

## **A unique piece of our history - preserved by Emma Lee Spray** (As published in *The Oak Ridger's Historically Speaking* column on October 25, 2011)

Recently a proposal was brought to the City Council regarding Historic Jackson Square. I was drawn into the discussion to help document the history of Jackson Square. I enlisted my good friend, Bill Wilcox, the official historian for the City of Oak Ridge, to help.

We wrote a brief history of Historic Jackson Square and I published the essence of it last week in *Historically Speaking*. What I realized at the time and have been made even more acutely aware of in the last few days, is that try as we might, we cannot begin to capture the rich history of Oak Ridge's Historic Jackson Square in a few paragraphs. All we could do was concentrate on the very earliest history.

The early history, while important and containing helpful insight for the grant proposal, was missing the larger and more varied history over the years. That history is known by many, but most have only the small segment of the history that affected them personally. Sad to say, capturing the FULL history of our Historic Jackson Square requires so much more effort and cooperation from its many connections.

The small but vibrant shopping area that is not even a "square" but is what we affectionately refer to as the Manhattan Project "townsite" and later as one of the city's small commercial shopping districts is actually a unique reference to our past and a strong harbinger of a potential future. *Historic Jackson Square* is many things to many people.

One group that was not invited to contribute originally to the proposal, but is being included now that their interest is understood, is the *Oak Ridge Garden Club*. I was pleased to be approached by Trish Jones when she saw The Oak Ridger article announcing the Historic Jackson Square proposal.

I readily agreed to help make more people aware of the Oak Ridge Garden Club and their historic presence in Historic Jackson Square. While I knew there was a garden there, I was unaware of the close kinship the garden club held with the beautiful and well maintained garden there, known officially as the *Emma Lee Spray Park and Garden*.

The Oak Ridge Garden Club had its beginning on September 19, 1953, when a group of young ladies met to establish an interest group to promote landscape development at private homes and civic buildings in Oak Ridge, according to an article printed in *The Oak Ridger* on September 12, 2003. The club formed as a member of *the Tennessee Federation of Garden Clubs, Inc., Fourth District*, and *National Garden Clubs, Inc.*

Their first order of priority was to beautify the intersection of Tulane Avenue and the Oak Ridge Turnpike. They have continued to maintain beautiful gardens at this intersection over the years.

The young ladies idea of a garden club seems to have caught on and soon other garden clubs formed. Before long the *Melton Hill Council of Garden Clubs* came into existence. But even early in the *Oak Ridge Garden Club's* existence, Emma Lee Spray may well have taken a special interest in the area of Jackson Square.

By 1960, she was seen working regularly on city property in Jackson Square to create a more permanent park. She pruned and cared for the trees there. Being a school teacher, she also arranged for her students to hang pinecones filled with peanut butter and suet on the branches of trees in "her personal little park."

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Emma Lee Spray had such a dedication to this Jackson Square park she was personally creating that she could be seen early in the morning working alone weeding and watering the garden plants there. She even fertilized the trees and fed the soil to assure the plants were healthy.

This dedicated care of what was obviously a special place to her continued throughout the 1960's and 1970's. She provided special care and made improvements to the small plot of ground in the focus point of what was even then beginning to be thought of as Historic Jackson Square.

Emma Lee Spray's death in 1982 brought a renewed energy by Oak Ridge Garden Club members. They determined to work on improving the beauty of this special ground and began to seek a decision to commemorate this dedicated lady's personal park in her memory.

In 1983, the Oak Ridge City Council passed a resolution renaming *Jackson Square* Park and Garden to the *Emma Lee Spray Park and Garden* to honor her lifelong contribution to the beautification of Oak Ridge. With this new and most meaningful name for the plot of ground, the *Oak Ridge Garden Club* began what continues to this day to be a dedication to the upkeep and maintenance of the plants in their beloved club member's namesake park and garden.

In 1992, as a part of the celebration of the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the City of Oak Ridge, Wallace Spray made a donation to the Oak Ridge Garden Club for the building of a fountain in Jackson Square. This unique fountain contained a model of a lithium atom that the fountain's water sprayed constantly.

At that same time as a part of the city's 50<sup>th</sup> birthday celebration, a time capsule was buried in the park with the intent that it be opened in 2042. The name of the park was changed again to *The Jackson Square Historical Park and Emma Lee Spray Gardens*.

In 1993, three benches were installed that were gifts from the *43 Club*. In 1994, an irrigation system was installed.

Then a major change was made in 2000 when a new fountain was installed to replace the original one. Again, the Spray family contributed significantly to this fountain. The model lithium atom was moved to the Museum of Science and Energy where it stands today near the main entrance.

In 2001 a Japanese Maple tree was planted in the as a memorial to Virginia Lee Ward, like Emma Lee Spray, a charter member of the *Oak Ridge Garden Club*. In 2003, Girard Rose Azaleas were planted as memorials to Rebecca Penland and Carol Stevenson. Also in 2003, a Magnolia Grandiflora Southern Charm Tree was planted honoring the club's 50<sup>th</sup> Anniversary. In 2005, a Pink Dogwood was planted within the lower flower bed.

Emma Lee Spray's dedication to a small plot of ground has resulted in a beautiful, peaceful and relaxing garden in the midst of our city. It has captured the heart of many and serves to remind us of our past in a beautiful manner. Our history is so much more than mere buildings or other tangible objects...our history is within our people who work to preserve an atmosphere or to create a memory.

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Our history is the uniqueness of Oak Ridge and the contribution to the benefit of the entire world that has resulted in the technological advances that have been produced by Oak Ridge. We can teach others how to preserve history in tangible yet creative ways. Let's continue to do it like Emma Lee Spray!



Emma Lee Spray

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Emma Lee Spray Park & Garden at Historic Jackson Square