

## **Selma Shapiro and the Children's Museum of Oak Ridge, the first giant steps**

(as published in *The Oak Ridger's Historically Speaking* column on May 17, 2011)

Continuing with the story of how the Children's Museum of Oak Ridge came into existence, in the memories of Selma Shapiro, long time director of the museum.

Selma said, "The building didn't look like it does today, because it was in terrible shape. The city was planning on tearing it down. We would use all of our imagination and the kids used all their skills and imagination, and we used that first two or three rooms for something that we thought was more like a museum.

"We were very lucky that, in the building at that time, John Rice Erwin was the head of the Tennessee Appalachian Educational Cooperative, and he was encouraging all of us to do something on Appalachia that was even bigger than we had even planned, and he was very helpful at that point.

"The girls were able to get another grant to be able to build the Pioneer Living Center at the museum. That was very exciting. My own children grew up in this community. They really didn't have much contact with Appalachia outside of Oak Ridge. This became the key place to acquaint students and families with the culture and life outside of Oak Ridge.

"The Tennessee Appalachia Educational Cooperative was located upstairs in that building, and because of that, we had some guidance from John Rice Erwin. That's how come the cabins became another project.

"Again, it was another *Reader's Digest* Foundation grant that got that off the ground. Again, girl scouts, boy scouts and a lot of John Rice's people worked to install those two cabins.

"That helped us to really build on our Appalachian collection and emphasize that as the main focus, of the museum. A major focus was Oak Ridge, the history, the arts, the Appalachian connection. And it just really caught on. The kids were just so ready for it. The children who had never been there, the kids who were working on the project, to this day, I have those kids come back and they're married and they have their own children, and they are so delighted that it's come so far.

Selma recalled that being in that building was a lot like "squatter's rights" in that when the museum needed additional space, there it was. From January of 1974 to 1982 they paid monthly to the city of Oak Ridge for the rent, not very much, "just so that we could be there," said Selma. The museum started to really grow.

During that early period, Selma took it upon herself to find out where the money was, how to get the money, and how I could make this a first-rate museum, and a children's museum in particular. She became active in the Association of Youth Museums that is now the Association of Children's Museums.

She said she learned so much from all of those people. Michael Spock, who was one of her mentors, was the director of the Boston children's museum. Selma went to all the museum meetings, and in 1986, she was elected president of the whole country for Children's Museums!

Selma said, "I don't know how that even happened. I was president for two years." That comment is so "Selma!" Sure she knew how it happened...it happened because she did her usual "get it done" thing and the people saw results. It is obvious when you look at the accomplishments of this great lady.

That put Selma in touch with all the people who were either starting children's museums or who have had the experience of being there for a long time. The first children's museum in this country was Brooklyn Children's Museum, in Brooklyn, New York, in 1899. Boston Children's Museum was in the 1920's.

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Selma was so taken with it. She had grown up in the Museum of Fine Art in Boston. She took art lessons there every Saturday morning, and was so fascinated with the concept of a museum, and the arts. She felt the director of the Children's Museum of Oak Ridge was a good fit for her.

Selma's father was not interested in her being an artist or working in a museum. He was interested in her having a business background. At the time, she wasn't very happy about it, but it really came together as something very important for her as the director of this museum.

She went so many places to find out about how the money could come into this museum, some of which came in from the Tennessee Committee for the Humanities. They were just starting up and she went to visit with them, and said "you know, what kind of a grant could this Children's Museum have?"

They were very interested in strip mining. Selma said she knew absolutely nothing about strip mining. However, there was a man that was in Oak Ridge that was heading up the environment center at the University of Tennessee, Jack Gibbons. Jack met with Selma. He was getting ready to leave for Washington, and introduced her to a professor at UT.

She literally took a course in strip mining and wrote that grant. It was chosen as the best grant that year in 1974, I believe. It brought together the Tennessee Valley Authority, environmentalists, coal miners, and coal mining operators. They had four major seminars at the museum, and that led to the museum's interest in the coal mining culture. And, as a matter of fact, TVA and the coal miners joined together to help build the coal mining room as it was at that time.

Selma went on from there and got into a couple of other Tennessee Committee for the Humanities grants which paved the way for what was one of the biggest growing spurts that the museum has ever had. Selma received applications from the National Endowment for the Humanities. They were looking for some kind of a grant that was about a locale that they had not, funded before, which was Appalachia, and essentially, Selma said, "we wrote a grant."

She continued, "It was for a huge sum of money, at least in our book, because we didn't have a very big budget at that time, and we had a three-and-a-half-year grant that really paved the way for the museum to get other funding." Simultaneously, Selma was working with the Tennessee Arts Commission, and other funding agencies that were interested in the arts and things to do with children.

Selma says, "it just kind of all came together." This grant brought the museum lots of support, and a wonderful director, Wilma Dykeman, a Tennessee Historian. Her son was just coming out of college and was very interested in Appalachia, and the culture of Appalachia. He was the director of that project in the museum. This grant expanded the museum onto the upper level of the building, and opened up all kinds of avenues for the museum. Selma said, "It was really wonderful."

In that three-year span, the museum grew tremendously. It was becoming known outside of Oak Ridge. One of the more prestigious publications of the museum was the Encyclopedia of East Tennessee. The museum wrote several other books and started a regional Appalachian Center.

The museum hired a really fine young man who is now a teacher in Sevierville, and he kept it going for several more years, with the funds that came in from the sale of those books. He was responsible for "These are Our Voices," which is such a wonderful resource, where so many people are writing their theses or teaching students or so forth.

Selma recalls, "So, it has been a series of things that have helped the museum grow. And it has become a real important part of the community, which is what we wanted to begin with. The fact that it's located in

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the Highland View area is very, very, important, because all of the people who lived in that area, and it was highly populated at that time with families and children, they were very hurt that they lost their school.

Selma continues, "And I'll always remember when we were setting up the museum, and they would come and look in the window, and everybody would say 'well, how are they going to be able to pay?' and I just across the board decided that they would never pay if they lived in that neighborhood.

"They became an important part of the museum. As they've grown up, they've come back also and tell, tell me how the museum played a major role in their lives. And to this day, we have after-school programs for the children in that neighborhood, and it's just a wonderful opportunity for them. We incorporate them into our programming. It's, it's wonderful.

"So many things have happened over the years. I think when we purchased the building, was a big step for the museum. After that large grant, and we had big ideas like we were going to build a new children's museum. We went out for bid in 1981 and 1982, and you know, really found out that it was going to cost \$13 or \$14 million to get what we had in that building, which was over 50,000 square feet. Even though, at that time, it was in really rough shape, and so we had a wonderful president of our board who sat me down and says 'we can't do that. We must get this building evaluated.'

"We went to the professional engineers, and also architects, and they worked for about eight or nine months, looking at every nook and cranny of that building, and they came back to the board, and said, 'Buy it, if you can.'

"Mayor Al Bissell was the mayor of Oak Ridge, and that was when we had 12 members on our city council, and I always tell my husband that was when I became a politician. I decided that there wasn't going to be any brand-new building, and this was it. And if they assessed it and told us that the square footage was wonderful, the floors were wonderful, they built the building with 2x6's, it was going to stand forever, that we were also able to get another grant, so that we could go out and raise the money. That was also for the National Endowment for the Humanities...a Challenge grant for \$150,000. We would have to raise \$450,000 in matching funds, which was a tremendous challenge.

"At that time, in 1983, after we actually went before council, I became very interested in every one of the council people and talked to them personally. John Holt, a wonderful councilman from our district in Highland View, and Harold Jernigan, so many other people played a role, Al Bissell, most of all, wanted the museum to have that building.

Selma has transitioned from a Girl Scout leader to a politically savvy community leader who knew her way around the politicians and people of substantial power and influence in Oak Ridge. Next we will see how she directed the Children's Museum of Oak Ridge through its years of growing pains.

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Selma and legendary Oak Ridge Mayor Al Bissell are shown as Selma gives the Mayor a check to purchase the Highland View School building that would become what we now know as the Children's Museum of Oak Ridge