

Muddy Boot Award and Postma Young Professional Medal – Oak Ridge Traditions

(As published in The Oak Ridger's Historically Speaking column on April 28, 2009)

Lamar Alexander, when presenting the 2008 Muddy Boot awards, said, “...**the Muddy Boot is one of Oak Ridge's great traditions.**” Traditions are defined as the handing down of statements, beliefs, legends, customs, information, etc., from generation to generation, especially by word of mouth or by practice. Over the past 36 years Oak Ridge has created a tradition for the generations.

This tradition is known as the Muddy Boot award. This unusual award is unique to Oak Ridge, yet it speaks to more than the city of Oak Ridge, it is a fitting symbol to communicate respect, honor, pride and joy for significant and long-term contributions to East Tennessee. It is presented to accomplished and experienced leaders in many fields, all of whom have shown their long term dedication to improving our region of East Tennessee.

A second award that is fast becoming a tradition also is the Postma Young Professional medal. Created in 2005, the medal is presented to honor the accomplishments of young professionals who have made an impact and fostered a community culture throughout the region. Again, it is broader than just the city of Oak Ridge, it also speaks to accomplishments that impact East Tennessee.

East Tennessee Economic Council President, Jim Campbell, says, “Muddy Boot winners come in all sizes and shapes.”

Jim notes that, “Scientists and visionary thought leaders like Alvin Weinberg, Herman Postma, Al Trivelpiece, and Bill Madia all received the award for their efforts to build Oak Ridge National Laboratory into the world class institution it is today. But there are also folks like Bill Manly, perhaps the premier metallurgist of his era, who got the Boot—even if it was mainly for his work to promote regional economic development and health care.”

“Not surprising, also, are the politicians that have and are serving Oak Ridge and the surrounding area that receive the honor. Al Gore, Sr., a senator during the days when Oak Ridge became a town, was one of the first recipients of the Boot. Senator Howard Baker, Jr., also was an early recipient. Leaders of the organization delivered his boot in person to his office in the White House while he was serving as chief of staff to President Ronald Reagan.” Tom Hill, Ben Adams and Jesse Noritake were the individuals who made the presentation.

Jim continues, “Congressman Chet Holifield of California got a boot as a consolation prize in one of the more interesting stories of Oak Ridge. The congressman, an appropriator on the Energy and Water Committee, really wanted Oak Ridge National Laboratory renamed after himself, and in fact, ORNL was for a brief time officially named the Holifield National Lab. Thankfully, the name didn't take.”

The name change forced on the Oak Ridge National Laboratory only lasted about one year. ORNL was briefly known as the Holifield National Laboratory from late 1974 until late 1975. This occurred when staff members of the Joint Committee on Atomic Energy acted unilaterally in late 1974 to change the name to honor their retiring chairman, Representative Chet Holifield. However, because of the pressure of the Tennessee congressional delegation reacting to intense pressure from Oak Ridge leaders, Congress was convinced to restore the name, Oak Ridge National Laboratory, in late 1975.

Jim continues, “Both United States Representatives Marilyn Lloyd and Zach Wamp, who combined to serve the 3rd congressional district for the last 30-plus years, have received Boots for their advocacy of

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Oak Ridge issues in Washington. So did Congressman Joe L. Evins, who helped bring the American Museum of Science and Energy to Oak Ridge.”

“Likewise, two State Senators—Buzz Elkins and Randy McNally—were honored with a Boot for their work at the state capital. (Randy McNally has to share the honor with his wife, Jan, former administrator of Methodist Medical Center of Oak Ridge. They have the privilege to be the only husband and wife to both win a Boot.) Oak Ridge’s first mayor, A.K. Bissell, is also an honoree.”

In discussing the history of the Muddy Boot Award, Jim and I noted that there are some surprises on the list. The award recipients are not always those individuals one would expect to be so honored and that is one of the unique aspects of our traditional award.

Jim pointed out that, “Two newspaper editors—Dick Smyser, a fixture at the Oak Ridger for over 40 years, and Horace Wells of the Clinton Courier, were selected for the Boot for the consistently outstanding journalism their organizations maintained. Clearly, both men did much to build this community.”

“Likewise, last year’s winner, community activist Tim Myrick, doesn’t fit the traditional community development mold either. But his work as a facilitator for the Oak Ridge High School project, his work with a dozen or more non-profit groups, and his willingness to go the extra mile for the people in this community made him an ideal candidate for a Boot.”

The list for Oak Ridge’s and East Tennessee’s most unusual traditional award goes on to include yet even more wide-ranging professionals and key individuals who contributed mightily to the East Tennessee region. There have been 46 Muddy Boot awards. There have also been five Postma Young Professional medal winners in the brief history of this prestigious award.

Economic development professionals like David Patterson, Tom Rogers, Lou Dunlap received Boots. So did Floyd Culler, longtime chair of the Oak Ridge Regional Planning Commission.

Also populating the list are corporate leaders who have gone above and beyond the call to make Oak Ridge a better place to live and work: Union Carbide, Science Applications International Corporation, Battelle, Bechtel, Lockheed Martin, Boeing, Burns and Roe, Oak Ridge Associated University, the University of Tennessee and South Central Bell all are represented.

“Each Boot has a story,” explains Jim. “It is those stories that the East Tennessee Economic Council and our partners want to preserve and tell to the next generation of Oak Ridgers and people throughout the area.” This telling of our stories, as you might expect, is also my passion. The Muddy Boot and Postma Young Professional award winners each have stories that **MUST** be told and **MUST** be remembered if our heritage is to survive to succeeding generations. It is vital that we create ways to tell these stories **NOW**.

All too many of our past leaders and scientists are passing from our midst without us adequately and properly capturing their stories for future generations. We should be ashamed of our lack of respect shown the people who made world-changing discoveries, who created new and wonderful practical applications of science that benefited mankind.

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We MUST capture these stories. An active and ongoing Oral History program is a MUST. The Center for Oak Ridge Oral History based at the Oak Ridge Public Library will play a key role in this monumental task. Funding for this historical preservation effort has just been provided by DOE Oak Ridge Operations. I hope to see significant progress in capturing our stories result from this initiative.

We MUST tell our story in every way possible and to everyone who comes our way. Every day new young men and women come to work in this town. They follow in the footsteps of truly remarkable men and women who created history through their hard work, their genius, their passion for this place. Keeping those stories alive, setting the bar high for those coming to Oak Ridge, is what the Muddy Boot project is all about. The Postma Young Professional medal also supports this same high standard of achievement.

In conjunction with other aspects of Oak Ridge and East Tennessee traditions, the Muddy Boot and the Postma Young Professionals awards take their place among the heritage of traditions that make our region an outstanding place to live and work.

I am pleased to see a permanent wall display of the Muddy Boot award and Postma Young Professional medal winners being unveiled and dedicated on Thursday, April 30, 2009, at the American Museum of Science and Energy. It is my hope that this unique tradition of ours that recognizes excellence in our East Tennessee region will continue to help us tell our most unusual story.



The Postma Young Professional Medal and the Muddy Boot Award – honored traditions