

# K-25 History important to Oak Ridge Heritage Tourism

(As published in *The Oak Ridger's Historically Speaking* column on January 29, 2008)

Last week, I explained some of the reasons that Oak Ridge and its area are uniquely suited to becoming a heritage tourism destination.

Along with the idea of expanding the heritage area beyond the Manhattan Project to include other historic sites, such as Lake City's Coal Mining Museum and the Children's Museum of Oak Ridge, I discussed the importance of preserving key historic structures and equipment so that visitors can actually experience "the real thing," not just read or see pictures of it. Below, I continue with more observations about the benefits of working towards a heritage tourism designation

1. K-25 is the only place in Oak Ridge where visitors, without access limitations, will be able to go for years to come where they can readily see actual once secret Manhattan Project World War II equipment in context that also contributed so greatly to the winning of the Cold War. This history is unique to Oak Ridge and no other location in our nation has such valuable and marketable history. Heritage tourists are attracted to sites with such claims.
2. Making K-25 into a heritage tourism destination will add more tourists to the American Museum of Science and Energy. Our museum is a part of our heritage, having been created at the exact same time as the city was opened to the public. It is a vital key element in our heritage tourism strategy. However, it can function as the central point of the tourist experience from which the experiential elements radiate.

From AMSE, the tourist, with proper security arrangements, can experience the Y-12 and ORNL elements, but with no added requirements, the tourist could experience the K-25 withdrawal alley and learn the secret things that were done during the Manhattan Project and the Cold War. The attraction of an actual Manhattan Project experience will draw World War II enthusiasts. See the immediate benefit to our economy?

Recently, Steve McCracken, DOE ORO's Environmental Management manager, asked the Site Specific Advisory Board – his normal source of public input regarding environmental management issues, to help provide public comment on the preservation of K-25's North Tower. The public meeting is scheduled for February 7, 2008, at the Pollard Auditorium. Your input counts...please attend and express your support for the importance of K-25's history.

The Oak Ridger has created a poll on the question, "Should a part of K-25 in Oak Ridge be saved for future generations?" <http://www.oakridger.com/opinion/>. Response thus far shows a 2 to 1 vote in favor of retaining something there for the visitor experience.

K-25 is but the most urgent of Oak Ridge's historic sites. Both Y-12 and the Oak Ridge National Laboratory will be facing decisions regarding demolition of facilities and still retaining the historic significance of the important sites. The Integrated Facilities Disposition Program is being planned to follow in the current DOE Environmental Management demolitions at K-25.

There are also other historic elements near K-25 that can play a role in the creation of a tourist destination there. One of the important historic elements is the Wheat Community, one of the pre-Manhattan Project communities located just east of K-25. Their story is one of personal sacrifice and dedication to the war effort. The George Jones Memorial Baptist Church and graveyard and the stone marker commemorating the Crawford Cumberland Presbyterian Church, the Poplar Creek Seminary, Roane College and Wheat High School. This impressive marker is very difficult to see because of the growth along the bank above the road.

Additionally, the African Burial Ground, several other pre-Manhattan Project cemeteries and the planned Southern Appalachian Railroad Museum with its Secret City Train are additional nearby potential tourist attractions. And that is just one location in west Oak Ridge! There are several other historic areas with potential within our city.

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There is also the very real possibility that Oak Ridge and other nearby communities could join forces to create a National Heritage Area and capitalize on Heritage Tourism. As I have observed before, starting at Lake City (Coal Creek) coal mining museum – an idea Buck Wilson is promoting strongly, and including TVA's historic Norris Dam and the historic planned city of Norris, the renowned and widely known Museum of Appalachia, the Clinton 12's desegregation struggle, Oak Ridge and even Harriman and Kingston could form a Heritage Area.

Collectively, these communities could build a strong coalition for Heritage Tourism. The Department of Energy can also support heritage tourism as a collaborative effort with communities where they are located. With the interstates passing close by and the heavy volume of traffic going both east and west as well as north and south, even a rather small percentage of this heavy traffic would mean substantial heritage tourism dollars.

Gordon Fee provided the following statistics on Tennessee tourism destinations. Dollywood in Pigeon Forge is number 1 in the state, Ripley's Aquarium in Gatlinburg is number 3, Ober Gatlinburg is number 5. Many of these folks go RIGHT BY Oak Ridge on the interstates. If we could draw a small percentage of them, think what that could mean to our economy.

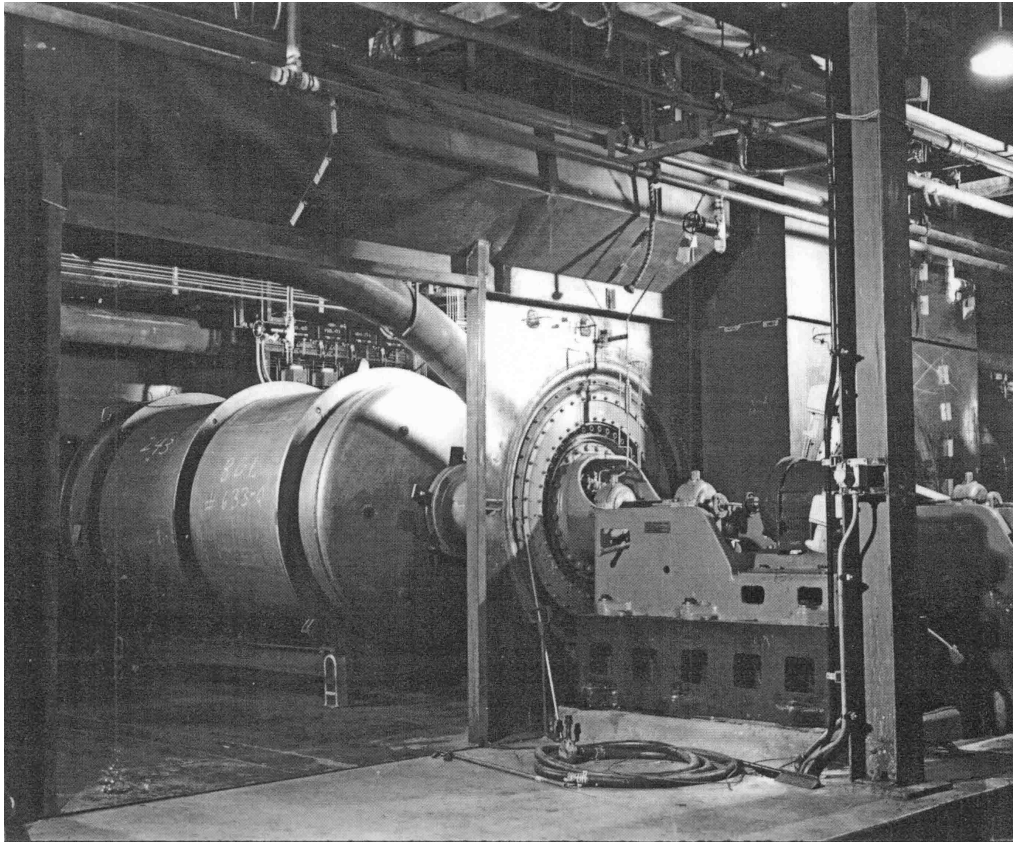
One last statistic, Casey Jones Village in Jackson, TN is the number 8 tourist attraction in Tennessee! If you have ever been there, you know there is very little there to see, yet it is a popular stopping place for tourist...all because of the legend of Casey Jones. Come on, surely the Manhattan Project and Oak Ridge's scientific research is a larger draw than a legend.

I mentioned Katy Brown, of the Oak Ridge Convention and Visitors' Bureau, at the beginning of this article. She and her staff along with a group of volunteers are working to implement heritage tourism. We in Oak Ridge have a unique heritage. We just need to learn to better use that heritage to our advantage.

Katy and the visitor's bureau cannot do this job alone. All of us will have to seek ways we can personally support the effort of the city and others who attempt to take us to the next level of tourism and economic growth. We need to look at cities where heritage tourism is done well and learn from them.

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One of the 3,000 diffusers and drive motors in the K-25 Gaseous Diffusion "U" Building - a close-up view in its historical setting will help the visitor to understand the complexity of the process