

A brief history of the Children's Museum of Oak Ridge

(As published in The Oak Ridger's Historically Speaking column on April 27, 2010)

Writing the *Historically Speaking* column gives me unique opportunities to bring you information about subjects that are of interest to me and also seem to be of interest to many of you as well. Thank you for your encouraging words supporting my efforts.

Often I choose to feature unusual aspects of our Oak Ridge history. I believe you will agree that this series of articles I am beginning today brings a story that is both unique and something in which all of Oak Ridge can take pride as a part of our storied history.

The Children's Museum of Oak Ridge is one of the premier icons of Oak Ridge history. Having begun as a Girl Scout project in 1973, it was formally opened on March 11, 1973. The library of the former Jefferson Junior High School provided 2,000 square feet of space for that first effort at forming an unusual hands-on experience museum for children.

As a matter of interest, the Girl Scouts remain a key element of the Children's Museum of Oak Ridge even today. This information from the Director's letter on the web site highlights some of the activities for 2010: "Girl Scouts of all levels will be participating in the International Festival on February 21. In addition, there will be a Victorian Tea for Junior Scouts on March 21, an Eco-Action Badge Workshop on April 18, and Daisy Day for Daisy-level Girl Scouts on May 9. All participants in badge activities must register with the Tanasi Office. For more information, please contact Joyce Morris at the museum."

In January, 1974, the museum moved into the former Highland View Elementary School. It was here that I first came in contact with Selma Shapiro and the Children's Museum of Oak Ridge. In 1976, Boy Scout Troop 220 formed Cub Scout Pack 220 and I was selected as the Cubmaster, a position I held for the next 16 years. We were an unusual pack in that all den leaders were men, we met year round in the evenings, held monthly outdoor activities such as camping, canoeing, caving, hiking, rappelling and had a Cubmobile Derby.

It was through the association developed primarily with Selma Shapiro that led to the use by the Cub Scout Pack 220 of a room and the gym in the school building being turned into the Children's Museum of Oak Ridge. I have the fondest memories of the times when we agreed, just between the two of us informally, on what we would do to help the young museum and how we would share the space.

Years went by and hundreds of young Cub Scouts experienced a quality program because of the free use of the facilities of the school building provided by the museum. I will never forget Selma for that! Literally hundreds of young boys and their parents became fans of the museum by learning about it through meeting there with the pack.

Often when I least expect it, someone will say to me something like this, "Hey, you were my Cubmaster," or "I remember those days at the Children's Museum when we met as Cub Scouts," or some might even remember the night of the ice storm when 80 boys were stuck for most of the night in the gym with a few nervous Den Leaders because it was unsafe to take them home and their parents could not travel to get them. We made it fine and eventually got them every one home safely.

Mine is but one of many such stories associated with the Children's Museum of Oak Ridge. Let me tell you of others and put the history of this jewel in our crown in perspective. From humble beginnings our museum has grown into one of the most well respected children's museums that exists anywhere in the world today. That is something we can all share in and experience the pride of having the exemplary model of children's museums that is the Children's Museum of Oak Ridge - a key element in our city.

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As I write the remaining installments of this series on the history of the museum, I am looking forward to the help I will be provided by folks like Selma Shapiro, who has loved this museum with a special dedication and devotion for years and still has more passion for it than most people have for anything in their lives.

I have already been provided significant help from Kay Brookshire who has written several excellent articles in the past on various aspects of the museum. I will draw heavily from her research and documentation.

Gordon Fee, long time member of the board of directors and dedicated champion of the museum has provided insights into some quite obscure details that I feel will add interest to the story of this part of our history that is truly more than a mere museum. As Gordon's dedicated involvement shows, the museum represents something deeper and more important, it represents a life's dedication to a worthy cause and a desire to see children grasp insights into the world in which they live through experiential learning.

Mary Ann Damos, Margaret Allard and Viola Ergen are all pitching in to help. Others will be involved as we continue to collect information. Joyce Maienschein, who found the Reader's Digest grant for that fabled first \$500, will help tell the story of the earliest beginnings. I am looking forward to that!

It may be true that only in Oak Ridge could be found the unusual mix of talent, dedication, perseverance and just plain stubbornness in support of a wholesome environment of learning, sufficient to build a world-class children's museum. Much larger cities cannot do it, only a handful of really high quality "hands-on" museums exist. Ours is among the best and has been recognized as such!

Please prepare to learn more about the Children's Museum of Oak Ridge over the coming weeks as we delve into its history through the eyes and words of such founding champions as Joyce Maienschein, the leader of the Girl Scout Troop who began it all...and maybe even some of the ladies who were the girls of that troop.

Just maybe we can capture the insights of the first hired director, Pan Zachry McElroy, and her unique story can be told. Bet you did not know that there was a director before Selma Shapiro. She has seemed to most of us to have been the director forever. And finally, Mary Ann Damos, the present director, will share with us her hopes and dreams for the future of the museum.

To sum up this first installment, let me quote from the Children's Museum of Oak Ridge's web site:

"The Children's Museum was conceived in 1973 as a Girl Scout project. It was formally opened on March 11, 1973 in the library of the former Jefferson Junior High School in 2,000 square feet of space and later moved to the former Highland View Elementary School in January 1974. The museum purchased the building and land from the city of Oak Ridge in 1983 and now operates in 54,000 square feet with exhibits, classes and programs for all ages."

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Our granddaughter in the Doll House – her favorite part of the Children's Museum



Two of our grandchildren learning by touch