

Bill Wilcox shares his Dad's letter

(As published in The Oak Ridger's Historically Speaking column on August 31, 2010)

World War II's dramatic end in August, 1945, allowed Oak Ridgers who had been sent here to work from all over the United States to finally write and tell the folks back home about how big Oak Ridge was and all the pros and cons about this place they had called home during the war. In last week's column we shared parts of a seven-page letter Bill Wilcox wrote home after the war's end.

This week he tells about a letter from his Dad in Pennsylvania responding to Bill's letter the week before - right after Hiroshima. It speaks to Bill's concerns about not being in uniform that he had expressed in his recent letters home. Enjoy Bill's recap of the situation and his Dad's letter.

"On August 7th, right after the first A-Bomb story came out, I had written a long letter home and sent all the local newspaper's clippings. In that letter, along with my ravings about all Oak Ridge's attractions for the many thousands of young people here, I also revealed my past concerns over what I had heard from people outside of Clinton Engineer Works - feelings that we healthy-looking men with deferments might not be doing our part in the war.

"My Dad, a Major in World War I, respected lawyer, history lover, scholar, much-loved and loving parent, decided I needed some hand-holding and wrote back his affirmation and some counsel that I should take a middle course -- caring a lot what people think if your behavior affects others, not too much when it doesn't. Perhaps you'll enjoy the pungent way my Dad put it to me.

"Keep in mind this was intended only for me, and we lived in the very different world of 1945. I have treasured it ever since along with many dozens of grand letters to our extended family that he typed every Sunday night on his portable [typewriter] with six carbon copies, keeping us all 'in the family' during college and then as we three kids raised families over twenty years.

"Allentown, PA, Monday, Aug 13, 1945,

"Dear Bill, You know we were thrilled when we learned what you have been working on. I must confess that had never occurred to us. We, of course, had an idea that it must be some phase of munitions due to the extreme secrecy, but that was as far as we got.

"Certainly no one with any intelligence has doubted that you were contributing more to the war effort there than you would have been likely to do somewhere else. The very fact of your continued deferment should have been evidence enough.

"You can't pattern your behavior on what people may 'think.' That is a much abused word. Most people do not think. They use the word to describe a process compounded of prejudices, emotions, intuitions, and wishes. It is surprising how few people really use genuine thought processes in arriving at decisions and programs.

"To let you in on a professional secret, I honestly believe a lot of lawyers would starve if people governed their action by thought. All that we lawyers have to do with many of our client's problems is apply logic and reason to them.

"Sometimes they are too prejudiced, sometimes too angry, and I guess, sometimes their powers of reason have atrophied from non-use. At any rate I get back to my starting point. If you think yourself and guide your conduct by the best reason of which you are capable, guided by wise consultation and conscience, you will do best to disregard largely what others 'think.'

"Of course you can't always do it. I believe the Declaration of Independence is generally regarded as one of the truly great documents of recorded history; without looking it up I believe it begins something like this:

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When in the course of human events it becomes necessary for a people to dissolve those ties which have bound them to another, a decent regard for the opinion of mankind compels them to state the reasons impelling them to such action. Look it up and see if I'm very far wrong, not from the exact wording, but from the meaning.

"So you see some regard must be paid to public opinion at least on public questions. The person who utterly disregards opinions of others becomes a freak, asocial, and probably an outcast –certainly I would not recommend that.

"The correct course usually is a middle one. In other words, decide for yourself what is right and do it without worrying what others may think unless it is a matter that concerns others more than yourself. Or is a matter whose yielding to the opinion of others is a duty or may contribute to the welfare of the whole without injuring yourself.

"The usual social graces, little matters of good manners in company and at table, dress, etc. etc., are often not supported by reason but being generally accepted and followed make life pleasanter and it is easier to adopt them than to try by reason or rebellion to change them. Here endeth the first lesson.

"I don't suppose that much of the secret of Oak Ridge and its work is out even if the object is out. I don't suppose your hours of work will radically change overnight. Your cottage (A group of us singles were renting them that week at Norris Dam State Park – Bill) sounds like the height of luxury and a marvelous place to be...

"Tell us all you are permitted to,

"With love, wjw

"Dad passed away in 1963, age 77, as the 'rebellion' against his generation's 'pleasanter social graces' was getting underway. RIP, Major!

Well, there you have it. I hope you appreciate the historic value of Bill's personal correspondence and with me share the awesomeness of what we have been allowed to experience vicariously. Bill's personal letter from his Dad is something he treasures mightily and when asked to share it, he quite understandably had some reservations. I prevailed upon him and you are the beneficiary.

I know he felt some degree of violation of his privacy by my request, yet he graciously agreed to it when I expressed the opinion that you readers would understand and appreciate the value of the fatherly counsel provided by his dad.

Sadly, parents today do not always take the time to deal with the larger issues of patriotism and self-esteem (don't be too swayed by what others "think" as most people don't!). Bill's dad took the time to teach him and did so in a most elegant fashion. I hope you agree it was refreshing to read his letter to his son. See why Bill has cherished this letter all these years and my sincere thanks to my good friend for sharing it with us.

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William J. Wilcox, Bill's Dad – see the strength of character in the eyes of the World War I Major turned lawyer and the caring Dad



Bill Wilcox as a young man in 1944 full of enthusiasm and eager to do his part to help win that awful war