

Guest House/Alexander Inn, a look at the history, part 2

(as published in The Oak Ridger's Historically Speaking column on August 2, 2011)

This second article in the series of three *Historically Speaking* columns will bring you some additional insights into the history of the Guest House/Alexander Inn that will help put perspective on the decisions needed regarding one of Oak Ridge's most historic structures. The text will continue to be taken from a presentation made by Oak Ridge City Historian, Bill Wilcox.

Why Save the Secret City's Historic Guest House? Why Not Just Tear that Eyesore Down?

By: William J. Wilcox Jr., Oak Ridge City Historian, for the Oak Ridge Heritage & Preservation Association, presented on July 14, 2011

Continued from last week's introduction and history:

The first guest registered August 5, 1943, as the Townsite (Jackson Square area) was just taking shape and though we regrettably have no written evidence in Guest Registers, it's safe to say it started filling up in September, October, and December as first X-10 and then Y-12 began to go into production. We know from X-10 history (Carolyn Krause) that as the Graphite Reactor approached criticality in the wee hours of November 5, 1943 that a courier was sent up to the Guest House to wake up and bring to X-10 the Univ. of Chicago's Metallurgical ("Met") Lab Head, Nobel Laureate Arthur Holly Compton and the Manhattan Project's lead scientist Enrico Fermi to oversee its approach to criticality at 5:00 AM.

Although we have no wartime Guest Registers from the Hotel, even if we had them they would not be of help in identifying the scientists who came to Oak Ridge. All through the war, when physicists whose names might be recognized as nuclear experts from the Physics Journal papers they had published or Nobel Prizes they had won, they were all told to sign in under code names to keep from giving away Oak Ridge's wartime missions.

For instance, Arthur H. Compton was Mr. Holly, Enrico Fermi was Mr. Farmer. Later when Niels Bohr, the world famous Danish physicist came to see Oak Ridge he was introduced as Professor Baker, Nobel Prize winner Ernest O. Lawrence whose group created the Calutrons for the Y-12 process was Mr. Lawson, and so on. My list of Nobel Laureates and Laureates-to-be who came to help with the Project includes: Niels Bohr, Arthur Compton, Enrico Fermi, Ernest Lawrence, Eugene Wigner, Glenn Seaborg, and Harold Urey. Some came many times. Lawrence finally got an apartment, and the Compton's finally rented a house right across Olney Lane from Colonel Kenneth. D. Nichols.

But in addition to these, many other first-rank scientists came to consult at the plants, like J. Robert Oppenheimer, Director of Los Alamos Scientific Laboratory, whose portrait by Ed Westcott, loftily holding his cigarette, is much admired and often reproduced. The portrait was taken in our Guest House Lobby just to the right of the fireplace.

Many of Lawrence's Berkeley team from the Radiation Laboratory came to help get Y-12 underway, as did those from Compton's Metallurgical Laboratory in Chicago who were helping the Graphite Reactor at X-10 get built and into production. Similarly, top engineers and corporate chiefs of Carbide came, helping K-25 get built.

These included John Dunning's Columbia University team and the Kellex team under Dobie Keith and Al Baker and the Carbide team under George Felbeck. Philip Abelson, the "father" of the liquid thermal diffusion plant at S-50 that utilized technology he had developed for the U. S. Navy, came often to help get that desperate effort moving.

And then in addition to the noted scientists we all like to brag about hosting, many top corporate officials of Y-12's Tennessee Eastman Company, K-25's Carbide, and X-10's DuPont came to visit and inspect their operations and help make key operational and contractual decisions. President Roosevelt never planned to come, but his Secretary of War Henry Stimson, the man directly responsible for the Manhattan Project all through the war did on April 11, 1945.

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Our Oak Ridge top Army boss, Colonel Kenneth D. Nichols in his memoir tells that the aging (to me a 77 year youngster), Henry Stimson arrived with his military aide and General Groves in time "for lunch at the Guest House where they were to spend the night." Stimson was awed by the scientific and technical achievements he saw here and was very eager to report to the President when he got back to Washington on the 12th, only to learn that Roosevelt had died that very day. It was two weeks later that he first briefed then President Truman on the Manhattan Project.

Even more numerous categories of guests each week were the scores of Army Engineer Colonels, Majors, Captains, and Lieutenants who came periodically to report in at the "Castle on the Hill" from the dozens of far-flung Manhattan Project offices all over the U.S. and even one in Canada.

Whether the guests were in Who's Who or not, all guests had to pay the same stiff wartime rates for rooms: The rate for a single room was \$2.00 per night with a connecting bath, \$1.50 per night for a single room with the community bath down the hall.

The Guest House's notables were off limits for Ed Westcott's camera throughout the War for obvious reasons, but one month after Peace was won, September 1945, the Army & Navy brass descended in force on our town to bestow Awards of Excellence (flags and pins) on our contractors. Ed then has his fill of photo-ops.

My favorite is his photo in the Guest House of two Secretaries of War! Henry Stimson had just resigned the week before having served so long and well, and the Secretary Robert Patterson had just been in office a week.

At the start of the year 1947, the Army turned everything over to the civilian Atomic Energy Commission who was anxious to get out of the business of running the city. In a year or two after the war, the AEC brought in an experienced hotel manager, McKie Alexander from New Jersey to operate it. The old place really hummed on the weekend of March 18/19/20, 1949 when the gates of the Secret City were opened to the public.

Hollywood celebrities and notable elected officials from Nashville and Washington came to town and helped celebrate with speeches and parade. Rod Cameron, Hollywood Cowboy Star, rode his horse up the front steps of the Guest House, and U. S. Vice President Alben Barkley and other Governor's from Tennessee and surrounding states as well as other notables sat down to a fine luncheon before an afternoon of speech making at our football field before thousands.

There is the second installment of Bill Wilcox's presentation on the history of the Guest House/Alexander Inn. Next we will look at the "Alexander Inn" era of the Guest House/Alexander Inn and Bill will conclude with a look toward the potential future for this grand old historical structure.

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General Groves leaves Guest House with others



Robert Oppenheimer and others