

Children's Museum, the future of Oak Ridge History and Gordon Fee's observations

(As published in The Oak Ridger's Historically Speaking column on September 28, 2010)

As we continue the series on the Children's Museum and Oak Ridge History, let's now look at the details of some of the books the museum has promoted over the years. I think you will find some excellent examples of preserving our Oak Ridge history here. We will also look at the potential Oak Ridge has for some extraordinary historic preservation efforts.

We are truly a one-of-a-kind city and should proudly promote our uniqueness. While our history is a short one, it is of tremendous value to the world. The scientific achievements are an important element of our history, but are not the only aspect that should be promoted. Our people stories are tremendous as well.

Margaret Allard comments that Joanne Gailar's book being published by the museum resulted from Joanne approaching Selma Shapiro about publishing the book and wanting all the proceeds to go to the museum. Selma was delighted by the quality of the book, the interesting account of Joanne's life in Oak Ridge, and happily published it for her.

The original artwork for the book cover for Joanne's book was done by artist, Kent Brown, and presently hangs outside Margaret's office, she proudly told me. It is among several special images of original art the museum holds. Additionally, there are many murals created by both local artists and artists of international acclaim located throughout the museum. See if you can locate them the next time you visit!

The book, *These are our Voices*, is a compilation of sixty-six personal accounts by Oak Ridgers and over eighty photographs illustrating the history of Oak Ridge from the early displacement of the inhabitants of the area through 1970. It is one of the most popular books about our Oak Ridge history.

The final book the Children's Museum has the rights to because of the generosity of its authors and is sold in the museum store is, *And the Fence Came Down*, by Joyce K. Maienschein and Eileen A. Neiler, 1993. It is a comprehensive history of Girl Scouting in Oak Ridge starting with the account of how Elsie Novy (Atkins) convinced General Leslie R. Groves that having Girl Scouts in the new city of Oak Ridge would be good for the war effort. Likely the first such effort of the Manhattan Project!

This book is a 50-year history illustrated with lots of fun photographs. Margaret proudly admits to having several of these books available that have been signed by the authors. You may purchase them while they last. Get one on your next visit to the museum.

An additional question that should be considered is how should the Children's Museum fit into the yet to be developed master plan for historical preservation and heritage tourism for the city. We have bits and pieces but no overarching plan that the museum and other entities can relate to when making their own plans. We do have the Atkins Crisp Heritage Tourism Plan, which is an excellent approach, but it is not widely known nor is it yet being used to the extent intended.

Obviously the building that houses the Children's Museum is of historical importance as well. We need to pull all the various elements of historic preservation under a single master plan that the community, government and all other organizations could follow as we move into the next phase of preserving and interpreting our history.

Gordon Fee concluded his comments to my questions about the museum's contribution to the preservation of Oak Ridge history by saying, "I think the question is not, what is the future of the Children's Museum? But, what is the future of Oak Ridge?" Wow, what insight!

Gordon continued, "We need a visionary for the new City Manager." I agree and certainly liked what I heard Mark Watson say at the reception held for him in the lobby of the Pollard when he first arrived. He

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stated he was for quick action rather than more "analyzing." We need a city manager who can aggressively lead a revitalization effort for Oak Ridge, not just Jackson Square or Grove Center (yet I applaud the Oak Ridge Revitalization Effort for what they are doing in these two areas, but most of all for what they are doing to restore the Guest House/Alexander Inn!).

Gordon said, "We need to bind together as a city and focus on revitalizing one neighborhood at a time. We need to get the Senior Management of the major contractors involved like they were in 1960." Wow again, Gordon shows us that he understands what is needed. Remember, he WAS a "senior contractor manager" as the president of Lockheed Martin Energy Systems, Inc. and thus appreciates the resources these companies have available to them.

He concluded by saying, "Can Oak Ridge turn this around? Absolutely, but not if we keep up the current atmosphere of we would rather argue about things than fix them." He chides our newspapers for focusing on the latest drug bust or murder and ignoring the fact that we have thousands of young people in town to row. We may be our own worst enemy when it comes to promoting our assets!

Finally, Gordon challenges our City's leadership to have on their radar screen the broad context of "how do we preserve the arts in this community?" He states, "A few retired folks and the dwindling retailers in Oak Ridge cannot do it the way it has been done in the past. "

I think Gordon has suggested some things we who want to see Oak Ridge prosper and reclaim some of our glory years would do well to ponder and consider how to take action to avoid the future toward which he fears we are headed. We can do better!



Original artwork of *Oak Ridge and me* by Kent Brown, located outside Margaret Allard's office