

Selma Shapiro and stories of the Children's Museum of Oak Ridge

(as published in *The Oak Ridger's Historically Speaking* column on May 10, 2011)

On Thursday, May 5, 2011, I attended the memorial service for Selma Shapiro after she passed away on Tuesday, May 3, 2011. All of her four children spoke about her from each of their unique perspectives. They cited her positive and influential "habits," her enormous strengths, her everlasting and nurturing love, her care giving and support and finally her adoration for children, especially children who needed their self image built up. While I was not family, I could identify with all they said of her. She was obviously a strong family oriented person, but she was also attentive to others in ways many of us can only dream of being capable of doing. She was special.

I am pleased that the family has asked that I continue to publish this series of articles highlighting her Oral History. If you knew Selma, you will recognize her here. I have edited the transcript only where absolutely necessary for its meaning to be clear and have attempted to keep her dialog intact where possible.

So, let Selma talk to you directly as we continue to follow her thoughts and now look at how she became involved with the Children's Museum of Oak Ridge.

During her interview, realizing she had left out a part of the information she wanted to convey, Selma said to the interviewer, "I want to go back to a very important part of the museum that I think I jumped over. In order to start the museum, to begin with, the girl scouts and their leader went to *Reader's Digest* foundation and were able to get a \$500 grant, and that \$500 grant started the museum."

Selma then went on, "I was privy to that information once I became the director, and that goes back to our very unique situation, where, the girls helped write the grant, the whole thing was just wonderful. I tell this at National Museum meetings, and they're so taken with it, and it really encourages small communities that they can go ahead and start something. All of us are now mentors who have been through the business of this [starting a museum]. [They can be successful] especially if the smaller museums stick together."

"The children, they weren't children, they were high school students mostly, did this themselves! (See Selma's pride in the accomplishment of others! - Ray) It was a miracle, literally, a miracle. It was very much hands-on, and they were very bright, excited young people who wanted it to be special.

"They opened the doors, encouraged schools to come, had programs on Sundays, and people started giving items for the collections and so forth. They were very excited, and they had classes where the kids could come and have little art projects that they could learn. They ran it March, April, May, June and July [of 1973]. By July, they were tired. And they went to their leader and they said 'you know, we did this all during our summer and we love this, but you've got to get more help here.'

"An ad went into *The Oak Ridger*, saying 'part-time director needed for Children's Museum.' They had already formed a board of directors and they were actively looking for a person or persons to take the helm of this place and help it to grow more.

"Simultaneously, my youngest was in Jefferson Junior High School, and I thought, when I saw the ad, it said, 'part time.' I said to myself 'I think I'll, I need to know more about this.' We were going on a 1,000 mile trip to Massachusetts to visit our family. I sent a note to the board of directors and said 'I need to know more, but I'm interested in this position.'

"Not knowing anything more than that and we were gone for two weeks. When we came back home, the phone was ringing, we had just come off the road from the 1,000 mile trip back to Oak Ridge, and the board of directors, the president of the board of directors, was on the phone. He said 'We've just interviewed' I think he said '15 people, and you're the last person. You need to come here right now.'

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"I said 'Well, I'm going to take a shower.' And he said 'Don't do that,' he said 'just come right now...right this minute.' So, I washed my face and combed my hair, I don't remember any more than that, and went up there.

"I hadn't been inside the museum. We were planning to take the troop up there. It was literally love at first sight, but I did not for the life of me think that I would be chosen as the director, I just thought 'Well, this is a nice experience that I'm going through.'

"There were, I'm guessing, looking back, maybe 18 people around that table, asking me questions. How I felt about children, how I felt about museums, did I have any racial lines, all kinds of things. There were teachers, students, and people who were on the museum board.

"I thanked them, and they thanked me. After I think a week or more, I heard from them, and they said 'we've decided that you would make a wonderful education director so we want you to be in charge of all the programming and the exhibits. We're going to find somebody who will specifically raise money for the museum.'

"I just loved it. It was close to my home, I could go home and make dinner, and I loved all of the projects. I loved working with the kids in the troop, and setting up classes and programs and new exhibits. Pretty soon they hired somebody from the University of Tennessee who was interested in the aspect of fundraising.

"I hadn't really thought about that part of it at all, because I was so busy with the educational aspect. It seemed to me that he was there for several months, and then all of a sudden they came to me and they said, 'he's not going to be here anymore and the board has decided that you will be the director, and you will have to find the money.'

"For a minute, I thought that was a really nice compliment, and it was, I'm sure. I hadn't really thought about the money aspect of it, because it was more like a volunteer job to me, even though they were paying me a little bit. I made that, I guess, my mission, that I really was literally, so taken with what this museum could be for this community and this region, that it was never a chore. I look back and I think, not even in all of 30 years was it ever a chore. [That comment is so typical of Selma – Ray]

"But I knew that if I didn't do it right, and by right I mean really find out how to run a museum, and what it takes, and how to raise the money...that it wouldn't be there. So that became my mission.

"I really started right from the beginning. Working with the girl scouts. We stayed up there at the old Jefferson until January of 1974, until they decided they were going to tear it down.

"Our board started looking around. And we had wonderful people on the board, there were a lot of teachers, Ben Adams, I remember was on the board. Just so many people that I knew, and they were very, very, diligent, and it was just at the time, that June, when Oak Ridge went from seven elementary schools to four elementary schools.

"One of [the schools closed] was Highland View Elementary, which was also turned over to the city. They felt that, at the very least, we could rent space temporarily, and see how things would go. Again, it was a community project between adults and children, moving what was the museum there, into, I think, three rooms. As you walk into the lobby that whole little section down in through there. And other non-profit organizations were also in that building and were renting from the city. We rented from the city for nine years.

"There were all kinds of things happening throughout that building, and we just had a small portion of it.

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So by then Selma had become very much central to the success of the Children's Museum of Oak Ridge. Next we will see how she led the continuing growth of the museum over the years and learn about some of the very special things she did to fulfill her chosen mission of creating a Children's Museum of Oak Ridge that was second to none!



Selma Shapiro and her good friend and co-worker Viola Ergen

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Selma Shapiro takes a donation of fossils from Dr. Alexander Holleander of the Oak Ridge National Laboratory's Biology Division. Note the large fossil that stood for years in the entrance lobby of Building 9207 at Y-12 and is now located in the lobby of the UT Arboretum.