

My day with The Oak Ridge Boys

(As published in *The Oak Ridger's Historically Speaking* column on June 19, 2007)

Several weeks ago, Jane Miller asked me if I would give The Oak Ridge Boys a tour of Y-12 to include the calutrons. Kathy Brown had indicated to her that in conversation with The Oak Ridge Boys publicist she had learned that they were quite interested in the history of Oak Ridge...not just how their name tied to it, but the real history of Oak Ridge. I said, "Yes, I will be happy to tour them."

From this conversation grew a full half-day tour of selected Oak Ridge history and a reception at the Scarboro Road Gatehouse. Jane and I picked them up at the Hampton Inn where their bus was parked and the band members were staying. We arrived at 12:15 PM to get them at 12:30 PM. Almost as soon as we got there, Joe Bonsall came strolling by, obviously finishing a run, with his shirt in his hand saying he had lost a bus. I knew right away that I was going to have a fun afternoon.

Our first stop was the City of Oak Ridge sponsored reception at the Scarboro Road Gatehouse. I explained the history of the gatehouse before they got off the bus. The details I gave them were that this gatehouse served as a checking station for entry into Y-12 starting March 19, 1949 and was used as such until 1953 when the gates to the Y-12 site were moved back to the site proper.

When they got off the bus, they immediately began shaking hands and introducing themselves to all who were there. Before long they were looking closely at the historic Ed Westcott photographs lining the walls of the gatehouse. I made sure they understood that if it were not for Ed Westcott, official Manhattan Project photographer, that we would not have the rich photographic history we enjoy today. They closely examined most of the photographs lining the walls asking questions and making keen observations.

I immediately understood that their interest in the history of Oak Ridge was genuine. They were looking forward to the tour of Y-12 and later a tour of Wackenhut facilities. The festive atmosphere included the several staged photos of the Oaks sitting at 1940's era desk with historic artifacts and props.

There were a number of photographers there and many photos were made. Refreshments were served. And the Oak Ridge Boys Way sign was unveiled. This road that runs just north of the Civic Center has been designated the Oak Ridge Boys Way. They were pleased to accept the honor. This ceremony was repeated later at the concert and one of the signs was provided to them to take with them. Joe Bonsall said they should put it up somewhere near their home town as they have yet to name a street for them.

Soon time came for us to begin the tours after badges were provided by Wackenhut. We took them on much the same route as the Secret City Festival Y-12 Public Tour had taken on Friday except the only stop was on Chestnut Ridge at the Water Tanks Overlook. The view of Y-12 gave them an appreciation of the size of the site and the unique historic role Y-12 has played over the years.

We then took them to see the calutrons in Beta 3. There they gained a full appreciation for the magnitude of the task required to separate the uranium needed for Little Boy.

Next we traveled to Wackenhut's Central Training facility where they saw the protective forces weapons, equipment, canine searches and even got to see the active weapons systems used for training.

By the time we arrived back at the hotel, they indicated that they had drawn a much fuller appreciation for the history of Oak Ridge. With barely enough time for them to eat dinner before the concert, a portion of the Magnolia Tree restaurant was reserved for a quiet dinner for a few guests and the band. This dinner was also an opportunity to have them meet Bill Wilcox, Official Oak Ridge City Historian.

Duane said of Bill Wilcox and their dinner conversation, "I sat at the dinner table with Mr. Wilcox. Wow, what a character, he started me back in 1942 and tip-toed me through the high points of how things came to be. What a wonderful old gentleman! I could have listened to him for days!"

Duane also wrote a lengthy post on Sunday AM for the Oak Ridge Boys web site's "Oaks Talk" bulletin board for fans. He told of the impact of the Oak Ridge visit on him. He said, "The day began at 1:00, and everything we did during that time was planned to the minute. We were carried into facilities that

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very few people have ever been. We were shown how the atoms were separated to manufacture the components of the atomic bomb that ended World War II."

He went on to describe more of the tour, "So many questions about our history, and the history of the Secret City were revealed to me. I will later include these historical facts in a book, if I ever get around to finishing it. I was happy to learn, for a fact, that most everything I have been writing about the history of our group, in relation to Oak Ridge and our group singing there in the 40's is true. I learned so many things that I did NOT know. I will try and sort them out and write them in a way that will be a very interesting read. I learned so much yesterday that my brain is in overload and I am still cataloging all this wonderful history!"

The four Oak Ridge Boys, Joe Bonsall, William Lee Golden, Duane Allen and Richard Sterbin are really nice guys. They are down to earth and easy to talk with. They asked very good questions and were intent on learning all they could about Oak Ridge history.

Here is a personal note of interest about William Lee Golden. He and his family own a home in Hendersonville, TN that was originally built in 1786. It has been hit by tornados twice, once about 100 years ago and the second time just a few years ago. It has been restored both times. The first time the ceilings were lowered, but after the second tornado, William Lee said they decided to raise the ceilings back to the original height. The house was rebuilt using the most modern and strong materials, yet remained authentic to the original design. He is rightly proud of that historic home.

There is a DVD *The William Lee Golden Story*, a sixty-five minute documentary film that includes interviews with friends, family and music industry family. His mother, Rutha Mae Golden, has published a book of poems, *Golden Verses, poems of life, love, family and faith*.

Joe Bonsall has written two books, one about thirty years with The Oak Ridge Boys, *An American Journey*, and the other, *GI Joe & Lillie* with a foreword by Barbara Bush and the story of Joe's beloved father and mother. I received a signed copy of *GI Joe & Lillie* and have found it to be a really good read about two World War II veterans who made a wonderful life together and whose love for family is something the world needs to better understand and practice. Reading this book made Joe Bonsall's life take on an even more special meaning for me.

Duane Allen is proud of his boots. He showed them to me. They have the presidential seal on them and are a present from George Herbert Walker Bush, our 41st president. He has worn out three pairs of them! He wears them almost daily! Duane is intent upon learning and documenting the history of The Oak Ridge Boys to the fullest and most accurate extent possible. I am pleased to have been able to help him some with this endeavor and hope to be able to be of even more assistance as he proceeds with the project.

Richard Sterban's trademark bass singing voice and the signature "Omm Bop A Mow Mow" is not the only use he makes of his tremendous vocal abilities. He has recorded public service announcements for the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA) weather radio network, the "voice" of the National Weather Service. Richard is also the "voice" for the Classic Country channel on Sirius Satellite Radio. He is quiet but keenly interested in everything around him. During the tours in Oak Ridge he watched intently at every new detail and when he asked a question, it was insightful and clearly stated. His ready smile and warmth makes him easy to talk with.

And then there was the concert. A huge crowd gathered in Bissell Park as the hot sun slid slowly toward the horizon. The "Blue Moon Rising" band served some excellent bluegrass music as the opening act.

When the welcoming remarks were ended and The Oak Ridge Boys took the stage, the sunset provided some welcome relief from the heat and the excitement swelled in the crowd. After a couple of songs, Joe took a moment to mention to the crowd how the activities of the day thus far had held much meaning for The Oak Ridge Boys. Their visit was more than another concert and they had learned much about Oak Ridge history. Of course, I wore my Oak Ridge Boys cap with pride throughout the concert and showed it

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to all who indicated any interest in what had happened during the afternoon. Scott Fraker, of The Oak Ridger, called me wanting to know the details of the afternoon tour for the newspaper. I tried to tell him on the phone what we had done, but may have been too tired to make much sense. So, I sent him an e-mail later in the evening hoping that would be of use to the newspaper.

The music of The Oak Ridge Boys was the capstone of a wonderful day for me. The singing was great, the crowd support was strong and the evening was a delightful relaxing time in the twilight and early night with the superb weather and clear sky. The Secret City Festival's premiere concert was a huge hit and I feel the entire day was a whopping success!



The Oak Ridge Boys — from left, Richard Sterban, Joe Bonsall, Duane Allen, William Lee Golden — on top of Chestnut Ridge overlooking the Y-12 National Security Complex earlier in the day before performing at the 2007 Secret City Festival on Saturday night.