

From start to finish: Oak Ridge's rowing history, part 1

(As published in *The Oak Ridger's Historically Speaking* column on May 19, 2014)

Tennessee State Representative John Ragan asked me to publish a brief history of rowing in Oak Ridge in *Historically Speaking*. I immediately agreed as I think our rowing course and the people involved in its history is a story that needs to be included in Oak Ridge history documentation.

The very first person to contact me with information about the early days of rowing was Jim Ramsey. Jim and I have exchanged praise for Oak Ridge history and he has long encouraged a connection between Oak Ridge's American Museum of Science and Energy and the *Memorial de Caen, Normandy, the Centre for History and Peace*. The *Atoms for Peace* may well be a connection we can work as they desire to move toward an emphasis on peace.

But the focus of his emails, photographs, posters and other information was the early days of rowing in Oak Ridge. His personal interest in promoting the sport locally enabled him to be a strong force in its inception in Oak Ridge.

Carolyn Krause asked if she could help by compiling information and writing the details of the history of rowing. I readily agreed as she does an excellent job with research and concise documentation of historical details. Enjoy her introduction to the history of rowing in Oak Ridge.

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The Clinch River–Melton Hill Lake stretch by the Oak Ridge Marina is usually peaceful and enjoyed by recreational rowers, walkers, joggers, bicyclists, Canada geese, ducks and ospreys.

But as one of the top three rowing regatta courses in the nation, it has been a venue for fierce competitions among some of the best American rowing teams. It has attracted 15,000 visitors a year to Oak Ridge to see the regattas and boosted the local economy.

This month the venue features two kinds of competition: Conference USA Rowing Championship (Saturday, May 17), and the first-ever dragon boat races. These races among almost 30 teams will be held during the inaugural Oak Ridge Dragon Boat Festival fundraiser on Saturday, May 31, from 9 a.m. to 4 p.m. (hosted by the three Rotary clubs of Oak Ridge).

When the Oak Ridge Rowing Association turns 35 this year, it will be hosting the U.S. Rowing Club National Championship, July 16-20. ORRA's regatta season closes with the Secret City Head Race on Oct. 25. Since 1978 Oak Ridge has been the permanent home of the annual Southern Intercollegiate Rowing Association (SIRA) Championship, held every April.

Before it was one year old, ORRA – whose first president was Louise Dunlap, then executive secretary of the Oak Ridge Chamber of Commerce – had hosted the 1980 Women's Collegiate & National Rowing Championships, which brought more than 1300 rowers to Oak Ridge. The women's rowing teams came from schools such as MIT and Radcliffe College; Cornell, Princeton and Yale, and the universities of British Columbia, California (at Berkeley and at Los Angeles), Chicago and Wisconsin.

The next year ORRA hosted another kind of competition: the 1981 Pan-American Olympic Canoe and Kayak Championships. It featured teams from Argentina and Cuba, as well as the U.S. and Canada. The Argentinians stayed at the nearby Campfire Girls campsite.

One of the observers was U.S. Olympic coach Andy Toro, who expressed deep disappointment in the U.S. boycott of the 1980 Summer Olympic Games in Moscow.

In those days before cell phones, the radio hobbyists in the Oak Ridge Amateur Radio Club enabled folks at the starting and finishing docks to communicate with timers and those at regatta headquarters and in patrol boats.

So, how did competitive rowing get started in Oak Ridge?

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One of the visionaries was Jim Ramsey – a 6'6" center on an Oak Ridge High School state champion basketball team, member of the Dartmouth College rowing team, graduate of the University of Tennessee Law School in Knoxville and a district attorney general of Anderson County for many years.

While at UT, he found that the athletic director was not receptive to establishing a varsity rowing team, so Ramsey helped start the Rowing Vols as a club sport in 1971. The college rowers practiced rowing in the UT Aquatics Center Pool. The program almost folded in 1973-74, but Ramsey kept it afloat by writing letters to coaches and rowing enthusiasts.

In 1975 the UT rowing club team performed well in the seventh annual SIRA championship in Stone Mountain, Ga. Ramsey, Dan Maynard (UT rowing team member) and Rod Townsend, a charter member of ORRA who helped establish rowing at UT and in Oak Ridge, suggested that Melton Hill Lake become the site of UT's home races.

In 1976, the Tennessee Valley Authority agreed to UT's request to design a rowing course on Melton Hill Lake in the area of the Oak Ridge Marina. Ramsey drove to Huntsville, Ala. and brought the SIRA president back to see the potential of the Oak Ridge course. On Sept. 26, 1977, Ramsey showed several Oak Ridge City Council members the Potomac Boat Club facilities during a business trip to Washington, D.C.

In December 1977 Dunlap attended the SIRA annual meeting in Orlando, Fla. She convinced the leaders there to hold the SIRA championship in April 1978 in Oak Ridge. It followed the first regatta held on Melton Hill Lake – the Dogwood Regatta that UT conducted in March 1978.

In January 1979 an ad hoc committee of the National Association of Amateur Oarsmen visited Oak Ridge to assess the lake's suitability as a regatta venue. The NAAO committee recognized the site's outstanding potential for national and international rowing races, including Olympic events, as well as canoeing and kayaking competitions.

Regattas likely could not be held on the venue, NAAO said, unless TVA denied the Terminal Development Corporation's 1975 request for an easement near the Oak Ridge Marina, where the company planned to construct a coal barge terminal. In October 1979 the TVA board declined to grant the easement.

In a meeting between NAAO and Oak Ridge Chamber of Commerce members, NAAO stated that to be certified for national or international competitions, the Oak Ridge course must have a sophisticated electronic timing system, overhead lane markers, an Albano lane system, boat storage areas and a good communications system.

In April 1979 after the second SIRA event in Oak Ridge, TVA civil engineer Ted Coppenger redesigned the course, taking into account international requirements. In July 1979 ORRA was organized with the goal of preparing the course for regattas it would host. Responding to ORRA's persistence, TVA granted \$25,000 to pay for the necessary rowing course upgrades.

Marshall Thurman, Dave Mason and Chris Keim were primarily responsible for setting up the course so it met the requirements. Thurman installed the Albano lane system, lines of buoys that mark the course. An ORHS graduate and art director for commercial design at UT, he conducted rowing clinics for ORHS students.

Dunlap persuaded her neighbor Tom White, a retired budget director for the Department of Energy's Oak Ridge Operations, to manage the Oak Ridge Marina in the early years. In 1980 he took on this role as a volunteer. He built what was needed in the boathouse, served as a finish line judge and worked 12-hour days at the marina during the six-week spring training season for college and high school rowing teams.

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ORRA's chief goals were to develop the Melton Hill Aquatic Sports Center, as the organization named the rowing venue, into a world-class rowing course; to host six regattas a year and rowing team training in March and April, and to teach rowing to ORRA members. It has met these goals admirably over the past 35 years.

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Thanks Carolyn for this introduction to the history of one of Oak Ridge's jewels, our beautiful rowing course. I am told that there needs to be an eighth lane installed. Tennessee State Representative John Ragan is hoping to help bring this about.

Others are desiring to assist in any way possible. We would take another giant step forward with the addition of the eighth lane which would enable the course to be used for even more prestigious events.

NEXT Carolyn brings us the story of how Oak Ridgers saved the rowing course from a commercial development



1981 Men's Nationals in Oak Ridge

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Aerial view of an early race



Typical scene at a regatta

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A beautiful setting for a world class rowing course