

The Shep Lauter Story

(as published in The Oak Ridger's Historically Speaking column on June 28, 2011)

A few weeks ago I visited Los Alamos, NM, Albuquerque, NM and the Trinity Site. The reason for my trip was to present *Stories from the Secret City*, a PowerPoint slide presentation filled with Ed Westcott photographs of early Oak Ridge to the Los Alamos Historical Society. They filled Fuller Lodge (approximately 200 people) and listened to me talk about Oak Ridge history for close to two hours. The presentation lasted close to an hour and the question and answer period lasted almost another hour. That was fun!

I was privileged to be given a tour of the Los Alamos County Historical Museum, Bathtub Row (where Oppenheimer's home is located), the Los Alamos National Laboratory's Bradbury Museum, the historical sites at LANL, the National Museum of Nuclear Science and History at Albuquerque, and Trinity Site. You can see photos of all but the LANL tour at: <https://picasaweb.google.com/smithdray>

The Los Alamos Historical Society is well organized, the Los Alamos County Historical Museum has excellent exhibits of the history of the area as well as the recent history of Los Alamos County. One thing they had that made me most envious was a full size bronze statue of Robert Oppenheimer and they had one of General Leslie Groves coming.

On May 19, 2011, they placed the two full size bronze statues of Oppenheimer and Groves outside the museum in a prominent location. They invited the descendents of both men to attend the dedication. I am sure it was a huge success as they told me many of the families were planning to attend. The people I spoke with were sure excited about the dedication ceremony and I sure understood why. We need something like that in Oak Ridge!

What made me so envious was the fact that we in Oak Ridge do not have a single bronze statue of any person who has significantly contributed to the history of Oak Ridge...not a single one. Not even Alvin Weinberg...surely we should have a full size bronze statue of him located prominently near the Secret City Commemorative Walk.

There are others who have contributed to our city who should be recognized. I know we have some level of recognition for some individuals such as Blankenship Field, Clark Center Park (most people don't even know that Clark Center was a person!), Pollard Auditorium and the Jack Case Center and Zach Wamp auditorium in the New Hope Center at Y-12. We have the A. K Bissell Park (we need a bronze statue of him there!).

Of course there is the Holifield Radioactive Ion Beam Facility. You will recall that an attempt was made to change the Oak Ridge National Laboratory's name to the Holifield National Laboratory in 1974. This met with substantial resistance. ORNL used two letterheads and only used the Holifield one for official DOE correspondence. The ORNL letterhead continued without abatement for all other communications. Through significant effort the naming decision was reversed after a year of resistance and political maneuvering. Finally there is the Weinberg Auditorium in ORNL's Building 4500-N, but he is worthy of so much more recognition. I am pleased there is a group working this issue now.

We even have a sycamore tree named in honor of Joe Lenhard and bridges in the Horizon Center are named to honor Pete Craven and Bill Manly. Then there is the Pheonix statue in the Horizon Center with a plaque honoring several individuals who have been active in the Community Reuse Organization of East Tennessee and also a plaque at the Heritage Center recognizing individuals from CROET and the Department of Energy who have had substantial influence in helping CROET be successful in converting the former K-25 site to the Heritage Center.

Then there are the main road bridges in the area such as the Herman Postma Memorial Solway Bridge and the Charles Vandenbulck Bridge (do you know who this man was?). What other structures can you think of that have individual's names attached for recognition?

Now, I know I have missed some. Don't be too hard on me, I am not trying to create an exhaustive list. I am trying to make a point that Los Alamos has two life size bronze statues and we have NONE. Shame

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on us, we can do better. Surely we can figure out a way to honor Alvin Weinberg with a bronze statue, as a start.

We do have the Oak Ridge Sports Hall of Fame and the Walk of Champions. We have other forms of recognition like several rooms at the Roane State Community College named for individuals and couples. There may well be others...

Of course, we have the East Tennessee Economic Council's Muddy Boot and Postma Young Professionals awards that have been given to many. This recognition is well respected and considered a honor by all who receive the annual awards.

Finally there is the Shep Lauter room at the Oak Ridge Civic Center...that is the subject of this *Historically Speaking* series.

This story comes to us compliments of Jack Campbell. Jack contacted me and asked if I would publish a story about Shep Lauter. I readily agreed and as is my usual response to such suggestions, I asked Jack if he wanted to write a first draft of the story. He agreed. What Jack has produced is a fine snapshot of impressions made on several people who knew, respected and yes, loved Shep Lauter. To these people he was truly their hero.

Jack begins by saying, "The Secret City Festival is a time to honor early pioneers. Shep Lauter, a favorite with Oak Ridge youth in the 1940's, 50's, and 60's, is one certainly deserving of our remembering. Nearly everyone who lived in Oak Ridge sometime between 1940 and 1960 probably had some contact with Shep Lauter, if they were lucky."

"He was an early pioneer in establishing and operating recreational programs in Oak Ridge and was a father figure to many Oak Ridge youngsters and teens, as he managed the Wildcat Den when it was the chief hangout and recreation center for Oak Ridge High School students

"In addition, most area boys who learned finer points about playing baseball probably learned them in Shep's free clinics. And, many teenage girls and boys learned to dance at the Wildcat Den and could be found there after many big ball games either celebrating the win or commiserating the loss.

"At other times, ORHS students could be found there playing ping pong, shooting pool or just enjoying chats with their friends. Yes, the Den was mainly a recreation hall, but it seemed more than that to most students, as they felt they had an ownership in an exclusive, fun club supervised by an effective, caring supervisor. The Shep Lauter story is the story of recreation of youth in early Oak Ridge and love and help that Shep had for them.

"In the early 1940's the Army controlled all of Oak Ridge and sensed a need for recreation for the youth of the City. It is little wonder that Shep was tapped early on to have a significant involvement with Oak Ridge youth.

"One look at his sports and leadership resume would have convinced anyone.

"Reared in Chattanooga, Shep was outstanding in many sports in high school and afterwards: earning all-city honors in Chattanooga in football and basketball at McCallie Prep School and leading his team to a state basketball championship in 1920 as team captain.

"After graduation, Shep played and coached semi-pro baseball and basketball teams over the southeast for about 20 years.

"He especially prized coaching the Atlanta Jewish Progressive Club basketball team to an upset win over the Boston Celtics in an exhibition game in 1943.

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Jack included the creation and early history of the famous Wildcat Den and Shep's tie to that historic youth center that is now the Midtown Community Center at 102 Robertsville Road. He has included insights that are totally new to me.

"Under the auspices of the Army's Recreation and Welfare Department, The Wildcat Den was founded in 1946 and located in part of the old Central Cafeteria on Central Avenue. (Did you know that? I did not. Ray)

"In the early '50's when the new high school opened in its present location, the Den was moved to its current location on the Turnpike. The building had previously served the mid-town trailer camp as a community center.

"The new Den was named 'Wildcat Youth Center' by the Oak Ridge high school students themselves and Shep continued as the director.

"Concurrent with his duties with the Wildcat Den, Shep also had a significant role teaching the fundamentals of baseball, football, and basketball to all boys of all ages in Oak Ridge. He originated youth baseball, football, and basketball clinics in Oak Ridge and operated them for 27 years, until this responsibility was taken over by the Boys Club.

"The Wildcat Den was ultimately a victim of its own success. In the early 1960's youth dances held at the Wildcat Den had become so popular that they outgrew the Den. Shep, his supervisor Carl "Rabbit" Yearwood, and City officials recognized the problem and moved some of the teen dances to the National Guard Armory.

Jack's story of the life and legacy of Shep Lauter will continue next week.



Shep and Boysc.jpg: Shep demonstrates batting form...do you know any of the boys? Photo was taken by Ed Westcott and provided to Jack by Bobby Copeland