

# Oak Ridge and the Red Cross, Part 2

By: D. Ray Smith | *Historically Speaking* | The Oak Ridger | August 28, 2007

Last week we looked at the beginning of the American Red Cross. This week we continue our examination of that history with regard to the local chapters and focus on the Red Cross response to the July 6, 1944, troop train wreck. The history of the Red Cross in Anderson County has some unique aspects to it with regard to the Manhattan Project in nearby Oak Ridge.

One person seems to have been a key player in the early history of the Red Cross in Anderson County: Maurine Owen. She was involved in much of what was going on during the Manhattan Project and also was personally very involved in the response to the troop train wreck.

In an article published in the Clinton Courier News on April 2, 1981, Katherine B. Hoskins authored "Oak Ridge was branch of county unit during war." In the column she addressed the history of the Oak Ridge Chapter American Red Cross.

The Manhattan Project brought substantial changes to the area of Appalachia near Clinton that had been quietly existing and continually growing for 100 to 150 years. The people were comfortably able to take care of themselves with their farms and the produce they marketed. Some areas had extensive peach crops. However, the people were about to experience drastic changes. The land they had lived on for generations was being taken by the government for the war effort.

In my research, I learned that Katherine Hoskins was the executive secretary of the Anderson County Chapter of the American Red Cross from September 1942 until December 1942, when Maurine H. Owen became the executive secretary. Owen still held that office during the response to the 1944 train wreck and continued to hold it until 1952.

That means that Maurine Owen was the key individual who managed the service provided by the Red Cross to the new and unique Manhattan Project. For the first time the Red Cross was being asked to manage services to civilians as well as military. And this was not the only radically new approach being asked of the Anderson County Chapter of the American Red Cross.

For the first time, the Red Cross was being asked to use extreme precautions to prevent divulging any secret information. Even the location of the area they were servicing was protected. Just the mere mention of a person's name in association with the secret operations at Oak Ridge was unacceptable. New methods had to quickly be devised to allow the necessary services to be provided, yet to protect the very special war effort being mounted right in the middle of Appalachia.

The Oak Ridge Chapter American Red Cross began in December 1943 as a branch of the Anderson County Chapter American Red Cross. The first Red Cross office in Oak Ridge was located at the Elm Grove Shopping Center where it opened in December 1943. In January 1945 the office was moved to its present location at 908 Oak Ridge Turnpike. It is now known as the American Red Cross – Appalachian Chapter.

Let's pick up our story with the changes in the local Red Cross required in the Anderson County chapter upon the arrival in Robertsville and Scarboro of the Army Corps of Engineers and their most secret Manhattan Project. The changes affected everyone in the small communities that were taken over by the Army, but also the surrounding communities and cities were impacted as well.



Maurine Owen, executive secretary of the Anderson County Chapter of the

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For example, think of the increased population of 3,000 people moving out of Bear Creek Valley, East Fork Valley, Bethel Valley and Wheat. These people had to relocate to surrounding communities. There was not a lot of available land, and with that influx of families, the price of land naturally increased because of the increased demand.

Almost immediately, the small communities of Robertsville and Scarboro, along with several other communities such as New Hope, Bethel and other small farming communities, no longer existed. Some of the major buildings, such as the school buildings, were spared, but the homes were almost all demolished right away.

Some of the larger homes served as offices for the Corps of Engineers as construction began immediately. Those people who sacrificed their homes did not know that this country was in a race with Germany to build an atomic bomb. They only knew they had to get off their land in a hurry.

The residents had been told to leave in October and November 1942. They were gone by December 1942 and massive new construction activities began, in early 1943, to bring huge numbers of new people into the "project" area. This influx of people taxed the system for helping the needy. Something had to be done almost immediately.

Many of the people coming to work on the secret effort only knew that work was available there, and if they could get hired and find a way to get to this unknown place they could earn some money for their families. Upon arrival, many of the workers had exhausted their funds just getting there. Therefore, help was needed in many different ways.

The military could see the needs but were not equipped to meet them. A Red Cross was needed. Being familiar with Red Cross support in other locations near military bases, they looked to the closest local chapter, the Anderson County chapter.

The needs were met as best they could be under the unusual circumstances. By December 1943 it was obvious the needs inside the secret city and its various construction sites required a presence of a local Red Cross office in Oak Ridge.

The National American Red Cross considered the Anderson Chapter the parent organization in the county and all other Red Cross organizations in the county would be branch offices. That is the primary reason the Oak Ridge organization was first established as a branch office. Later, in 1947, the Oak Ridge chapter was given its own charter.

The unusual circumstances of Oak Ridge required some most unique arrangements be made. Information about the "secret city," that was not even on any maps, had to be protected. The people there could not be identified with the project. There were concerns that information about the hospital being built there would compromise security. Yet when the troop train wreck occurred, the hospital was quickly opened to the injured soldiers.

During the Manhattan Project, the secrecy of the Clinton Engineer Works at Oak Ridge was such that even operating a Red Cross required special precautions. All correspondence was sent through the Anderson County Chapter.

Katherine Hoskins, Anderson County Historian, says in her April 2, 1981, Clinton Courier News article that, "all mail going from Oak Ridge Chapter was sealed, carried to the Anderson County Chapter, put in another envelope, then stamped and mailed with a Clinton postmark." Again we see the secrecy associated with the Manhattan Project also had an impact on the neighboring city of Clinton as the Red Cross was involved in protecting the identity of individuals involved in the project.

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Before the Oak Ridge branch office was opened, all requests for assistance were handled by sending them to the Anderson County Chapter executive secretary, Mrs. Maurine Owen, who forwarded them to the Red Cross field director, T.W. Brownback, stationed at the University of Tennessee in Knoxville. Brownback would clear the case through Captain T.W. Taylor, special services military officer at Oak Ridge. When the case was approved, Owen would be granted the necessary pass into Oak Ridge to interview the person involved in the case.

Hoskins wrote in a March 26, 1981, historical article in the Clinton Courier News of the actions of the Red Cross during the 1944 train wreck. She notes that Oak Ridge was the closest military installation and that many of the survivors were sent to Oak Ridge to stay in the barracks there; injured were taken to the hospital there. She further notes that as Oak Ridge was a "secret city" or as she says, a "top secret installation," the Oak Ridge Branch Red Cross chapter was also secret. Casualty messages were sent by the military personnel.

She said, "Every family who had a boy recently inducted from the Virginia area began telephoning or coming to Clinton Red Cross office. Volunteer workers were recruited to answer phone calls and talk with the families arriving in person; even so, the Anderson County executive secretary, Mrs. Harry L. (Maurine H.) Owen, one time during the disaster aftermath worked for 36 hours without lying down or sleeping. She also was sent to Jellico and LaFollette to visit the hospitals and homes there, where some of the injured were taken. Some died in private homes."

Hoskins continued, "Emergency canteens were established by the Oak Ridge Red Cross office in the hospital to serve those bringing in the injured. Volunteer workers were stationed at Elza Gate to assist families coming to Oak Ridge to visit the injured soldiers. Financial assistance was furnished some of the wives who came to Oak Ridge to stay until their husbands were transferred."

Next we will look at the details of the disaster report prepared by the executive director of the Oak Ridge Branch of the Anderson County Chapter of the American Red Cross.