

A brief history of the Holiday Bureau

By: D. Ray Smith | *Historically Speaking* | The Oak Ridger | April 15, 2008

As is often the case, I got a phone call suggesting this week's subject for an upcoming *Historically Speaking* column. I certainly do appreciate the loyal following this column has generated. The feedback when I miss the mark is helpful, but the encouraging remarks help keep me focused on what interests you readers and are most appreciated.

This week I want to introduce you to the history and work of the Holiday Bureau. You will learn of a group of folks who are dedicated to serving children in a unique manner. They have all been doing this for a number of years. Some have been at it longer than others. It is obvious that they enjoy the work — and it is work.



An older photo of Holiday Bureau volunteers, their role or specialty include: Jean Berry, seated, clothing; standing, from left, Don Kelsheimer, president; Nancy Kelsheimer, games and puzzles; Buzz Muckenthaler, battery toys; Gear Valentine, now deceased, bicycles; Meg Schrieber, school supplies; Milt Sealand, battery toys; Jean Anderson, general work, sorting; Mary Jane Lindner, books; Jim Bowers, board member; Gordon Lindner, books; Dave White, repair and paint; Jim Gibson, bicycles; and John

Can you imagine how much labor is involved in collecting, cleaning, repairing, packaging and dispensing used toys? It is an enormous undertaking. Those who do this work are to be commended. The service they provide is much needed. I am told that a very high percentage of the toys come from Oak Ridge donations and almost all of the toys are distributed to people outside Oak Ridge. This is one more example of Oak Ridge being a good neighbor to surrounding communities.

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The Holiday Bureau has served Anderson County for 64 years. Most of the early history comes from word of mouth. The Bureau started in 1944, when two GIs upon returning from the war found a need for toys and started collecting, repairing and distributing them to the less fortunate families.

It is believed that in the beginning, only 25 or 30 families were helped. The area at that time was known as the Manhattan Project and more specifically, as the Clinton Engineer Works. Here is yet another example of our lasting heritage that began in the earliest days of Oak Ridge.

Sometime during the first few years, the local American Legion Chapter No. 100 got involved and Charles Jackson served as director. Jackson worked for the Atomic Energy Commission. This is typical of much of the early volunteer efforts whereby those who worked at the government sites or the administrative offices of the government oversight groups took the lead to meet the needs of the communities where workers lived. This trend continues and individuals who work at various jobs in Oak Ridge can still be seen today taking the lead in Oak Ridge and surrounding communities to make needed things happen.

After a couple of years, people started donating money to buy food baskets. The baskets were given mostly to families in the northern part of the county. This was the coal mining area. Jackson served until 1958, when he was replaced by Jerry Goldberg, who served as director until his death in 1979.

During Goldberg's leadership, the bureau decided to incorporate in order to receive funds from a broader base including corporations. The charter was approved on Nov. 26, 1971.

Because the bureau had incorporated, the American Legion had to withdraw as the sponsor. Goldberg remained as director but worked under a board of directors and a set of bylaws. This evolution was intended to allow the bureau to grow larger and help more needy families.

Up until 1990, the bureau worked out of a number of locations. These were mainly old dormitories, a union hall, and finally, the tin building, located on the property at the southeast corner of what was once called the Daniel Arthur Rehabilitation Center.

Upon Goldberg's death, Nat Johnson became the director in 1979 and served until his death in 1990. During his 12 years as director, he decided that it was time for the bureau to try to find a place of its own. Under his guidance, the bureau petitioned Anderson County government leaders for a piece of property on the east end of the Daniel Arthur property. A fund drive was started, and \$58,000 was raised to build a metal 60 feet by 80 feet, 4,800 sq. ft. building.

The Holiday Bureau's current address is 728-B Emory Valley Road. The home of the bureau is a clean and spacious warehouse that is full of toys on shelves in various stages of preparation for becoming gifts for children. Computers are being rebuilt, puzzles and games are being sorted and packaged, bicycles are either in line for repair or ready to go to a child who will leap for joy when their new bicycle arrives. There are many shelves chocked full of various items being made ready for the next holiday season.

Johnson passed away just as the final stages of construction were winding down. He would have been proud of the accomplishment of getting the bureau its very own well equipped warehouse. The workers are better able than ever before to make the necessary repairs to the toys and other items given away. Each item must be as good as new or it is not given out.

After Johnson's death, Loretta Crane became director. She had worked with the bureau since 1963, and served as deputy director under Johnson. She continued to serve as director until Howard Kirkland became director and served until 1991.

Since opening the new location, the bureau has expanded from giving food baskets and refurbishing toys to providing brand new toys, clothing for all ages, rebuilt computers, used televisions, compact disc players, Christmas items such as trees, lights, decorations and wreaths and even household items.

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If funds are available, the bureau helps families after Aid to Distressed Families of Appalachian Counties has screened and verified the families' need. Most of these families come from the outlying communities and appreciate what Oak Ridgers are doing to help them provide for their children.

In October 1993, Don Kelsheimer became the bureau's director. Don showed me around the warehouse recently and talked with pride about each and every operation. He spoke of each task by telling me who did that particular part of the job. It is obvious the entire volunteer staff is fully committed to the high quality and attention to detail that has come to be a hallmark of the Holiday Bureau.

The Holiday Bureau Inc. of Anderson County has served all of Anderson County and portions of Campbell, Morgan and Roane counties over the years. Many families benefit from the gifts when parents or guardians might otherwise have to explain to the children why they wouldn't be getting those gifts. With the bureau's help, these families are able to have quality gifts and other needed items for the holidays.

To qualify, one must show proof of residence, proof of income and proof of each child's age, (birth to 13 years of age). If grandparents show they have legal custody of the children, they can receive the same privileges as the parents.

During the first part of October, announcements are sent out as to when and where sign-ups will take place. The bureau has two, two-day give out dates.

One two-day period is set aside for food (baskets or vouchers) and clothing. Two other two-day periods are set aside for toys. Most of the items have to be picked up at the bureau, but food vouchers are delivered to Clinton Towers, Callaghan Towers and Auburn Hills. These are clients asking only for food.

When clients come in for toys, one family member is allowed to come in the toy warehouse to pick out toys. The family members are escorted by a volunteer to pick out the selected items. As the clients arrive on a give out day — as early as 4 a.m. — they are given numbers to assure they are served according to time of arrival.

The bureau has no paid personnel. There are approximately 25 people working hundreds of hours in preparing for the Christmas season. Two volunteers work to repair battery-operated toys. Four volunteers work to repair bicycles. One person works on computers. One or two people work on dolls, games, puzzles, stuffed animals, school supplies, sporting goods, books, Legos, clothing, Christmas decoration items and household items.

The bureau is normally open 9 a.m. until noon Tuesdays and Saturdays. There is a drop box in front where items can be left at any time of day each day. Upon requests, receipts are available for tax purposes. All donations go to the less fortunate of Anderson County and other surrounding counties. The Holiday Bureau's only expenses are insurance, utilities (heat, lights and phone) and batteries for the toys. Most of the funds come from individuals, in lieu of cards, memorials, churches, real estate agents and clubs.

The bureau is a nonprofit organization. Some \$35,000 is spent on food and \$10,000 on new toys. It is the goal of the bureau to try and give each child one new toy. Approximately \$1,000 is spent on batteries. This is based on 1,000 clients (families) and about 800 children.

Items not up to the bureau's high quality standards are given to two groups to distribute to individuals in their areas.

A group in Lansing, Tennessee is a beneficiary of these items, and a gentleman who takes them to an area in the mountains of Kentucky. Some items are also donated to the Ecumenical Storehouse.

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Nothing is sold or donated to be resold.

Each child, birth through age 12, can receive these appropriate gifts:

1. Bicycle, tricycle, wagon, sled, skateboard, cars that can be rode, tractors, etc.;
2. One large doll and two small dolls (babies);
3. One large stuffed animal and two small stuffed animals;
4. One new toy;
5. Five to seven refurbished toys;
6. Two games;
7. Two to three puzzles;
8. Backpack and school supplies;
9. Roller blades;
10. Six to eight books;
11. Coloring books and crayons;
12. One semi-large and one large toy (tables, chairs or stove);
13. Computer and software;
14. VCR tapes or DVDs;
15. Clothing — eight to 12 pieces.

Each family will receive:

1. Eight to 12 pieces of clothing per individual;
2. One Christmas tree;
3. One wreath;
4. Three to four household items;
5. One food basket or a \$35 food voucher.

The Holiday Bureau has been located at the following places over the years:

1. Dennison Hall — West end of town next to the YMCA. That hall was later demolished.
2. Central labor Union — burned in 1985 (this is where the current Oak Ridge Utility District is located).
3. Off Central Avenue in Jackson Square.
4. Tin building — southeast corner of DARC building.
5. The present location at 728-B Emory Valley Road.

In addition to the long-term directors, there have been five interim directors: Howard Kirkland (over one year); Jim Bowers (one year); Gordon Lindner (one year); Buzz Muckenthalen (one year); and Rodney Kyser (one year).

I am indebted to Kelsheimer, current bureau president, for much of the information in this article. He took the time to hand write much of the history and the details of the bureau's operations.

I hope you now have a better appreciation for another of our historic organizations with beginnings in World War II. The Holiday Bureau continues in the spirit of the two servicemen who returned home to find needy children who were not getting any gifts on Christmas.

These folks are dedicated to serving children and put a lot of personal effort into what for them must be a joyous task. I applaud them!