

# More on Maria, and her daffodils and redbuds

By: D. Ray Smith | Historically Speaking | The Oak Ridger | April 29, 2008

Last week, we introduced the history of the daffodil flowers and redbud trees planted on the scenic Pellissippi Parkway heading south out of Oak Ridge. This week we continue to focus on Maria Compère, the 90-plus year old lady who is the inspiration for the beautification of Pellissippi Parkway.

The plantings along Pellissippi Parkway are excellent and much appreciated. And a bit later we will talk more about how all that came to be. But first, let's look at something closer to home.

We could have the same beauty that exists all along Pellissippi Parkway at the entrances to our city of Oak Ridge. I believe that is a worthy goal. Remember what the determination of Maria Compère accomplished on Pellissippi Parkway!

We already have several redbuds on our north entrance coming up from Oliver Springs. We just need some daffodils. We should extend the combination from the Dr. Herman Postma Memorial Solway Bridge on the Clinch River to the intersection of South Illinois Avenue and Lafayette Drive. While there are already some plantings of daffodils there, plenty of room exists to expand the plantings and to add redbud trees.

Tom Row told me of the effort by The Rotary Club of Oak Ridge, where some 50,000 to 60,000 daffodils have already been planted at some locations in Oak Ridge. However, this effort was replaced a couple of years ago by an attempt to plant dogwoods. Last year was hard on that effort as many of the dogwoods planted died because of the drought.



The K-25 Gatehouse is precariously located in the path of future road improvements – It MUST be preserved as an Oak Ridge historic structure and Heritage Tourism icon

I would like to see the daffodil planting effort revitalized and redbuds added. Now let's look for a minute at other entrances to the city.

At the east entrance there is again a great opportunity to add the mixture. There are already some daffodils planted near the Office of Scientific and Technical Information and the Department of Energy's federal office building, and there are many places along the Oak Ridge Turnpike in the eastern portion of town where more daffodil flowers and redbud trees could be added.

But the greatest opportunity I see for us is our west entrance! What a mess now; but with the proper planning and execution of a well-thought-out approach we can turn a "sow's ear into a silk purse." Daffodil flowers and redbud trees, lots and lots of them, would be a great addition.

Because this recent clear-cutting of all trees along the right-of-way for whatever reason happened so quickly, I became concerned for the historic "Checking Station" on the Oak Ridge Turnpike. I do not want to wake up one morning and find that those historic buildings have disappeared like the trees.

Now there is yet another story ... why was the term "Checking Station" applied to these buildings when

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they were placed on the National Register of Historic Places?

This gatehouse to isolate K-25 was constructed late in 1948, according to Bill Sergeant, in preparation for the opening of the gates to the city of Oak Ridge on March 19, 1949.

This gatehouse was used as the main entrance to K-25 from the city until 1953 when the fence was moved back to the site proper. The other two "gatehouses" (on Scarboro Road and Bethel Valley Road) were built at that same time and also stopped being used in 1953 as the fences for Y-12 and the Oak Ridge National Laboratory were moved back to the sites as well.

While not in danger from this most recent Tennessee Department of Transportation action, the phase that will widen the section of Highway 95 from Westover Drive to the intersection of Highway 95 and 58 near the East Tennessee Technology Park might have the potential for adverse impact.

We MUST assure that will NOT be allowed to happen. Although the road will be widened, accommodations MUST be made in the planning to retain the gatehouse at that general location.

There is a need to greatly expand tourism in Oak Ridge by taking advantage of the appeal of tourists for Heritage Tourism along with other potential tourism attractions in our region. The gatehouse on the Turnpike is a most appropriate symbol of our heritage that should be retained. It could become a centerpiece for posters and billboards for Heritage Tourism in Oak Ridge.

Now, back to the present situation in which we find ourselves with that section of the turnpike being widened. I understand that plans are being made to dig up the daffodils located just west of Jefferson Avenue. The intent is to provide them to citizens to use to plant in other areas of the city. Good idea!

Tom Row is leading this effort to save the daffodils near Jefferson Avenue and the last I heard he was planning to do this on May 10, 2008. If you want to help, contact Tom Row. I am sure he will appreciate all the help he can get. Look for announcements regarding these flowers and how you can help.

Wayne Clark recently planted some daffodils along the southern section of the roadside near the same area. I hope these will be dug up and replanted as well.

I know many are upset by the seemingly overzealous removal of trees "for safety sake," and I hate to see trees cut in our city when we have an official "Tree City" designation. But, these trees were not, for the most part, planned growth and anyway they are gone now. Might as well accept that they are NOT coming back and let's replace them with something even more beautiful.

Maria told me of a golden opportunity for Oak Ridge's interested individuals to work together with the community of Alcoa as there is a potential for Tennessee Department of Transportation grants for the addition of flowers and trees to roadways. She said there is a meeting the last Tuesday of the month, April 29, 2008, where Ruth Pardue will be attending and Maria. If you have an interest, and did not know about the meeting in time to attend, please contact Ruth Pardue.

Remember, we are being asked to meet with a legend! Maria has succeeded where many thought she did not have a chance. We might just learn something from her experience.

She began with pure determination and no money, met a Dutchman named Leo Vanderblud, who made a deal with her that if she would buy 13,000 daffodils bulbs at 10 cents each then he would donate another

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13,000 bulbs. She jumped at the chance and has been planting and selling excellent quality daffodils ever since.

She has still not really slowed down, but has only changed her specific task. She is still the key coordinator. She has the prisoners from Brushy Mountain helping her. They even call her to know if their flowers are blooming, according to Ruth's article. Maria spoke highly of the personnel from the prison as well as the inmates.

Maria said the break rooms and the library at the prison have photographs on the walls of the flowers that prisoners have planted. It gives her great joy to see the pride these men take in helping her with the project. There is more going on here than just planting flowers.

I asked Maria if she still plants the flowers herself. She is over 90 years old, you know! She said she still gets out there, but her job now is to use a can of spray paint to mark the spots where the flowers are to be planted. She HATES straight lines and says that it seems all too often that the men doing the planting tend to want to plant the flowers in straight lines.

She tries to avoid that.

Maria has been recognized for her work by a number of organizations such as Knoxville City Council, the governor and many others. Yet, she remains humble and earnest in her desire to add beauty to the roadways.

I asked her, "when is the best time to plant the flowers?" She replied that usually she tries to get that done in October through December of each year. However, this year was an exception in that the plantings were done in January and February.

Maria is quick to brag on the support she gets. The Department of Transportation applies 20,000 lbs. of fertilizer annually. Knoxville City Council is providing \$2,500 to help this year as she attempts to plant the parkway from I-40 south to the Tennessee River.

I asked Maria where she purchased her daffodils. She said she buys them from a Dutch nursery in Holland as they have the best quality bulbs. She also said the Dutch government pays the shipping cost for her from the nursery to her front door. She carefully explained that their reason for doing that was because they truly wanted to help America beautify our roads. Of course, using Dutch flowers to do that is good for them as well.

Last, Maria and Ruth both said that it is important not to mow the flowers until six weeks after their blooming stage. Also, the flowers must be left to grow ... NO DIGGING them up! Buy your own! Maria sells them. She has some of the best quality daffodils that are available anywhere in the world.

Please consider what we might do to beautify the entrances to our Secret City of Oak Ridge with daffodils and redbuds. After Ruth Pardue returns from the April 29th planning meeting she would welcome anyone who wants to help. Your ideas are needed. Your thoughts are important.

We must do something to overcome the discouragement of losing all those trees. If we replace them by working early with the Tennessee Department of Transportation, we can make the west entrance to our city a real showplace! Daffodils and redbuds, I can just see it now ... what wonderful photographs could be made along that new scenic route into our city.

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And remember, saving the historic gatehouse needs to be included in the planning for the next phase.