

# **The Children's Museum of Oak Ridge and some young men who helped**

**(As published in The Oak Ridger's Historically Speaking column on May 18, 2010)**

As often happens when I write about almost any subject in Historically Speaking, I have gotten several comments from readers. I was delighted recently to get an e-mail from Jim Young!

Jim said, "Just thought I'd point out there were several male members of the Oak Ridge High School class of 1974 who were also involved in the Children's Museum! I was a photographer at the time for the Oak Leaf and was asked by Joyce Maienschein in 1973 to set up a darkroom in the Jefferson Jr. High location so we could hold some classes in processing film and enlargements."

Jim went on to say that those photography classes served to introduce him to the Children's Museum. He was also involved with the move to Highland View and some of the cleanup of the building as the Girl Scouts got ready for the move.

He remarked about an unusual observation made regarding the Highland View school building, "I remember being told that they had measured the rooms and discovered that several of the large rooms were off of square by several inches in the quick construction that was done during the war."

Jim, along with several other young men, was involved in the work on the log cabins with Mr. Sharp. The black and white photos in my column recently were photos that Jim took and developed. He said that several of his photographs were at one time displayed in the log cabin room on the wall to show the process of moving the cabins.

Jim's long time friend and later college roommate Steve Wust (now at Santa Fe, NM) and several other names are signed in chalk on a piece of wood that was left under the porch of the cabin (possibly under the dog-trot). I am seeking this artifact to get a photo of it.

Jim also secured a small collection of fossils from a lady in Venice, Florida, Mrs. M. C. Thomas who wrote what was the definitive book on fossil collection on the beach back in the late 60's and early 70's. He knocked on the door of her home to get a copy of her book autographed and Jim and Mrs. Thomas corresponded some after that. Eventually, Jim says, she donated a small collection of fossils that was on display for many years at the museum.

Jim's dad was Jack P. Young who served for a number of years on the board of the Children's Museum.

What a treat it was to get Jim's e-mail. See how clear his memory is of the contributions made to the Children's Museum. Obviously, this was something that he, along with others, were involved in during their young impressionable years that has stuck with him ever since. The kind of achievement accomplished by these young people who helped create the Children's Museum of Oak Ridge creates a life-long impression on all who were involved.

After the cabins were installed, another unique exhibit was not far behind. I am referring to the large stuffed Polar Bear.

When you enter the Children's Museum of Oak Ridge and look to your left a tremendously huge Polar Bear is the ONLY thing you can see. It is impossible to miss. "Nanook," a real stuffed polar bear dominates the scene.

It may seem somewhat out of place for what the first time visitor might expect to see, yet it is so right for the unique Children's Museum of Oak Ridge. Of course there is a story there!

Selma Shapiro tells it like this. "In the early 1980's I got a call from the Tennessee Association of Museums director saying, 'Boy, have we got a present for you.'"

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Selma went on to say that the Tennessee State Museum was making substantial changes and had decided the Polar Bear was not going to be a part of their future displays. They were looking for a home for the immense stuffed bear. Selma recognized an opportunity and said she would take the bear.

Now, how to get it from Nashville to Oak Ridge? Never one to hesitate to take on a challenge, Selma set out to make the necessary arrangements to transport this huge bear to Oak Ridge. She described the trip as being one where the polar bear was placed on a large truck and the Tennessee National Guard flew a helicopter above it all the way from Nashville to Oak Ridge.

I asked Selma, why a helicopter? She said she really did not know, but did not ask questions, just thanked the National Guard for bringing the enormous display to Oak Ridge. I still am not sure I fully appreciate the significance of that fly along.

Whatever the full reason for the helicopter the Tennessee National Guard and the Tennessee State Museum took extreme measures to assure the safe arrival of this very valuable trophy bear. It stands proudly today welcoming all comers to the Children's Museum of Oak Ridge. While the agreement with the Tennessee State Museum is a loan arrangement, I doubt this bear will ever leave its present home.

There were some major grants obtained by the Children's Museum which helped move the museum ahead by huge steps and allowed some very substantially important aspects of Appalachia to be brought to light. As the years went by, the museum began to be recognized more and more for its tremendous achievements. A "Best in the State" award and even more grants helped establish a museum that went far beyond what a troop of Girl Scouts dreamed just a few years back.

It all started because of Selma's visit with a representative of the National Endowment of the Humanities at the Knoxville Hyatt Regency hotel where she asked the simple question, "What specifically are you looking for and for what do you want to provide a grant?" The representative said, "Strip Mining."

It seems this lady from Massachusetts had the idea that the mine owners and the local folks here in the south were having a tough time communicating. She wanted to help with that perceived problem. Selma did not know a thing about coal mining at the time, but she immediately set out to learn.

She contacted Jack Gibbons, yes, the exact same person who was tapped by President Bill Clinton as his "science advisor," and asked him to teach her about coal mining. He came by Selma's office in the Children's Museum regularly and taught her about coal mining.

Selma applied for and obtained a \$6,000 grant which funded the creation of a four-panel exhibit on strip mining that was placed in the gym at the Highland View school building. The public was invited to view it free of charge, and interestingly enough, the mine owners and miners began a dialog around that small exhibit that may well have improved communications between them substantially.

It was for this effort that the museum received recognition as the "Best in the State." While this award may not seem very significant, it actually turned out to be of immense importance as it helped substantiate the capability of the museum as much larger grants were sought and obtained. These grants enabled the museum to advance well beyond just a museum of hands-on exhibits.

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*Nanook*, the Polar Bear is on loan from the Tennessee State Museum and is either really liked by children or they are terrified until they realize it is just a big stuffed “teddy” bear