

Children's Museum of Oak Ridge and the History of Oak Ridge – part 1

(As published in The Oak Ridger's Historically Speaking column on September 7, 2010)

When I first began this series on the Children's Museum of Oak Ridge, it was at the suggestion of Gordon Fee, long time supporter of the Children's Museum and board member. His association with the museum goes back to the very beginning and his daughter was one of those Girl Scouts who helped the start the museum in the very early days.

Among the many things Gordon said to me about the museum and its role in our community was that he felt the museum had been a key element in the preservation of the history of the city of Oak Ridge. So, I looked for that when I did the research on the museum's history. As he suggested, I found some examples of that role.

Margaret Allard says, "I can confirm that we have a large collection of Alvin Weinberg's personal papers. He personally asked Selma Shapiro to put them in the museum's collections to save them. We also have collections of William Pollard, Charles Vanden Bulck (the chief administrative officer for the Manhattan Project after whom they named the Vanden Bulck Bridge), a collection of Ed Westcott photos as well as three of his cameras, Joyce Maienschein's large Girl Scout collection which includes over 100 historic uniforms, books, awards, papers, artwork, and memorabilia, and a collection of photos, papers and speeches donated by the family of Mayor Bissell. "

Margaret continues, "We have many small collections of historic early Oak Ridge papers as well as many artifacts such as furniture, household items and even parts of houses (doors, windows, etc.). Many people give us one or two items at a time that they find out we need."

Finally Margaret says, "I'm so happy that I just received a donation from Jim Cole which will be the focal point of a section of our early Oak Ridge exhibits. It is his uniform jacket and hat which he wore here during WWII as a member of the Special Engineer Detachment."

I might add that the Children's Museum also has a collection of oral histories. They have several exhibits that promote understanding of our history, such as the "Difficult Decisions." This exhibit opened in 1992. It is now undergoing a renovation. This exhibit explains the history of Oak Ridge in terms of 10 decisions made from 1933 to 1959.

The ten sections of this exhibit are: 1) Power in the Valley; 2) Isolationism - World War II; 3) United States enters World War II; 4) Manhattan Project; 5) Displacement; 6) Oak Ridge 1942 – 1945; 7) Secret Science; 8) The Bomb; 9) Gates Open; and 10) City on its own. Each section has a question, for example, "Should Congress pass the Norris Act to create the Tennessee Valley Authority?"

Then the actual decision is explained and discussed. Photographs, artifacts and activities enhance each section. The renovation of the exhibit is underway and will be very similar to the original.

Right now the renovation stands with progress slowed because of other more pressing needs in other areas. The bays are painted, the new lighting system installed and the big panels of text are ready to go to the silk screen printer. A next big step is to replace the 100 plus photos which are all in very bad condition and are such a vital part of the exhibit.

When all that is completed the artifacts will be put back in with some new ones added and the interactive components that reinforce the understanding of the visitor will be the last elements reinstalled. Then one of the most effective Oak Ridge history exhibits will be back better than ever.

So, Gordon was indeed correct, the Children's Museum contributes greatly to the resource archives for Oak Ridge history. He actually called the museum's collection, "a modest effort" at preserving the stories

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of the city. Gordon knows the magnitude of historical information needed to be collected and saw what was being done by the groups in Oak Ridge as less than adequate to capture our full and unique history.

I want to focus some future Historically Speaking columns on the importance of preserving Oak Ridge history. I will use the Children's Museum of Oak Ridge, as well as other organizations, as examples of valiant attempts at capturing aspects of our history. However, I will also point out the tremendous lack of adequate attention that I believe is being paid to the documentation of all aspects of Oak Ridge history.

What is being done at the Children's Museum and at other similar local organizational efforts only touches a very small part of what we need to capture. I am not sure that even we who are most enthusiastic about our history understand the true magnitude of what has been done in Oak Ridge.

A "secret city" that began with the world's most incredible scientific and industrial achievement has gone on to produce many of the world's most significant discoveries, yet we take it all for granted and do not even have a good list of the scientific discoveries emulating from the Manhattan Project. Shame on us!

We should be promoting our accomplishments and taking credit for the discoveries. This should be presented in a tastefully manner, but it should be presented in a broad scope fashion so as to allow the coming generations to understand fully what has been accomplished in Oak Ridge over the years. More to come!



"Margaret Allard is working hard to update the Difficult Decisions exhibit. This first part of the exhibit is complete. Margaret also noted that, 'at the end of the exhibit, children get the answer to the question, 'who will make the difficult decisions in the future,' by looking in a mirror.'"