

Lester Fox: How a teen served the Manhattan Project

(As published in *The Oak Ridger's Historically Speaking* column on June 17, 2013)

Carolyn Krause brings us the story of one of my favorite people, Lester Fox. I tell Lester's stories to all visitors to Oak Ridge with whom I interact. His true experience of being the messenger boy for Senator McKellar's phone call to Oliver Springs to let people know they were going to have to move off their home places because of the war effort never fails to get the attention of audiences. The follow on story to his and his brother's bus company where he actually got his driver's license at age 14 never fails to bring amazement and boisterous laughter to everyone who hears the story.

Enjoy learning about my friend Lester Fox through Carolyn's research and Lester's oral history.

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Lester Fox, once a successful auto dealer in Clinton and Oak Ridge, spent his early adolescence helping the war effort.

Born in 1929 in Dutch Valley, Lester is the youngest of nine children. He had five brothers and three sisters. When he was in sixth grade at Oliver Springs Grammar School, he and his brother Clyde, who was two years older, rose at 4:30 a.m., milked cows and rode their bicycles around town delivering milk from their family's dairy farm.

By that time his three sisters and three brothers had gone out-of-state to get jobs, and their father, a former railroad company worker, was disabled from a stroke. An older brother worked at a grocery and dry goods store in Oliver Springs.

Their mother supported the family by selling milk. But in 1942 two of the family's milk cows became mad cows from bites by a rabid dog. The Fox brothers and mother received rabies shots, the state health department shut down their dairy and their mother sold the healthy milk cows at a low price.

In the fall of 1942 when Lester was a freshman at Oliver Springs High School, he and a friend left school at noon one day to eat at a café. Lester bought a hamburger for 15 cents and a Pepsi Cola for 5 cents with his quarter, leaving him a nickel to insert into a pinball machine.

He won 100 free plays. The two boys decided to keep playing rather than return to school by 1 p.m. Classes changed every hour, so they decided to use up the free plays and then go to the 2 p.m. class.

As they strolled toward the school, they called out to a telephone operator on the porch of a dwelling house where the town phone was. She said, "Boys, boys! Go get the principal. I have an important call from Washington, D.C." They fetched the principal, who ran to the dwelling house to take the call from Tennessee Senator Kenneth McKellar's office.

He returned to the school with Lester and his friend, rang the bell at 2 p.m. to change classes and asked the two boys to tell all the teachers to take their students to the gym. There the principal asked the students to inform their parents that the federal government had condemned some 50,000 acres between the Elza and Wheat communities.

As workers arrived in the area for the Manhattan Project, Lester's mother rented two rooms to up to 12 new hires at a time. His brother Clyde, 15, got a job with the Aluminum Company of America in Alcoa and rode a bus to get there. Then, when he heard that laborers were laid off in Briceville and that Oak Ridge was hiring, Clyde bought a used bus for \$600 and started transporting men from Briceville to Oak Ridge and back. Lester served as ticket puncher.

Then Lester accompanied Clyde as he drove his car to Red Bank to buy a bus from a farmer for \$1,700. Clyde drove the bus back and Lester, 13, drove the car back home.

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After that Lester drove the buses in need of repair to the Ford garage in Clinton. The principal let him out of school so he could drive a car to the plant where a bus required repair because, as Lester told Keith McDaniel in an oral history interview, the principal thought it "more important that I go help the war effort than stay in school." Lester took the repaired bus from Clinton to the driver, picked up his car and drove home or back to school.

After Clyde got three buses running, he volunteered for the Air Force, became a pilot during World War II and then returned to the area to build houses in Oliver Springs and Oak Ridge as a building contractor. Meanwhile, older brother Gene, 26, a gunner in the Army's Tank Corps, had recovered from a broken back after his tank rolled over a bluff and into a ravine in California.

Gene came home and Lester showed him the three bus routes and introduced him to the drivers. Three years earlier, Gene had allowed Lester to drive a pickup truck forward a few yards at a time when he was 10, so Gene could spread lime from the back of the truck onto farmers' fields.

Then the government brought American Industrial Transit to Oak Ridge. By the end of the war, Gene had leased over 100 buses from AIT and recruited drivers to operate them. Lester cleaned mud from the buses and drove them to the Central Bus Terminal for maintenance. The terminal was located west of Bus Terminal Road where the hospital's Physical Therapy building is.

At age 13 Lester also drove a wrecker to pull broken-down buses in for repairs. And he drove a car to Knoxville to pick up bus parts from Reeder Chevrolet.

Because of a shortage of parking places, he would park the car on a 10-foot-wide sidewalk next to the car dealer. When a Knoxville police officer asked to see his license, he said, "I ain't got any. I'm working for the war effort." So the police officer let him park on the sidewalk whenever he returned.

In Lake City a state trooper named Doug who daily saw Lester drive a bus or wrecker heard he was about to turn 16. Doug told Lester to meet him at the courthouse in Clinton so he could get his driver's license.

Doug told the clerk, "Give this boy a driver's license. He turned 16 today. You don't need to give him any test because I've seen him drive everything." Lester wrote down his name and address, and the clerk typed up a set of driver's licenses, handed them to Lester and charged him \$2.

Lester walked out of the courthouse feeling 10 feet tall. He was 14 years old.

A political tradeoff?

The principal of Lester Fox's school took the call in 1942 about the federal takeover of almost 60,000 acres in the Black Oak Ridge area. The caller was Sen. Kenneth McKellar, chairman of the Ways and Means Committee.

Lester said he later learned that President Roosevelt said to Sen. McKellar: "We've got scientists that can split atoms and make a bomb so strong it could end this war. We must build a plant for them. Could you hide it in the budget?"

Senator McKellar replied, "Yes, sir, Mr. President. I sure can. Where in Tennessee are we going to build it?" (My punch line to that story is, "Yes, Mr. President, I can do that for you, just where in Tennessee are you going to put that 'thang?")

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Thanks Carolyn! I find it most delightful to see how these stories are so similar to the way I have heard Lester tell some of them and the way I have heard others repeat them as well. I find the minor variations of special interest in that the different slants help me to realize how oral traditions are passed on from one person to another and one generation to another and how variations on stories come to add flavor and interest to the basic stories.

The telling of the Senator McKellar story that I treasure most is the one where Senator Howard Baker, Jr., began his Oral History video interview with Jim Campbell, sitting in his office in Huntsville, TN, by stating, "Before we begin to talk about Oak Ridge, let me first tell you how that location came to be chosen for the Manhattan Project."

The Senator then proceeded to tell the Senator McKellar story with strong expression, waving of his arms and much enthusiasm. He was obviously enjoying himself tremendously. When he finished, I thanked him for validating the story that I tell every visitor to Oak Ridge with whom I interact. He smiled and asked, "Where did you get the story?" I said, "Dick Smyser, long time editor of *The Oak Ridger*." He laughed and said, "That's where I got it, too!"

Next week Carolyn will give us another insight into the life history of Lester Fox. She will tell the stories of "Lucky Lester," the highly successful car dealer.



Lester Fox, he lived the stories we tell