

Children's Museum of Oak Ridge and the History of East Tennessee

(As published in The Oak Ridger's Historically Speaking column on July 20, 2010)

Over the past 37 years the Children's Museum of Oak Ridge has undertaken a number of projects intended to capture aspects of the history of East Tennessee. Some of the first efforts were aimed at early times in Anderson County. Several later efforts have focused on the unique history of Oak Ridge. One of the first such initiatives was the publication in 1976 of Beulah Braden's excellent book, *When Grandma was a Girl*.

Recently I was kindly gifted with a copy of the book signed by Clifford Smith, the illustrator. He sent the book with the following note that after kind words regarding Historically Speaking continued:

"I am a retired school teacher from the Oak Ridge Schools (1985). At different times I taught art, science, and mathematics at Jefferson Junior High School. During the seventies and eighties I did a lot of art work for The Oak Ridger. Usually, it would be the result of an idea that Dick Smyser had. I would have a note in my box at school to stop by the Oak Ridger.

"Since I was the Eighth Grade basketball coach it would usually take me a while to get down there, but I was always pleasantly wondering what kind of idea Dick had this time. He was a very clever man, and it was always fun to try to get his ideas into a drawing.

"Most of the drawings were fairly simple, so imagine my surprise when I walked into his office one Friday afternoon and he informed me that I was going to illustrate a book. I was even happier when he told me that I would working with him and with Horace Wells, the publisher of the Clinton Courier, and with Tom Hill, The Oak Ridger publisher.

"I had worked on several publications with Mr. Wells and some articles with Mr. Hill, and I knew what nice people they were to work with. Of course, at our first meeting, Mr Wells surprised me by telling the others how lucky they were to have me to work with, because I wasn't an 'artist.' It took me a minute or two to realize that he considered that to be a complement.

"Anyhow, it was really great to be involved with something in which both of the two area newspapers were involved in such a friendly, cooperative manner and were working for such a good cause, the Children's Museum. Thanks for bringing up the memories. – Best wishes, Clifford Smith

Clifford went on to tell me of his early years growing up on a farm near present day Fox Den in Farragut. He ended his note by stating that "times have changed." I enjoyed that and I certainly appreciated his thoughtfulness at sending me a signed copy of *When Grandma was a Girl*.

John Rice Irwin said in his preface to the book, "The participation of Tom Hill and Horace Wells is no more a commercial venture than was Mrs. Braden's writing of the book. In fact, they have drafted and signed a contract which stipulates that any and all profits accruing from the publication of the book shall go to Mrs. Braden and the Children's Museum. I think Mr. Wells and Mr. Hill, in their generous publication of this book are principally concerted that the culture, heritage and lifestyle of our region be preserved and recorded for the many thousands of school children in this area (and perhaps other areas) who have been reared in split-level subdivision homes developed on someone's grandfather's old home place."

Beulah Brummett Braden wrote the manuscript that resulted in *When Grandma was a girl*, not for publication as a book, but rather as a memoir for her grandson, Patrick Francis Killeen. It was Selma Shapiro who, upon reading the original manuscript, thought it was something worthy of much more

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widespread distribution. She is the one who shared the manuscript with both Tom Hill and Horace Wells...and the rest is history.

The book fits perfectly with the goal of the Children's Museum to help present day children understand what has gone before and to better understand what makes our region so special. The Dunkin farm upon which Beulah grew up exemplifies the warmth and simplicity of the lifestyle in East Tennessee at the turn of the 20th century.

The statement on the flap of the back cover of the book, "Beneath the surface of this family history, with its detailed accounts of their daily living on her Grandfathers farm, lies a beautiful portrayal of a genuine, unpretentious and independent people," so rightly observes that this wonderful book serves to convey the history of our region in a most personal and effective manner. Just the thing the Children's Museum has continued to accomplish through the years with various other such projects and exhibits.

Other projects followed, such as the three-year program started in 1979 titled "An Appalachian Experience" where Jim Stokely was named director of the project and Jeff Johnson, assistant director. This project created numerous projects, programs, literary works, and documentary videos on the culture of the southern Appalachian mountains.

In 1981 *An Encyclopedia of East Tennessee* was published by the Children's Museum and co-edited by Jim Stokely and Jeff Johnson. I was pleased to have included in this publication an article on the history of Nancy Ward, Beloved Women of the Cherokee, my first published work.

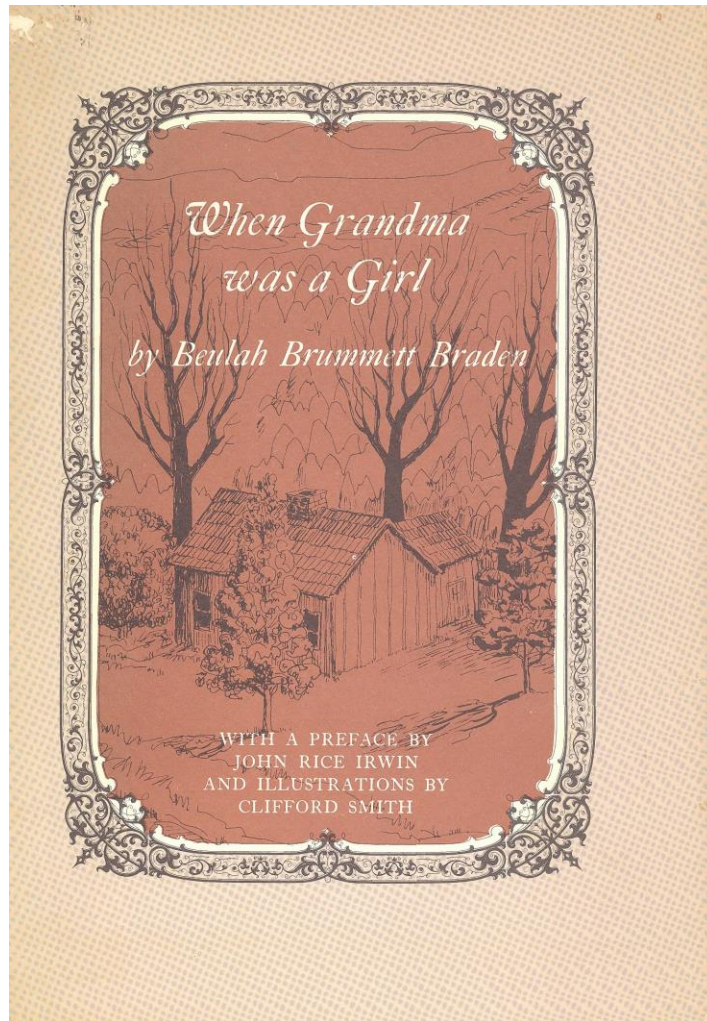
In 1982, James Overholt, author and historian, became director of the Regional Appalachian Center, an outgrowth of the Appalachian Experience project. 1987 saw the publication of *These are our voices: Story of Oak Ridge*, an anthology of essays written by many of the people who lived the experience that was Oak Ridge.

In 1991, Joanne Gailer's *Oak Ridge and me: From youth to maturity*, was published by the museum and featured Joanne's observations of life in early Oak Ridge.

So, you see the history of our region, naturally including much about the history of Oak Ridge has been woven throughout the history of the Children's Museum of Oak Ridge. Exhibits such as the "Difficult Decisions: History of Oak Ridge," winner of the Tennessee Associations of Museums Award of Merit for Exhibitions, and the outstanding Ed Westcott exhibit of excellent photographs of early Oak Ridge exemplify the level of commitment the museum has to interpreting the history of East Tennessee. And a fine job has been done in all endeavors.

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The book that started it all, *When Grandma was a Girl*, by Beulah Brummett Braden, illustrated by Clifford Smith