

## ***Wartime Churches in Oak Ridge***

(As published in *The Oak Ridger's Historically Speaking* column on July 8, 2013)

A few months ago, Mona Raridon called me with a request to speak to the United Church Chapel on the Hill Women's Dinner Group. Unlike most groups who request me to speak on the history of Oak Ridge, Mona had a very specific aspect of Oak Ridge history she wanted addressed.

She had been researching what she could find regarding the churches that were here in Oak Ridge during the war years (1942-1945). She had found some information and I realized right away that she already knew more than I did about the subject.

But, not wanting to refuse her request, and because her schedule had me speaking a couple of months from when she asked me, I told her I would see what I could learn and would make a presentation for her. I knew I was in for a challenge, but was interested in the subject.

My first call after that request was to my good friend and best resource, Bill Wilcox. He agreed to help. So, I felt better.

Bill helped research the early church services. The first service led by an official minister in the new city was conducted by the Reverend Bertram M. Larson, a Presbyterian minister from Knoxville on July 25, 1943. The service was held in the Army's cafeteria on Central Avenue near Townsite.

According to Martha Cardwell Sparrow who wrote in "*The Oak Ridgers*, A Thesis submitted to the faculty of Mississippi State University..." May, 1980, a more informal service was held a week earlier on July 18, 1943, also in the cafeteria on Central Avenue near Townsite. Sparrow said, "A group of thirty people met for worship in the Townsite cafeteria. Paul Water, a young electrician, conducted the service." She credits this informal service as the "first religious service."

Sparrow continued, "Afterwards, Samuel S. Baxter, Oak Ridge's first 'city manager,' and several others discussed the possibility of holding services on a regular basis. The majority of the group favored the organization of an interdenominational church. "

"Floyd M. Glass, a member of the group, remarked that the Oak Ridge situation provided people with an excellent opportunity to get together for religious interests without becoming involved along denominational lines. This remark and the discussion which followed became the basis on which the United Church was founded.

"The church was organized in the spirit of friendship and community cooperation as an interdenominational venture.

Sparrow says on page 108 of her thesis, "Religion was an important aspect of life in wartime Oak Ridge. When officials of various denominations in East Tennessee heard of the Oak Ridge project, they wrote Manhattan district officials to offer their services to the people in the new town."

She gave an example, "In his reply to one such letter, Lieutenant Colonel Robert C. Blair, Deputy District Engineer, wrote, 'It will be the policy of the Clinton Engineer Works to encourage and foster in every way possible the organization of religious groups and the development of church programs among these individuals who will be residing upon the reservation.'"

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Her reference for this exchange of letters is "Colonel Robert C. Blair to the Reverend B. M. Larson, 26 May 1943, Manhattan engineer District Records." Note that this is the same Bertram M. Larson mentioned by Bill Wilcox as the first official minister to come to the Clinton Engineer Works.

Sparrow goes on to say, "Project officials appointed an army officer to assist in the organization of religious groups. They also constructed two army chapels and made other public buildings available to groups for religious services. Officials emphasized, however, that the Army could encourage the development of religious organizations, but participation by residents had to be strictly voluntary."

By July 1943 when the first religious services were being held, the city of Oak Ridge - still known officially as the Clinton Engineer Works – but already taking on a unique personality and culture, was beginning to grow by leaps and bounds.

The army built two chapels, the first one completed in October 1943. This first chapel served the congregation that had formed in July 1943 and was known as the "United Church" intended to be an inter-denominational congregation.

The first chapel quickly became known as "The Chapel on the Hill" because of its picturesque location. The United Church initially shared the facility with the Catholic and Jewish groups. The first Catholic service was conducted in August, 1943, in the Central Recreational building (across from the Guest House – probably called The Ridge Recreation Hall).

The first Episcopal service, an "Evening Prayer" was held at 5:00 PM at the Chapel on the Hill, on October 3, 1943.

The second chapel, an identical building, located at the corner of Atlanta Road and Anna Road. It is still there today and can be seen as a twin building to the Chapel on the Hill. The Baptist were the first group to use that facility. However, the first Baptist service was held at the Chapel on the Hill on October 17, 1943, at 9:45 AM.

Bertram M. Larson would become the first minister at the United Church Chapel on the Hill. He is quoted by Sparrow as saying, "There is a depth and a breadth of spirit here which is indeed unusual ... It is inspiring to work with the people." She also noted that Larson saw the congregation as the most "sympathetic and attentive" with which he had worked.

He also noted the diversity in the congregation. Sparrow said of Larson, "Larson saw the purpose of the church as allowing each individual to suit his own needs. As an example of the diversity of individuals represented, Larson commented that the church had a Quaker teaching a Sunday School class with Methodist literature."

Larson was serving with the Presbyterian Home Mission of East Tennessee and Kentucky, according to Sparrow who stated, "Larson had expressed his willingness to help meet the religious needs of the new community. He agreed to return to Oak Ridge for services each Sunday and seemed interested in a church which would serve all denominations. He also arranged for a field worker to minister to trailer camp residents."

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In *Historic Preservation in a New Town*, by James P. Shaw IV, in March 1988, is found: "The Chapel-on-the-Hill received its name during prayer at its September 30, 1943 dedication ceremonies. The wood frame structure is a standard U. S. Army Corps of Engineers design known as a '700 Series' chapel."

Shaw continues, "It still stands on the knoll behind the Alexander Motor Inn and is the United Church, a church that was begun during the Manhattan Project era. The chapel looks very much like it did when originally built, although its wood siding has been covered with aluminum, a small porch was added to the front and a standard window above the front door was replaced with a small stained glass window."

In addition to these two army chapels, many other locations were used for church services ranging from schools to recreation halls to movie theaters. The Methodists even had an office in a drug store. Most just met anywhere possible.

Of course there were church buildings that were here before the Manhattan Project took over all buildings in the 60,000 acres. Some of these buildings were used and one remains to today.

There was a church building at the corner of Arkansas Avenue and the Oak Ridge Turnpike that was used. The building that is now home to The Oak Ridge Alliance Church building at the corner of Robertsville Road and Raleigh Road. It was originally the building for the Oak Ridge Community Church.

Many other churches were formed during the war years and met at various places. However, these four buildings were the church buildings within the town of Oak Ridge proper.

Religious services were seen as important to the residents of the newly forming community that would become Oak Ridge and were organized quickly. Several religious groups meet multiple times weekly in many locations other than these two army chapels and two buildings from previous communities, but they were the only church buildings during the war years.



United Church Chapel on the Hill

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Oak Ridge Community Church – as it looked a few years after the war

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Oak Ridge Alliance Church – was wartime church building seen in photo of Oak Ridge Community Church



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Arkansas House, built prior to the establishment of Oak Ridge, at the corner of Arkansas Avenue and Oak Ridge Turnpike. It was used as a church and torn down several years later. Robert Knight photo.

Arkansas House, no longer there



The second army chapel built, now Calvary Lighthouse Church