photographers and our activities were chronicled daily. Teachers who chaperoned us worked at reminding us, less heads swell hopelessly, that people were interested in us for what we represented, not our intrinsic charm or looks.

"We are just ordinary kids, as irrepressible as most teen-agers.

"Leatha Fulkerson was asked in a Pittsburgh radio interview how she liked Pittsburgh. 'Wonderful,' she answered. 'The first thing I did was take a bath; I haven't had one in 2 years.' She then de-flustered her interviewer by explaining that Oak Ridge houses had showers, not bathtubs.

"Summers, we went to church camps to deliver our messages. I went to camps in the Shenandoah Valley of Virginia, Pennsylvania's western Alleghenies, outside Camp David in Maryland and on Maryland's Chesapeake Bay. Some were Church of the Brethren, others Quaker. All were pacifist.

"We took along movies about Hiroshima, atomic fission and conflict resolution techniques. But it wasn't all serious. We'd mix with fellow teen-agers, play softball ('Let's see some of that atomic power!') and ping pong, swim, and sing spirituals and camp songs at sunset vespers.

"I got bus/train travel money but instead hitch-hiked place to place, saving the money for special things. One very 'special thing' was a date in New York City with a girl I'd met at camp. We attended a new Broadway show, 'Oklahoma!' It was strangely familiar; then I realized that I'd heard all the songs in our ORHS show, which was titled 'Green Grow the Lilacs' from the play that spawned 'Oklahoma.' There may have been some copyright issue involved.

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“That was all about 60 years ago. It’s interesting to look back.

“Most of the things we wished for, happened.

“The MacMahon Act passed Aug. 1, 1946, creating the Atomic Energy Commission, assuring civilian control of atomic energy.

“The peacetime uses of atomic energy have indeed been developed. Witness all that’s going on in Oak Ridge today. (Maybe atomic-powered electricity hasn’t grown as some had hoped, but that could still happen.)

“There is indeed an international organization devoted to peace, the United Nations. The Nuclear Non-proliferation Treaty was signed in 1968, leading to the International Atomic Energy Agency.

“Most tellingly, there’s not been another A-bomb dropped anywhere, though that may reflect more the grim realism of mutual assured destruction than the cooperative international comity that YCAC envisioned.

“In any case, we’re delighted that, so far anyway, a dour prediction about atomic power contained in our 1945 Christmas letter has not come to pass: ‘As scientists, we consider it probable that one person of every three of you will die because of it.’

“Sources: The Oak Log, 1946 school annual, The Oak Leaf, ORHS student newspaper. Vol.3,No8 2.29/1946; .T,E,C. Bulletin of Tennessee Eastman Corp. Vol. 3, No. 51, 12/27/1946’; Reunion of the Fabulous Forties, 629-30/1979; imperfect memories.

Now what do you think about that? The YCAC experience was certainly unique for those Oak Ridge High School students and teachers.

My heartfelt thanks to Dee Chambliss for taking the time and effort to document this amazing story of the early years of Oak Ridge High School from his memory and to cite the details of a most incredible time when Oak Ridge High School students took advantage of the intense interest in anything Oak Ridge or “atomic” to help lead the thoughts of the nation regarding the highly technical emerging technology associated with atomic energy.

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The Oak Ridge High School students gather backstage around famed Philadelphia Symphony Conductor, Eugene Ormandy: Joyce Griggs (l), Claire Doran, Mary Lane, Richard Taylor, Elmo Leslie, Dee Chambliss (obscured) and Theoron Atkins. (Philadelphia Record photo)

The Oak Ridge High School students gather backstage around famed Philadelphia Symphony conductor Eugene Ormandy: Joyce Griggs (l), Claire Doran, Mary Lane, Richard Sawyer, Elmo Leslie, Dee Chambliss (obscured) and Theoron Atkins. (Philadelphia Record photo).