

R & R Properties – a brief history of one family’s dream come true

(As published in The Oak Ridger’s Historically Speaking column on July 14, 2009)

This *Historically Speaking* column is dedicated to telling the history of a family whose members have devoted their life to the betterment of Oak Ridge. Early in their marriage the parents chose Oak Ridge for a number of valid reasons. By choosing our community to raise their family and by creating a family owned company that now provides a large amount of industrial space (over 600,000 square feet of it to date) for businesses in Oak Ridge, they have been strong contributors to Oak Ridge’s economic growth.

The Chinn’s are very much a part of Oak Ridge history. I am pleased to tell their story with the primary emphasis on the patriarch of the family – Richard Chinn, and his equal partner, Shirley Shelton Chinn.

However, as you will see as the story develops, it is told from the sons’ perspective and at their request, without their parents involvement. Richard and Shirley will see the story for the first time as you readers do. I am delighted to help Rick and Ryan bring you this history of the Chinn family in Oak Ridge with the unique perspective of the second generation.

But first let me give you an overview of the Chinn’s perspective on Oak Ridge. It will help set the stage for the story to follow. It is written by Ryan Chinn, the youngest of the immediate family, yet a most mature thinking young man:

“There is a reason every great city has become a great city. The common tie to a great city’s history is its local business leadership. It needs people with the vision and more importantly, the capital to make a dream become a reality. Over time, those well developed decisions combine to form a community where people want to live and raise a family. I’m sure one can go back to the earliest civilizations and find a group of business leaders that helped guide their communities towards a brighter path.

“A community’s strength rarely comes from companies or persons that do not dwell in that same community. Most often, strength comes from the people that live and work in the same place. They are the ones with the greatest vested interest in their community’s future and well being. The money made from local businesses is mainly reinvested back into the community through taxes and economic participation. These companies often have the pulse of the community as to which direction it should be taken and where the city’s emphasis should be directed.

“The nature of Oak Ridge lends itself to growth from outside involvement, i.e. DOE and its subcontractors. Now, I am not inferring that this is a bad thing. On the contrary, a city of this size is blessed to have such involvement. But let’s be honest, those entities primary purpose is something other than making sure the community it is growing and more importantly, improves. I believe that is how it should be. It is up to locals to make decisions that are going to benefit its community’s future. Organic economic growth, i.e. growth that is born from within its community, is the bedrock of any city’s future.

“In relative terms, Oak Ridge is a young city. Although it was established in 1942, it wasn’t until 1959 before Oak Ridge was incorporated. That makes it 50 years old. The fact is that this city was born from mainly people moving here from other parts of the country, it has taken time for the seeds of organic economic growth to take hold.

I hope this introduction to Ryan’s broad thinking gives you insight into what is in store for you in the remainder of this series. I have thoroughly enjoyed the research and getting to know the family better. I think you will find their history here in Oak Ridge intriguing.

In this series of *Historically Speaking*, I am going to profile R&R Properties, a company that has grown from its earliest beginnings to a key mainstay business in our community. It is a local company that we in

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this community can truly be proud to call our own. And it all started with a young energetic husband and his loving and devoted wife and their shared dream. Today it is an excellent example of what is possible through hard work and dedicated effort.

First let me share just a bit of insight into my relationship with one of the Chinn's. I first met Rick Chinn, Jr. in 1998 when he and I both went through Leadership Oak Ridge. That was a life-changing event for me. I came away from that class intent upon helping my community be a better place through volunteer efforts. I believe Rick was also changed by his experience in Leadership Oak Ridge.

In fact, Rick was instrumental in encouraging his dad, Richard, and his sister-in-law Blair to attend Leadership Oak Ridge 2009. While I believe Richard's first reaction to the suggestion might have been a bit reserved regarding the value he might gain from the program, he has told me repeatedly that he has found the program this year to be most beneficial.

As you may know, the Leadership Oak Ridge program is now a part of the Oak Ridge Chamber of Commerce and has been revamped into a longer and broader based program. This first year of the expanded program is really going well.

Back to the 1998 class experience, I chose to become a chaplain for the Oak Ridge Police Department soon after completing the class. Rick and I have stayed close since and I believe the class had an equal effect on Rick that has caused him to increase his volunteer involvement in the community as well.

Recently I have gotten to know Ryan and now his wife, Blair, and have found my relationship with each of them to be first rate. Richard and Shirley and the rest of their family are true Oak Ridgers and all of them fully support their home town. Now let's look more closely at the Chinn's!

To fully appreciate the Chinn family we should first understand about the name. It is not one of our most common southern names.

Although some may at first think so, the Chinn name is not of Asian origin. The surname Chinn can be traced to the south of France and a special section of England. The name has an interesting history. The book "Genealogies of Kentucky Families" published in 1981 gives the following beginnings for the CHINN family:

The CHINNs are an ancient family in England and Scotland, where we find the name under the seal CHEYNE, bearing one of the oldest and most illustrious Coats of Arms in Great Britain. The orthography of the name has been changed many times from the Norman-French title, DeCheyne. We find it variously written in Nisbett's Heraldry and other works on this subject, viz: Le Chein, CHEYNE, Chynn, CHINN, the last being adopted as the spelling of the name in America. In London there is an avenue called for the family of ancient times, "Cheyne-Row."

The CHINNs in Kentucky are descendants, as far as their history has been traced, from John Chynn, the Colonist, and from his eldest son, Raleigh Chinn, Burgess for Lancaster County, Virginia, 1731. (see Hayden's Virginia Genealogies" and Bishop Meade's "History of Old Churches and Old Families of Virginia, and Register for May, 1905).

Raleigh Chinn married at Stratford-by-Bow, London, 1700, Esther Ball, daughter of Joseph Ball, by his first wife. She was half-sister of Mary Ball, the mother of Washington. In 1713 it is written, he settled in Lancaster County, Virginia, and was one of the largest landowners in Southeastern Virginia. Colonial William Chinn (Raleigh, Chichester, Richard) born in Albemarle County, Virginia, in 1768, came to

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Kentucky and married Sarah Bryan, a daughter of Captain William Bryan, of Bryan's Station, Fayette County, Kentucky.

Richard Chinn was born in Jellico, Tennessee as there was no hospital in Williamsburg, Kentucky where his parents, Thurman and Exie Richardson Chinn, lived. Jellico was only about 20 miles from Williamsburg. Richard was the youngest of seven children and the first baby in his family to be born in a hospital.

Thurman Chinn ran a sawmill and expected his sons to earn their own way. He and Exie instilled a strong work ethic in their children. Richard is named after his mother’s maiden name, Richardson. Shirley Shelton Chinn was also the youngest of seven children. Both of them grew up in the same location, Whitley County, Kentucky. She lived in the county and Richard lived in Williamsburg. Although they grew up living fairly close to one another, it took Richard getting kicked out of the city school to cause him to go to school where Shirley attended so he could meet her.

Getting kicked out of school was not something Richard necessarily wanted, but his nature was such that he was known around town as somewhat of a “hellion.” The last straw for the school was when Richard wondered what a smoke bomb would do if it were dropped down a commode. Well, it did a lot of damage. Enough so that he was summarily dismissed from school immediately and ordered to find another place to go to school as he was no longer welcome in Williamsburg city schools.

Richard was allowed - I am sure after a bit of questioning to assure he would not repeat the smoke bomb experiment - to attend the Whitley County School where Shirley was a student. She was three years younger than Richard, but their destiny was set at an early age when the two of them were attracted to each other while in high school. So, his smoke bomb incident was not a total loss, huh.

When Richard finished high school at age 18 he left Williamsburg, KY to go to Toledo, Ohio, taking a job on the railroad. Not long after that, still in 1963, he moved to Cincinnati, Ohio, to take a job at Fisher Body making Chevrolets. This connection with cars was something that would eventually bring Richard and Shirley to Oak Ridge.

In 1965 when Shirley graduated from high school, they were married. I must admit an affiliation with them in this regard. Fanny and I were married in June after I graduated from high school in May, 1964.

Although working for Fisher Body was a good job and Richard was already on his way toward getting into management, he was yearning to do work for himself rather than to work by the hour for someone else. His father had owned that sawmill and Richard saw owning his own business as a better way than working for someone else.

By 1966 Richard had started a business on the side buying used cars, refurbishing them and reselling them. Then the next year he began buying wrecked cars, fixing them up and then reselling them. It was about this time that he and Shirley went to California to visit Shirley’s brother, Ray Shelton, who had an automobile body shop business. Richard convinced Ray to join him in starting an automobile body shop business back east. Ray already had the experience of running a business and Richard wanted to get out on his own.

At the time he really did not know just where they might start such a business, but he knew he wanted Ray to come east rather than trying to start a business in California. He had thought it through enough to know that.

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In discussing where to locate an automobile body shop, several considerations were spelled out. Richard knew they needed to locate a fairly small town of about 30,000 people that was near a larger city. He knew it needed to be a town without an independent body shop. He wanted it to be in the South where the weather was fairly mild and he was familiar with Kentucky and Tennessee.

So, they began to look. He and Shirley looked through a World Almanac and she recalled a visit she had made to a small town near Knoxville, TN called Oak Ridge. She had been on a choir trip while in high school that included a stop in Oak Ridge.

And the rest, so to speak, is history! Next we will tell you about the Chinn’s arrival in Oak Ridge and how a small family-run automobile body shop grew into the present excellent local firm, R&R Properties.



Richard and Shirley Chinn on their wedding day



Richard and Shirley Chinn today