

The Children's Museum and Harold Jernigan

(As published in The Oak Ridger's Historically Speaking column on June 1, 2010)

Before continuing, let me add some information gained from Joyce Maienschein. She indicated that Becky Weeren and Debbie Mesmer were the young girls chinking the cabin in one photo I included a few weeks ago, and the gentleman is Bill Countess. I incorrectly identified him as Doug Sharp. She said the second photograph was Mr. Sharp and also included Barbara Reeves. I appreciate the help identifying these folks.

I also learned that upon the move from Jefferson Junior High School to Highland View, the full east wing was included in the deal. I am sure there were struggles to properly allocate space, but Joyce assures me that the initial exhibits filled much of the wing.

What a joy it is to document the history of the Children's Museum of Oak Ridge. And at the same time, what a chore it is to select the specific details that best convey the history of this most important icon of Oak Ridge. I am so very thankful to those of you who are helping me.

The museum staff has been most supportive. Mary Ann Dumas has assured that she and all others respond to my requests promptly and thoroughly. Selma Shapiro, of course, is of immeasurable value with her long history of involvement in the museum, and what can I say about Joyce Maienschein, she was there at the beginning and her touch began it all.

Then there are the members of Girl Scout Troop 69, whose energetic and enthusiastic involvement made the dream a reality. As is often the case, I include something in *Historically Speaking* of which I am totally unaware of the personal connection to some reader, and that reader contacts me with astonishing revelations.

Such was the case when I ran a photo of Marion Metcalf, a member of Girl Scout Troop 69 and whom I learned took a leadership role in the creation of the Children's Museum of Oak Ridge. Her brother, Larry Metcalf, works with me at Y-12. He approached me with thoughtful thanks for the pleasant surprise of seeing his sister's photograph featured in one of the *Historically Speaking* articles.

Well, I was pleased and asked if I could possibly talk to her as I wanted to get the perspective of some of the members of Girl Scout Troop 69. He politely informed me that she had died and that she had actually had a serious health problem all her short life, but he quickly told me of her amazing accomplishments in her chosen career.

Larry credited the experience she gained in Troop 69 and the project to begin a Children's Museum in Oak Ridge as having helped give her the needed self confidence to succeed in life in spite of her handicap. He said that Joyce Maienschein had actually spoken at Marion's funeral regarding her life in Girl Scouting.

So, I quickly contacted Joyce and asked her what she could tell me about Marion. Rather than repeat what she said at the funeral, she suggested I would be better served if I contacted another member of the "Troubadour Patrol of Girl Scout Troop 69," Mary Beth Wiley Robinson. I did contact Mary Beth and she is working on a reunion of the Troubadour Patrol and will include me in the event. What a story that will be!

However, the Girl Scouts and Joyce were key elements of the creation of the museum and the present staff members are important to its present success and potential future. Yet, as is most often the case, the full story of such successful endeavors includes a champion who is external to the operation and who is in the political arena. This phenomenon is one we would do well to better understand!

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That was the exact situation with my friend, Harold Jernigan and the events that led to the museum being located in the Highland View Elementary School building. Let me tell you the story of Harold's years-long supportive involvement with his beloved Children's Museum. You will be amazed at his love for this museum.

Harold said, "Before I was elected to City Council in June, 1967, I had not heard of the Children's Museum. I was re-elected to four more terms, making a total of 20 years! I finally retired in June of 1983. [Harold's service over these 20 years is one of dedication to this district, Highland View, and dedication to progressive city government while holding dear the wishes of his represented community – Ray]

Harold continued, "I was elected by my fellow members as Mayor pro tem in July, 1981 and served in that position until July of 1983. Council members were first elected from districts, and I represented Highland View. When I heard about the Children's Museum, I was very interested. And when they needed my help to get space in the old Highland View School, I was glad to do that.

"My children, Mary and Hal, had gone to Highland View in their elementary school years, and we lived across the street from the school. I was very familiar with the building and the neighborhood.

"When the government houses were sold, many of the flattops, TD-U's, and K's were bought up for use as rental property. Some of these owners were slum landlords. They would use the cheapest materials on the rental units. They would take all their leftover pieces of roofing and put it on one roof - all colors. They would mix up leftover paint colors and paint the walls. Kudzu was growing behind the school -- we used to call it the 'kudzu bowl.'

Harold continues, "So I was worried about the neighborhood. And I thought a children's museum in the former school building would help not only the neighborhood kids, but kids from all around. I met with Joyce and others, and they described what they had in mind.

A champion for the Children's Museum is born in City Council, Harold said, "When the decision came before City Council [as to disposition of the school building], some of the Council members thought it should be torn down and the land used for more profitable purposes. I argued for allowing the Children's Museum to use it. I won that vote, and I am very proud of it. The rest is history.

And history it is...don't you know that without the support of Harold Jernigan, this icon of Oak Ridge history might never have survived. What would have happened if he had not taken the challenge to support the movement of the Children's Museum from the doomed, Jefferson Junior High School building to the Highland View Elementary School building?

What would have happened if those who wanted to see a "more profitable purpose" for the structure had won the day? What a shame. Maybe a bit more money for the city for the short run, but the cultural enrichment for kids provided by one of the best Children's Museums in the world would have been missed.

Harold further stated, "I have continued to be involved with the Museum -- as a member and supporter. As a county commissioner (1998 to 2006), I worked with my friend Selma [Shapiro] to assure that funding continued from Anderson County's appropriations to non-profit organizations.

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Without support from political champions such as Harold Jernigan, our precious Children's Museum and other non-profits would be unable to continue to provide the services we are so accustomed to that we take them for granted...shame on us. These organizations REQUIRE continual vigilance by elected representatives of our government at all levels. Without such dedicated support as epitomized by Harold Jernigan, we all lose.

Harold continues, "The Museum today is something for this city to be proud of. Though they're having some financial problems, people in the community will help out.

With no small amount of pride, Harold states, "I'm also proud of my granddaughter, Kate Jernigan, who has worked at the Museum since she was 12. She worked as a volunteer for six years, and for the second year now she is a paid summer employee.

"Kate is a history major at the University of South Carolina. Because of her experience here, she is a student curator at that university museum. She designs and sets up exhibits and obtains artifacts.

"Helen and I still live in the Highland View neighborhood, within walking distance of the Museum. We also vote there, at the precinct polling place.

What a great tribute to community service! Harold is facing health problems now and I am so indebted to him for allowing me to impose on him for these quotes. His dedication to Oak Ridge remains as strong as ever and his desire to see "his" museum grow and prosper is un-abating. He remains one of the museum's strongest supporters!

Thank you, Harold Jernigan, for your years of dedicated service to our community.



July 7, 1983 photo from The Oak Ridger of Harold Jernigan, Mayor Pro Tem, receiving a check from the Selma Shapiro purchasing the building and 8 ½ acres that today forms the present home of the Children's Museum of Oak Ridge