

Later Life by Harold Duncan – Living conditions in early Oak Ridge, part 2

(As published in *The Oak Ridger's Historically Speaking* column on August 4, 2014)

In the last Historically Speaking column I introduced readers to Harold “Dunc” Duncan, David Duncan’s father, whose book, “Later Life” David loaned me. The section of Dunc’s book that I am drawing on for this series describes the early living conditions in Oak Ridge as Dunc experienced them. Enjoy reading this next excerpt from Dunc’s book that focuses on the city:

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Shopping Centers: At various location throughout the city space was provided for the construction of limited facilities where day to day needs of household items could be purchased. These areas were called shopping centers. The largest of these, at first, was constructed at a town site between Broadway and Tennessee Avenue. It was identified as Jackson Square. In addition to a movie theater, bank and post office, many retail stores were located there, such as a grocery store, restaurant and others. A multi-story hotel or “guest house” was also constructed just west of Jackson Square.

Another large center with many of the same types of stores was built at Grove Center, about two miles west of Jackson Square between the Turnpike and Robertsville Road.

Smaller shopping centers were scattered throughout the residential areas. Some of these were the east Village Center, Elm Grove Center, Jefferson Center, Mid-Town Center, Gamble Valley Center and others. Farmers markets were also available at various places along the Turnpike.

Gasoline service stations in early 1944 were at three locations, one on the Turnpike at East Village, one on Tennessee Avenue near Jackson square and one on the Turnpike west of Lafayette Drive.

City Management: It seemed rather difficult for many of the Oak Ridge residents to realize that they were living on a military base – that all the real estate was owned by the United States Government and that it was under complete control of the US Army. The guards at the gates were Military Police.

Security measures were enforced more rigidly than at any of the other military reservations. All roads were patrolled. Loiterers and curiosity-seekers were not allowed. Each resident had to have an identification badge, worn visibly at all times. Many plainclothes officers were employed to investigate all evidences of unusual behavior or anything suspicious or that indicated the possibility of security violations.

“Scuttlebutt” was continually making the rounds about incidents, which resulted in people being ejected from the area. These may or may not have been intentionally circulated for the purpose of continued alertness. Several times in those early years, someone whom we had known, suddenly disappeared from sight without any prior announcement.

Maybe he just went back home, or maybe he left for some other reason. We soon became reconciled to his absence and jokingly made the often heard remark, “I guess they took him over the hill and shot him.” The same remark was made jokingly about many of our fellow workers in the plant when they failed to show up for work for a few days.

Plain clothes operations as well as military intelligence personnel were located in many sensitive areas within the plant. They listened in on small talk on buses, in the cafeterias, canteens, change houses or elsewhere that employees were sometimes found in small groups.

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One example I will mention here was a close friend of ours, a young girl, had been recently transferred to another department. She was riding the plant bus to lunch one day and accidentally sat down by a former friend. This friend asked her what her new job was and she replied, "I'm an M. S. operator."

Before the day was over, she was called in and reprimanded. An M. S. operator was one who operated a mass spectrograph which was a highly-classified instrument in the product assay laboratory. She was horrified, first, because her title was highly classified, and second, that someone had overheard her conversation on the bus.

The Army maintained a very low profile. There were several hundred GIs living in barracks just off the Turnpike, but many of them wore civilian clothes and worked along with non-military personnel in various areas in the plants.

We, however, couldn't escape the fact that the Army was in charge and that all of us were subject to various degrees of regimentation.

From the very beginning the decision was made to "operate the City" through a contract organization. The Turner Construction Company from New York was chosen as the contractor for this assignment in late 1943. The name of the company became The Roane-Anderson Company, and appropriately so, since it would be serving large areas of both Roane and Anderson counties.

The first assignment made by the army to the Roane-Anderson Company was the management of all housing in the city. They collected the rents, maintained the housing units, delivered coal to all houses, stoked the furnaces (except in single family houses), picked up the garbage, repaired streets and the wooden sidewalks and many other services required by residents. Later, they took over custodial duties in many buildings such as warehouses, offices, post offices, cafeterias, laundries, etc.

The law enforcement forces throughout the City, including traffic police, became a part of the Army's jurisdiction. The hospital personnel, except the doctors who were all specially chosen military officers, as well as the maintenance of hospital facilities, was administered by the Roane-Anderson Company.

The Army continued to transfer the responsibility of many other city connected activities to the company. Some of these additional areas of responsibility included: the bus system throughout the entire reservation; the utility systems which included water, electric power, telephones and sewage disposal. They also had control of all commercial leases to private companies and individuals.

Recreation facilities including maintenance, operations and scheduling was in their charge. In fact, the Roane Anderson Company was the buffer between the "Castle" and the city residents in almost every activity that one could imagine. Their authority, however, did not extend into any of the major plant areas. Each plant managed its own internal affairs which were dictated by the Army and closely monitored by them.

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There you have "Dunc's" insights into the city during its earliest days. I find it is good when someone who actually lived the experience can share their personal perceptions of what living in early Oak Ridge was like for them

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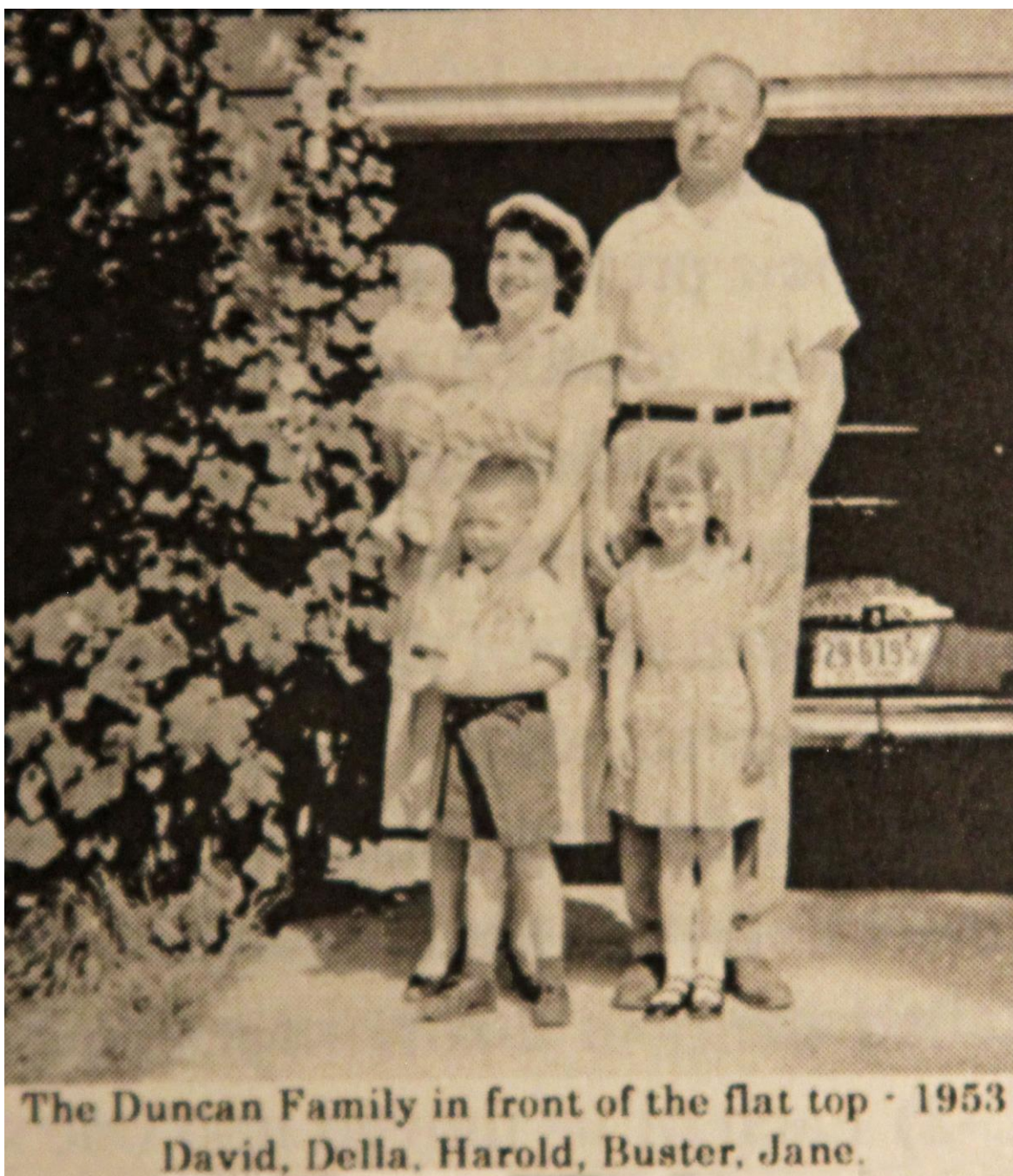
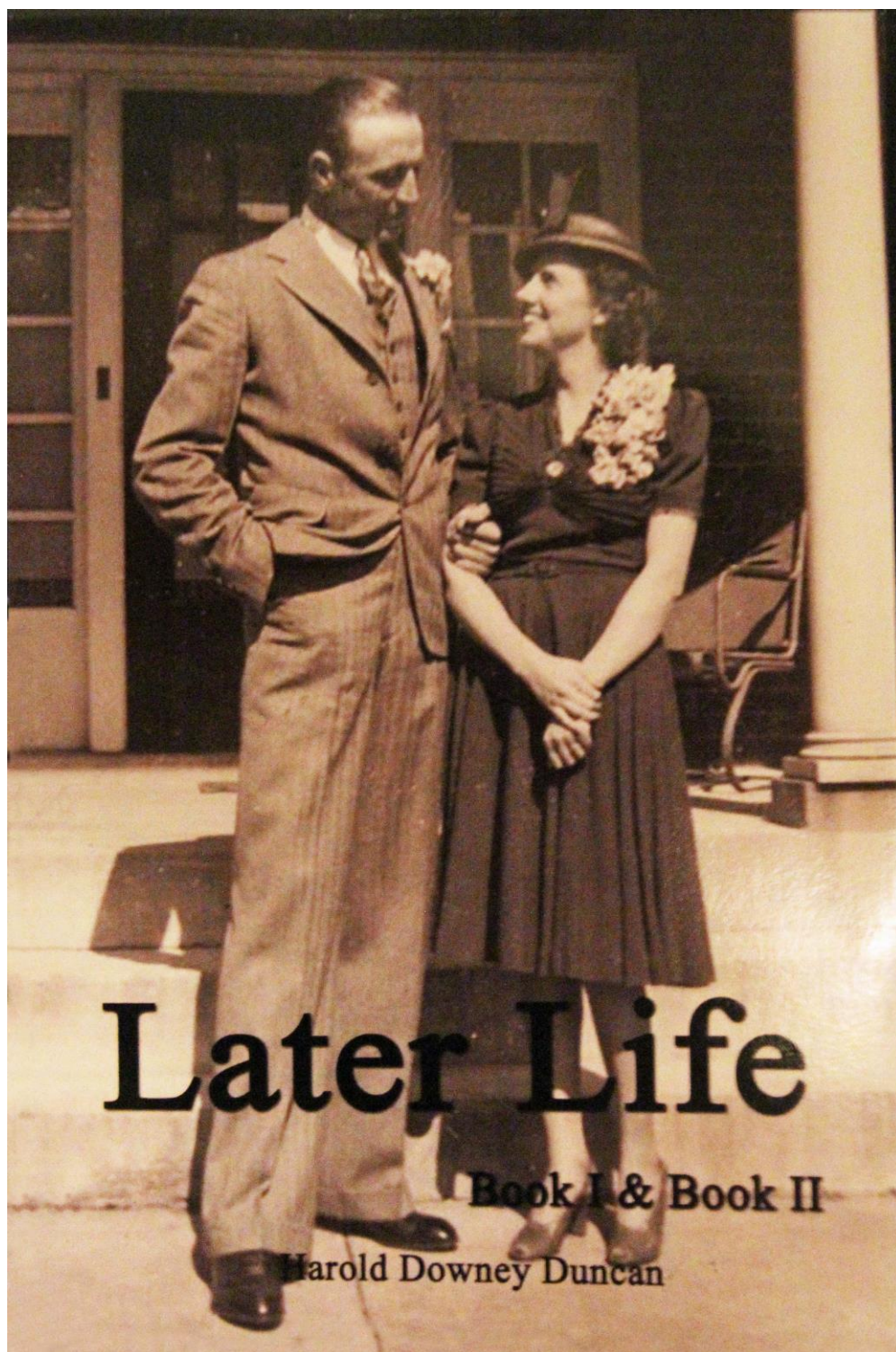


Photo of Harold Duncan family in Oak Ridge

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Harold Duncan's book of memories