

The original Gates Opening Ceremony

(As published in *The Oak Ridger's Historically Speaking* column on March 17, 2009)

Last week's Historically Speaking column featured the details of the planning that went into preparing for *Operation Open Sesame*, the code name for the original gate opening ceremony that allowed public access to the city of Oak Ridge for the first time. The Secret City had been gated for seven years when, on March 19, 1949, four of the main gates were opened allowing unrestricted access for the public to the city.

The Elza, Edgemoor, Solway and Oliver Springs gates were opened and new gatehouses were placed in operation to isolate the three plant sites of K-25 (on the Oak Ridge Turnpike to the west of the main part of the city), Y-12 (at Scarboro Road just before Bear Creek Road) and Bethel Valley Road at the intersection with Illinois Avenue. Interestingly, these new gates were only used until 1953 when the main access gates for the three plants were moved back even closer to the plants and additional fences were erected at the plant boundaries.

Let's look at the actual events of the momentous occasion of March 19, 1949. Bill Wilcox's *The Opening of the Gates to the Secret City*, notes that the first event of the day was at Elza gate on the extreme East end of Oak Ridge along the road to Clinton. The rationale was to open the gates at all four locations, but to feature the Elza gate as the official "welcome" location.

An estimated 10,000 people gathered at the Elza gate near the intersection of Melton Lake Road and the Oak Ridge Turnpike. The special Speaker's Stand was swamped. People filled the roofs of the Guard structures that were decked with red, white and blue bunting.

Lot's of people had walked to the event as the bus strike was entering its third week with no bus service to the city. This frustrated folks and led them to wonder if "normalcy" was a desired state if it meant dealing with things like this bus strike. Remember that for seven years, those living in Oak ridge had not had to worry about anything as many things that would now be required in a "normal" arrangement had all been done for them by the government. This is one reason they were reluctant to support the gate opening.

As a prelude to the big day, there was a Friday evening VIP reception on the 18th held at the American Museum of Atomic Energy then located at 55 Jefferson Avenue. Among the first visitors to the new museum were, Hollywood stars, Adolph Menjue, Lee Bowman, Marie McDonald, Adele Jergens, cowboy star Rod Cameron, Jack Bailey – radio host for "Queen for a Day," and political guests, U. S. Representative Albert Gore, Sr., Tennessee Governor Gordon Browning, Connecticut Senator Brien McMahon – Chairman of the Joint Committee on Atomic Energy – and, Tennessee Senator Estes Kefauver.

I wonder if they all got their souvenir radioactive dime...do you still have yours? These dimes were a mainstay giveaway until in the late 1960's when the percentage of silver in a dime was reduced.

At 8:30 AM, the Reverend Roy C. Arbuckle gave the invocation. John C. Franklin, the Atomic Energy Commission's local manager of Oak Ridge Operations, welcomed the crowd on what he declared as an auspicious occasion. He also noted the "secret was out" that Oak Ridge was the home of atomic energy and thus there was nothing to be gained by continuing to keep the city closed. In fact, he said the plants could be made more secure by separating them from the city.

Community Affairs Director Fred W. Ford was next on the agenda and gave the keynote speech. Thanks to B. B. Blevins, who recognized the small stack of 3" X 5" cards he found as being the original notes for Ford's speech, we have the content of this speech today. Blevins recognized the tremendous value of

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such a find. In the re-enactment of the Gate Opening Ceremony at the 60th Anniversary Gate Opening Celebration, City Manager Jim O'Connor will re-enact Fred Ford's original speech.

I know I promised to give you the full text of Ford's speech and I will do that next week for your records. However, on second thought, it may be best NOT to upstage our City Manager's re-enactment of this speech. I have learned that the exact details of Ford's speech have been deliberately held out of advertisements by Bill Wilcox and the program committee planning the re-enactment. They desire to give Jim O'Connor the opportunity to be the first in 60 years to present the speech publically.

So, I have decided to delay printing the speech, and want to encourage readers to come Saturday morning to hear it in person. The full text of Fred Ford's momentous speech can be heard at that time and then after the fact of its re-enactment, I will document it in *Historically Speaking*.

My thanks to Bill Wilcox for converting the note cards of the Ford speech into text in his *The Opening of the Gates to the Secret City*. This Wilcox document was also the source for much of the rest of this article and may be purchased online at www.secretcitystore.com.

Dr. George T. Felbeck was next on the program and he was to "cut the ribbon" through a most unusual means – atomic energy! Logan Emlet, head of the Operations Division of the Oak Ridge National Laboratory, had named three individuals to be responsible for the successful execution of this first-ever use of atomic energy in such a demonstration. They were, W. Ragan, C. G. Goss and D. D. Walker.

Felbeck, as heard by the crowd through the public address system, made a phone call to the "atomic pile" engineers. The crowd listened attentively as the atomic pile worked (I wonder just what that sounded like?) This went on for three full minutes as the crowd waited in eager anticipation of what was to come.

Then precisely as planned, the signal from the Graphite Reactor (atomic pile in 1949 vernacular) ignited the magnesium section of the ribbon which provided a brilliant flash and huge puff of white smoke. It also ignited the potassium chlorate that created the alarming and unexpected BANG! In one of the photos of the event, people in the front row, both young and old, are obviously alarmed and trying to get away from the "fearsome" explosion. Then all cheered!

By 8:50 AM, the Elza Gate opening ceremony was finished and the gates open for visitors. The other three gates (Edgemoor, Solway and Oliver Springs) had opened at 8:30 AM without ceremony. The center city soon filled with the curious crowd and the streets were heavy with traffic as visitors got a first glimpse of the once "Secret City."

At 10:00 AM there was a "second gate opening ceremony" held on Ogontz Lane. This one was organized by Logan Emlet's young son, Johnny. He had heard the plans from his dad and even talked him into providing a small piece of the magnesium ribbon. Johnny invited the neighborhood kids and actually talked some of them into playing the parts of the visiting stars and dignitaries.

Their gate opening ceremony also had a code name, "Operation Gates – Ajar." *The Oak Ridger* provided coverage for this gate opening as well.

Then at 11:00 AM there was the Parade. My friend, Bill Sergeant led this parade! It formed at Midtown and went up the Turnpike to Tyler Road where it turned left and went to Tennessee Avenue turning right through the main crowd down to Georgia Avenue where it turned right and crossed the Turnpike to disperse on Administration Building Road.

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Tennessee Governor Gordon Browning and Alabama Governor "Kissing" Jim Folsom were a part of the parade as were the Hollywood stars. However, Vice President Alben Barkley and Senators McMahon, Kefauver and other dignitaries from the Capital did not make it in time to participate as their airplane did not arrive until after noon.

When the Washington DC guests finally did arrive, they were taken to the Oak Terrace for lunch. While the honored guests did not arrive for the main parade, it was still an excellent event.

The best story coming out of the parade portion of the day's events, in my opinion, is the one Harold Cofer tells. Frank Munger has captured that story well in *The Knoxville News Sentinel* and has just recently reprinted it on his Oak Ridge Underground blog. So, I will just give you a link to the story rather than repeat it here:

http://blogs.knoxnews.com/knx/munger/2009/03/my_favorite_story_on_oak_ridge.html#more

At 2:30 PM, Master of Ceremonies, Marshall Pengra, Chair of the Program Committee and Manager of WATO, our first radio station, kicked off the major speechmaking part of the day's events. After Reverend R. R. Sala, Pastor of Grace Evangelical Lutheran Church provided the invocation, Pengra introduced the dignitaries and movie stars.

Although there was some consternation by at least one potential speaker who refused to speak because he was not provided the level of recognition he felt entitled to, the speechmaking was a huge success for the crowd, who knew nothing about any squabble for appropriate levels of recognition. Adolph Menjou spoke representing all the Hollywood stars, David Lilienthal - Chairman of the Atomic Energy Commission, Senator Brien McMahon, author of the Atomic Energy Act of 1946, Senator Estes Kefauver and finally Vice President Alben Barkley spoke to the excited and appreciative crowd on Blankenship Field.

All speakers had great and complementary things to say about the history-making Secret City that helped end World War II. They each recognized the importance of the effort and gave homage to the people who had made it possible. I am sure Oak Ridger's were most proud that day.

At 4:00 PM there was a Woman's Club Fashion Show held at the Oak Ridge High School auditorium. Vice President Barkley's daughter, Mrs. Max Truitt and Marie McDonald were Guests of Honor.

At 7:00 PM at the Oak Terrace in Grove Center there was a banquet. This was the largest venue the town had to offer. Attorney and later Judge Frank Wilson, Chairman of the Speaker's Committee was the Master of Ceremonies.

The main speakers after dinner were Senator Brien McMahon and Governor Gordon Browning. At 11:00 PM a festive floor show featuring appearances by Marie McDonald and Rod Cameron and climaxed with a Grand March led by Governor Browning and Marie McDonald with dancing continuing until 2:00 AM.

Much of this day's historic events will be replicated on March 21, 2009, as we celebrate the 60th anniversary of this momentous occasion. Honored guests will recreate some of the most memorable moments, including Gerald Boyd as John Franklin, Jim O'Connor as Fred Ford, and others.

Make your plans now to take part in the historic re-enactment of the Gate Opening Ceremony events. At 8:30 AM, be at Elza Gate on the east end of Oak Ridge Turnpike. At 10:30 AM be at the American Museum of Science and Energy Auditorium for the premier showing of the new Keith McDaniel DVD Gate Opening Documentary Film and much more. At 12:30 PM be at the Wildcat Den or Midtown Community

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Center at the corner of Robertsville Road and the Oak Ridge Turnpike for a lunch hosted by Heartland TV Series' Bill Landry.

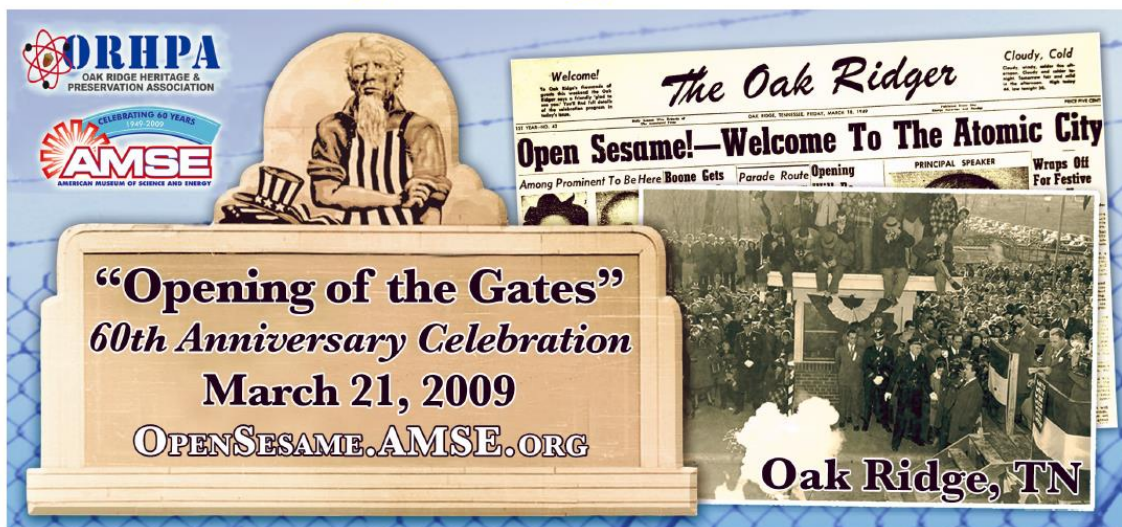
The lunch is the only event with a cost. \$20 will get you lunch and more. Contact Margaret Allard at 607-1122 for tickets. In addition to the DVD Historic Documentary Film, *Operation Open Sesame*, a 227 page photographic history book documenting the events of the gate opening will be available for purchase.



Fred Ford delivers the primary speech at the Elza Gate Opening Ceremony

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Gate Opening Celebration



SCHEDULE OF EVENTS

EVENT ONE: ELZA GATE OPENING CEREMONY—ELZA (OAK RIDGE TURNPIKE AT MELTON LAKE DRIVE) 8:30 AM

EVENT TWO: OAK RIDGE 60 YEARS AGO—AMSE 10:30 AM

EVENT THREE: OPENING GATES LUNCHEON —WILDCAT DEN/ MIDTOWN COMMUNITY CENTER 12:30 PM

**FEATURING HEARTLAND SERIES' BILL LANDRY (HISTORY OF AMAE/AMSE)
TICKETS ARE \$20 AND MAY BE PURCHASED FROM MARGARET ALLARD AT 607-1122**



Reserve your copy of Keith McDaniel's *Operation Open Sesame* DVD Historical Documentary film—call Betty Stokes at 483-3202

Reserve your copy of 227 page photographic history book documenting the events of the original gate opening—call Betty Stokes at 483-3202

Both will be available for purchase on March 21, 2009

Graphics by Ray Smith

Advertisement for Operation Open Sesame 60th Anniversary Celebration

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Bill Sergeant leads the Gate Opening Parade