

# Is the Answer In Oak Ridge?

*(As published in The Oak Ridger's Historically Speaking column on December 30, 2008)*

Occasionally an opportunity comes our way that enables us to tell our Oak Ridge heritage story to a huge television audience. When this happens, several individuals and organizations in Oak Ridge can be relied upon to give unselfishly of themselves to make a great impression for which the rest of us can take pride.

Such occasions as the History Channel's *Secret Cities of the A-bomb*, and *Modern Marvels* have resulted in good coverage of Oak Ridge in months past. A few weeks ago, I was contacted by e-mail by Kristen Vaurio representing the Lion Television production company of New York City when an e-mail was passed on to me from ORNL's public relations group.

Attached to the e-mail was a patent that looked to me like something to do with the Calutrons. My first thought was to ask Scott Aaron about it. He confirmed my first impression. I put him in contact with the Lion Television representative by phone and Scott answered her questions about the patent. I thought that was the end of that.

However, a week or so later, she contacted me again by phone. She wanted to know if there were any records of the two individuals who filed the patent having worked in Oak Ridge. I assured her they had indeed worked here and gave her the information to contact the proper officials in DOE ORO to inquire about official records of past employees. Again, I thought that was the end of that.

Yet, a few days later, Kristen called me back all excited. She said she thought the decision was about to be made to pursue the patent as one of their History Detective shows. She said she would hand me off to a producer. Within minutes I was getting both e-mails and phone messages from Laura Marini, producer for History Detectives, a program Lion Television produces for the Public Broadcasting System.

That was the start of a whole slew of daily e-mails and phone conversations. All of which were full of good questions and fun exchanges of information. Laura is a quick study. She often asked intelligent probing questions about nuclear physics. It was fun to help her learn the basics of Oak Ridge's role in the Manhattan Project.

Late one night she left me a phone message and I happened to listen to it early the next morning. Thinking I would call and just leave a message on her voice mail as it was 6:00 AM and surely she would have her cell phone turned off, I called her. Well, to my surprise, a sleepy voice answered. I had awakened her. I later learned that she used the cell phone as her alarm clock! That was a bit embarrassing for me, but did not seem to bother her at all.

I am pleased that this highly professional group chose to do a program that included Oak Ridge. I feel confident you readers will enjoy the program they have created. I will be sure and give notification in the Historically Speaking column when the program airs, likely in June or July 2009.

The following contribution to Historically Speaking is provided by Bill Wilcox, Oak Ridge City Historian, Co-Chair of the Partnership for K-25 Preservation and board member of the Oak Ridge Heritage & Preservation Association and Nicky Reynolds, of the Oak Ridge Convention and Visitors' Bureau.

First Bill's take on the week's events:

"In your occasional or frequent TV watching, do start keeping an eye out for a fun program on the Public Broadcasting System, Channel 2 in Knoxville, called "History Detectives." (check out the following link: <http://www.pbs.org/opb/historydetectives/index.html> to learn more about this unique program – Ray)

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"It's on every other week. Their half-hour program audience just increased by a dozen or so of us here in town who spent most of last week helping members of the New York City television production company, Lion Television, chase down the answers to one of their real, live history mysteries.

"This one surfaced when the son of an Oak Ridger went to them asking to learn the story of a patent his father filed way back in October 1945 titled "Isotope Separating Apparatus." This son was born here in World War II, moved not long after, but grew up knowing Oak Ridge was all **top secret**, so his question to the History Detective Wes Cowan was, "Did this invention help win WWII?"

"By 1958, some dozen years after the application was first filed, the United States had decided to grant the patent, assigned it to the USA, declassified it, and sent it to the family with the \$1 they 'generously' give to inventors in their employ if they hold on to the idea. Now some 63 years after the filing by Michael Kudravetz and Harold Greene, the inventor's son, Michael, ran across the old patent and hence his query.

"Naturally, the History Detectives first stop was to check out the isotope separation capital, Oak Ridge, Tennessee. Emails and telephone calls over several weeks to a few Oak Ridgers ended up with folks getting involved at Y-12, ORNL, DOE ORO, UT, and AMSE. We rolled out the red carpet as we have for others who want to tell our story – even though the public ends up usually seeing only a small part of what we tell them. That is just the nature of television shows.

"As soon as the PBS folks sent us the patent in question it was clear that the invention was a way to increase the productivity of the Calutron. So Ray Smith at Y-12 played a key role in helping them with print and video about Y-12's early years, and arranging for them to visit Chestnut Ridge above Y-12 and other places in town and Knoxville to tell their story. And Nicky at the CVB acted as their point person here, hosting and staying with them for their three long days here plus scouting the day before.

"You wouldn't believe the work that goes into this kind of 30 minute show. They worked three 12 hour days, much of it shooting people talking, and then re-shooting it again and again from different angles.

"On Wednesday, their five-person team (augmented at times by three more from Channel 2-locally) went to work, first at the Y-12 Gate House on Scarboro Road, then Ellen Boatner took us up onto the west end of Chestnut Ridge overlooking Y-12. Wouldn't you know it was so rainy, cold, and misty you could barely see Pine Ridge north across the Valley, let alone any of the Alpha Buildings except 9201-4 and 9201-5! But I talked there with Wes about Oak Ridge, World War II, and Y-12.

"From there the group proceeded to AMSE where they filmed how the Calutron and the Patent worked about five times until I finally got it down to less than a minute which seemed to suit.

"Thursday they were on the road to Knoxville before 7:00 AM where they filmed a segment at the UT Library, then back to ORNL where Fred Stohl took them to the Graphite Reactor for a talk with Joe Tracy, who worked many years with the calutrons separating the stable isotopes that have been so important in research and as precursors for production of valuable medical radioisotopes in the Graphite Reactor.

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"Joe also clued them in on the answer to the riddle about the Kudravetz patent. We won't reveal the answer just yet.

"Friday morning at 8:15 AM, the crew descended on Jeanie's "F" house on New York Avenue. The week before, their producer Laura asked me by phone if I knew of a Cemestos they might use as the Kudravetz home. In 1945, the Kudravetz family lived at 111 Englewood, long since replaced with private housing.

"In a spirit of, sure we Oak Ridgers are hospitable, I offered mine and Jeanie's home, not aware that this particular show wouldn't be aired until June - next summer! What was that? Yes, Jeanie's Christmas decorations outside and in had to go. Set back her Christmas spirit just a tad.

"They filmed all day long with Wes Cowan driving in to see Michael Kudravetz to learn his "story", with Wes studying the patent, talking it over, telling him the news at the end of the study, all in different rooms, and then leaving – each sequence done several times to please the Producer, Laura Marini, and the Field Director, Lindsay Carswell, Cameraman Matt Howe, Soundman Brian Gilbert, and Production Assistant Glen Glover - hard working, fun people, real professionals, all.

"But still they weren't through for Friday. The Soup Kitchen was yet to come.

"They left Saturday morning, promising they'll tell us when to watch. We'll be sure to let everyone know when.

"Tough week, but with lots of Ridgers, workers and retirees, across many organizational lines -- ORCVB, Y-12, ORNL, AMSE, ORHPA, and DOE's PR staff all showing we can pull together effectively to tell our story and project our image in the best possible way.

Now for Nicky's reflection on the week's events from her perspective:

"Having the PBS crew in town this week was both exciting and exhausting! They worked round the clock to get as much of Oak Ridge on film as possible, working through rainy, cold weather, and trying their best to work around the schedules of area businesses so they wouldn't hinder their daily traffic or impede visitor experience.

"In my nine years of tourism and Public Relations experience, I've had the good fortune to work with numerous media outlets, both print and film. This crew was, without a doubt, one of the nicest, most professional groups I've ever had the pleasure of working with.

"They took great care in cleaning up after themselves at each location, and replacing all furniture or items that had to be moved for production purposes. They were cordial to all staff persons they encountered. And they made it a point to ask me for recommendations for local restaurants, as they wanted to try the local flavor of Oak Ridge during their stay here.

"I readily handed them a copy of the CVB's Dining Guide and gave them several recommendations when they gave me a specific idea of what they were looking for. I know they dined at the Flatwater Grill, Magnolia Tree, Riverview Grill and Soup Kitchen for dinner during their visit, and at Panera Bread for lunch several times.

"They stayed at the Doubletree here in Oak Ridge, and shopped at our local Walmart and Kroger while in town. In addition, I know that they purchased a gift card for someone

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from Burchfield's as a thank you gift, adding more to our economic impact on the immediate front.

"But it is the far-reaching economic impact of their project that I'm most excited about. When people think about the Manhattan Project, they oft times think about Los Alamos and Hanford. Oak Ridge is many times an afterthought, even in our own state.

"When we get great publicity – and *free national* publicity – like the History Detectives will bring to us, we need to embrace the opportunity given to us and try to take every advantage we can find to promote Oak Ridge.

"The History Detective film crew has had the great fortune to visit many cities and destinations all over this country in pursuit of their stories. Working with them in the weeks leading up to their arrival in Oak Ridge, it was evident to me that they were fascinated by the story of our Secret City and enthralled by all that Bill Wilcox had to tell them.

"Laura Marini, the Producer, couldn't wait to meet Bill and Ray in person. She told me time and again that she felt as though she already knew them both through their phone and email conversations.

"We are so fortunate to have two great historians who have both the required facts and the determination to preserve our history, who are both eager and willing to share their valuable time and knowledge with journalists when they come to town. It makes my job easier and makes the media happier! (Awww shucks! - Ray )

Laura and her crew filmed in a number of locations as Bill has noted. I got to be with them at Bill and Jeanie's home and at the Soup Kitchen. The rest of the week, I was spending time with my grandkids!

I hope you have enjoyed reading about this film crew's time in Oak Ridge and I hope you will tune in to Knoxville's PBS Channel 2 and enjoy the History Detectives show. As promised, I will let you know when the show featuring Oak Ridge is to be aired, likely in June or July, 2009.



Lion TV Producer Laura Marini and Bill Wilcox, our city historian



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Wes Cowan, History Detective, Bill Wilcox, our own TV star and Michael Kudravetz, the son of the patent holder



In the Soup Kitchen, Wes Cowen researches the patent as he is filmed by cameraman, Matt Howe under the watchful eye of producer, Laura Marini