

# Oak Ridge and the Red Cross, Part 3

By: D. Ray Smith | *Historically Speaking* | The Oak Ridger | September 4, 2007

An interesting insight into the details of the local Red Cross chapters and their response to the troop train wreck can be seen in the following "Disaster Report." While unsigned, I believe it was written by Mrs. Neata H. Hutchins who was the American Red Cross, Oak Ridge Branch, Anderson County Chapter, executive secretary from June 1944 to December 1945.

## "DISASTER REPORT:

"On July 6, 1944, Mr. Brownback came to my house at 3 a.m. and reported a train wreck at Jellico. I dressed and went to the hospital to offer Red Cross assistance. I was informed that ambulances would be arriving within an hour bringing the injured.

"I went immediately to the office and called Mrs. Harry Traynor, chairman of Staff Assistance, and asked for six people to report to the office immediately. I called a member of Motor Corp to report. I then contacted townsite Cafeteria and ordered five gallons of coffee and five dozen sandwiches, six dozen doughnuts ready to be taken to the hospital.

"As soon as Motor Corp arrived and staff assistants, we left one in charge of the office and I sent the other five to the hospital and took Motor Corp to the Motor Pool to obtain a station wagon. Then Motor Corp delivered the food to the hospital. We set up a canteen in the hospital lobby and also set up an information desk.

"Three telephones were at our service and as soon as the injured began coming in, the staff assistants were busy serving the ambulance workers, doctors, nurses and others who came in with the injured. Two staff assistants manned the desk from 5 a.m. until Sunday night at 6 p.m., handling long distance calls, wires, arranging passes for parents sent for, placing them in rooms near the hospital, sending wires and mail for the injured boys.

"The staff assistants worked in six hour shifts. Three staff assistants worked with the hospital staff obtaining information as to next-of-kin, serial numbers, and names, collecting and registering personal belongings of the soldiers. As fast as a list was compiled by Military, it was given to us so as we could inform the staffs as to what information they could give out.

"Motor Corp was busy keeping food for the Canteen and also obtaining magazines, cigarettes, stationary etc. for the soldiers.

"Saturday morning, Military requested Red Cross to serve box lunches and coffee to the injured being moved to Moore General Hospital by hospital train. Fourteen staff assistants did this. Red Cross also furnished 100 additional box lunches and two five gallon containers of coffee to go with the train.

"Also when Red Cross was advised the boys had lost all their personal possessions, a group of surgical dressing workers made kits and we filled them with razor blades, tooth brush, tooth paste, and comb, also a razor. Material for the kits was partially donated. These kits were not elaborate but extremely appreciated by the boys.

"Also I would like to add these were completed within one hour and a half after requested; it did take longer to obtain the supplies but the kits were ready and filled before the hospital train was loaded. I personally checked with Military the list for identification was definite.

"Two staff assistants were stationed at the gate day and night Friday and Saturday to speed the entrance of parents and relatives requested to come. Motor Corp transported people from Knoxville to Oak Ridge when notified of the time of arrival.

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"When requested by the hospital at 8 a.m. Friday, nurse's aide trainee gave 47 hours. Major Rae stated, 'Their achievement is something to be proud of. The help they gave us in the recent disaster was invaluable and we consider them an integral part of the hospital.'

"The injured remained in the hospital after the hospital train left and the wives or parents, sometimes both, came to stay until they were able to be transferred. Red Cross was called upon for many things — loans, advice as to train schedules, we provided magazines, cigarettes, gum, etc.

"I called at the hospital twice a day and was called by telephone many times a day. We were called upon to make telephone calls to relatives reporting conditions, sending wires. Two of the injured died and Red Cross assisted Military in helping the family make plans, contacting funeral homes, arranging transportation, making reservations notifying relatives of the deaths.

"When some were ready to be taken to North Carolina, Red Cross contacted the field director at Moore General to arrange a place for four wives to stay as Military felt they should go there for a few days with their husbands. We helped wives contact home to arrange for the care of children left. We arranged for them to be taken to Knoxville to catch a bus.

"Red Cross arranged for barbers to shave the injured until they were able to shave themselves. Also Red Cross supplied a new outfit of clothing for the three porters and supplied them with magazines and cigarettes."

A further insight in to the intense impact of the troop train wreck tragedy is also provided by a handwritten note received by the Red Cross from a distraught mother of one of the young soldiers killed in the train wreck:

July 11, 1944

Dear Chairman:

As I have been a township chairman of the Red Cross and was always glad to be of some service in time of trouble, now that trouble has come to me, I too, am turning to the Red Cross.

My son, Raymond B. Rillie, was killed in that wreck near Jellico. All we know is just the official telegram, and would surely appreciate any information or newspaper articles you could send us. Raymond just entered the Army June 26, 1944, and we thought he was safe at Fort Benjamin Harrison until the telegram on Saturday night.

We are waiting for his remains now and some times I feel I cannot stand it any longer, but still there is some consolation in being able to have my son home.

If you can have some chairman write me, it will mean so much.

Mrs. Raymond J. Rillie  
434 Borth Place, Warren, Ohio

Many Red Cross volunteers served during the response to the wreck in the various hospitals and communities nearby Jellico. From Oak Ridge to Jellico, every town got involved. Maurine Owen, executive secretary of the Anderson County American Red Cross, was heavily involved in the Red Cross response to the troop train wreck. It is reported that she went for 36 hours straight without a break to lie

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down or sleep. 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.

After the event, and documented in the Red Cross history, is the following letter of appreciation from Col. K.D. Nichols, the district engineer for the Manhattan District.

July 24, 1944:

Your efforts in connection with the rescue work at the accident undoubtedly saved lives and reduced the suffering of the injured men. Your prompt and conscientious handling of messages and replies to and from relatives of the injured and dead reduced greatly the worry and anxiety of many anguished people.

This station, victims of the accident, and their relatives owe a debt of gratitude to you and your organization.

Sincerely, K D Nichols

Obviously, the Red Cross did a great job supporting the response to the 1944 troop train disaster. Finally, let me share a bit more history of the Oak Ridge Red Cross, now the Appalachian Chapter of the American Red Cross. The present building was first occupied Jan. 1, 1945. Until then they had operated out of a small office in the Elm Grove Shopping Center. Services had consisted of assisting the full range of civilian workers in Oak Ridge in addition to the military personnel. Because of the unusual nature of the secret military effort being undertaken, it was decided that one agency, the Red Cross, would handle all needed services.

Since its beginning in December 1943, the unusual arrangement between the military and the Red Cross worked well. Need for services continued to grow as the project ballooned in scope and people coming to live and work in Oak Ridge. A swimming pool opened in the late summer of 1944 allowing swimming classes to be conducted under the supervision of the Red Cross. Expanded services were being implemented as quickly as the need was identified and volunteers could be trained and scheduled.

The new facility located at 908 Oak Ridge Turnpike near Tyler Road made the Red Cross more easily accessible. The building's entry lounge in the center of the building could accommodate 60 people, making it an excellent venue for the general public to hold meetings and other functions. It also had large production room with excellent lighting as well as adequate office space and electric sewing machines.



The building remains functional even today and sees a great amount of routine community service activities. While the structure is over 60 years old, it continues to serve the necessary functions.

In 1947, the Oak Ridge Chapter was granted a charter independent of the Anderson County Chapter. This was the direct result of the significant amount of effort required to address the needs in Oak Ridge through a multi-tiered approach and the need to streamline services.

908 Oak Ridge Turnpike, the building where the Red Cross has been located since January 1, 1945

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Over the years the organizational arrangement has continued to evolve until in 1987 the Anderson County Chapter and the Oak Ridge Chapter merged together to form the Appalachian Chapter. Now the Appalachian Chapter, located in Oak Ridge, is the central location for service to all of Anderson County. Over 180,000 people are in the service area of this consolidated local Red Cross organization.

In 2002, a community fund raising effort resulted in the purchase of an Emergency Response Vehicle. It has expanded the response capability of the organization substantially. Tim Myrick was a key volunteer that helped make this increased capability a reality.

In 2005, hurricanes Katrina and Rita resulted in the Appalachian Chapter providing substantial relief responses. Many victims of those devastating hurricanes moved into the area and were assisted by the local Red Cross and their volunteers.

The Appalachian Chapter of the American Red Cross is today a strong and healthy organization. The following officers serve the organization: Margaret Morrow, chapter chairman; Tony Farris, chapter manager; Scott Chippendale, disaster services coordinator; Michelle Davis, community services coordinator.

Approximately one-third the funding needed to operate the local Red Cross comes from the United Way of Anderson County. The remainder is supplied by other donations. Services provided include disaster relief, community disaster education, armed forces emergency services, health and safety, and community volunteer services. We are well served by our local Red Cross.

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The Emergency Response Vehicle provides added capability for quick and effective response

This overview of the history of the Red Cross in our area wraps up the series on the Oak Ridge response to the July 6, 1944, troop train wreck in the Jellico Narrows of Highcliff, Tenn. I hope you have enjoyed the series as much as I have enjoyed researching and writing the story.