

## Christmas Past: Oak Christmas 1948

(As published in *The Oak Ridger's Historically Speaking* column on December 25, 2013)

*EDITOR'S NOTE: Part One of this holiday feature series segued from Santa Claus' detainment at the Elza Gate in 1944 Oak Ridge to a 1948 children's Christmas party held in the Center Theater (now the Oak Ridge Playhouse). The following information was gleaned from a Jan. 7, 1947, article originally printed in THE NEWS, an employee newsletter of the Oak Ridge National Laboratory.*

...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.

Then eight year old Balinda Baker, the "Martha Graham" of Oak Ridge, thrilled the overflow crowd with her ballet, "Dance of the Flowers." Balinda is the talented daughter of Juanita Baker, a Laboratory employee in Central Files of the Security Division. Last but not least on the fun bill of fare was a midget exhibition match in the manly art of self-defense. The young fry boxers and contenders for the title of "Mr. Big" in the fistic world were Jimmy Klemski and Stevie Pennington, both protégés of the Carbide-Oak Ridge Boxing Academy.

Jimmy is the three year son of Henry Klemski, General Foreman in the Maintenance Division. Stevie is the four year old son of Herb Pennington, a supervisor in the Chemistry division. The battlers, Jimmy weighing 30 pounds, and Stevie weighing in at 32 pounds, fought a draw by unanimous acclaim of the entire audience of some 500 wildly cheering people.

During the Entertainment, the program was interrupted when a message was received from the Oak Ridge Police Department that Santa was being slightly delayed at Elza Gate but would hasten to the theater as soon as he could be properly cleared. Only a short time had elapsed until Old Saint Nick came bustling down the aisle of the theater and just as fight fan cheering had just about died away, Santa presented gifts of appreciation to each of the children who took part in the entertainment program.

He then said a few words of cheer to everyone and was soon on his way to visit other Oak Ridge parties. However, Santa Claus who is never camera shy, stayed long enough to get himself photographed a number of times.

Judging by the reports received in the Recreation Department the entire program was a huge success; and Hal Mate, Recreation Supervisor and coordinator of the event, wishes to thank everyone who took part in making the first annual event the success it was.

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Thanks to Tim Gawne of ORNL for digging out the "rest of the story" to the famous Santa at Elza Gate photograph by Ed Westcott.

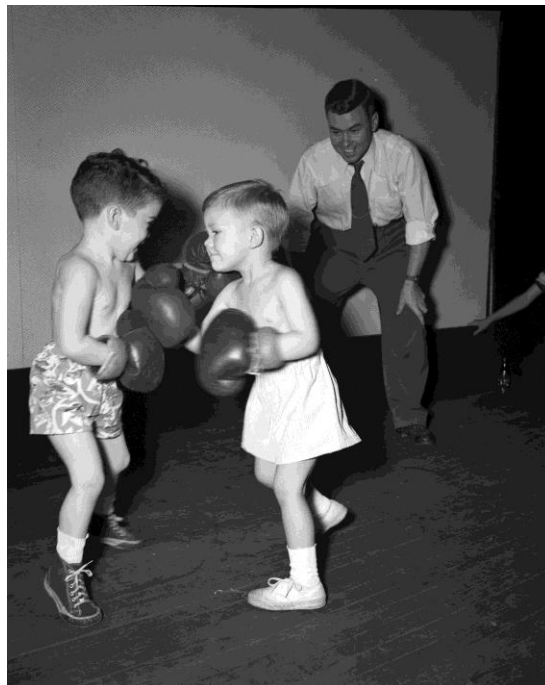
Merry Christmas to *Historically Speaking* readers...thank you all for your continuing support and positive comments regarding the column. I hope you agree that it has become an "Oak Ridge tradition." The column has now been running for seven years! Wow! I am blessed to be able to provide insight into our history. Your suggestions lead to many of the stories. Please keep up the input...

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Balinda Baker, the “Martha Graham” of Oak Ridge



Stevie Pennington and Jimmy Klemski battle to a draw

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Santa Claus awards one of the fighters with a gift



Santa Claus awards the other fighter with a gift



Santa and the entertainers

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Santa listens to a young boy



What a great expression on this little girl...