

High school memories of Dee Chambliss, class of '47, Part 2

By: D. Ray Smith | *Historically Speaking* | The Oak Ridger | May 8, 2007

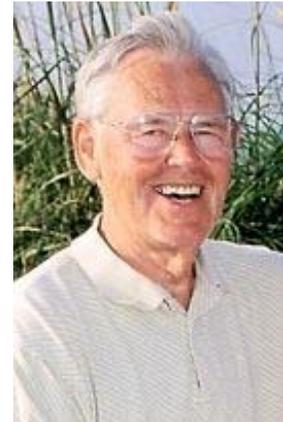
Last week Dee Chambliss told of coming to Oak Ridge in 1944 and of his relationship with Coach Ben Martin. We introduced Dee as an award-winning Associated Press business writer, executive and author. In this column he continues his memories of Oak Ridge High School and, as I promised last week, we get to hear about his most memorable kiss.

“Somewhere along the way, we moved to a three-bedroom asbestos house at 110 Clarion Road. The house overlooked a beautiful wooded area where I enjoyed exploring nature with my younger brothers, Blake and Don.

“Social life was good. The Recreation Hall at the Townsite was the place everyone went to play ping pong, dance to the juke box, drink Cokes, and mostly, see and be seen.

“A sweet memory from my sophomore year was kissing Geogia Ayre under a blossoming apple tree while taking her home to West Outer Drive. Even today, the barest hint of that scent invokes that glorious moment. But alas, Georgia broke my heart twice — once when she moved away and again years later, at a reunion, when she didn’t remember me.

“I dated several girls, but my eventual steady was a blue-eyed honey-blonde named Bettie Maree Preston. I remember that she had an inconveniently close relationship with her mother: Bettie clarified early on that we couldn’t do anything on a date that she couldn’t describe to her mom.



Dee Chambliss

“Bettie’s father got me a summer job in the personnel department of J.A. Jones Construction Company. Our task was to photograph new hires for badges and fingerprint them for security clearance. We would send the fingerprints to the FBI to read and classify but most bounced back to be redone because it takes more skill than I possessed to get clear prints of the rough hands of construction workers (bricklayers have no fingerprints). If any spies had wanted to infiltrate the operation, what I was doing wouldn’t have prevented them.

“School dances were big deals, with music by Bill Pollock. As I recall it, they started with a grand march and ended with “Good Night, Sweetheart,” and the music card always included “Stardust.” Maybe I was naive, but I don’t remember any drinking and certainly no drugs.

“A popular fun destination was Norris Dam and Big Spring. There was lovely lake water with beaches and parkland. The Letterman’s Club held our annual picnic here.

“The specters of the fictitious Harry and Harriet Pruitt, products of a previous class’ whimsy, still traversed the halls of ORHS. Years later, I put them to work in a book I wrote on personal finance, using them in an example where I might have used “John and Jane Doe.” Also, later, when I needed an alternative byline to avoid using my own twice is the same issue, I often used “Harry Pruitt.” And — reckless revelation — one of my Internet sign-on names is Harry Pruitt.

“School political elections were serious stuff. Danny Dolan, one of the nicest guys I ever knew, ran for council president with me as his campaign manager. He was easily the most popular kid in school and deserved to win by a landslide, but I bungled his campaign by presenting him as a shoo-in. I still feel bad about that, though he never reproved me.

“The quality of teachers at ORHS and the education program were both excellent. We were told that the powers-that-be recognized that they needed an excellent school system if they were to attract the kind of people they wanted. I believe they required a master’s degree, which was a pretty high bar, especially back then. They used what I think was called the “core curriculum,” which meshed related subject matters

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rather than breaking them up as separate class subjects. The character of education was enhanced by the fact that the study body was very bright; students were always challenging each other and teachers facilitated lively discussions.

"We all had our favorite teachers (Margaret Marrs was on most lists). My favorite was Philip Kennedy, chiefly because he was the spark behind the Youth Council on the Atomic Crisis (and also because he helped get me a scholarship to Duke, where he later taught).

"Here is an anecdote about another remarkable teacher, Mrs. Nancy Swain. Years later, my good friend Ray King (also a member of the class of '47) remarked about how tough she had been with her Spanish classes. I said she wasn't THAT tough, and as evidence told about a time when I'd cut her class (I hadn't done my homework) and went instead to the library (study hall?). I was going through a phase then and cut lots of classes. The study hall teacher asked me where I was supposed to be and I told her. When I next went to Mrs. Swain's class, I was prepared for a scolding but she said nothing until class was over. Then, as I was leaving, she said, 'Dee, you missed class last time, but I'm sure you had a good reason.' That's all. So, see, I said to Ray later; she's not so tough. 'Um huh,' said Ray. 'And did you ever cut her class again?' Well, actually, no, and that was probably the only class I didn't.

"I also remember a science teacher — can't recall his name — who had very thick glasses. Students in the back concluded that he couldn't see them, so they would relax in class, pass notes, that sort of thing. Some even talked of sneaking out the window. This went on a while, and then Teach said, 'You in back, could you bring me that bottle on the second shelf of the cabinet behind you?' A student stood up, opened the cabinet, took out a small bottle with a small label.' Teach said, 'No, not that one, the little one just two jars over, the one that says 'formaldehyde' (or something).' That instantly tamed the back row. We speculated later that he may have set that up in advance, but no one was brave enough to test that theory.

"As I think back now to those wonderful ORHS days, I'm forced to recall a questionable decision I made in the 1960s. My old friend Ed Westcott, the photographer, came to see me at 50 Rockefeller Center in New York City where I was a writer for the Associated Press. Ed described a job that would have moved me back to Oak Ridge. But I had contracted the dread New Yorker's top-of-the-mountain myopia: 'How could anyone, after working so hard to get here, leave voluntarily?'

"Because of that delusion, I regret to say, I didn't give Ed's suggestion serious consideration. That I passed up a chance to return to the scene of a very happy youth, to a town where I could raise my kids safely among nice people, a place of lakes and trees and mountains, one where I no longer spent three hours a day commuting: what was I THINKING?"

That concludes Dee Chambliss' memories of Oak Ridge High School. He also sent the following memories of his relationship with Ed Westcott:

"I was sports editor of the short-lived Oak Ridge Daily Times (1948 I think) and Ed was staff photographer. We had a Class D professional baseball team and Ed supplied me great photos of the players in action, including a dramatic shot of the shortstop in mid-air rifling a peg to first base. I combined it with several other shots, but noticed that the shortstop was throwing off the page, unbalancing the layout.

"Then I had a bright idea. His uniform logo was an "O", which reads the same forwards or backwards (duh), so I reversed the negative and had him throwing into the page. Much nicer. Well, it took no time whatever for baseball aficionados to react with calls and letters: I had depicted what appeared to be the only left-handed shortstop in the history of organized baseball."

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Dee Chambliss also sent me the following update on his present status and I include it here for those of you who might remember Dee:

"Mary, my wife of 10 years (my first wife died in 1987), and I live in Reston, Va., just outside Washington, D.C. Like Oak Ridge, it's a planned community (about 60,000, just under Oak Ridge's peak) with meandering streets and lots of trees. Our house overlooks a woods, much as did our house on Clarion Road. It's not accidental that an old Oak Ridger would pick such a place.

"I've been an eager, if unthreatening, tennis player, past president of the Fairfax County Golden Racquets Club for Seniors (though I'm taking time out this summer for knee replacement). I volunteer as Virginia marketing specialist for AARP's Driver Safety Program.

"My first love is family. I have three grandsons nearby aged 6, 10 and 13; I take them fishing and camping and have them over once a month for a sleepover. Their mother, Elisabeth, is my youngest of three kids. My eldest, Cathy, lives outside Philadelphia and her eldest son works near here; he clobbers me at tennis ("You taught me too well, granddad."). Son David lives outside San Jose, Calif.; I see him a couple of times a year and his eldest daughter occasionally comes down from college (Princeton) to visit."

Now I have a real treat coming next week for *Historically Speaking* readers. Dee has written a column for you describing his experience at Oak Ridge High School as a part of a most unusual and unique organization — the Youth Council on the Atomic Crisis. You will be amazed at what these Oak Ridge High School students accomplished, and Dee will be speaking from his personal experience.