

Guest House/Alexander Inn – a look at the history, part 3

(as published in The Oak Ridger's Historically Speaking column on August 9, 2011)

This third and final 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:

We owe major thanks and are much indebted to Oak Ridge leader Jane Shelton for the excellent and valuable research she did of digging out the history of the Alexander Inn and the Jackson Square's history. Her aim was the "Walking Tours of the Historic Townsite" that she developed and then led as Chair of Oak Ridge's part in the State's "Homecoming '86 Heritage Project."

Jane tells us that the big news of 1950 was that in September, the USAEC turned the Guest House title over to McKie Alexander, the successful bidder in a public offering, and he forthwith renamed it the Alexander Motor Inn. The year before, in August 1949, the government had added the large, new back wing, a concrete block building with 44 rooms.

Another major change in ownership that Jane tells us about occurred in March, 1958, when McKie sold the Alexander Inn to a new hotelier named William W. Faw for \$34,000. He added private bathrooms as well as an expanded the kitchen and several dining rooms (the ballroom addition). Mr. Faw had been a cook in his early hotel days, and was anxious to provide the best food service possible.

The Alexander Inn's Dining Room soon became THE place to eat, meet, and greet, fast becoming the more permanent city's gathering place. It became the prime place for all the civic clubs to hold their meetings like the Rotary Club, Kiwanis, Optimist, and others, the Garden Club, the Woman's Club, the '43 Club and the Sons of the American Revolution.

It became to the place to entertain distinguished visitors, for example, the Reverend Billy Graham. Dick Smyser wrote "that a steady schedule of meetings, seminars, and special events fills its meeting rooms, and the City Club is a popular place for people to socialize and entertain."

Guests in the Alexander era either staying there or being entertained there during the Alexander Inn years were notables like Senator John F. Kennedy and Jackie, Margaret Mead, Norman Cousins, Queen Frederika of Greece and her daughter Princess Sophia, Wilma Dykeman, the French Ambassador and his wife, and the Reverend Dr. Billy Graham.

Now return to our history – Mr. Faw really improved the services offered and the environs, planting everywhere. He kept it for seven years, and then in 1964 sold it to a group headed by Eugene Joyce, a leading lawyer in town with Dr. Dana Nance, Frank DiCarlo, and Dr. Paul Spray.

In October 1978, the ownership passed to a group led by Merrill Boatman, and several others.

Now in more recent times, in December, 2009, we were all so pleased to see the Oak Ridge Revitalization Effort (ORRE) take title to the sad old property with a promise to pay the owners a purchase price of \$353,700 in 12 months. That date, in turn, was amended to June, 2011.

Just this last month ORRE regretfully announced they had to give up their dream after a long and valiant effort.

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The Oak Ridge Heritage & Preservation Association, as most of our audience tonight knows, has been for many years looking at ways to save the place for years so we really applauded ORRE's courageous 2009 action and helped as we could. Our own Howard Harvey recruited a fine team of volunteers and made major strides like cleaning out 30 Dumpster loads of trash and debris, filling in the old swimming pool hazard, and cleaning up and painting the Lobby interior so that ORRE could hold several successful fund raising events there.

My Third Reason. The Manhattan Project National Historical Park.

The news has just been released that Secretary of the Interior Ken Salazar has presented to Congress his Department's proposal to create a Manhattan Project National Historical Park. This Park will include Oak Ridge, and the Guest House/Alexander can be the primary place for National Park visitors to the city of Oak Ridge to see the iconic public building of the wartime town center, Townsite.

We surely need this Guest House to show visitors, and we need the National Park Service to help us tell that story as they are so well at doing. And maybe the building could be used as their Welcome Center or headquarters. What else have we got? We sure can't turn the two World War II Chapels, Townsite Apartments, Elm Grove Shopping Center or Pine Valley School into visitor attractions!

The National Park will not celebrate the war that was World War II, but rather the Peace the Manhattan Project brought to the aching world and all the so meaningful peacetime legacies of the Project of which Oak Ridge has had such a major part: nuclear medicine, nuclear power reactors, the thousands of industrial uses like soda-pop can thickness controllers, radiation sterilization of bandages and medical supplies, and radiation killing of mold spores on vegetables and fruits that now allow us to eat fruits from Chile and New Zealand, just to name a few.

Richard Rhodes, author of the Pulitzer-prize winning account, "The Making of the Atomic Bomb," reflected,

"The Manhattan Project was a great work of human collaboration that has almost mythic proportions in its scale and ambition. Discovery of how to release the enormous energies latent in the nuclei of the atom has improved the quality of life and made world-scale war no longer possible - reason enough to preserve and commemorate this history."

The fact that Oak Ridge played such a major role in ending that terrible war is reason why so many visitors come here, and not just Secret City Festival time. They express their thanks because they or some dear relative was on their way to Japan for the invasion and whose life they felt we saved. It's a history heritage tourists are aware of and appreciate, and now the National Park Service is moving to help us more effectively show and tell our story to the public.

We know that to some Oak Ridgers that old falling down building is a just a derelict structure, an eyesore that ought to come down to give our city a more modern look. But I know of so many other Oak Ridgers who see its potential, who honor and cherish the history the Guest House/Alexander Inn represents, and who have family history of their own within its walls. They tell us they want to pitch in and help save the Historic Guest House/Alexander Inn.

Why? Its unique history justifies it. Its place at the top of the list of the few remaining unaltered public buildings of our World War II founding justifies it. Its need as the structure the National Park Rangers can show and tell as an icon of the historic Townsite justifies it.

Let's pitch in and save it.

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There you have it. Bill Wilcox, the Oak Ridge City Historian, has elegantly described the unique history that is the Guest House/Alexander Inn. We only have one such facility...if we don't save it now, we may well regret it later. Won't you help? Contact Bill at (865) 483-4990 or me at (865) 482-4224 and let us know just what you are willing to do to help. Or you can send me an email at draysmith@comcast.net.



The Guest House/Alexander Inn today – what a shame!

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The Guest House in better days – maybe, just maybe there are even better days ahead



The beauty of the azaleas adds to the majesty of the historic old inn and could do so again