

The 43 Club, some of Oak Ridge's finest (As published in The Oak Ridger's Historically Speaking column on April 29, 2013)

On Saturday, April 20, 2013, I attended a meeting of the 43 Club. Yes, I have almost been in Oak Ridge 43 years and I want to join that club in September when I will have been here long enough to qualify for membership. So, why did I go to this meeting rather than wait until after September? Bill Tewes, one of my good friends who is a member of the club, invited me to attend and encouraged me to take a look at the club's history. I agreed to do that.

There were 24 people in attendance at the meeting and I found that I knew many of them. Several of them knew me and were quick to comment on the *Historically Speaking* column. Some have commented on my articles when I fail to convey our history as they recall it. I appreciate that because these people actually lived the history I often write about it from research alone or from a source that may well have not been as close to the history as the members of the 43 Club. So their help is certainly appreciated.

The 43 Club was organized on July 24, 1958 and its charter has these words on the banner: "In That Eventful Year Of Nineteen Forty Three, Among The Wooded Hills Of East Tennessee Was Created, Oak Ridge, City of Destiny."

One of the groups that talked together after the meeting consisted of three friends who are in their 90's. Bill Harman, who turned 93 on April 23, 2013, Percy Staats and Virgil Haynes are still close friends. Bill says he shares a birthday with Shirley Temple and Shakespeare. He claims he is older than Shirley and younger than Shakespeare!

Bill Harman told the story of how he was hired in 1943. He started out by telling me that he spent the night in the Oak Ridge Hospital on the very first day it opened. He also said he got his job in Oak Ridge in a most unusual manner.

It happened this way. On the day Bill was married, he received a telegram to come to Oak Ridge for a job interview. He was in the bridal suite of the Lafayette Hotel in Marietta, West Virginia. Bill, who grew up in Parkersburg, West Virginia, on the Ohio River, along with a couple of his friends who were already in Oak Ridge.

So, the next morning, leaving his new bride with assurances that he would soon be back to get her, Bill took a train from Parkersburg, West Virginia, to Knoxville, TN. When he arrived at the L&N Depot, he was met by his friend Percy Staats on a motorcycle that he had borrowed from Dick Woodard, who lived with Percy and Virgil Haynes at 103 Turner Road. Virgil was another of Bill's friends from West Virginia.

You see, these bachelors had joined together to live in a house when there were not enough dormitories. They stayed as long as allowed, but finally had to move into dormitories when enough space was available because of new dormitories being built. Bill, Virgil and Percy have spent their lives here in Oak Ridge and remain close friends to this day.

So, back to the L&N Depot and the story of Bill's arrival in Oak Ridge. Bill hopped on the back of the motorcycle and away they went...with Bill holding his two suitcases, one with each arm. The motorcycle was not like modern ones that have a second seat built on, the driver had to straddle the gas tank and the passenger got the one seat.

When they came through Powell and came near to the service station with the Airplane for the store, Bill told Virgil to stop and get some gas as he had some gas coupons. Yes, that airplane was there on the side of Clinton Highway in November, 1943! It is being restored today and designated as a historic place.

When they had filled the motorcycle's gas tank and were getting ready to start out again, Percy asked Bill if he would like to take over the controls and let Percy ride behind him the rest of the way to Oak Ridge.

Of course, Bill said "Yes!" You see, Bill liked motorcycles and was accustomed to riding them. So, getting the chance to try out any motorcycle was something he would not hesitate to do. So away they went

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heading north on Clinton Highway with Bill straddling the gas tank and Percy now hanging onto Bill's two suitcases, one in each hand, and sitting in the seat.

They were doing fine until they reached the curves in the road that approaches Claxton when on one of the sharpest turns the front tire blew out. There was no way Bill could hold the motorcycle up with the tire blown out. He tried desperately to knock the gear shift into neutral, but instead moved the lever to a lower gear. That was not good...

So, down they went and Bill recalls that his pants was caught in the back wheel and it was pulling his leg so that he could not get away from thing as it fell over. Percy recalls that he thinks he first landed on top of Bill and as he says, "I crushed his face into the road and he broke my fall."

Percy rolled free, but Bill was tangled up with the motorcycle on top of him and the motorcycle, being in low gear and still running, was spinning around on top of Bill, bruising, crushing and taking the skin off where ever it scraped him, legs, arms, and torso. Bill was soon unconscious and had abrasions literally almost everywhere. His clothes were almost torn off.

As there was a lot of traffic on the narrow winding road, no four lane yet, Percy had no trouble getting a ride for him and Bill to Oak Ridge. When they came to the Edgemoor Gate, Percy used that telegram that had been sent to Bill to get him in. The guards hurriedly escorted them right straight to the new hospital. Bill was admitted and says he does not remember much about all this as he was not conscious much of the time!

Bill was one of the very first patients in the new hospital. He said he was bandaged over almost all of his body and sure looked a sight. But the injuries were not broken bones or deep cuts. Bill says he was just about skinned alive by that motorcycle that kept going because he could not get it out of gear.

Anyway, Bill said the very next day Sam Rich of Tennessee Eastman Company came to see Bill. It seems that Rich was a fairly high up manager on temporary assignment from the Eastman head office to help hire people in Oak Ridge. He hired Bill on the spot and then told Argus E. "Gus" Cameron about Bill.

Gus came by in a few days and told Bill that he was in need of a chemist. Bill assured him he could do that. So without any further interview or questioning, Bill was destined to be a chemist at Y-12. Gus would later laugh about hiring a chemist almost unseen as Bill was totally wrapped in gauze and bandages.

Bill sings the praises of Gus Cameron saying that he stands "20 feet tall in my book" as Bill admires ingenuity and creativity. He said Gus was an inventor who did not slow down enough to patent his inventions, but just went on to the next thing that needed creating and did that as well.

Bill's badge number was 6959. Percy's was 562 and Virgil's was 417. All are still friends and have many fond memories of working in Oak Ridge during those early years.

Virgil told me that he was in Building 9204-1 when it started up and was also there when it shut down to remove the Beta Calutrons. Bill worked for years in Building 9995, the Plant Laboratory working for Ken Bernander. Percy had a long career at Y-12 as well. I am sure if I had had time to listen, these three friends could have filled me in on much more of their exploits while working at Y-12.

If you are interested in supporting the 43 Club, contact Tom Normand at (865) 482-4237 or me at 482-4224 or draysmith@comcast.net. Dues are only \$4 per year and they could sure use some younger members who have been in Oak Ridge at least 43 years.

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Virgil Haynes, Percy Staats and Bill Harman – friends from West Virginia who settled in Oak Ridge in 1943, did some great work at Y-12 and made their homes here in East Tennessee – all in their 90's and still going strong!