

The Children's Museum moves to a new home

(As published in The Oak Ridger's Historically Speaking column on May 11, 2010)

The Children's Museum had its formal beginning on March 11, 1973. Its first home was the library of the closed Jefferson Junior High School building. Girl Scout Troop 69, through a Reader's Digest grant of \$500, and using exhibit materials from an earlier effort of the Association for Early Childhood Education and many new and creative exhibits created by the girls of the scout troop and their adult leaders, formed the Children's Museum of Oak Ridge.

The museum was formally incorporated on November 27, 1973, and official papers filed with the state on December 5, 1973, and with Anderson County on December 20, 1973. Memberships were immediately established and the girls of Girl Scout Troop 69 and Joyce Maienschein were granted life-time memberships. Memberships continue to be a mainstay of the support for the museum today. To join the Children's Museum visit their web site: <http://childrensmuseumofOakRidge.org/members-index.html>

In January, 1974, the Children's Museum moved from Jefferson Junior High School library to former classrooms in the east wing of the Highland View Elementary School, a building that was excess to the city's needs for schools. Elementary schools had been reduced from those constructed originally during the Manhattan Project to the four that remain to this day, Linden, Willow Brook, Woodland and Glenwood. Closed were Highland View, Cedar Hill, Elm Grove and Pine Valley.

I must insert a note on Pine Valley since this series focuses on the Children's Museum that was begun by the girls of Girls Scout Troop 69. Girl Scouts in Oak Ridge, maybe the very first such volunteer or civic organization in the new emerging city of Oak Ridge, was formed first at Pine Valley when General Groves was asked to request permission to establish a girl scout troop at that school. Permission was granted and the rest is history.

I should also like to insert a modern reference to the continuing relationship between the Children's Museum and Oak Ridge elementary schools. This comes from the Glenwood Elementary School's web site: <http://glenwood.ortn.edu/> "The Children's Museum is again hosting the Oak Ridge Schools Children's Art Show. Opening night was wonderful. Twelve children were chosen from each school to have their creations displayed. The art will open until May 15th"

Now back to the history... The Jefferson Junior High School building was the old Oak Ridge High School building and was being used by a number of organizations besides the newly forming Children's Museum. There was a Girl's Club there as well as organizations serving handicapped individuals.

However, the old school building that served as a home to these organizations was doomed by the cost of maintenance and upkeep and demolition was planned by the city. The organizations, including the less than one year old Children's Museum had to find suitable space in some other location and move out.

This massive transfer of exhibits required to move the Children's Museum was carried out primarily by the girls Girl Scout Troop 69 and their parents. Gordon Fee and his daughter Debbie were among the many girls and parents engaged in both the preparation of the library in Jefferson Junior High School building and a few months later, the clean up and move to the Highland View Elementary School building, the museum's present home. I dare say all the parents of these young girls were proud to help.

The first "official" exhibit space in the former Highland View Elementary School building consisted of only two rooms in the east wing, which very quickly grew to eight rooms! Selma Shapiro told me she, being the director at the time and the one who entered into the "rental" arrangement with the city, practiced the art of "squatters rights" by just taking over space that was not occupied in the building as the need arose.

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I can well remember doing much the same with the Cub Scout Pack 220. We met in a room that was used as a day care center during the day, but on Monday evenings the rooms in the west wing transformed into space for cub scouts to do a multitude of den meeting activities. We made use of space that was needed to accommodate our growing size. We all strived diligently to assure we did no harm and left the space as we found it or better.

Later in 1974, a Pioneer Living Homestead exhibit was made possible by yet another Reader's Digest grant to develop an Appalachian study area with two log cabins located and moved to the new museum by John Rice Irwin, founder of the Museum of Appalachia.

This combination of the Girl Scout grant and John Rice Irwin proved to be a winning combination and set the tone for the museum's focus on early Appalachia that remains a primary theme today and will remain a future feature area for the museum. Additional grants obtained by the museum supplemented the new direction and yet another Reader's Digest grant in 1975 funded a pictorial catalog that told the story of each of the objects and artifacts in the log cabins.

The log cabins and artifacts still today provide a popular and much needed experiential exhibit. Many families and their children never have seen the interior of a real log cabin in the hills of Appalachia. Yet understanding that heritage conveys great strength of character and a self-sufficient attitude that our children and grandchildren need to understand and internalize.

John Rice, at the time the museum moved into the old Highland View Elementary School building, occupied an office complex in the center of the building where he served as director of the Tennessee Appalachian Education Cooperative, a progressive approach to education in Appalachia. He held this position and occupied the offices in the center of the building until 1980, when he left to devote his full energies to the burgeoning Museum of Appalachia. This unique museum he had founded had by then grown from a single log building to an extensive village-farm complex, containing thousands of authentic Appalachian artifacts.

Some of these artifacts were loaned to the Children's Museum of Oak Ridge to augment the log cabin displays. A grant obtained by the museum supplemented the Girl Scout's Reader's Digest grant and funded the purchase and movement of the two log cabins. John Rice personally managed the disassembly and reconstruction of these excellent examples of Appalachian log cabins.

As of July 15, 1975, it was reported that over 15,000 people of all ages visited the Children's Museum of Oak Ridge thus far in 1975. The girl scouts in Girl Scout Troop 69 were right. The Children's Museum of Oak Ridge seemed a suitable next step for their efforts to create a multi-generational gathering place where the earlier concerns that caused them to create Awareness House could be taken to the next level.

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Pioneer Living Homestead log cabin being "chinked" by Doug Sharp and two unidentified girl scouts inside the display area of Children's Museum



Selma Shapiro and Mayor All Bissell celebrate the opening of the new Appalachian study area's Pioneer Living Homestead log cabins

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Doug Sharp and unidentified helper reassembly the logs for the cabin John Rice Irwin had located



New home of Children's Museum and offices of Tennessee Appalachian Educational Cooperative housed in old Highland View Elementary School building - 1974