

Clark Center Park – named for a man, Mr. Carbide!

(As published in *The Oak Ridger's Historically Speaking* column on September 22, 2014)

Did you know that *Clark Center Park* was named for the man, Clark Center? You say, just who was "Clark Center?" He was known as Mr. Carbide. For some readers, even "Carbide" may have no meaning.

I am constantly amazed at the history that I take for granted which is not even known by younger people. For example, I recently heard of a situation where a person placed both hands in the air with the index and second finger on each hand pointed upward and said, "I am not a crook!" You guessed it, some people in the room did not even have a clue what was so funny, they had never heard of Richard Nixon!

You may be more familiar with the name "Carbide Park" as Clark Center Park was known for years. Union Carbide Nuclear Division stepped aside on April 1, 1984 as the primary contractor operating all three Department of Energy sites in Oak Ridge as well as the gaseous diffusion plant in Paducah, KY.

Clark Center had badge number "1" at the K-25 Gaseous Diffusion Plant, having been the very first person hired by George Felbeck, the designer of the plant. Felbeck knew Center well as they had worked together on other projects where Felbeck designed the plants and Center managed and operated them.

One of the reasons General Leslie Groves selected Carbide and Carbon Chemicals Company to design and operate the K-25 Gaseous Diffusion Plant was their previous experience separating chemicals. For example, at Diamond, WV, Felbeck and Center jointly designed and Center operated the plant that separated "hydrogen, ethylene, naphthalene, butane and heavier hydrocarbons," according to Center.

He was quoted in *The Oak Ridger's* special edition on April 10, 1984, which commemorated the 40 years that Union Carbide Nuclear Division had been in Oak Ridge. The lead article in that issue focused on Clark Center, retired at the time, but still recognized as "Mr. Carbide."

It is of interest to note the changes that took place in the company during those years. The several name changes somewhat reflect the times and were: January 1943, Carbide and Carbon Chemicals Corporation, Unit of Union Carbide and Carbon Corporation; January 1950, Carbide and Carbon Chemicals Division, Union Carbide and Carbon Corporation; March 1951, Carbide and Carbon Chemicals Company, a Division of Union Carbide and Carbon Corporation; August 1955, Union Carbide Nuclear Company, a Division of Union Carbide and Carbon Corporation; May 1957, Union Carbide Nuclear Company, Division of Union Carbide Corporation; and in September 1963, Union Carbide Corporation, Nuclear Division.

When Clark Center came to Oak Ridge on February 15, 1943, he ate his first lunch sitting on the steps of the Wheat School building. Lunch consisted of a sandwich he had purchased in Knoxville at the Andrew Johnson Hotel. Wonder what his thoughts were at that time, knowing he was embarking on something that had never been done before and knowing that it was important "war work."

Don't you imagine he swelled with pride on the one hand and on the other contemplated the enormous potential of enriching uranium on such a large scale. You just must realize these men, Felbeck, Center, Fred Conklin (who was the Tennessee Eastman Company's "Works Manager" at Y-12 and Martin D. Whitaker, Dupont's person serving as the Director of Clinton Laboratories, were men of extremely high capabilities. They were handpicked for these jobs!

General Groves insisted on the very best these companies had to offer. He twisted the arms of the top executives of the known best managed companies in the nation. He used guilt. He pressured them by citing the need for patriotism. He stopped at nothing to get the exact team he wanted and felt necessary at each of the Manhattan Project sites. Clark Center was one of those key individuals.

Clark Center was also a member of the Oak Ridge Rotary Club. He joined on December 1, 1945. He was an active member of the Oak Ridge community and was influential across many fronts. He received two significant citations from the Atomic Energy Commission and numerous local awards. For 40 years with Union Carbide and 24 years as a top manager in Oak Ridge, Clark Center excelled at his job, at

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supporting his community, and enjoyed his retirement on a 250 acre farm below Kingston on the Watts Bar Lake.

Oak Ridge was not Center's first introduction to the Manhattan Project. He had been working in New York with Felbeck. An item of interest that gives some insight into the nature of some of the bright scientists gathered for the Manhattan Project is Center's recollection of a conversation he had with Harold Urey. Center said, "I came out of the building one day to go eat lunch and met Urey. We talked for a few minutes, and when we were finished, Urey asked, 'when you met me was I going up the steps or down?' I told him he was going up. 'Well good, then I've had my lunch!' Urey replied."

Urey had been awarded the Nobel Prize in Chemistry in 1934 for the discovery of Deuterium. He headed the team at Columbia University that first developed the gaseous diffusion method of isotope separation. He was highly intelligent and focused intently on his research.

This new large scale separation process approach became known as "enrichment." It would become the method that resulted in the K-25 Gaseous Diffusion Plant in Oak Ridge and later two other plants during the Cold War. Literally world changing technology in practical process equipment. Such design engineering must have been heady stuff for Center.

He also spoke of becoming a good friend of Admiral Hyman Rickover who picked six people and sent them to the Reactor Training School at the Clinton Laboratories. Rickover himself had attended the very first Reactor Training School when Eugene Wigner was the Research and Development Director in 1946.

Rickover went on to create the nuclear navy and through the years he kept close contact with his friends in Oak Ridge, Clark Center and Alvin Weinberg. Both Clark Center and Alvin Weinberg were invited to New London, CN, for the launching of the Nautilus, the world's first nuclear submarine, in January, 1955.

Included in The Oak Ridger special edition published on April 10, 1984, featuring Clark Center is a statement that General Groves wrote Clark Center a letter after he had received one of many awards from the Atomic Energy Commission. Groves said the award was "well deserved." He went on to add, "...The most succinct comment I can make is that you always met my expectations and I am sure that you, better than most people, know just how high those expectations were. While they were a bit under my openly expressed demands, they were still beyond what anyone else thought could be achieved."

Clark Center went on to become the top manager for Union Carbide Nuclear Division and earned the reputation of "Mr. Carbide" for his many years in that position. He was also loved by many who worked for him. Obviously, he was interested in the individuals who worked for him and was seen as a genuinely happy person who took the time to get to know those who worked for him.

Roger Hibbs, the Union Carbide Nuclear Division President who succeeded him, stated in Clark Center's obituary, "Clark Center was the best boss I ever had. He was the kind of individual who insisted that you do your job, but he was also a king, big-hearted person. He was a pleasure to work for."

In 1967 when he retired, Clark Center Park was named in his honor. It was also known as "Carbide Park" for many years. It was reserved for use by the employees and retirees of Union Carbide for many years before being opened to the public.

I encourage you to do as Oak Ridge City Manager Mark Watson requests and get involved in the public input process to determine the future of this unique asset of our city!

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Clark Center, top manager of Union Carbide Nuclear Division and known as “Mr. Carbide”



Clark Center after retirement seated at his piano

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Clark Center at his beloved farm on Watts Bar Lake