

## ***Later Life by Harold Duncan – Living conditions in early Oak Ridge*** (As published in *The Oak Ridger's Historically Speaking* column on July 21, 2014)

David Duncan is a good friend. He thought of my interest in Oak Ridge history and made me a gift of his father's book, *Later Life, Book I and Book II*. I have thoroughly enjoyed reading it. The book tells the story of Harold Duncan (affectionately known as "Dunc" as related in a story about selling and moving many of the flattop houses out of Oak Ridge written by Dick Smyser and published in *The Oak Ridger* on May 22, 1951).

Harold grew up in Salem, near Hohenwald in Hickman County of West Tennessee. He tells of growing up with Minnie Pearl of Grand Ole Opry fame...she was in the class behind him in school. He also knew Rod Brasfield, also of Grand Ole Opry fame.

Dunc went to Detroit, Michigan, immediately after graduation from high school in June, 1929, to find work in the automobile factories there. Most young men in Tennessee travelled north to find work at that time. My oldest brother did the same thing.

However, as was the case with many who went north seeking work, the jobs were cyclic there and layoffs common. Dunc returned to Tennessee and worked at a number of jobs before deciding to use the \$300 he had saved while working in Detroit to pay for a year of college at Tennessee Polytechnic Institute in Cookeville, TN. He earned a Bachelor of Science degree in 1935, the first person in his family to complete college.

While working for TVA building dams on the Hiwassee Project in 1943 when he began to hear of a huge government construction project near Knoxville. He decided to check into that and came to Knoxville in December 1943. He went to the employment office of Tennessee Eastman Company where they promptly sent him to their field employment office at the Oak Ridge site for an interview. He was hired on the spot and he returned to live in Oak Ridge with his wife, Della, in January 1944.

The section of Dunc's book that I want to share with you is the part where he describes the early living conditions in Oak Ridge as he experienced them. Enjoy reading this excerpt from Dunc's book:

...

During the early months of living in Oak Ridge we were faced with many problems and inconveniences, but most of them were of a minor nature. We felt that many of them were major at the time, but as we look back, we tend to minimize them. One thing that won't go away though is that overwhelming "sea of mud." During the spring of 1944 it rained very much and very often. As construction work progressed all over town, the earth moving equipment, trucks and other vehicles kept on stirring the mud into a soupy mess.

Driving around town, though not impossible, was very difficult at times. The mud plus the heavy traffic discouraged many drivers causing them to park their cars and ride the buses. Bus lines extended from a central bus station on the Turnpike, about three blocks from Jackson Square, to some residential areas and to each of the major plant areas. Many Y-12 employees chose to ride buses to the work areas.

We were among this number. Some of the buses were huge trailers pulled by large six-wheel tractors. There was little or no communication between the drivers and their passengers in the trailer. Nearly all of the 75-100 people stood in the trailers holding to straps for balancing.

There were no stops between the bus station and the Y-12 plant. We referred to these buses as cattle cars. Occasionally the doors would stick in the closed position requiring several swift kicks to open them and let us out.

Miles upon miles of wood walkways were built along many of the streets. These plus some crushed stone walkways to each house or apartment provided a much needed and welcomed improvement. Continued additions of crushed stone to the roads and streets also made travel about town much easier. No driveways for off-street parking were provided.

## ***Later Life by Harold Duncan – Living conditions in early Oak Ridge*** **(As published in *The Oak Ridger's Historically Speaking* column on July 21, 2014)**

One unusual feature in the housing designs was that the fronts of the houses, especially the “cemestos” faced away from the streets. With the rear side facing the street the cost for coal deliveries and garbage removal were greatly reduced. This arrangement also eliminated the need for alleyways found in the back of houses in most other cities.

The housing units were of conventional wood-frame construction. The windows were the casement type, hinged to swing open horizontally. The roofs on the “cemestos” were made of pressed-board slabs about one inch thick and twelve inches wide, covered with heavy asphalt roofing materials. They were installed by overlapping them in a horizontal direction across the rafters, eliminating the need for customary sheathing. The floors were usually made of hardwood in the living areas and linoleum in the kitchens and utility areas.

Heating was provided by coal-fired furnaces or stoves. Ducts were installed to all rooms for heat distribution. Air-conditioning was virtually unknown in all of the housing units. We just opened our windows or furnished our own fans in order to provide cooled air.

The soft coal used in the heating units was the source of much soot and dust which plagued many of the more fastidious housekeepers. The only way to cope with the problem seemed to be frequent washing of all walls and ceilings. No provisions were made for the hook-up of washing machines. Clothes lines were seen in many “front” yards or between porch columns. Electric cook stoves and refrigerators were supplied as options for a small monthly fee, which was added to very reasonable rental charges for these housing accommodations.

Residents were faced daily by many shortages, as were people everywhere. Some of the items in short supply included such things as gasoline, sugar, bacon, fresh meats, coffee, new automobiles, tires, cigarettes, etc. When the local markets received supplies of these items, the “word” spread quickly, and lines of shoppers formed to purchase them. The merchants put limits on each purchase in order to accommodate more customers. When we saw a line forming in any marketplace, we, along with many others, immediately joined the line without even knowing what was being sold. We always bought the limit allowed whether we needed it or not. We knew that some of our friends would be glad to get it.

Gasoline was rationed to one-and-a-half gallons per week. This did not handicap many people, however, since need for travel was small and ration stamps could easily be found for emergency trips from many people without cars who had unused stamps. Sugar was rationed also, but many unmarried employees were willing to share their stamps with families who could use them. Fresh meats could usually be found at off-area slaughter houses or farmer’s markets.

We had our share of the gripes and complaints which seemed to be an inherent part of human behavior, but looking back again, we can be most thankful that our basic needs were provided as well as they were.

During the middle 1940’s much of our attention was focused toward our jobs at the Y-12 plant. We were deeply involved in learning our new jobs which were so unusual and difficult to fully understand. We also realized our responsibility to teach others also. The task was so challenging and time-consuming that we had little time except to work, eat and sleep. We worked on rotating eight-hour shifts.

After working forty hours each week for three weeks, the changing of shifts allowed us to take three days of every four weeks. We used these breaks, occasionally, to go out of town with friends for relaxation and some recreation. Other recreation included occasional gathers of small groups of fellow shift workers in our homes, usually following the evening shift, for parties, games, etc.

We were able to develop some very close friendships within our own work groups. There was limited contact or interaction made with other groups because of this work schedule.

## **Later Life by Harold Duncan – Living conditions in early Oak Ridge** (As published in *The Oak Ridger's Historically Speaking* column on July 21, 2014)

All employees were continually reminded of the need for maintaining absolute secrecy as to our job and all matters related to the process operations. Security requirements were so strict that we were careful not to discuss the job anywhere outside the plant. Our social gatherings and parties never involved “shop talk” or any job related matters.

There were some recreational activities available to shift workers. Facilities were provided where groups could gather and enjoy bowling, basketball, tennis, movies, softball, etc.

As summertime approached, the weather improved, the rains subsided and the sun appeared again. The mud holes dried up and the roads, after much resurfacing, began to reach standards adequate for safe, all-weather travel.

The wooden walkways, which had become infested with rats and other assorted creatures, were giving way to crushed stone and concrete walkways. We no longer had to leave our shoes on the front porch when coming home or visiting neighbors. The mud “era” was gone, but not forgotten. Grass, in some seeded areas, began to show its green and people began to venture outdoors.

These improved conditions provided opportunities for neighbors to get better acquainted with each other. We found that those who lived around us had come to Oak Ridge from places both far and near, mostly far. They generally were very friendly and seemed to enjoy our brief social visits. They would often have us and others in for a cup of coffee and periods of chit-chat.

We enjoyed the stories told by our neighbors. Many of them would go to great lengths in describing conditions “back home.” All of them expressed fond and probably exaggerated memories of the people and places from which they had come.

Some were quite outspoken on many of the reasons for their present unhappiness, such as the the mud, the weather, travel conditions, shopping inconveniences, shortages, lack of adequate entertainment and many other items. Others expressed their desire for the time to come when the “freeze” on manpower would be lifted so they could return to their former homes.

Still others, however, seemed to be happy in their surroundings, willing to make the best of everything and enjoy fully the unusual opportunities afforded them.

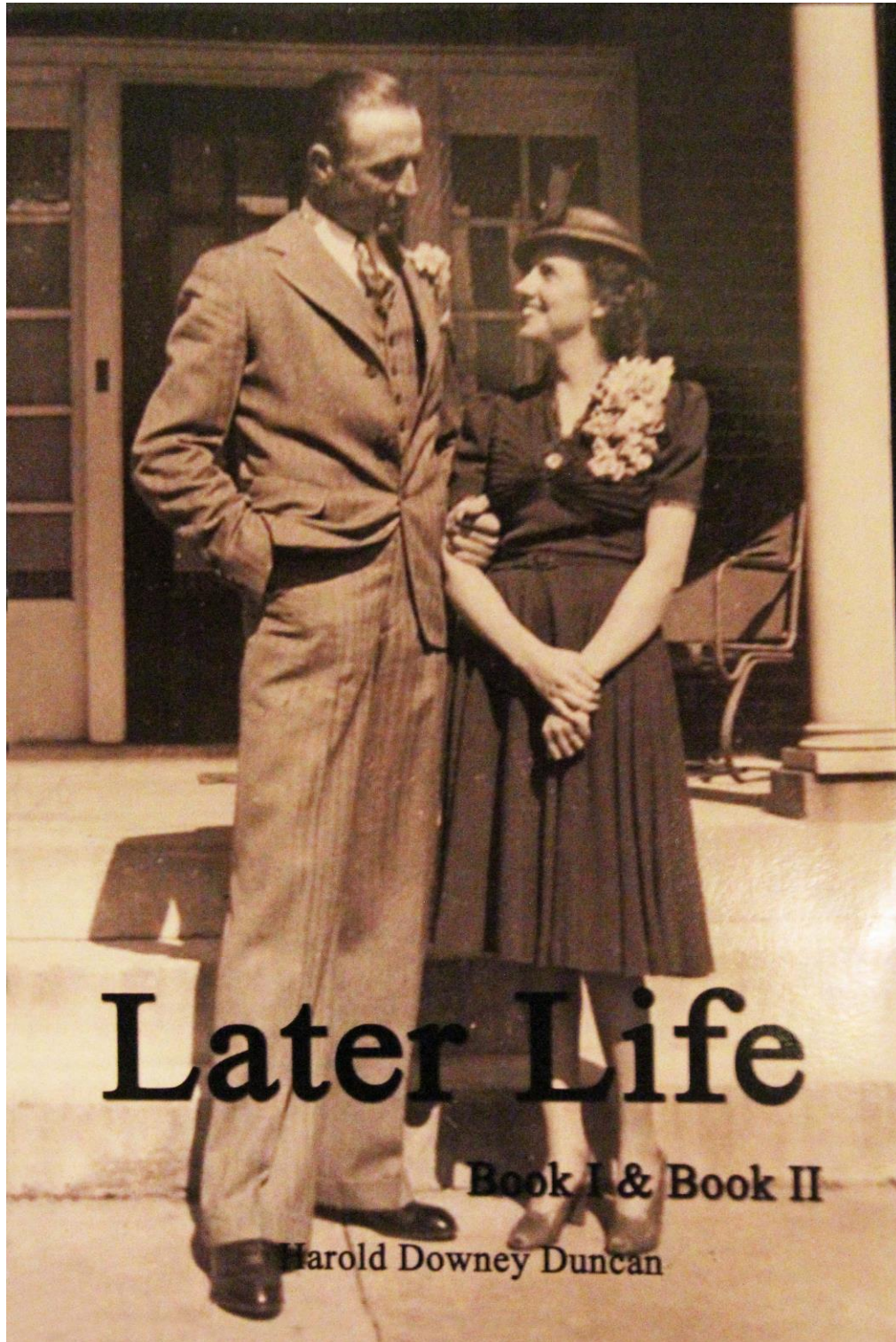
Backyard gatherings became more and more frequent. These usually involved such things as cookouts, games (pitching horseshoes, badminton, ball-playing), along with a variety of other activities, traditions, lifestyles, likes and dislikes of people from many locations and a great variety of social and ethnic backgrounds. Life in Oak Ridge proved to be exciting, interesting and educational.

Some of our restless and more energetic neighbors showed some interest in making outside improvements. They seeded and mulched the bare spots in their yards. Other planted flowers along the walks or small vegetable gardens in their back yards. Many who were settled in for long-time occupancy, planted trees and shrubs around their houses. The town gradually began to take on a different look because of the pride shown by some many residents.

...

The next section of Dunc's book describes the shopping centers and city management. I hope you enjoyed reading about early Oak Ridge once again from one person's perspective. If you lived here during the Manhattan Project, you have your own recollections, however, most all of our citizens now did NOT experience what Dunc describes...so periodically, it is good to take a look back and remind us late comers of the conditions under which the true pioneers of the Nuclear Age lived here in Oak Ridge.

**Later Life by Harold Duncan – Living conditions in early Oak Ridge**  
(As published in *The Oak Ridger's Historically Speaking* column on July 21, 2014)



Harold Duncan's book of memories