

Facebook: A new way to experience our history?
(As published in *The Oak Ridger's Historically Speaking* column on September 6, 2011)

As historians, city planners, economic development strategists, tourism professionals and others who seek ways to promote Oak Ridge history as a key element in the continuing Oak Ridge heritage and future potential, we may do well to consider a recent significant change in communication techniques, known as "Social Media." It has already changed the way many communication actions take place. Texting has become the norm for many of the younger generation and those of us in the older generation who want to interact with our grandchildren, have learned to text.

Facebook has become the leading social media tool for a majority of those who choose that method of interaction. It has grown to over 750 million active users. In Oak Ridge, a small thought placed on Facebook has quickly erupted into a firestorm of interaction.

On July 30, 2011, Gayla Bailey, mother of two teenage girls who were about to return to school after their summer break, and avid Facebook fan, decided to try something a bit unusual. She said it this way, "On Friday night, July 29, 2011, just a few short weeks before my high school age daughters were to begin a new school year here at Oak Ridge High School in Oak Ridge, Tennessee, their dad's Alma Mater, I sat comfortably on my sofa, my iPad at my side. "

"My mind drifted back to my own high school years, 1977 to 1982 at Decatur High School in Decatur, Alabama. I thought of how much I adored my school administrators and teachers; they were my family, I felt. (My mom was the beautiful red-headed Guidance secretary for 30 years.)

"The next day, I noticed that a young lady from my hometown had started a group on Facebook entitled, *If you're from Decatur, Alabama, you remember when....* I decided to see if a few of my Oak Ridge Facebook friends had any memories to share.

"That was Saturday night. By Sunday night close to 700 individuals had sent a request to join this group so they could comment on their memories of Oak Ridge.

"By the end of just one week , there were already over 1,200 members. By end of the second week , there were over 1,700 members. Currently there are over 1900 members.

Gayla named her Facebook group, *I remember when in Oak Ridge...favorite memories*. She was amazed at the immediate interest generated by the group and the huge number of responses to the initial simple posts. Gayla only suggested people share their memories and did they ever! One of the most popular posts on the group was the one about Doug Painter's father, Charlie Painter and Putt-Putt, with 277 comments! There are others who caught the attention of large numbers of people who made comments. Another favorite was Coach Emory Hale. Many people commented on a post of his picture by a person who had played football for him.

Gayla said, "The best thing to me was reading how proud and happy it made my neighbor when someone posted a photo of her dad from 'way back when!' That is the thing I have enjoyed the most about ALL of the memories that people have shared and that so many individuals have been reunited with their childhood and the common bond of growing up in Oak Ridge."

"What a joy it has also been to meet so many Oak Ridgers and former Oak Ridgers through this common site. No one seems to become bored with it. The comments go on and on!!

What's Happening Now In -n- Around Oak Ridge has been created as a result of *I Remember when in Oak Ridge...favorite memories* to communicate current news, events, and information. This second group is also catching on, but nothing like the favorite memories group.

One of the most exciting things about Gayla's Facebook group was that it attracted several people who had access to photographs that they posted. Photos are by far the most effective thing to get a group commenting. They want to identify the people in the photo and the place as well as the time.

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Tim Gawne was by far the most prolific at posting photos of interest. Here is what he had to say about the experience, "There are two things I know. One is that everyone at some point in their life wants to know about where they came from and who came before them. The second is that communities are knit together by common experiences.

"Now, Oak Ridge from its birth was not very common and it was definitely was a unique experience. There is much about the history of Oak Ridge that has yet to be discovered or rediscovered. I have had the privilege of digging through volumes of photos, documents, and publications in my job at Oak Ridge National Laboratory. The frustrating fact is that we are slowly losing the folks who can make sense of some of the most pivotal events that have shaped the town and community.

"What the Facebook group, *I remember when in Oak Ridge...favorite memories*, is doing is enabling multiple generations of Oak Riders to share in this common experience that spans nearly seven decades in an effort to preserve that knowledge for generations to come.

All you need to do if you have a Facebook account is to search on Oak Ridge and the top response will be the group. Click on it and there you are...join in the fun of sharing memories of Oak Ridge.

There is another group that has formed that has more humor in the responses. Not to say there aren't some funny entries in the memories group, but this one tends to encourage poking fun. It was started by Jay Osborne a little after the memories group began. There are not many people who are on both groups. There are 218 members of this fun group.

Jay tells how the group began, "*You Know You're From Oak Ridge When* started when I saw my girlfriend enjoying the same page title to her hometown in southern Illinois. She was cackling with laughter and with good reason...but Brookport Ill. is another story.

"Facebook has made it so easy to start your own group. Literally two clicks [from the home page] and I was on my way. I added about 20 people from my own address book that I thought the group would be relevant to and from there it averaged out to 11 new people a day. It was more explosive than that though. 11 is an average, but in the first week was when most came on board. Today the member total is 218 [I wonder what your article will do for this number?]

"It was no more than 15 minutes of work to get going.

"I counted the pages and watched the dates on the pages to see how quickly the group developed and it went roughly like this: August 7, first night, starting at 5pm—by midnight there were 7 pages of comments. Aug 8th-- 10 more pages, Aug 9th--27 more pages, Aug 10th—25 pages, Aug 11th—24 pages, Aug 12th—14 pages, Aug 13-16 about 10 additional pages...

Jay observed that the comments slowed down rather drastically after that. One possible reason for this is that a group that is purely fun may run out of new material and folks move on to some other interest. Whereas the memories group seems to still be going strong.

Jay said, "Some of my personal favorites were:

- ...you remember Cub Scout Pack 220 meeting at the Children's Museum.
- ...you remember actually seeing Big Ed sitting at the bar at Big Ed's, watching everyone hang out.
- ...you can go from being a B & C student to an A & B student overnight by just moving from Oak Ridge.
- ...you got lost when you went to college because the streets weren't alphabetized!
- ...you remember being able to ride your bike all over town and your parents didn't worry.
- ...you knew what time it was by the plant sirens.
- ...you don't think of the planet when you hear the word "mercury."
- ...you know the Soup Kitchen is a place where you have to pay for your food.

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"Many of the posts that recalled the academic excellence of Oak Ridge schools brought me a sense of pride in Oak Ridge. There were several recollections of teachers who have passed and places that are gone that make you realize time is flying by without any concern for our memories. Some of the posts mentioned things that made you go learn something you didn't know. A post mentioning Key Springs Rd. as G-Road garnered remarks that other roads A-F might have existed.

Well, there you have a couple of unusual ways to engage people in recalling our history. Of course there are other more traditional ways that are growing in popularity such as video oral histories and the standard archiving of records, documentary films, books and of course, newspaper articles.

I hope you have enjoyed reading about a few people who are recalling history in their own way. If you are on Facebook, check these groups out. If you are not on Facebook, consider getting on...but be warned, it is addictive!



The Daffodil Man, Harris Gilliam, 1956, was one memory that attracted a lot of confirmation by others



Coach Emory Hale as he appeared when winning championships in Oak Ridge, his famous quote: "Well boys, the Wildcat has done died, and they are diggin' a grave out behind the press box!" was cited as working well to motivate the team to a win.

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Many of Tim Gawne's early images generated much interest. This one, while at present day Robertsville Road and Louisiana Avenue shows flattops there and the road names quite different. Folks had fun identifying the location and the roads...Nick Fielder was key to identifying this and other locations in photos that Tim posted.