

Citizens' group saves future top-ranked rowing course

(As published in *The Oak Ridger's Historically Speaking* column on May 26, 2014)

On August 13, 1979, the Tennessee Department of State issued a certificate authorizing the formation of the Oak Ridge Rowing Association, Inc. The following persons signed the charter, Louise Dunlap, Tom Hill, Charles Manning, James McMahon, Donald Roe, Jack Pope, James Ramsey, William Sewell, Marshall Thurman and Rodman Townsend.

I spoke with Tom Hill and Jim Ramsey about the events Carolyn Krause will bring to us in this installment of *Historically Speaking*. Both Tom and Jim saw this time as one of tremendous community effort that set the direction of our Oak Ridge Marina and were proud to have been a part of the action.

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Six-story-high piles of coal unloaded from 300 railroad cars a day sit on the Clinch River-Melton Hill Lake shore across from the Oak Ridge Marina, which is zoned recreational. An overhead conveyor transfers the coal to barges. Twelve barges leaving at different times for the Tennessee and Ohio rivers carry 18,000 tons of fuel for coal-fired power plants and for export to Japan.

Frank Wilson, CEO of the Terminal Development Corporation (TDC) of Knoxville, had this vision in 1975 for the land owned by the Tennessee Valley Authority and zoned industrial. He envisioned big earnings if he could get a construction permit from the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers for his proposed coal-loading barge terminal and if TVA would sell the shoreline area to TDC.

Wilson and some Anderson County residents argued the terminal would provide lots of jobs and more income to the area, as well as a partial solution to the energy crisis.

For Anderson County Attorney Jim Ramsey, rows of coal barges would mean ruination of a great venue for rowing. For Chuck Coutant, who left the Pacific Northwest to take a job as fish biologist with Oak Ridge National Laboratory partly because of the lakefront's scenic beauty, this proposal called for strong citizens' opposition.

For numerous Oak Ridgers, especially those living close to the Oak Ridge Marina, the proposed terminal was unacceptable. They were concerned about excessive noise, air and water pollution from coal dust, destruction of the shoreline's beauty and decreases in property value.

Ultimately, after many twists and turns and even threats to terminal opponents, the Oak Ridgers won the battle in October 1979, preserving what has become one of the nation's three best rowing courses. "Our rowing venue has not only brought revenue to the city but also has improved its image," said Louise Dunlap, who helped lead the development of the rowing course.

On Sept. 22, 1975, the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers held a lengthy public hearing, attended by 140 persons in the Oak Ridge Civic Center. Coutant urged the Corps engineer charged with deciding whether to grant a construction permit to comply with a national law that requires an environmental impact statement (EIS) for proposed federal agency actions.

At its Oct. 15, meeting the Anderson County Regional Planning Commission, which had jurisdiction over the barge site, recommended that the Corps defer action on the building permit until its EIS is completed.

On Jan. 9, 1976, Oak Ridgers learned the Corps had issued the construction permit for the terminal even though the company had submitted no detailed plans.

On Jan. 19 in the home of Virginia and Charles Jones, she, Coutant, Jim Azzi, John Barrett, Bill Gall and others organized the Citizens Council for Clinch River Planning (CCCRP). Bob Compton

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later became active in it. Coutant was president and Ann Mostoller was attorney for the citizens' group, which sought to defeat the terminal proposal.

City Council announced its opposition to the project after hearing from Virginia Jones.

On Feb. 16, the Anderson County Court asked the Planning Commission not to issue a building permit without a benefits-over-burden study of TDC's proposal. At their Feb. 18 meeting the planners' tie vote deferred action on the permit. John Mayes, a state planner, asserted that the Planning Commission could ponder questions of environmental impact and costs vs. benefits only if the land is up for rezoning.

So, on Feb. 19, CCCRP asked the Planning Commission to rezone the land from industrial to a category that would exclude terminal operations. More than 100 Oak Ridgers, mostly from Emory Valley, signed a petition supporting CCCRP's position. "We really thought it should be rezoned recreational and residential," Coutant said in an interview.

On March 17, 1976, the Anderson County Regional Planning Commission voted 7-1 to reject TDC's application for a building permit. Attending the evening hearing was Jake Butcher, then a wealthy Knoxville banker and former gubernatorial nominee who owned a mansion near the site.

He said the terminal could reduce his property value by half. Compton, once a high school classmate of Sonya Wilde Butcher, called her the day of the meeting and she convinced her husband to make a statement to the planners.

At the June 29 meeting in Knoxville, TVA Board Chairman Aubrey Wagner argued that Congress had agreed to fund a coal barge terminal and that the best site was across from the Oak Ridge Marina. Coutant said that CCCRP was opposed not to the coal terminal but to the selected site.

Anderson County Attorney Ramsey, a former college team rower who enjoyed recreational rowing on the lake, said he might sue TVA to stop the sale of the land, blocking the terminal's construction.

On Aug. 17, 1976, the Anderson County Court rezoned the barge site from industrial to light industrial, making a rail-to-barge facility illegal.

In late 1976 TDC took CCCRP to Anderson County Circuit Court. Coutant testified on behalf of CCCRP. Judge Sidney Davis "required us to put up a \$250,000 bond so that, if we lost, we could reimburse TDC for all the delays they had," Coutant said, adding that the group couldn't raise the funds. Judge Davis ended up throwing the case out of court in 1977.

Ironically TVA, which was actively promoting the terminal, agreed in 1976 to grant the University of Tennessee's request to design a race course on Melton Hill Lake. And in April 1979 a TVA engineer redesigned the course.

In an Oct. 27, 1978, letter to TVA Chairman S. David Freeman on behalf of the city of Oak Ridge, Coutant argued that TVA's draft EIS overlooked noise impacts and the proximity of the terminal project to Oak Ridge's residential and recreational areas. TVA held a hearing at Jefferson Junior High School at which Coutant gave a presentation, even though someone had turned his slides upside down and backwards (Compton straightened them out).

By that time Coutant had been called the "worst guy to come to Anderson County since the guy who bombed Clinton High School," he said in an interview, adding that Wilson once lashed out at him on an airplane, calling him a detriment to industrial development in Anderson County.

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At one hearing the Tennessee Department of Health denied it had issued a discharge permit that Wilson claimed he had received.

On January 1979, a National Association of Amateur Oarsmen ad hoc committee that had visited Oak Ridge called a coal barge terminal incompatible with rowing and said that the stretch of lake by the marina was ideal for championship races and an Olympic Training Center. TVA Chairman Freeman expressed interest in the jobs this center could provide.

In April 1979 after reviewing the EIS, TVA Chairman Freeman and TVA Board member Bob Clement announced their opposition to the terminal. The other board member, Richard Freeman, supported the project.

In October 1979 TVA General Manager Bill Willis told the board he would not sell the land to TDC.

"TVA moved from actively promoting the coal barge terminal to actively turning it down," Coutant said. "It was interesting to see how the tide turned."

"We wanted to preserve the lake area for the benefit of many, not just the few. In hindsight, that has happened with the success of rowing in Oak Ridge."

"With the demise of coal use for power, imagine the situation if the terminal had been built. We would have had a huge environmental remediation project on our hands."

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Thank you Carolyn. Chuck and Louise are examples of community activists who led the effort along with the likes of Jim Ramsey and Tom Hill as well as many others that has resulted our present day pristine rowing course. While we are not yet the Olympic Training Center envisioned by the National Association of Amateur Oarsman, the final chapter of our rowing course's evolution has yet to be written.

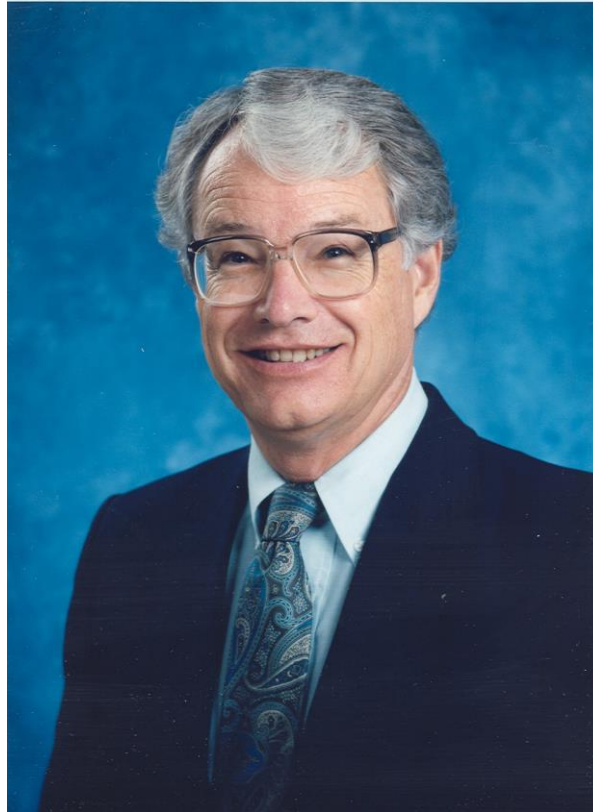
It may well be that the next thing that must happen for further growth is an eighth lane to be created. I am told that it is fairly easy to accomplish, it just takes funding to dredge a small portion of the shoreline to widen the course in a rather small section to make the entire course wide enough for eight lanes.

I am sure there are many more stories that could be included here of regattas, large gatherings of college rowers and other such events that have a strong and positive economic impact on our community. I hope you agree that these two columns from Carolyn have helped remind us of the importance of our rowing course.

We can all be proud of the beauty and peaceful stretch of Melton Hill Lake that includes a top notch rowing course. We can all also take pride in the future potential of that site which, unlike Wilson's vision, has now made Oak Ridge a common name among the rowing teams of many colleges. The future looks bright for rowing in Oak Ridge...

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Chuck Coutant



Louise Dunlap

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Caption: IMG_9802c.jpg: The wooded eastern shoreline would have been altered drastically had the coal barge terminal been built and there would not be any rowing there today