

UT Arboretum – Oak Ridge Treasure, part 2

(As published in The Oak Ridger's Historically Speaking column on September 29, 2009)

Before we continue with the history of the University of Tennessee Arboretum located at 901 South Illinois Avenue, let me tell you about a couple of side items that have developed while doing research on the history of this treasure of quiet and solitude among us. I think you will appreciate the connections.

First, the early group of hikers who accompanied Alexander Hollaender of the Oak Ridge National Laboratory's Biology Division, located at Y-12, included Don Foard. I did not know it until the article published, but a co-worker of mine is his daughter. Ellen Boatner, of Y-12's Government and Public Affairs organization, called to tell me that she had actually accompanied her dad on some of these hikes into the Cumberland Mountains just north of Oak Ridge.

Ellen's dad is still living in North Carolina and has led an eventful life spending time living in Europe and doing things that Ellen relates as exciting and rewarding. She said that Alexander Hollaender hired her dad and got him started on his most interesting career. She is proud of his accomplishments and quick to give him credit for things he has taught her over the years, starting with those hikes.

She reminded me that the group never hiked in the Cumberland Mountains without first asking permission, for good reason. That reminded me of a time when I was on an outing with Boy Scout Troop 220 of Oak Ridge. We had obtained permission to hike on the Walnut Mountain Coal Company's property just south of Highway 116 at the top of the mountain pass above Brushy Mountain Prison at Petros.

We arrived there late on a Friday evening having left for the weekend hike after work on Friday. So it was dark before we got on the mountain and when we arrived at the coal mine boundary we were halted by an armed guard. The mines were on strike at the time. The guard had his dog with him and it was obvious from the outset that he just might be a bit drunk.

We attempted to show him the letter from the mine owner in Knoxville, but he refused to see it...I am not convinced he could have read it anyway, as he sounded quite drunk. He sic'ed his dog on us and the boys just petted the dog. He was not much of a guard dog, huh. This made the man even madder and he threatened to shoot us if we did not "get down off this mountain right now!"

We turned to leave and he fired over our heads. The birdshot in his gun struck several of our backpacks. Needless to say, we hiked in another direction that weekend and did not cross the coal mine land back toward Oak Ridge.

Another note of interest gives more information on the building where Robert MacDonald, assistant professor in Forestry and the first Arboretum Director, located his first office. It was an abandoned guard house near Solway Bridge, according to Begun.

Richard Evans provided the following details on that first building: "The building you reference was a garage type structure, of sorts. It was dismantled shortly after the Arboretum Project was started, probably in/around 1967, and the materials were "re-purposed" to build the first structure on the Arboretum grounds. That 28'x24' building became the first Arboretum office, workshop, potting shed, and equipment storage building- all-in-one structure.

"The Arboretum crew did most of the construction work; however Mr. Bob Smith, then Oak Ridge Chief of Police and member of the Arboretum Society, helped lend his physical services and construction skills to

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this endeavor. Bob worked many weekends building roof trusses, laying foundation block, framing, and the like.

Richard continues to say, "Another structure of interest, and which exist today in the form of our parts storage building, is an old AEC wooden 8'x8' guard shack. It had one door and windows on all four sides... looks like a fire lookout tower, with the tower.

"Before we built the present day Office Building that structure stood on the site and served as a welcome 'booth.' Arboretum Society members used to occupy the 'guard shack' on the weekends, welcome visitors, give answers to their questions, and provide impromptu tours. Mrs. Mary Smith (Bob's wife) and Margret Petersen were among several women who volunteered their time as 'those women tour guides in the guard shack.'

What rich stories of the early years of the UT Arboretum. Now, let's take a look at more of the UT Arboretum history from 1980 and forward, thanks to Richard Evans for taking time to help with the research.

In the early 1980's the UT Arboretum achieved two designations and was the first organization to be so recognized. The Arboretum was the first site in Tennessee to be designated as a "Watch Wildlife Area" and was also selected as the first "Tennessee Recreational Trail." Both of these designations were provided under the guidelines of the Tennessee Wildlife Resources Agency and Tennessee Department of Conservation, the sponsors of these recognition programs.

Following the "great freeze" of 1984, the Arboretum's Holly Collection was moved to a more favorable location. Mrs. Lois Good and Mr. Harold Elmore volunteered their talents and time to move the collection. Lois, a graduate of the UT Horticulture program, developed a conceptual garden plan, and Harold, who was an avid holly enthusiast, collector, and owner of a holly plant nursery in Knoxville, donated almost all of the holly plant specimens.

The UT Arboretum's holly collection had been a major feature from the very beginning of the Arboretum's existence. In both 1964 and 1968, the American Holly Society designated the UT Arboretum as an "Official Holly Test Garden," one of only 10 test gardens in the United States.

The present Arboretum holly collection boasts over 150 different species and cultivars of holly. In recognition of Harold's generous contribution, in 2003, it was named the "Elmore Holly Garden."

Also in 1985, the UT Forest Resources Center and Arboretum was the site for the first release of native Turkey in the Oak Ridge region. This was after at least a century of America's largest bird being absent from this area. This project to reintroduce the Turkey was part of a habitat research project conducted by the UT Department of forestry, Wildlife, and Fisheries and the Tennessee Wildlife Resources Agency.

The research dispelled the notion that it took 500 acres of unbroken forest land to provide suitable habitat for the turkey. As anyone can testify, we have an ample number of Turkey now. We even see them on the Y-12 site, usually on the side of Chestnut Ridge along with the several head of deer that seem to come there to avoid the reservation game hunts each fall.

In 1998, a partnership was formed with the Clinch River environmental Studies Organization. This association provided access to the UT Forest Resources Center & Arboretum's property for conducting

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field research programs focused on the training and extended learning of middle and high school age students in the natural sciences.

Each year since, mostly in the summer months, 15 to 20 students are engaged in scientific research and investigative studies in such areas as the ecology and habits of box turtles, snakes, birds and salamanders. Many of these students have turned this initial introduction to science into career choices including biology and physical sciences, wildlife, math, computers sciences and other fields of science.

In the course of conducting their research projects, these students have the opportunity to observe and interact with UT scientists who are also conducting research and teaching programs here. Kathy Strunk and John Byrd are coordinators of this most successful program. The program is also sponsored by the Anderson County and Oak Ridge Schools systems.

Funding is provided by a Department of Energy grant. The students are paid a stipend for their scientific papers published in professional journals. These papers were either authored or co-authored by the students themselves.

In 2004, the Arboretum applied for and received a \$25,000 matching Urban Forestry Grant from the Tennessee Division of Forestry and Tennessee Urban Forest Council. This grant was intended to enhance the Arboretum's capabilities as a learning center for increasing knowledge and understanding of the elements of urban forestry.

The primary focus of the grant was on the care of urban trees. Included were instructions for pruning, wildlife structures, feeding, mulching and the proper selection of trees that do well in urban settings.

Over the years more and more public trails have been created until now there is a total of five miles of self-guided and pleasant walking trails with moderate ascents and descents. The walks vary from ½ mile easy strolls to 2 ½ mile loops that can serve to exercise your need for prolonged walking on somewhat challenging terrain.

There are numerous activities such as lectures, workshops and guided walks. All free.

Next week, *Historically Speaking* will look at some of the exciting and unique programs of the Arboretum and will describe some recent improvements. I will also gladly bring you a most unusual treat in the form of Richard Evans' description of an "Indian Trail Tree" that pointed the way.

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The old Manhattan Project era guard shack is seen beneath the trees where it is being used as a visitor center for the Arboretum around 1965



The same Manhattan Project era guard shack remains in use today - Richard Evans, Superintendent of the UT Arboretum, is standing in the doorway

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Preschoolers enjoy the woods of the Arboretum