

Heritage Tourism and Hot Air Balloons

(As published in The Oak Ridger's Historically Speaking column on October 21, 2008)

Continuing the thought on our heritage and what tourism possibilities might exist for us. You may recall that recently I published an article focusing on the fact that heritage tourism was not included in the seven "Core Issues" City Council identified. I also encouraged anyone who would like to learn more to attend a meeting scheduled to coincide with the Governor's Conference on Tourism in Gatlinburg. I am pleased to express my sincere thanks to Charlie Hensley who took me up on my offer and attended the meeting.

I believe Charlie learned some things he did not realize existed and found a networking opportunity that allowed him to meet some key individuals in sustainable tourism in Tennessee. The meeting was chaired by Susan Whitaker, state Commissioner of Tourist Development.

I took the opportunity to give her copies of the film documentaries, *Secret City: The Oak Ridge Story – The War Years* and *Secret City: The Oak Ridge Story – 1945 – 2006*. She was excited to get copies and indicated she wanted to show them to some folks in other parts of the state that should be doing similar films to promote their heritage. She obviously knew about Oak Ridge and our historical heritage. She said that we, in Oak Ridge, had tremendous potential for Heritage Tourism and she hoped we would fully capitalize on its potential. Amen!

In the Saturday, 9/27/08, Knoxville News Sentinel's business section, a column titled *Talking Tourism*, she also stated that tourism resulted in \$14.2 billion in economic impact for Tennessee in 2007, including \$1.1 billion in sales tax revenue. She went on to say this was a 6.2 percent increase over the previous year.

Susan concluded by stating that Tennessee is now ranked among the top 10 states in the country in number of visitors per year. We should be getting a greater share of those tourism dollars! Oak Ridge may well be one of Tennessee's greatest and as yet unrealized heritage areas of potential growth...we sure have been a most "secret" one! We should change that!

Governor Bredesen said, "Tennessee needs to look at ways it can leverage its tourist attractions to create even more economic opportunities." He compared the recent effort to bring the Volkswagen plant to Chattanooga as the type of effort that should be made to develop potential tourist areas. Oak Ridge is, in my opinion, a place with huge potential for heritage tourism that is virtually untapped. Why don't we collectively work to promote our heritage to visitors? Why not seek ways to draw more visitors?

Recently, the Community Reuse Organization of East Tennessee, announced a plan to develop a portion of the Heritage Center at East Tennessee Technology Park in an attempt to be better prepared to attract support industry for the Volkswagen plant in Chattanooga. Great idea! That area has exceptional potential with the K-25 history, the Southern Appalachia Railroad Museum that is planned, the African Burial Ground, Wheat, Happy Valley as cultural heritage assets that could well be a compliment to the industries being courted to locate there.

We should promote collaboration there to use our heritage to advantage to promote the Heritage Center. While decisions are still being made regarding what can be physically preserved, documentary films, books, historical fact sheets, tours and living history exhibits could add to the appeal of the site.

Along with other potential attractions nearby, such as the Green McAdoo Cultural Center, The Museum of Appalachia, the Coal Mining Museum and Cultural Heritage Trails in Lake City (soon to be renamed back to the original "Coal Creek"), the growing human powered sports in Oak Ridge and even the annual Hot

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Air Balloon Festival at Pellissippi State are all potential tourism draws. We should take full advantage of each opportunity to draw visitors to Oak Ridge.

Recently David Rogers, a Virginian who has ties to Lake City said, "...certainly the Appalachian coal culture and so many rich stories and events surrounding that special area, should be an important part of the historical tapestry" of our region. He spoke of a "cultural corridor" for Heritage Tourism from Lake City to Oak Ridge. Good idea!

The recent Hot Air Balloon Festival at Pellissippi State is an excellent example of regional potential. With a gathering of 25 hot air balloons coming from as far away as Albuquerque, New Mexico, home of the Energizer Bunny Hot Hare balloon that was by far the largest and the most unusual of the 25 balloons to "blow" around the lake on the college campus just off Pellissippi Parkway at Hardin Valley Road. At 166 feet tall the world's largest hot air balloon is 15 feet taller than the Statue of Liberty according to their web site: http://www.energizer.com/energizer-bunny/hot-hare-balloon/Pages/hot_hare_balloon.aspx

I wonder what we in Oak Ridge did to capitalize on the recent festival so close to our city? There was a huge crowd there for the "blow" to music at 8:00 PM on Saturday evening. Why not work with the college to arrange for hot air balloon flights over Oak Ridge? Let them land and provide the passengers with something special from Oak Ridge. Why not provide something complimentary to the festival in Oak Ridge at the same time?

Zero Energy Homes being built in the heart of Oak Ridge! Yet another example of something we in Oak Ridge should promote as unique to our practical scientific minded community. Can't you see it now, a huge banner flying over the entrance to the Crossroads at Wolf Creek saying "Come see ZEBRA!"

And when folks get there a promotional explanation (visual, of course) of what is being done and why could be provided along with handouts of information that promotes energy conservation. ZEBRA stands for Zero Energy Building Research Alliance, but I just could not resist the play on the acronym as an attractive sign to draw the inquisitive visitors.

Keep thinking creatively and maybe we can rethink the seven "Core Issues" to add an eighth one – Heritage Tourism!

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The recent “blow” by some 25 hot air balloons at Pellissippi State drew a huge crowd. How should Oak Ridge participate in such area events?