

VJ Day Celebration – what does it really mean to Oak Ridge?

(As published in The Oak Ridger's Historically Speaking column on August 24, 2010)

Something special happened in Oak Ridge on Thursday, August 12, 2010. The Midtown Community Center was filled to capacity with people. Many of them were alive on August 14, 1945 and their memories of the winning of World War II were shared with those of us who were not yet alive at that time.

We ignored the official designation of VJ Day by President Truman as being September 2, 1945 when the Japanese officially surrendered. When the news was first heard on August 14, 1945, is when these folks had an indelible impression imprinted on their memories. That is what we celebrated. The Oak Ridge Heritage and Preservation Association was the host.

I busily took photographs of these wonderful elderly folks who effectively shared the spirit of the memories they held, each with a somewhat different approach depending on their real life experience on that day some 65 years ago. Many of them thanked Oak Ridge...can you imagine that? I find the positive changes that are now taking place regarding the memory of the atomic bomb refreshing.

A few years back Oak Ridge sadly abandoned all ties to the slogan "atomic energy capital of the world" because of the negative connotation of any reference to the atomic bomb. Now we are fighting for the chance to build a nuclear energy reactor that will supply all the electrical power needed to run all of Oak Ridge and take us completely off the TVA electrical grid! Imagine that! We ARE again becoming the "Atomic Energy Capital of the World!" I think we ought to revive the slogan!

On this special evening, there was no shame in expressing sincere thanks to Oak Ridge for the uranium 235 that fueled Little Boy, the first atomic bomb ever used in warfare and dropped on Hiroshima, Japan. The people who were on ships headed toward Japan knew full well they were headed into a series of horrendous battles that would likely result in their possible death, but for the atomic bomb.

Take for example Preston Herndan's comments that on VJ day he was on an assault ship in Okinawa getting ready to go to Japan. He had already survived four island assaults. He was very relieved that he did not have to go to Japan. He was very thankful to everyone here in Oak Ridge for their efforts to end the war. He remembered the death all around him from those four assaults and knew the attack being planned to invade mainland Japan was even worse. Don't you know he did not think he had a chance of coming out of this next assault alive! Having survived four, he must have realized that the odds were that the next assault battle was likely his last.

The plans for the assault on Japan have just recently been made public. The scope of the planned attack was enormous and the deaths expected were in the hundreds of thousands! Oak Ridge helped avoid those deaths! People who were headed to Japan realize their lives were likely saved by a bunch of workers at Oak Ridge, most of whom did not know exactly what they were doing but realized it was of enormous importance and was intended to help win the war...that is all they needed to know. They worked their hearts out to save the lives of the young men who were fighting for their lives daily.

I sent the following link to the subscribers to my SmithDRay Web Pages e-mail notification list: <http://picasaweb.google.com/SmithDRay/VJDayMemories#> so they might view the 55 images I posted showing the people telling their VJ Day stories.

Of the many replies I received, this one struck me as particularly insightful: "Although I knew nothing of those people, at least that I could recognize, but I found myself tearing up at times. My father's two youngest brothers, still living at 89 and 92, were in WWII. They left the cotton fields of north Alabama, one for the Army and went all over the South Pacific and the other the Air Force in which he flew 30 missions out of England over Europe. I think I am emotional about seeing those pictures because, though quite young, I remember well the parental concern on both sides of my family and the fact that some of my mother's nephews did not return alive. I am sure your event was both pleasurable and sad."

Wow, a stranger to Oak Ridge, yet he understood!

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A further insight into the impact of VJ Day on people who were fighting that awful war in their own way is the letter sent by Bill Wilcox to his parents. It was written on August 15, 1945 from Norris Dam where Bill and some of his friends were staying, having rented cabins at the Norris Dam State Park months before without realizing that their commuting vacation from the Clinton Engineer Works would coincide with this once in their lifetime historic week when World War II would end.

Here is what Bill said to his parents:

"Dearest Mother and Dad,

"At last, thank God it's all over. The 'blood, sweat and tears' of everyone, the wild hopes and awesome fears of those here (in Oak Ridge), and the great sacrifices of those who gave their all do not immediately appear to be in vain. Let's pray we don't have occasion to change our mind.

"After the din of battle dies for the last time, and after the first exuberant moments of rejoicing, one cannot but be sobered by the feeling that an end of another era has come.

"You now know part of the biggest secret of the war. Never before has the knowledge of so vital a nature been entrusted to so many with so great success in keeping it secret. The world has never known so many precedent breaking discoveries and methods as have been developed here. I cannot hope to ever be able to explain to you what has happened here. It is not just the atomic bomb story but also the atmosphere in which it was created. Oak Ridge is not a town, city, or name alone, it symbolizes a great and unique philosophy which is felt only by those who have stormed, sweated, and cussed here for two years.

"One feature is 'nothing is impossible.' You have heard the phrase before. This time we are dealing with pure scientific facts. The atomic theory of matter, a postulate of long standing, has been proven beyond the shadow of a doubt.

"Perhaps if you could see Oak Ridge and the Plants, you might understand. The very size of the place would normally require twenty years of construction work. We have some of the largest buildings in the world here, built, developed, and operating in two years. We are entirely self-sufficient. We have the best hospital service in the south (with hospitalization insurance). We have the best organized and most efficient recreational program in the country. We have six theaters, three bowling alleys, four dance halls (beautiful), about 15 tennis courts, new swimming pool, gorgeous high school, skating rinks, archery, etc., etc.

"It is without a doubt the most socialized town in the country and it works beautifully – no slums, no unemployment, no civil police department (but thousands of guards), etc. All in two years!

"I hope this push is over. I'm glad we know how to use uranium, and the Germans, Russians, and Jap's don't yet. I'm thankful we worked for two years doing what was premature by maybe a century. I'm glad it's over. There will never be another World War that anyone will ever be able to sign a peace to.

"I'm glad I've been able to do my share in this war. Hirohito said it was the Atomic Bomb that did it. When the story comes out, you will see he was right, for once. Don't feel bad about my not being in the Army. I lost a lot. I'll be observing my 25th birthday next January.

"If you waded through to this point, you can tear it up. You can pent up a hell of a lot of emotion in two years with people saying, 'why are you not in uniform?', and calling you a draft dodger.

"Love, Bill

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Regarding the above letter, Bill remarks, "I had been working on the Manhattan Project for the Tennessee Eastman Company, the operator of Y-12, since May 1943 - long before any building was finished at Clinton Engineer Works. I came here in October 1943. Only 22 years old when VJ Day came, I was so excited about being able to write some of the restricted details about this secret city and of how impressed I was, and co-workers were, about the work of the Project. Though I had read all the newspaper stories since Aug. 6, 1945, it's clear from my letter that I knew precious little about the details of the work at the other sites and my world was still pretty small - confined to Y-12 at CEW!"

I think Bill's letter is tremendously helpful to put in perspective what happened here in Oak Ridge from 1942 through 1945. It was nothing less than the most significant scientific and industrial achievement in the history of the world!

On August 12, 2010, in the Midtown Community Center of Oak Ridge, TN, the people who lived the experience of winning World War II shared their perceptions of that momentous event with us who only know it through association with history. What a blessing it is to be in the presence of the greatest generation who won the last World War! God bless them, they are tremendous!



Colleen Black describes how she quickly became engaged to be married the very night after hearing that the war had ended

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Ernest Cossen a member of the 509th Composite Group, US Army Air Force, who was at Tinian Island preparing for the invasion of Japan when the war ended by the dropping of the Atomic Bomb