

July 6, 1944: Oak Ridge responds to a troop train wreck

By: D. Ray Smith | *Historically Speaking* | The Oak Ridger | May 22, 2007

Editor's Note: This is the first in a series on this topic.

In late 1942, under the most unique and unusual circumstances, a city was born almost overnight, and 3,000 people had to find another place to live to accommodate the huge industrial effort to obtain sufficient quantity of Uranium 235 for an atomic bomb. Oak Ridge was born. In 1943 the city grew at an amazing pace never before seen.

The Oak Ridge community was a gated city, a "Secret City," as it was not on any map and badges were required of all who sought to enter the military area known to various people first as the Kingston Demolition Range, then the Clinton Engineer Works, and The Manhattan Project in Tennessee, and finally Oak Ridge.

The local people had no idea what was going on. They wondered about these unusual people coming to live where their small communities once proudly stood. Yet the surrounding communities knew by word of mouth that something very important was being done there and that it had to do with the war effort. Occasionally the surrounding communities interacted with the new and most unusual "Secret City," and often officials in surrounding cities exchanged communications with the military officers there.

This unusual collection of young energetic and educated individuals were placed in the midst of several communities of Appalachia that had been settled starting a century and a half ago by a mixture of people seeking freedom and independence without the crowded conditions of the coastal cities. They took the land from the Cherokees through various treaty negotiations and by just living on the land they wanted. Over the years, a proud heritage had developed in the area which was typified by the Overmountain Men's victory at King's Mountain.

A fiercely independent people who were, at the same time, strongly patriotic toward the young United States lived in the ridges and valleys of East Tennessee. It is these people who were removed in November and December 1942 with little notice and less consideration to make way for the new wave of highly educated and singularly focused people, the main leaders of whom knew their effort was dedicated to winning a race for the very life of the planet.

These few individuals, both the leaders and the primary scientists and engineers, understood the stakes. They knew the awful danger the world faced if they could not be the first to create an atomic bomb. Many other workers came only knowing that whatever it was that was being done in this secret location was extremely important. It is in this setting that the following story of uncommon valor in the face of danger and response to the need for help is set.

In researching the 1944 train wreck which is the subject for *Historically Speaking*, I had two primary sources for this material: Bill Sergeant, the person who personally went to Jellico late in the night as one of the leaders in the response from Oak Ridge to the Jellico Troop Train Wreck on July 6, 1944; and Scott Chippendale, a volunteer with the Oak Ridge Chapter of the American Red Cross.

Bill provided information about the troop train wreck and recalled for me the tremendously strong impressions he received about the enormous damage done by the train wreck. He quickly told me that the night he spent there helping organize the assistance remains a vivid memory firmly planted in his mind.

During the research for this column, I found a Web site that is dedicated to the memory of the famous troop train wreck: www.trooptrain.com, titled "My Tribute to the... WWII Troop Train Wreck of July 6, 1944" by Phil Lea of Benton, Tenn. This Web site is extremely informative, with photographs of many of those who died as well as several of the survivors of the train wreck. Phil has also done an excellent job of documenting the train wreck.

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This project has grown significantly and will require more column space than I first imagined. I hope you will enjoy the final product as much as I am enjoying learning the details about the train wreck and the response by Oak Ridge. It is yet another source of great pride in our city's support for our neighbors that started during the earliest months of the Manhattan Project's Clinton Engineer District.

Some details about the ill-fated train and the awful wreck will help put perspective on this disaster, often mentioned as one of the nation's major troop train accidents and placed in the top 25 United States railway accidents of all time. The overwhelming response by the citizens of Jellico and surrounding communities will make you proud to be a part of this special part of our country.

A southbound Louisville-Nashville passenger train derailed at approximately 9 p.m. on Thursday evening, July 6, 1944, and plunged into the approximately 50-foot-deep Clear Fork River gorge at a place known as the Jellico Narrows. The train, No. 47, a south-bound second-class passenger train, consisted of steam engine No. 418, four Pullman tourist cars, one Pullman kitchen car, one Pullman troop-sleeping car, two Pullman tourist cars, one baggage car, three Pullman troop-sleeping cars, one Pullman kitchen car, two Pullman troop-sleeping cars and one baggage car, in the order named. All 16 cars were of steel construction.

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Steam Engine # 418 and four passenger cars are down in Clear Fork River near Highcliff, Tennessee, where the troop train wrecked on July 6, 1944 – Photo by Ed Westcott

The train was transporting new army recruits (the exact number is unknown to me as my research has found numbers ranging from 400 to 1006) from Virginia to Camp Croft, S.C. However, this was not common knowledge, as the exact destination of the train was kept secret.

In Cincinnati, a strange thing happened that surprised the riders in the last tourist car. A new locomotive, number 418, backed up to the car that was the last in line when they arrived. Some of these riders may well have chosen the last passenger car because of it being the last one and thus thought by some to be the safest place to ride on a train.

Then in Corbin, Ky., another change may have taken place. Engineer John C. (Lyle) Rollins and fireman John William Tummins, both of Etowah, Tenn., had both just completed a 16-hour shift, and after the required eight-hour rest were now working this train back toward Tennessee. They could not know they had boarded and were running their last train. One reference indicated that another engineer was scheduled to have replaced Rollins at Corbin but did not show up. Later, Tummins would indicate that something happened at Corbin, Ky., that upset Rollins.

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The change in terrain along the railroad right of way coming south out of Kentucky and entering Tennessee is dramatic. The Kentucky portion of the track is rather level with few curves and none of them with significant enough degree to present a hazard to a train traveling at a rather high rate of speed.

However, the curve where steam engine No. 418 left the track, taking four additional railcars with it to the bed of Clear Fork River and derailing four more railcars, is said to be the worst curve in the entire L&N railroad line. The curve is a specified 10 degrees (actually measured to be a little over an 11-degree curve) and is the point at which a train coming south at a high rate of speed (above 35 mph) would be expected to naturally wreck.

In the coming weeks we will examine the various investigations into the reason for the train wreck and the response Oak Ridge made to the disaster. We will look at an FBI investigation into sabotage, two accounts of the Oak Ridge Manhattan District response to the disaster, the Interstate Commerce Commission report, and several newspaper accounts of the epic event. We will also look at the Red Cross response and the history of the origin of the Red Cross in Oak Ridge.