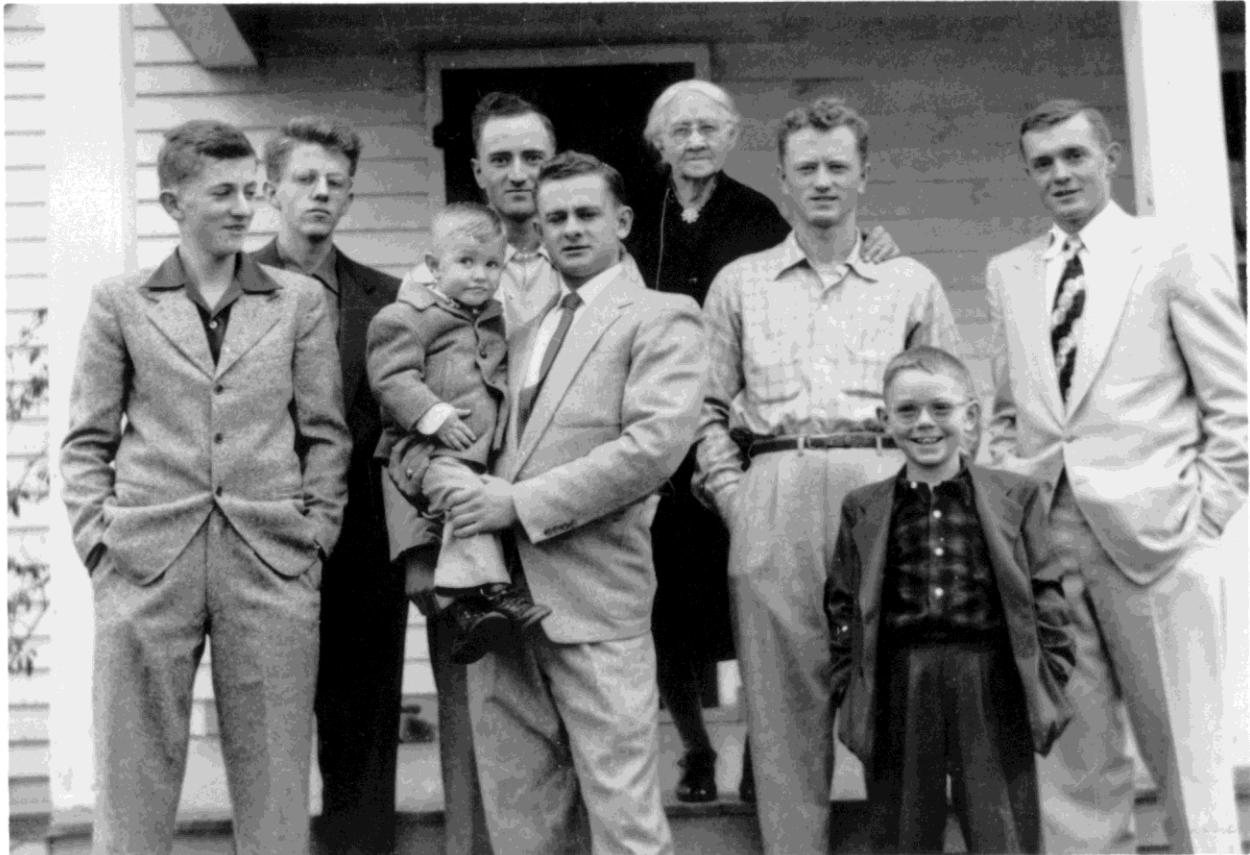


John Rice Irwin before Oak Ridge, Part 1

By: D. Ray Smith | *Historically Speaking* | The Oak Ridger | September 25, 2007

Editor's note: This is the first in a two-part series about John Rice Irwin.

Over the years since I have been in Oak Ridge I have had occasion to interact with John Rice Irwin a number of times. I have watched him transform the Museum of Appalachia, near Norris, from a personal collection of historic artifacts, log cabins and folk art to the nation's premiere museum for Appalachian history.



"Aunt" Sarah Jane Irwin, who left Oak Ridge in 1942, is shown here with her grandsons and one great-grandson: First row (from left): Jimmy, Rex, baby John Paul held by John Rice, Paul, Tommy, and David Irwin. Back row (from left): John Earl and "Aunt" Sarah Irwin

My first encounter with John Rice was in the mid 1970s, when he asked me to photograph the granite statue of the famous Cherokee Beloved Woman, Nancy Ward. The statue was on a white woman's grave in the Arnwine Cemetery on the bank of Norris Lake in Grainger County. He wanted the photograph to submit to the Tennessee Blue Book as the one they were using was not a good image. I did that project for him and today that photograph is on exhibit in the Museum of Appalachia and the Children's Museum in Oak Ridge.

There is much more to that story. The statue was stolen from the grave in 1980. I have spent over 20 years looking for it and only located it a little over a year and a half ago. I am still trying to get it returned to Tennessee. Also, that assignment from John Rice is what got me interested in doing historical

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research. I wondered about that “Beloved Woman of the Cherokee” and began researching her history. Ultimately, I have written and published her history in two books and my Nancy Ward Web site is the top site that comes up when one “Googles” Nancy Ward on the Internet.

So, you could say that John Rice got me started doing historical research. I also interacted with John Rice regarding the history of Harrison Mayes, the coal miner from Middlesboro, Ky., who made concrete crosses and placed them along the roadway in 26 southern states in the mid 1900’s. A model of his home built in the shape of a cross is in the Museum of Appalachia along with a number of the crosses Mayes built but never did get placed. Many are marked with intended locations — one has Jupiter written on it. You see, Harrison Mayes thought we would be traveling in space by now! Mayes’ story is on my Web site as well, www.SmithDRay.net at <http://smithdray.tripod.com/hmayes-index-7-1.html>.

Another and more recent project that brought us together was making the short video for the ribbon-cutting at Y-12’s New Hope Center. John Rice agreed to be interviewed for the opening segment of the video. We completed the interview at the museum and enjoyed a hearty lunch after the interview was completed.

As a result of our discussions about Oak Ridge, John Rice gave me a copy of a letter his mother, Ruth Rice Irwin, wrote. He also agreed to write a story for me telling about his memories of the time when his family lived near Robertsville and were a part of the 3,000 people who had to move because of the Manhattan Project.

First the story of the letter from Ruth Rice Irwin, that I have titled, “Ruth Rice Irwin and the pain of leaving”

In November 1942, 1,000 families made up of approximately 3,000 individuals all had to leave the small communities of Robertsville, Scarboro, New Hope, Wheat, New Bethel, Elza and others. There was not an acre in the entire 59,000 taken for the Manhattan Project that was not owned by someone. Many of these families were at first understandably upset by the demands of their government. Some remained upset for some time. Others were quicker to accept the inevitable and move on.

The following letter is written by John Rice Irwin’s mother, Ruth Rice Irwin in November 1942. John Rice Irwin has said in introducing the letter, “It was written when our family had just been given only a few days to move from our home, where Oak Ridge now stands. It is a sad and insightful view into the minds of those who were forced to move, and who were paid only a fraction of the worth of their homes and land.”

Ruth writes,

“November 24 -42

“Dear Mama,

“I hope you and papa are well. We are O.K. I have had a pretty bad cold but it is about well now. I have been meaning to write every day, but seems like things are happening so fast down here I am in a whirl, least I feel that way.

“First, I will tell you that we have bought Sam Hill’s farm and Frank has bought Uncle Pierce’s. We don’t know what we will get here but we have to go some where. We will be a lot closer to you all.

“I guess you saw the piece in the paper today about people ganging up on Morgan. That is really what they done. Some people are just about mad enough to kill over their prices. It is a shame what they have offered some. Glenn and Morrell were in the bunch that went to Harriman yesterday and of course they

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came to appraise our farm while they were gone. They had told Mr. Irwin time and again not to let them go on it if they were gone. He never paid a bit of attention to them and let them go on it by themselves.

"So I guess we won't get anything. They met at the school last night and appointed appraisers of their own to go over all the farms. You remember the new house up above Rogers on the left coming this way. It is built a lot like ours. I am sure you remember it. They have 80 acres, of course not the best of land and the house is really nice, and they offered him 36 hundred for that and he says his house cost him 5 thousand, so that is an example of what they are offering.

"It is now 2 o'clock and Glenn hasn't come in for dinner yet. I reckon he is going to wait 'til supper.

"How do you think you will like our new home? The house is not very good but looks like it was the best we could do. We will at least have lights.

"We have not killed hogs yet. Seems like they can't get time.

"Glenn and Morrell are selling all the calves they have that is not sick this morning. I think they will be baling hay the last of the week or the first of next.

"I wish this business was over with. I guess that is all the news now. Come down if you can. I don't know when we will be up. Let me know how you are.

"Ruth

The letter was sent to Mrs. M. M. Rice, R#11, Fountain City, Tenn. and had a three cent stamp.

I would say this letter is typical of the frustration most people endured. Can you imagine the thoughts that would go through your mind if someone out of the blue told you that you had less than two weeks to get out of your house and find another place to live?

The 3,000 people who left their homes to support the war effort sacrificed so others could benefit. They were selfless in their giving. Many of the families have never regained the community status or prestige they once enjoyed in their large farms in the small communities.

Yet, when I speak to descendants of these families, I find no animosity and little resentment at all. I admire them for their sacrifice. However, there were some who were reluctant to leave and were initially very upset by the situation.

Time seems to have softened the memories, the success of the Manhattan Project and many other important contributions to the nation and even the world that have come from Oak Ridge may have made people whose families sacrificed their home places feel a part of the overall experience.



Ruth Rice Irwin, mother of John Rice Irwin and David Irwin, holds a Feathered Star quilt made by her mother, Ibbie Weaver Rice, c. 1904. The quilt in the background was made by Ruth Irwin's grandmother, Sarah (Sally) Longmire Rice

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While the fact remains that they had to give up their homes, the time and distance coupled with the huge impact of Oak Ridge accomplishments such as the medical isotope program make such sacrifice seem very worthwhile.

When asked what was the most significant contribution Oak Ridge has made to the world?, Alvin Weinberg said without hesitation “the medical isotope program.” Can you even imagine what the world would be like if those 3,000 people had not been asked to make that sacrifice?



Although Uncle John and Aunt Sarah Irwin and their children were ordinary farmers, they, like many of the people in the area, dressed up for church on Sunday. This photograph was taken in the front yard of the large Victorian house where the Irwins lived.

From left:

(Front row): Lige Irwin, John G. and Sarah Jane Irwin (John Rice Irwin’s grandparents), Roger Irwin.

(Second row): Morrell Irwin, Sophia Irwin Atkins, and Glenn G. Irwin (John Rice Irwin’s father)

Next week we will be treated to John Rice Irwin’s memories of living “Before Oak Ridge”.