

## ***Revolution, Reaction and Reform: Transformation of the Community of Wheat, by Sarah Littleton, part 4***

(As published in *The Oak Ridger's Historically Speaking* column on September 2, 2013)

Sarah Littleton was an eighth grade student when she competed successfully in the National History Day competition by winning at the local and state levels and participating at the national level. She is now a sophomore at Farragut High School where she enjoys swimming, diving and ensemble singing, along with her studies.

Now let's return to the epic story of Wheat that Sarah has written. This is the last article in the series.

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School children were given their grade cards, told the school was closing, and told to find another school.

James Littleton, only nine at the time, remembers losing his classmates and the closeness of his family. "For the defense of the country they took the land, and they took it under what we call today eminent domain." Eminent domain is the power of the state to take private property.

Perhaps the most saddened by the relocation were the elderly, some of whose families had lived in Wheat since the 1800's. Though some tried to fight back, they still had to relocate. The U.S. Army acquired fifty-six thousand acres; some families, like the Van Glider's, lost one thousand acres of land.

However, even with losing so much, most people considered it a way to help the war effort.

The majority of Wheat residents were farmers. Families had to work extremely hard to get all their hay, sack oats, wheat, and corn prepared for the move. There was also farm equipment and livestock that had to be relocated. Moving all these things proved to be a challenge for many families, and some barns were left full of hay.

The most difficult factor in relocation was knowing that they could never return. Their homes would now be government property.

Relocation split apart many families. One of these was the Littletons, whose extended family of nine siblings had been living near each other for years. Part of the clan moved to Knoxville, some to nearby Clinton, while James Littleton and his parents and sister moved to Little Emory, near Harriman, Tennessee. The family would never again be as close together as they were in Wheat.

It was hard to rebuild their lives, from suddenly having a home to not. Some found work in Knoxville; others found employment in Oak Ridge. Many families had sons drafted to war.

J. E. Magill fought through Europe and returned to a peaceful life in Clinton, Tennessee.

Others, like Hazel Simmons' brother-in-law Dwight Harvey, never returned. Dwight was buried in France, leaving a young family behind. "They told Gladys (her sister) about Dwight down...where she worked," recalled Hazel. It was devastating to the young mother with two toddlers.

Even though some families reacted to the relocation in a positive way, others thought it was terrible. "The Army had stolen the farmers land and had not reimbursed the counties for expensive roads and bridges. It was, as one believed, "an experiment" in socialism "carried on by New Dealers cloaked under the guise of a war project."

The Army wasted no time starting the "Secret City." Churches and stores were closed and later demolished.

Cemeteries were left; houses and barns abandoned. Swings sat empty. These common places would never see foot traffic again. One building, however, was left untouched. One of the prominent churches

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was the George Jones Memorial Baptist Church. Originally named Mt. Zion, it is the only Wheat structure still standing.

After the "Secret City" was built, workers arrived; and soon Oak Ridge became Tennessee's fifth largest city. The government had changed the tranquil, agrarian, and rural society to an urban one. The little community of Wheat had been revolutionized by this sudden change.

To keep the project a secret, all books about atomic bombs or nuclear science were taken out of the libraries in Tennessee and eventually all over the country by the government. People who lived and worked in Oak Ridge avoided discussing their work with outsiders.

Even though they did not know what was happening, they knew it was top secret. In fact, most people who were making the bomb did not know what they were making. Only a select few knew what was happening. This shows how critical and top secret this project was.

The thought of building an atomic bomb may seem like a drastic thing to do, but Japan had a force of five million. They had also mistreated their prisoners of war, which made America even more determined to win.

Japan had tremendous air and naval power and all the raw materials to continue the war. When Germany, another of America's key enemies, surrendered on May 7, 1945, work on the bomb continued because America still needed to defeat Japan.

The summer of 1945 was a turning point in the war. It was clear Japan was losing, but they refused to surrender. Japan's soldiers were trained to fight to the death and would rather die than let their country be defeated.

In July, a group of U.S. scientists tested an atomic bomb. It was more effective than they expected.

President Truman personally decided to use the atomic bombs. On August 6, 1945, the first one was dropped on Hiroshima, Japan, instantly killing seventy-five thousand people.

On August 9, 1945, the second bomb was dropped on Nagasaki, Japan. The shock was unbelievable.

Almost no one in the whole world expected, knew, or even thought something like this would happen.

The people who once lived in Wheat certainly did not expect this either. When asked how he reacted to the bombing, Boyd Littleton said, "My mind couldn't conceive what I was seeing." When Ralph Magill was asked if he was surprised, he said, "Surprised?! All of us were! Yeah, back then that was a big surprise!"

For them, it was not just knowing about the atomic bomb, but knowing they had once lived on the land where the bomb had been made.

Some believe that if America had not used the atomic bomb we would not have won the war. "It accomplished the fact that the atomic bomb was developed; sorry it had to be used to settle a war, but there wouldn't have been a Hiroshima bombing and a Nagasaki bombing if there hadn't been a Pearl Harbor." (James Littleton)

Not only did the atomic bomb end the war, with Japan surrendering on September 2, 1945, but it reformed warfare and saved an estimated one million lives. America was to invade Japan on November 1, 1945. This would have caused numerous casualties on both sides.

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Today the city of Oak Ridge is remembered for being the heart of the atomic bomb project. The bomb that was built using material separated there was two thousand times more powerful and destructive than the biggest weapon ever used in warfare.

In fact, the Knoxville News Sentinel noted that Oak Ridge "...managed to become one of the historic cities in America, a town that will ever remain associated with the greatest secret of World War II."

General Groves, the man who chose to use Oak Ridge said, "Oak Ridge will have a unique place in history. It will be a landmark in the field of atomic development."

The book Anderson County says, "When information headquarters in Oak Ridge announced on August 6, 1945, that the radioactive heart of the atomic bomb began in the Oak Ridge facilities, the public was stunned. It was the best-kept secret of World War II."

The people of Wheat contributed greatly to the war effort. They were forced to give up their homes, barns, land, school, friends, and everything they had ever known in a manner of a few weeks. They did what they were told.

The atomic bomb did not fall on Wheat, but it devastated the community. Wheat residents reacted with strength and courage, forging new lifestyles but not forgetting old friendships.

Today, the George Jones Memorial Church is open once a year. Past residents gather to sing, worship, decorate family graves or just share memories over fried chicken while their great-grandchildren run around on the gorgeous hilltop overlook. These people should always be remembered for the sacrifice they made for the war. They still call it Wheat!

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Wasn't that grand? With young people like Sarah Littleton coming along, I believe East Tennessee history is in good hands. She researched and wrote an outstanding insight into the history of Wheat. She wrote it through the eyes of the people who experienced that life-changing transformation.

Sarah may be the next "Denise Kiernan, author of 'The Girls of Atomic City'" as they both used as primary sources, the people who lived the history. We are losing these primary sources quickly. Thank goodness for such people as Sarah and Denise!



Sarah Littleton standing beside the Moon Box, a part of Y-12's post Manhattan Project mission in support of the NASA Apollo space program

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Benita Irwin, matriarch of Wheat, stands beside the historical marker with the George Jones Memorial Baptist Church and cemetery in the background



The George Jones Memorial Baptist Church, last remaining structure of Wheat, and cemetery, one of over 70 on the Oak Ridge reservation and within the city of Oak Ridge