

Children's Museum of Oak Ridge and the History of Oak Ridge – part 2

(As published in The Oak Ridger's Historically Speaking column on September 14, 2010)

Please consider with me the full need to interpret the full history of Oak Ridge. Bear in mind that we individuals are responsible to interpret our history. Remember also that the Department of Energy carries a responsibility for interpreting our history. Between the two of us we organize and attempt to bring our history to life through Heritage Tourism and various other means to communicate our history.

The “modest effort” by the Children's Museum as well as what the Museum of Science and Energy has collected, what is located in the Oak Ridge Public Library's Oak Ridge Room and what the Oak Ridge Heritage and Preservation Association has collected, are all far too limited to serve the full purpose of capturing our history to the degree needed for a full interpretation. More is needed, far more.

With the Department of Energy sites holding such key elements of our Oak Ridge history, we have to rely on those who make decisions regarding the extent the government is committed to saving that history as well. While the main missions of the sites are primary, the importance of preserving the history of these unique technological mainstays of the Manhattan Project, the Cold War and now the age of Terrorism, is vital to the understanding of coming generations. The history must be preserved and interpreted.

It is not enough to rely on volunteerism and small scale efforts to interpret our fast passing history. Daily we lose individuals who have specific and often unique knowledge that should be retained for future generations. I am proud of the knowledge capture program at Y-12 that focuses on technological processes. I am sure the lab is doing something similar with specific research. Recently an attempt was made to capture some specific K-25 technical history that was in danger of being lost. I am proud to have been allowed to help with some of this as I feel they are vitally important efforts.

Yet, so much more is needed. As the National Park Service looks to creating a Manhattan Project National Park that includes Oak Ridge, Los Alamos and Hanford, I am again pleased to see the national level of recognition for the importance of capturing and interpreting this history for future generations. But, what about the Cold War history, how do we interpret that? What about the history of the Age of Terrorism, how do we capture that as we are living it right now?

What about the birth of our city, how do we best capture that unique and most unusual story? Many of the people with the first-hand knowledge of how that was done are gone. Eugene Joyce and Dick Smyser are examples. Their papers are not always archived so as to be easily researched. The Children's Museum of Oak Ridge tries to help as do other organizations, but all the efforts are woefully inadequate to the task. Full interpretation is far from being accomplished.

While the city, the museums, civic groups and individuals may preserve elements of our history, the main elements of the government sites are overwhelmingly important to the full story. So, while the Children's Museum's contributions to preserving our history is on a small scale in comparison to the government sites, what is preserved there is often so very insightful and conveys huge messages to the children of our next generations.

It is vital for each of us to preserve what is important to us about our history. Oral histories such as the ones at the Children's Museum, the government sites and other locations are being collected at the Oak Ridge Public Library in the Center for Oak Ridge Oral History. Many who lived and worked during the Manhattan Project era have passed away already. We are losing more and more of our World War II veterans daily.

Capturing the oral histories is but one facet of a well rounded historic preservation program. We need to look at the whole picture and realize that the Children's Museum and other entities who desire to help

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preserve our history can only do so much. We are in danger of losing more key elements if something is not done soon.

Look at the Alexander Inn/Guest House. It is being preserved now because of a group (The Oak Ridge Revitalization Effort) who took action. We need much more of that level of personal, corporate and government commitment if we are to save the unique things and memories that are our important Oak Ridge history for the benefit of coming generations.

We can all take pride in what is being done at what is among the most historic structures in our city. ORRE is working hard to raise the necessary funds and using much volunteer labor is making a difference in the historic inn. You may want to help, if so, you may contact them through their web site: <http://www.revitalizeoakridge.org/alexander.htm>

While the private sector efforts are to be commended, they cannot touch the full extent of our history. Only the Department of Energy can address the extensive history of the government sites. Yet, we who see the importance of historic preservation have a responsibility to alert our elected officials to support the initiative of our Department of Energy officials. They can only do what is authorized and appropriated.

Again, they cannot use large amounts of mission critical funds for this purpose. Congress must allocate funds for historic preservation. The National Park Service study is a good example of what is required to fully interpret our history. More on this subject next week...stay tuned!



The main lobby showing the freshly painted walls and famous mantle in the Ed Westcott photos of Robert Oppenheimer

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Vandalism of hallway, typical of what has to be restored



Main entrance to the stately old Guest House/Alexander Inn structure that is certainly getting a major facelift