

First reception in The Guest House at the Alexander Inn

(As published in *The Oak Ridger's Historically Speaking* column on November 24, 2014)

On Friday evening, November 7, 2014, at 6:30 PM, a group of approximately 50 people gathered in the historic Guest House at the Alexander Inn. Many of them had just attended the two-day East Tennessee Preservation Alliance's 2014 annual conference held in the Y-12 New Hope Center.

This reception, catered by Judy Dodd Catering, was a pre-completion celebration to let interested individuals view the progress being made to create the senior living center that is the ultimate result of the restorative efforts by Rick Dover of Family Pride Corporation. The reception was held in the area where the main cafeteria will be located.

As the visitors arrived they were met by a brightly lit front entrance. The interior was lit by temporary electrical wires strung across the rafters and through the open wall studs to makeshift lighting fixtures. Music was provided by Kim Trent's iPhone playing through a portable sound system. Kim is the Executive Director of Knox Heritage, the parent organization for the East Tennessee Preservation Alliance of sixteen East Tennessee counties. Portable heaters knocked off the chill in the air as the evening progressed.

The visitors signed the "guest book" at the original counter that had served such dignitaries as Robert Oppenheimer, Senator John F. Kennedy and Jackie, Enrico Fermi and maybe even General Leslie Groves (although he is rumored to have preferred the maternity wing of the Oak Ridge hospital).

Kim Trent, Rick Dover and Scott Brooks (ETPA President) spoke to the audience. Kim recalled the efforts of the city of Oak Ridge, the Department of Energy, the Oak Ridge Heritage & Preservation Association, the Tennessee Historical Commission and cited the teamwork that resulted in the \$500K stabilization grant that enabled this project to become a reality. Scott thanked the audience for coming and for their support.

Rick Dover described the restoration effort to include the final plans for the facility and the 64 spacious senior living units. He indicated that lots of phone calls were being received from people wanting to reserve space already. Rick was complimentary of all the support received by the city, state and federal agencies to enable the development. He expressed excitement as he saw the final touches being placed on the restoration.

His vision of the potential for The Guest House at the Alexander Inn is refreshing and a delightful turn of events for local preservationists who had fought for years to save the structure. Howard Harvey would be proud!

The State Historic Preservation Officer, Patrick McIntyre was given a private look at the progress as he was unable to attend the reception. He was most impressed with what he saw and expressed the importance of saving this iconic Oak Ridge structure again and again. I understand that it was actually his suggestion that got the ball rolling to allow for the substitution of the \$500K from the K-25 preservation initiative by DOE Environmental Management.

I explored the facility areas near the cafeteria and found that original flooring is being preserved in as much of the area as possible, the fireplace in the main lobby will again be the centerpiece of what one sees when they walk through the front door. As much as is feasible, original items are being retained.

Rick indicated a desire to have the main lobby become a museum curated by the Oak Ridge Heritage & Preservation Association and for the Manhattan Project National Historical Park to include the lobby and museum in heritage tourism tours. There will be public events held there and visitors will be encouraged to drop by and see the historic inn that will once again be one of the main attractions of the Jackson Square (townsite) historic district.

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The evening reception was a delight! I believe we got a glimpse of what the future holds for the grand old Guest House. It will have a third chance at survival and I believe it will thrive for many more years than it functioned as a Guest House or the Alexander Inn.

The Guest House at the Alexander Inn senior living center will be with us for a very long time. We will be proud of the iconic historic structure along with the Chapel on the Hill and Jackson Square which together will form a heritage tourism hot spot. These three historic facilities will, I am sure, form key elements of interest in upcoming tour guides that will undoubtedly be developed as a part of the Manhattan Project National Historical Park.

Already there is a replacement being developed for the dated Oak Ridge driving tour created several years by Leadership Oak Ridge that will feature the senior living center's main lobby as well as many other attractions in our historic city. It is good to see such progress!



Well lit front entrance to The Guest House at the Alexander Inn



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The historic fireplace will be restored and the famous Ed Westcott image of Robert Oppenheimer sitting beside the mantle will be on display, I am sure



Rick Dover speaks to the reception audience about his vision for the historic structure



The spacious main lobby where museum exhibits will be featured