

The Last Robertsville Reunion, part 1

(As published in *The Oak Ridger's Historically Speaking* column on February 3, 2014)

This *Historically Speaking* series was researched and written by Myra Mansfield. She attended a reunion of the Robertsville community and shares insights gained from the attendees who fondly recall a time before Oak Ridge or the Manhattan Project came to their small close-knit community. The only structure left of that community is a portion of the original Robertsville High School still standing within the present Robertsville Middle School. Enjoy Myra's story about some of the people who lived in Robertsville.

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They share a fading heritage, and they know it. The last class of the pre-Oak Ridge Robertsville School had been meeting together annually for 40 years. On August 15, 2010 they held their last official "Robertsville Reunion" at the Clinton Community Center.

James Ford, the group's final president began their time together by leading a prayer. "...Be with those who are not here and cause them to lean on you in time of trouble because You are the only source of help. Bless the refreshments, and bless each one as they travel back to their homes. Forgive us where we have failed thee; in Jesus' name, Amen."

His father had driven a "rolling store" back in the old days. A rolling store was a truck converted to a small store on wheels. It ran from Scarbrough, thru Wheat, Robertsville, Elza and Edgemoor. He would buy goods from one resident, such as a bushel of apples and resell it down the road to someone else such as the beloved Robinsons. The Robinsons were an African American family who had been born in slavery here just as the civil war was beginning. They were invited to stay in Scarbrough.

One particular lady was given the privilege of cutting the cake. She had grown up in pre-Oak Ridge and had catered most of these reunions until her health declined. The group honored her for her contributions over the years.

The smiles and conversation scattered around the room told us these people valued each other. As my husband panned the room with the video camera Maydean Freels Gault playfully scolded him, "That will break your camera."

Vivian Kerr was there for the reunion. Her family had owned the farm where Illinois Avenue passes the UT Arboretum. The old Kerr Hollow Road is still there running parallel to Illinois Avenue inside the arboretum. Her father worked on the trains but wanted to raise horses so they settled in Kerr Hollow because he could easily cross the Solway Bridge to reach the train stop in Solway.

Vivian's mother, Molly was a petite 112 pound woman who could manage farm life with the best of the men, even lifting 100 pound bags of grain by herself. But most of all she loved people. Vivian remembers her mother throwing planks across tree stumps to create benches so the farm folk could gather together for a corn "shuckin," a "quiltin," or a prayer "meetin."

Mary Walters Taylor's family owned the farm across Scarboro Road from where the New Hope Center sits today. Her father used to sit on their front porch with John Hendrix talking about his prophesies.

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Her grandmother is the woman who walked to John's farm while he was lying on the ground for 40 nights. She covered him with a handmade quilt and took him chicken soup.

The Snodderlys attended the reunion. They moved to Robertsville when they were evicted from Loyston by the government in 1933 for to make way for Norris Dam. Not only did the Snodderlys also lose their Robertsville farm to the government in 1942 but they found themselves in the way of progress two more times over the years – once because the state highway department wanted to build a road on their land and another time because the railroad wanted to use their property for rail lines in Powell.

James and Naomi Brummitt were there though he has since passed away. He had lived where the Briarcliff Nursing Home is now. They moved to Robertsville in the 1930s and had just completed a new eight-room home when the government took 1,000 farms to build Oak Ridge.

Naomi was a Magill who grew up where Y-12 sits today. Her mother was a widow known around Robertsville and Scarbrough for all her good deeds. When my husband and I visited with them about a year later, she recounted how he had gone to war when they were engaged while she got a job inside the Secret City. After he was fortunate enough to survive the war they were married in a beautiful candlelight wedding and had three sons.

James and Mary Elizabeth Brennen were there also. Mr. Brennen shared a story about his father making him drop out of school for two years to work on his lumber mill. Then he went back to school and finished. Mr. Brennen has the distinction of being one of those who survived both theatres of the war.

He says Oak Ridgers were pampered during the war while he and fellow veterans suffered extreme cold and heat, mud and thirst, and sleeplessness almost constantly. It wasn't uncommon for a journalist to call and request an interview with him up until his passing last year. A few years ago he was featured on WBIR TV with his medals and awards.

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Thanks Myra for the insights into the people who called Robertsville home before Oak Ridge. Next Myra will continue this saga of the Robertsville Reunion and the people who were there. I will include some additional information about one of Oak Ridge's most prominent lawyers and judges, Lawrence Tunnell, who also attended Robertsville High School.

I have enjoyed visiting with him and learning of his life experiences. At my last visit with him, he shared the story of how he became known as the "Mayor of Marlow!" It seems he was in a trial opposed by a lawyer who took great pride in telling the court that he was at one time the Mayor of Knoxville.

So, when it became Lawrence's time to speak, he noted that his opponent spoke of his past experience as a mayor and indicated that he also was a mayor, of Marlow. The story stuck and he now relishes the memory and is proud of the tag placed on him. He takes great pride in his beautiful 60 plus acre farm in Marlow.

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Learn more about Lawrence Tunnell and others who grew up in Robertsville in the next *Historically Speaking*.



Robertsville Reunion: Row 1 (L to R): Ruth Peters Bryan, Ray Ernest Kear, Ernest Sheppard, Frank Mounger, Maydean Freels Gault, Ruth Brennen, Louise Snodderly, Hugh Snodderly, James Brummitt.

Row 2 (L to R): Bob Bryan, Elmer Turpin, James Brennen, Mary Elizabeth Brennen, Lela Delmonte, Mary Taylor Walters, Vivian Lillian Kerr Young, Alma Brummitt, Delia Jordan Davis, Bessie Fox Smith, Naomi Magill Brummitt.

Row 3 : James Ford