

Children's Museum of Oak Ridge and the History of Oak Ridge – part 3

(As published in The Oak Ridger's Historically Speaking column on September 21, 2010)

As this series of articles continue to focus on the importance of preserving Oak Ridge's history, let me now come back to the Children's Museum of Oak Ridge. Their contribution to capturing and preserving Oak Ridge's history is one of the important elements in the overall efforts to define the various aspects of our most unique history that began only 68 years ago, a very short time as histories go.

I also want to look again at observations made by Gordon Fee. His long-time devotion and dedication to the Children's Museum of Oak Ridge goes back to its beginning. He has continued his support over the years, whether as an active board member, leading fundraising efforts or creating exhibits.

Gordon has a dedication for the museum that few have equaled. He is the one who encouraged this Historically Speaking series on the history of the Children's Museum of Oak Ridge and has contributed much to it. I am most grateful for his assistance and willingness to take a strong stand for the importance of preserving our history by all means available to us.

Gordon has expressed concern for the general failure of Oak Ridge to fully document and preserve our history. He has chastised us for our lack of foresight on numerous occasions and has attempted to convey the importance of heritage tourism several times in various ways to a wide variety of audiences.

Of course, he is swayed by the success of his son, David (Lucky Lem the Magician, to those who remember him in the 1970's and early 1980's here in Oak Ridge). The Comedy Barn, the Black Bear Jamboree and the Miracle Theater are all huge successes in Pigeon Forge.

Recently Gordon attended a play at our Oak Ridge Playhouse and told me he was struck by the condition of the Playhouse structure. He mentioned that they have advertised the need for a significant amount of money to come into code and grow as they feel is justified. I imagine they are having a tough time raising funds just as has the Children's Museum had a tough time raising needed funds over the years. It is indeed a sad commentary on our community that mainstay institutions of our community can't raise needed funds to properly maintain their facilities.

Gordon also expressed to me his concern for our arts facilities and programs. He sees them as being in great jeopardy for the long term. Roane State Community College and Pellissippi State Community College are seen by Gordon as having to transform the way they are funded if the State drops back on public education funding. Gordon is involved at the State level in education, therefore he has insight into the education funding situation that many of us do not. All these situations, if they continue to struggle and eventually come to be as Gordon fears, will have a significantly negative impact on our city and our future.

As for the Children's Museum, unlike the American Museum of Science and Energy where what Gordon calls the traditional "Oak Ridge Model" of the government taking care of us has prevailed, no government money has come their way. Every dime that has gone into the museum has been fought for. No major firm has stepped up to the plate with a significant year in and year out sponsorship. Again, shame on us!

The Children's Museum has to maintain a tight budget because of the limited support of the major entities in the community. Individual and small corporate donors have been good to the museum, however, in this era of "instant gratification," these donors prefer their money be used to create exhibits or other tangible elements with which they can readily identify. Getting a major commitment to support long-term operational needs and capital improvements is hard to come by.

Yet, with all the limitations mentioned, the Children's Museum of Oak Ridge has managed to create some excellent exhibits and retain key historical collections that contribute mightily toward the preservation of

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our Oak Ridge history. The "Difficult Decisions" is but one of the exhibits focused on interpreting our history.

Gordon also points out that the Children's Museum has published a number of books that contribute to the preservation of our Oak Ridge history. Margaret Allard notes that two of the museum's excellent books are out of print, *An Encyclopedia of East Tennessee*, edited by Jim Stokely, 1981, and *Anderson County, Tennessee, A Pictorial History*, by James Overholt, 1989.

There are three books that are available at the museum store, *An Appalachian Studies Teacher's Manual*, edited by Jim Stokely, 1981, *These are our Voices – The Story of Oak Ridge, 1942-1970*, edited by James Overholt, 1987, and *Oak Ridge and Me*, by Joanne Gailar, 1991.

Ridges and Valleys: A Mini Encyclopedia of Anderson County, TN, written by students in Anderson County in 1989 and four pamphlets entitled, *Appalachian Livin'*, which has summer, winter, spring and fall editions are other examples of books produced by the museum. These are both available at the museum store.

All these books contribute to our history and are excellent examples of preserving our history. The promotion of local authors and their works by the Children's Museum is commendable. That helps support individual efforts to preserve our history through personal involvement and engagement in the struggle to pass on our history to the next generations.

The next article in this series will look in detail at some of the books available at the Children's Museum of Oak Ridge and how they contribute to helping capturing Oak Ridge's history. The important role played by the Children's Museum of Oak Ridge to help preserve our history is a major emphasis that continues to be promoted and holds a key place in the strategic plans for the future of the museum.

While this installment has focused on the Children's Museum, we cannot forget the much broader historic preservation issues such as the National Park Study to form a Manhattan Project National Historic Park that includes Oak Ridge, Los Alamos and Hanford and the Department of Energy's responsibility to interpret the substantial history of the government sites.

While this National Park study is very important and the DOE efforts are vital to our ability to convey the history to subsequent generations, even these efforts do not capture the full extent of Oak Ridge history. That is up to each of us to do all we can to capture the oral histories and other unique personal stories that round out our history.

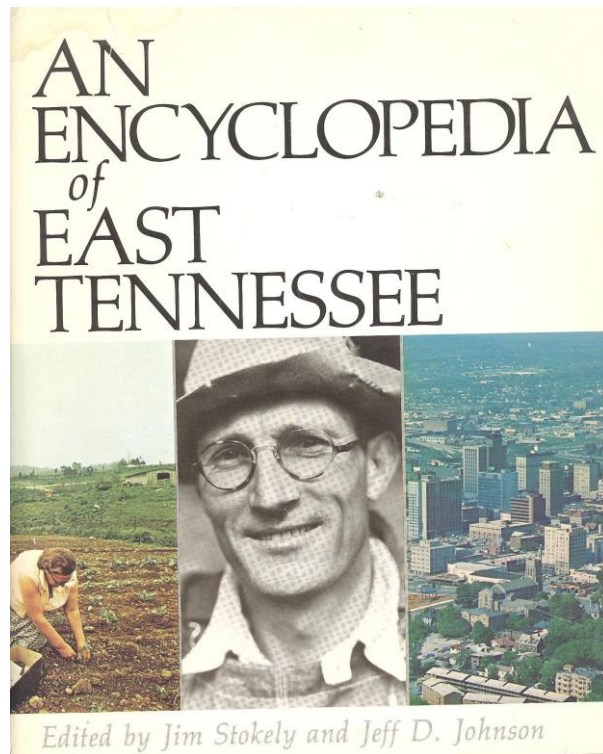
The Manhattan Project is extremely important, but we also have created enormous history in helping win the Cold War and fight the dreaded War on Terrorism. This latter history is not even understood by many. General Carl Stiner of Campbell County is one of the few who appreciates the significance of this most recent challenge to the security of the world by terrorist organizations. We need to capture his oral history!

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A huge historic map of the city covers a wall along the main hallway of the Children's Museum



Out of print book where I published my first article on Nancy Ward