

# **American Museum of Science and Energy – what does the future hold?**

**(As published in *The Oak Ridger's Historically Speaking* column on August 18, 2014)**

The American Museum of Atomic Energy irradiated dimes from 1949 until sometime in the early 1970's. The Oak Ridge National Laboratory also irradiated dimes for a time. These dimes from both places were and still are a huge hit. There are far more from the museum than the lab, but both are seen occasionally on eBay. The reason for stopping the popular program was that the US Treasury stopped making dimes with any silver in them in 1964.

You see, the silver was the key to the dime becoming slightly radioactive. After only about 22 seconds one-half of that small amount would be gone. By the time a person got their dime out of the museum, it was essentially back to normal.

For some time after 1964, the museum continued to use the older dimes and would even go to the bank to get the older dimes. But this did not last too many years until the activity was stopped altogether.

A story is told about the museum deciding to replace the plutonium-beryllium source used to irradiate the dimes with an americium-beryllium source but when Glenn Seaborg, discoverer of plutonium and then Chairman of the Atomic Energy Commission, happened to walk into the meeting in Washington and casually mentioned that he thought they were using plutonium for that process. That did it.

The Oak Ridge folks who worked at the museum as Oak Ridge Institute for Nuclear Studies employees returned home to the American Museum of Atomic Energy and continued using their plutonium source. See how even a casual comment made by the proper person can influence things miles away.

We are experiencing a slightly similar situation today with our American Museum of Science and Energy. Its future hangs in the balance and decisions about that future can be influenced by even casual comments made in sometimes faraway places.

The public in Oak Ridge has been asked to provide input about the best ways to keep AMSE viable and even improve upon it. We need to provide that input!

The first public meeting was held on July 24, 2014, at the American Museum of Science and Energy. The purpose of the meeting was stated to be "For information and conversations about the management and operation of the American Museum of Science and Energy."

There will be other such meetings to draw out as much community input as can be obtained. Here are some of the suggested sample questions used to get the discussion going. What would your ideal museum look like? What role should the museum play in the broader community? How do we work together to achieve that vision?

If you were unable to attend that first meeting, please give consideration to these questions and plan to attend future meetings. It might even be good to invite others to attend with you, even folks who do not live in Oak Ridge have a stake in this as well.

Oak Ridge is not alone in the struggle to sustain our city and surrounding communities. A good museum adds value to more than just Oak Ridge. So invite others to help with the idea generation.

Another thing to keep in mind as we plan for the future of AMSE is that the Manhattan Project National Historical Park should be coming in the next few years. The bill has passed the House of Representatives and is now in the Senate. It should pass there as well this year.

When the planning begins to define where the "Hub" of the "Hub and Spoke" concept that has historical sites at the Y-12 National Security Complex, the Oak Ridge National Laboratory and the Heritage Center at East Tennessee Technology Park as well as a "Hub" in the city of Oak Ridge, AMSE is in the mix as well as the Oak Ridge Public Library's Oak Ridge Room.

## **American Museum of Science and Energy – what does the future hold?**

**(As published in *The Oak Ridger's Historically Speaking* column on August 18, 2014)**

The construction planned at the old Oak Ridge Mall site figures in this as well. It is time to get all of the variables on the table for consideration by the community. These public meetings to discuss the future of AMSE may well be a good start.

As I was preparing this article and needed a current photo of AMSE, I went there on a Sunday afternoon. What amazed me was that I found about 20 young ladies, obviously from the rowing competition being held this weekend, who were touring the museum. They were upstairs and had just returned from visiting the Flat Top house.

I overheard one of the young ladies ask their adult leader if there was anything more in the museum that told about the history of Oak Ridge. She said, "Much of what I see here is a science museum and I want to know more about the history."

Well, you know I could not let that go by. So, I asked the group if they had been to the Oak Ridge room, known as "Oak Ridge: The Secret City?" They replied that they had not and asked where it was. I sent them downstairs to the location near the information desk.

So, after I had made a few more photos of the areas of the museum I was interested in photographing on that day, and I went to the Oak Ridge room just to see if they were still there. Here is what I found.

Several of the young ladies were reading the wall displays and others were watching the video playing in the small theater there. A couple of them were chatting about something they had noticed in Ed Westcott's photos that make up the heart of the exhibit.

So, smiling to myself, I refrained from interfering further with their visit. I just left them there to enjoy what is arguably the most effective display of our Oak Ridge history in existence. They continued to peruse the exhibit until the museum closed at 5:00 PM and we all had to leave.

As I have been thinking more lately about AMSE and trying to not take it for granted, as I am afraid way too many of us Oak Ridgers do, I have read some of the online reviews. It is really great to see how impressed visitors are by our museum.

Here are some quotes: "If you come to Oak Ridge as a visitor, you have to visit the American Museum of Science & Energy -- I'm not trying to tell you to go there, I'm just saying that you will visit, because everyone does. And it's definitely worth a visit, particularly if you are with kids who like science or computers, or if someone in the party has an interest in World War II and Cold War history." – Ellen S. (of course this is our own Ellen Smith, I just could not resist starting off with this one!)

"I loved this museum!!!! I really enjoyed the upstairs exhibits, particularly the videos, but my favorite part was the large exhibit about the 'Secret City' of Oak Ridge. There were great photos, videos, and text and I particularly liked all the old WW2 propaganda on display." – Cassandra B. from Brooklyn, NY.

"I am a native Oak Ridger and find this to be one of the best items for showing out-of-towners the history of Oak Ridge. A little known secret is that if you have an Oak Ridge Library card you can check out a free pass for 2 to go to the museum... During the summer don't miss the bus trips to the area scientific sites." – William O. Oak Ridge

TripAdvisor.com has 132 reviews! 67 rated it excellent, 52 very good, 11 average, 1 poor and 1 terrible.

Knoxville.com has an excellent page on AMSE with directions and hours of operation.

Several months ago at the request of David Keim, Communications Director of ORNL, I assisted in the development and execution of a Museum Workshop to take an initial look at AMSE using five museum experts. One was from the National World War II Museum in New Orleans, LA; one was from the

## American Museum of Science and Energy – what does the future hold?

(As published in *The Oak Ridger's Historically Speaking* column on August 18, 2014)

National Air Force Museum in Dayton, OH; one was from the National Museum of Nuclear Science and Energy in Albuquerque, NM; one was from the National Museum of Atomic Testing in Las Vegas, NV, and one was from the East Tennessee History Center in Knoxville, TN.

At the conclusion of the workshop, each of the visitors who had toured the museum and the historic sites at Y-12, ORNL and ETPP's Heritage Center as well as the city of Oak Ridge were overwhelmingly positive in their encouragement that AMSE should be and could be among the top museum attractions in the nation.

It is up to us. What do we want to see AMSE become. Won't you help decide the future of this marvelous gem in our crown! Make your plans now to attend upcoming public discussion Community Meetings on the future of AMSE. The next meeting is scheduled for Tuesday, 8/19/14, at 6:00 PM at the AMSE Auditorium.



The American Museum of Science and Energy – a jewel in Oak Ridge's crown

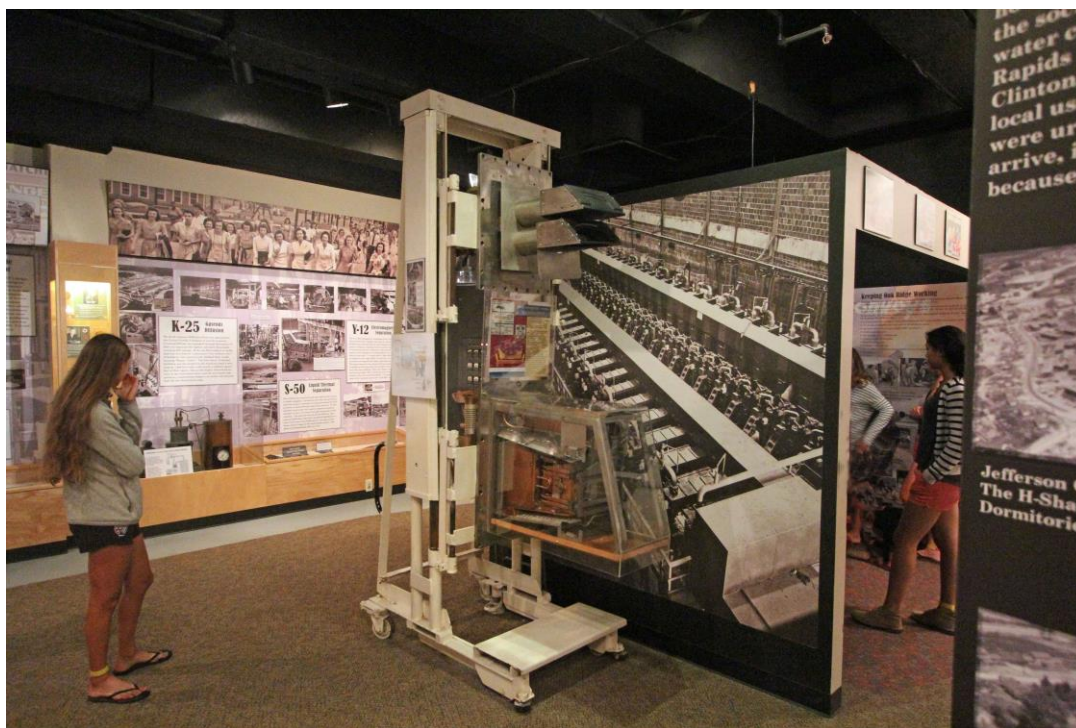


The Flattop house that was once the home of Bob Presley and now shows visitors an authentic example of the homes in Oak Ridge during the Manhattan Project



## American Museum of Science and Energy – what does the future hold?

(As published in *The Oak Ridger's Historically Speaking* column on August 18, 2014)



Part of the group of young ladies from the rowing competition enjoy the “Oak Ridge: The Secret City” exhibit



One of my favorite exhibits – famous Oak Ridge photographer, Ed Westcott