

Heritage Tourism and Hot Air Balloons

(As published in The Oak Ridger's Historically Speaking column on October 28, 2008)

On Saturday, October 18, 2008, Connie Bolling celebrated his 100th birthday. He received a letter from President and Laura Bush, a proclamation from the City of Oak Ridge designating his 100th birthday as Connie Bolling Day in Oak Ridge, a letter from Zach Wamp and several cards from friends and family. The recreation room was filled to capacity at the newly named Greenfield Senior Living center that was until recently the Oak Ridge Retirement Center as the party gathered to celebrate Connie's 100th birthday.

One unusual item Connie received was a poster of the famous Ed Westcott image of the Calutron Girls with Connie standing in the back as their supervisor that was signed by numerous Y-12 workers wishing Connie a happy 100th birthday.

Connie had returned to Y 12 on two occasions recently and served to provide the official welcome to each and every Secret City Festival Y 12 public tour participant who toured the Beta 3 calutrons in June, 2005, and who ventured into the Y 12 History Exhibit Hall at the New Hope Center in June, 2008. Both were joyous occasion for all, but especially so for Connie.

On that June day in 2008 Connie proudly sat near a poster of the famous Ed Westcott image "The Calutron Girls" and explained constantly that he was "the supervisor standing in the rear" of the photo featuring the girls. He is Y-12's most senior "ambassador" for sure.

Connie recalled fondly the time in June, 2005, when he and Gladys Owens served as host and hostess for the Y 12 public tours of Building 9204 3 (Beta 3) where the calutrons remain to this day. It was the only time the public had been granted access to that historic site in such large numbers. The only way to get congressman Wamp's photo in the paper that day was to gently push him in the middle of Connie and Gladys.

When Connie last toured Y-12 and we passed Beta 3, he told again of the years he worked there and how important that work was for the world. The medical isotope program that is so well known as an Oak Ridge National Laboratory mainstay over the years, had its genesis in the calutrons of Building 9731 and Beta 3 — the same equipment that separated the uranium for Little Boy.

Connie was born in Flat Gap, Virginia, way back in the woods. He was one of 16 children who shared an outdoor toilet and worked hard on a farm. He knew as a young child that hard work would be needed to get out of that backwoods farm life.

Yet, Connie has written often of his childhood in *Growing up on Cumberland*, a homespun witty column, published in local newspapers both in Virginia and here in Anderson County. There he described numerous adventures and misadventures of his childhood. His funny stories are even funnier when you realize he is not making them up, they actually happened to him!

Many stories of Connie's youth have been documented in his long running column printed in several newspapers over the years. The column was always known as *Growing up on Cumberland*, regardless of the newspaper for which he wrote. Through this medium Connie has recorded rich, varied and colorful stories enjoyed by readers through the years. He continues even today to publish his articles in Anderson County *Visions Magazine*.

Connie went to Emory and Henry College in Southwest Virginia while working as a hired hand on a nearby farm and as a coal miner. He then taught school for 14 years during which he married a fellow teacher, Katherine Edwards. The young family added a new baby girl before Connie learned of a new opportunity in a place in Tennessee called Oak Ridge.

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While he did not know much of anything about this work, he took the opportunity to "better himself." The employment office was in Knoxville, but Connie soon learned the work was with the new activity in what would become Oak Ridge. He spent his first night in Knoxville on a rented cot in a massage parlor.

Thereafter, he slept in his car until living arrangements could be improved. He has fond memories of what was called "The Castle on the Hill," where his initial training about the Y-12 calutrons took place. Because he was already trained as a teacher and had actual experience teaching, he was soon chosen to teach others how to operate calutrons.

In a couple of months, he was able to bring his family to Oak Ridge. This was in 1943 and Connie and his family have been in Oak Ridge ever since. After teaching the Calutron Girls (young girls right out of high school that Tennessee Eastman hired to operate the calutrons) to operate the complicated yet simply controlled machines. Connie soon became a supervisor of Calutron operators. As he had taught many of the young ladies, he was already trusted by them and they knew he was knowledgeable of the machines.

Except for a period spent working in personnel, Connie was always involved in the process of the refinement of uranium at Y-12. Because of his leadership abilities, he spent a period of several years doing special work planning for the production areas of Y-12.

Central in his life has been his church affiliation, namely Kern Memorial United Methodist Church, where he was critically active for decades. Now he is largely inactive because of physical limitations.

Connie's other passion was writing that newspaper column. He first wrote the column, "Growing up on Cumberland" for The Coalfield Progress in Norton, Virginia. He kept that up for 30 years; then he wrote for The Oak Ridger for many years. He currently contributes a monthly column to *Anderson County's Visions Magazine*.

When Connie came to Y 12 in early 1943, there were no dormitories yet completed in Oak Ridge. He actually arrived here before some of the farmers had left their homes, and a few people coming in to work on this new and exciting effort actually lived with those farmers.

Connie slept one night in his car near the newly constructed administration building in Oak Ridge. He was already 35 years old at that time and a school teacher. Yet, here he was, in a strange new place in the middle of East Tennessee. He says he was just proud to be able to do something to help work on the war effort.

Connie was trained to operate calutrons and quickly began to teach others to operate them. His teaching background made that a natural step. He was soon promoted to supervisor of calutron operators and continued in that capacity throughout the war effort.

After Y-12 transitioned from an electromagnetic separation plant to a weapons production plant, Connie supported operations through work planning initiatives saving considerable time and resources for Y-12's primary mission of producing components for nuclear weapons.

Connie Bolling is truly one of Oak Ridge's citizens who reflect the dedication and pride in accomplishment that so admirably represent those who worked here during the tremendously exciting Manhattan Project era and who chose to remain long after that excitement turned into a more routine experience.

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Connie is most proud to claim the title of “Ambassador for Y 12,” which he will tell you if you talk to him very long at all. Now that he has reached the century milestone, Connie may think of slowing down a bit.

He is the last remaining charter member of Kern Methodist Church and has outlived most all his early co-workers. He was an active member there for years. Now he attends the church services at the retirement home.

Connie still calls me regularly just to “see how Y-12 is doing?” I always am proud when he calls for he constantly tells me how much he enjoys the columns I write for the two Oak Ridge newspapers. Being a long time writer, he appreciates the importance of a pat on the back. And he is good at it!

Connie Bolling at 100 years of age is still young at heart and full of spirit. It is a pleasure to know him and to appreciate all that he has contributed to Oak Ridge over the years.

He is truly one of Oak Ridge’s citizens who reflect the dedication and pride in accomplishment that so admirably represent those who worked here during the tremendously exciting Manhattan Project era and who chose to remain long after that excitement turned into a more routine experience. A title Connie is most proud to claim is that of “Ambassador for Y-12,” which he will tell you if you talk to him very long at all. At 100 years of age, he is certainly Y-12’s most senior ambassador!



Connie holds the matted poster from Y-12 wishing him a happy 100th birthday and showing the calutron girls he supervised during the Manhattan Project

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Connie poses with an original calutron girl, Peggy Stuart