

An Oak Ridge Treasure – the UT Arboretum

(As published in The Oak Ridger's Historically Speaking column on September 22, 2009)

Located on 250 acres just south of our city and nestled on the wooded hillside of Chestnut Ridge is a fair and peaceful setting that beckons to the weary soul and relaxes the tired mind. It is within minutes of all Oak Ridgers and is open to all from sunrise to sunset. Walking trails are plentiful, shade is abundant and quiet solitude is a mainstay. Once experienced, you WILL return often.

Such a beautiful, peaceful and stately park-like setting is without equal. Sadly, too many of us take it for granted and often fail to even avail ourselves of the easy access and quick transition from our hurried pace to a more relaxed and sedate atmosphere. Sad indeed!

This small secluded yet open area contains wetlands, wooded trails, flowers galore, trees that are being researched for desired properties and shrubs that are being cultivated to demonstrate their inherent good points. It is uniquely an Oak Ridge phenomenon, even if it is officially the University of Tennessee's property and program of forestry research and protection.

In this *Historically Speaking* column, I hope to share with you readers a bit of the history of this icon of solitude and solace that is both a working forestry research area and a local community treasure. I will introduce you to Richard Evans, the Superintendent of the Arboretum since 1972.

First, let me acknowledge the work of Eunice Begun, who wrote the *History of the University of Tennessee Arboretum Society* published in the *Journal of the Tennessee Academy of Science*, Volume 56, Number 3, July, 1981. It was this document provided by Richard Evans that provided the basis for the historical information prior to 1980 that I have included here.

Begun explains that the idea of an Arboretum in Oak Ridge had existed in the minds of several people long before such a beautiful setting as described above was an actuality. She cites such individuals as Alexander Hollaender of the Oak Ridge National Laboratory's Biology Division, located at Y-12, Charles Cogdon, Don Foard and others who routinely hiked in the Cumberland Mountains just north of Oak Ridge as examples of the people who harbored such an idea.

You will recall that Hollaender was the individual responsible for bringing our beloved Bill and Liane Russell, the husband and wife team of world renowned biologists, to Oak Ridge in 1947. He was known to be a very smart and forward thinking individual. His insight into the virtue of having an arboretum in Oak Ridge is but yet another example of his outstanding visionary thinking.

Hollaender hoped to interest the University of Tennessee in establishing an arboretum in Oak Ridge and was prepared to donate a sum of money from the Biology Foundation to support such a cause. Ultimately none of the Biology Foundation funds were used to purchase the land, but Hollaender's willingness to support the idea with funds had succeeded in bringing credibility to the idea of establishing an arboretum in Oak Ridge.

From this encouraging beginning, a group of University of Tennessee officials, in August, 1961, acquired 2,260 acres of forested land in Oak Ridge from the United States Department of Health, Education and Welfare for use in teaching, research and demonstration. This site was described in an early brochure published by the University of Tennessee.

The brochure stated, "Prior to the 1940's...the area was heavily farmed. Virginia Pine and a Shortleaf Pine now cover most of the old fields, but Yellow Poplar and some Black Walnut are found on sites in

An Oak Ridge Treasure – the UT Arboretum

(As published in The Oak Ridger's Historically Speaking column on September 22, 2009)

these fields where the soil is better. The rest of the Arboretum is largely second-growth Oak and Hickory forest in what was originally an Oak and Chestnut forest.”

Begun's history of the UT Arboretum cites April, 1962 as the date when a committee from the University of Tennessee first met to establish an arboretum. A. J. Sharp made a recommendation that the committee request a portion of the university's Oak Ridge property be designated for an arboretum. This proposal was passed unanimously by the committee.

In December, 1962, a proposal was presented to John Ewing, Dean of the UT Agricultural Experiment Station containing the following objectives: “To establish a collection of woody plants adapted to the climate of Tennessee...to utilize and expand existing plant groups and preserve such areas as have special values for ecologic study...to provide space for a collection of mutants of woody plants...development of the arboretum should be in the hand of one individual directly responsible to the Director of the Experiment Station. A satisfactory office, laboratory and assembly building with the necessary herbarium space and library should be erected...”

By April, 1964, The Oak Ridger reported that “The UT Forestry Department has started work on an Arboretum, a place where trees and shrubs are grown for scientific and educational purposes.” Robert MacDonald, assistant professor in Forestry, was the first Arboretum Director. His first office was an abandoned guard house near Solway Bridge, according to Begun.

While I don't know for sure if this was the original Solway gatehouse, one of seven such gates to the Secret City, it reminds me of the white checking station on Bethel Valley Road. That building and its companion on the south side of Bethel Valley road remains empty today and has not been renovated. I did succeed in getting it painted five years ago and routinely go by and pull the vines from it. I wish we could find a good use for that building. Readers, do you have any ideas?

By February, 1965, efforts were underway to form a non-profit organization to support and enhance the arboretum. At the first meeting, Alexander Nowicki, City Planner for Oak Ridge served as acting coordinator. Others in attendance were, Evan Means, Clinch-Powell Valley Association; F. R. Bruce and H. D. Smith, Boy Scouts; David Campbell, Anderson County Conservation Board; B. M. Robinson, AEC; Robert P. Ball, Oak Ridge Memorial Park; Eleanor DuBois, Helen K. Lewis, Julia Moore, members, and C. M. DuBois, President of the Smoky Mountain Hiking Club; Ruth Davis, Oak Ridge Garden Clubs and Girl Scouts; L. R. Phillips, Kiwanis; Julia Hoppe, Campfire Girls; John Clark, Oak Ridge Chamber of Commerce; A. A. Foster, Grace Foster, John Selfridge, and J. D. Amundson, interested citizen. UT personnel in attendance were: B. S. Pickett, Horticulture Department; E. E. C. Clebsch and H. R. DeSelm, Botany Department; Robert MacDonald, Forestry Department, A. R. Nowicki was appointed temporary chairman and Evan Means was appointed temporary secretary.

At subsequent meetings during the first formative years, the University of Tennessee Arboretum Society, as it was soon named, made good strides attracting such individuals as Eugene Joyce and other notable community leaders to the society. They also created scholarships, determined to publish a regular bulletin, established fundraising efforts and generally set about making the society functional.

Eighty people had joined the society by the end of 1965. The organization's purpose was defined as: “to promote interest and participation in the study and enjoyment of trees, shrubs, and other plants.” I might add that this purpose has been fulfilled over the years and anyone who ventures to the Arboretum today

An Oak Ridge Treasure – the UT Arboretum

(As published in The Oak Ridger's Historically Speaking column on September 22, 2009)

can attest to the beauty of the park-like setting and the care given to the plants by the staff that leads to the continual fulfilling this purpose, even today.

By March, 1966, the first of many Newsletters was sent to the membership. A general meeting was held that was open to the public and followed by guided tours of the Arboretum. Some 285 people attended! Interest was demonstrated by the community and the society was surely pleased to see it. The idea was taking hold and people were enjoying the serenity of the woods.

The first plant sale was held on June 18, 1966, as a fundraising project. These funds were intended to finance a summer student employment program. David Rugh, a Maryville College student, became the first such summer student to work at the Arboretum.

Another development brought about by the rapid growth of the society was the offering of better office space for the director when Robert Ball, a society trustee, agreed to provide space in the nearby cemetery building. A 1955 half-ton pickup truck was purchased as well. Plant materials were donated by the Tennessee Nurseryman's Association and a computerized list of plants in the Arboretum was created by Margaret Olson.

In June, 1966, a request was made to the state legislature for funds to upgrade and improve roads, construct bridges and build a residence for the Arboretum Director. Other construction of various greenhouses, arbors and potting sheds showed the nature of the efforts to promote healthy plant environments.

The focus of the Arboretum was narrowed to forestry alone by directive of the UT Agricultural Experiment Station officials. This was at first a bit troublesome to the staff and the society alike. But soon, the forestry theme became the new direction being pursued. The revised objectives of the Arboretum were: "to establish a collection of trees, including mutants and those plants having commercial value as forest species from which materials may be obtained for breeding and propagation; to provide a place open to the public where individuals or groups may study the forest associations which are adapted to the environment of Tennessee."

Added emphasis was placed on the public visitors with weekends being added to the schedule and guided tours being promoted. This was the beginning of open access and encouragement to visit the Arboretum. Many volunteers were used to keep the Arboretum open and tours provided.

By 1970, the Arboretum had grown to the point that more than 2,000 labeled plants of approximately 600 species were found on the grounds and the public access roads and walking trails were being well maintained. The director's office was moved from the cemetery to the Arboretum grounds.

UT announced, in 1972, plans for an office building at the Arboretum. In September, 1972, Richard M. Evans became the Superintendent of the Oak Ridge Forestry Stations and Arboretum. Richard has seen many improvements over the 37 years he has served as staff leader of the Arboretum. We, Oak Ridgers, owe him a great deal for the manner in which he has managed the maintenance and capital improvements to our Arboretum over the years.

By 1974, the new Forestry Stations and Arboretum Headquarters building had progressed until it was well on its way toward becoming a reality. The official dedication was held on November 19, 1975.

An Oak Ridge Treasure – the UT Arboretum

(As published in The Oak Ridger's Historically Speaking column on September 22, 2009)

Changes in 1975 and 1976 included the introduction of Trail Guides that made self-guided tours possible. On special requests, guides could still be made available, but the trend toward more open access was becoming a reality.

The News Bulletin first published in March, 1978. This publication combined the Newsletter and Bulletin and served to keep the society informed of activities, events and society business. Public lectures continued. The plant sale continued to be a huge success with an added feature of providing expert answers to the public's questions about the plants.

It was also in 1978 that the first Fall Walk to observe birds and other wildlife, trees and shrubs, landscape plants and wildflowers was initiated. Such walks continue to be a mainstay of the programs provided by the Arboretum staff over the years.

1978 was also the year of the infamous attempt to locate an airport on the Chestnut Ridge site of the UT Forestry Experiment station and Arboretum. Looking at that in hindsight is hard for me to comprehend. Why in the world would an airport even be considered for such a site? Reckon it made sense to someone then...I like the idea of locating an airport at the East Tennessee Technology Park site much better!

This misdirected airport proposal was no small thing for Oak Ridge and the Arboretum supporters. The controversy went on for months, even years...sad to say. Eventually, in 1980, with the future of the Arboretum much "unsettled" as Begun says in her history of the Arboretum, the airport issue had been put to rest and the society again focused on its goals for the Arboretum.

In the years since the Arboretum has become a mainstay element in Oak Ridge. It is now fully an integral part of our heritage. Who could think of Oak Ridge without an Arboretum...we even take it for granted like many other fine features of our city.

It is good to see recent continued improvements in added parking and landscaping. It is good to see the trees aging well, the forest sustaining its transition from a Chestnut and Oak forest to an Oak and Hickory forest even as evidence is being seen through research that the stately Chestnut just might return someday.

If you have not visited the Arboretum lately, please consider a return or if it is your first visit, get ready to be amazed by the tranquility and peaceful setting in which you cannot help but learn about our natural environment. It is a beauty of a spot to relax and enjoy a quieter existence for even a short time.

An Oak Ridge Treasure – the UT Arboretum

(As published in The Oak Ridger's Historically Speaking column on September 22, 2009)



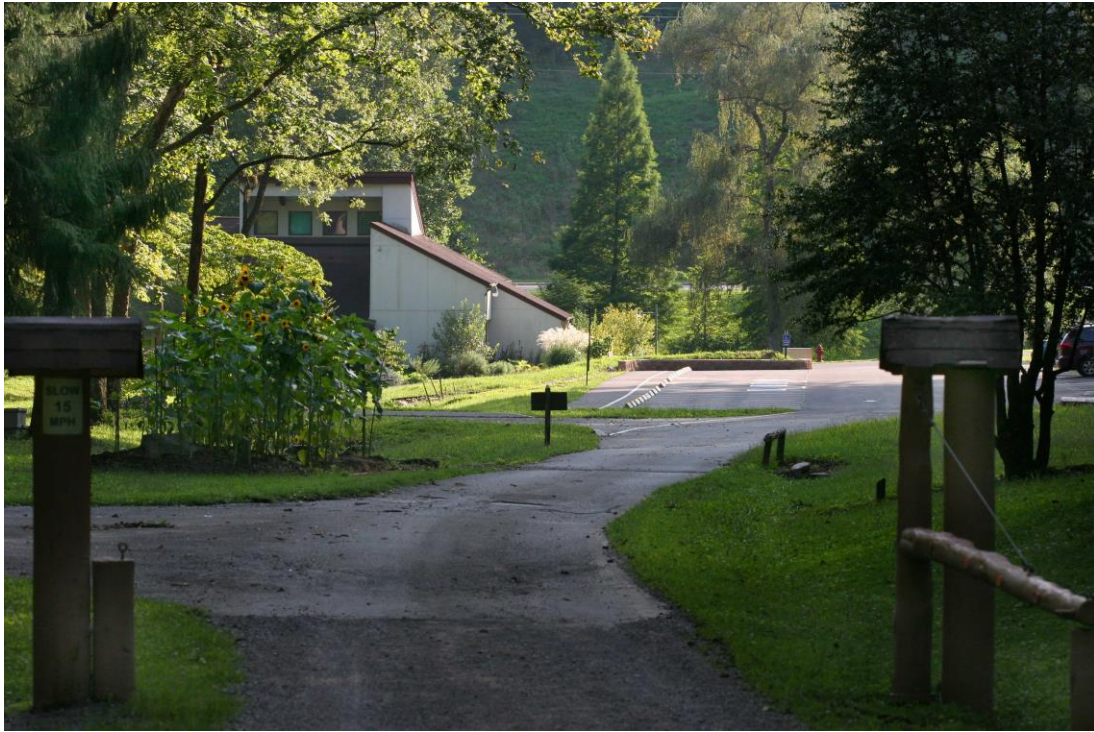
An example of the beauty of wildflowers – Mayapple in full bloom



Welcome to the UT Arboretum at Oak Ridge

An Oak Ridge Treasure – the UT Arboretum

(As published in The Oak Ridger's Historically Speaking column on September 22, 2009)



A peaceful setting of beauty and quiet stillness – our Arboretum