Detaining Santa Claus and other holiday ‘traditions’
(As published in The Oak Ridger’s Historically Speaking column on December 24, 2013)

Part one of a series:

Some things that happened in Oak Ridge became a “tradition” quickly in the early years. In 1948, Santa Claus was attempting to get to the first annual Oak Ridge National Laboratory Christmas Party held in the Center Theater (now the Oak Ridge Playhouse), when he was detained at Elza Gate and searched.

Photographer Ed Westcott, who was recently awarded a Muddy Boot award by the East Tennessee Economic Council, took a photograph of Santa at Elza Gate on December 14, 1944. It has become one of his many famous images. This one evokes laughter as it depicts poor Santa, doing his best to convince the guards that he is harmless, but they are insisting that all his Christmas gifts must be searched...sound familiar? Some things seem to never change...

The Carbide and Carbon Chemicals Corporation had taken over the contract to manage and operate the newly designated “Oak Ridge National Laboratory” on March 4, 1948. By Christmas time that year, they were obviously building the laboratory, starting the Biology Division and expanding research in other areas.

The political fight to create a national laboratory in the South had been won, thanks to folks like Dr. William Pollard, who led an effort that formed a consortium of 14 southern universities to support that goal. Not only did he succeed there he also formed the Oak Ridge Institute for Nuclear Studies which evolved into Oak Ridge Associated Universities that today is a consortium of 100 universities and has a variety of missions as well as managing Oak Ridge Institute for Science and Education in support of the Department of Energy.

Now back to the detained Santa Claus. Here may be the rest of the story of how the earlier photo in 1944 established a tradition of delaying Santa...thanks to Tim Gawne of ORNL who found the story in the January 7, 1949 THE NEWS, an employee newsletter of the Oak Ridge National Laboratory.

... Children’s Christmas Party Acclaimed a Grand Success

Lending verity to the ancient proverb that “one picture is worth a thousand words,” the pictures above more aptly tell the story of the grand success of the first annual children’s Christmas Party than could columns of news print. The party, sponsored by the Carbide and Carbon Chemicals Corporation and coordinated by the Lab Recreation Department, was attended by 435 children of ORNL personnel as well as by 175 accompanying adults.

The program began at 10 a.m., Wednesday, December 22, at the Center Theater, with a half hour showing of movie cartons. Then came the children’s program in which sons and daughters of Laboratory employees played the leading parts. Sandra, eight year old daughter of Fred Eggers, a carpenter in the Maintenance Department, did a specialty number with her excellent tap dancing. Next on the program were two songs, “White Christmas” and “Silent Night,” both sung by Sylvia Hurt, nine year old daughter of S. S. Hurt, an electrician of the Electrical Maintenance Department.
Santa Claus is detained and searched at Elza Gate entrance to Oak Ridge in this picture taken by famed Manhattan project photographer Ed Westcott
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The crowd gathered in Central Theater (now Oak Ridge Playhouse) for a children’s Christmas party.

Sylvia Hurt, nine year old daughter of S. S. Hurt, an electrician of the Electrical Maintenance Department, sings Christmas songs “White Christmas” and “Silent Night”
The full story in the January 7, 1949, edition of ORNL’s employee newsletter, THE NEWS