

# Longing for the Bomb – Oak Ridge and Atomic Nostalgia

(As published in *The Oak Ridger's Historically Speaking* column on October 12, 2015)

Continuing the series of book reviews in *Historically Speaking*, this one is different in that the author is not presently an Oak Ridger. However, she was born here and lived here long enough to form an association with the “Secret City” that would stay with her until she ultimately researched and wrote a book about it. She also speaks fondly of wearing her “Glow in the Dark” tee shirt!

Lindsey A. Freeman, assistant professor of sociology at State University of New York - Buffalo State, certainly brings a fresh perspective to her view of our city. She still has a good working knowledge of what has taken place in Oak Ridge over the years. She knows the heritage and understands that the history has been told many times over.

She takes the challenge to go beneath the surface of our visible artifacts, our standard historical photographs (mostly Ed Westcott's for sure) and the efforts of historians such as myself to look at the social structure and struggles we face attempting to create our future. I find her treatment of Oak Ridge's situation refreshing and enjoyed the read!

Hugh Gusterson of George Washington University is quoted on the book's back cover, “The story of the creation of Oak Ridge, told here with a light, elegant touch, is fascinating, and Lindsey Freeman has a masterful command of archival sources, no matter how obscure. *Longing for the Bomb* will position her as a leading authority on the history of Oak Ridge, just as the work makes a vivid contribution to American social history more generally.” I agree.

When I first learned of the book, it was in the beginning stages. Lindsey contacted me and we began a series of interviews where she focused on many of the stories I routinely tell to visitors who come to Oak Ridge. She kept coming back to the John Hendrix story in our early discussions and she liked the Senator McKellar story as well. Needless to say, I enjoyed telling her these favorite stories that I tell so often.

It soon became clear that Lindsey was seeking to write a book different from the type of writing I tend toward, that of storytelling and history. While she appreciated the history and seemed to genuinely enjoy the stories, it was the sociological aspects of the history of Oak Ridge and the transition taking place in the present along with what might be in store for our future that she was most interested in capturing.

To show you what I mean, let me pull from a section of her book. In the portion titled, “Nostalgia,” Lindsey writes, “Nostalgia is pining for times in a particular place, but more than that it is a state of mind and a moment of perception that actually ‘melds time and space,’ creating a vertiginous space of temporal disruption.” Wow, don't you see that she is sure enough describing something well beyond storytelling for the fun of it!

About Oak Ridge, Lindsey writes, “Oak Ridge wants to be remembered for its science, its process, its ‘progress’ – the Manhattan Project – which is still in motion, spinning backward and forward simultaneously: fear of a German bomb – atomic utopia – fear of nuclear winter – the Cold War – fear of the soviet Union – atomic nostalgia – fear of an Iranian bomb – Uranium Center of Excellence – fear of a North Korean bomb – atomic nostalgia.”

She asks, “Are good memories of the Project and the resulting mushroom clouds still possible, amidst all the terrible nightmares and the mounting evidence of destruction?”

Then she answers, “If Oak Ridge, Tennessee, one of the key production sites for the Manhattan Project, is any indication, then, yes, it is possible. Atomic nostalgia is a new form of longing, a distinctively American, post-nuclear, industrial scientific vision of a lost utopia. It can be experienced anywhere, but it vibrates most strongly in places dedicated to nuclear industries, places like Oak Ridge and Los Alamos.”

While I hold a more direct relationship with Oak Ridge history, having lived here for 44 years, I can see what she is attempting to analyze. However, I am also convinced that I am too close to the real life situation to be objective. So, it is with interest that I read what a professionally trained sociologist is able

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to discern from examining Oak Ridge's history and the way in which we are attempting to interpret it now and how we are striving to move into the future.

Lindsey, without hesitation, addresses the segregation that abounded in Oak Ridge as it did throughout the South and even somewhat in much of the nation in the 1940's. She uses specific interviews of individuals who actually experienced the racism to reflect on the treatment they received. Each person she spoke with agreed about the situation, yet she saw a tendency in even the ones experiencing the discrimination to gloss over the specific racist activity or to treat it with somewhat of a humorous approach.

She says, "This is one area that tends to be glossed over or that receives a quick explanation when it comes up in the otherwise nostalgic storytelling of the town's past. Discussions of racial inequality are suppressed in order to maintain the imagined utopian atomic landscape."

She continued, "Question about the treatment of the black population often elicit what I call the 'fevered wartime explanation,' in which the need for expediency is used to explain away mistakes and unfair policy decisions. That is, having 'a war to win' justified a lot of what went on in Oak Ridge; it was a phrase used both as explanation for progressive actions and for maintaining the existing state of affairs, depending on what suited Project needs at the moment."

The history of the American Museum of Atomic Energy and the change of its name to the American Museum of Science and Energy is addressed in light of the underlying reasons for the name change. She takes the reader beyond the standard and often repeated explanation that the name change was to reflect the broader scope of science than just the "atomic" or nuclear energy. The word "Nuclear" was a dreaded title in the 1970's which Oak Ridge shied away from using for several years. She examines this phenomenon and the impact it had on Oak Ridge

Lindsey fondly recalls the huge photograph on the wall of the museum that depicted a mushroom cloud and had a small white telephone hanging just right for her to pick up the receiver. When she held it to her ear she could listen to Enola Gay pilot Paul Tibbitts give a step by step account of the historic flight that resulted in the first atomic bomb used in warfare being dropped on Hiroshima, Japan.

The photograph and the phone have long since been removed and the Oak Ridge room renovated. She found that portion of AMSE to be helpful and full of interest for her. The tourist visits to the museum she found predictable. She took the DOE Public Bus Tour and the Secret City Excursion Train. Both of which she provided helpful critique comments and used them to show our attempts to tell our story remains limited.

The Secret City Festival is seen by the author as an example of Oak Ridge's attempt to capitalize on the atomic nostalgia and the potential of heritage tourism. She also mentions the Manhattan Project National Historical Park briefly as the legislation authorizing the park had passed the House of Representatives but had not yet passed the Senate when she published the book.

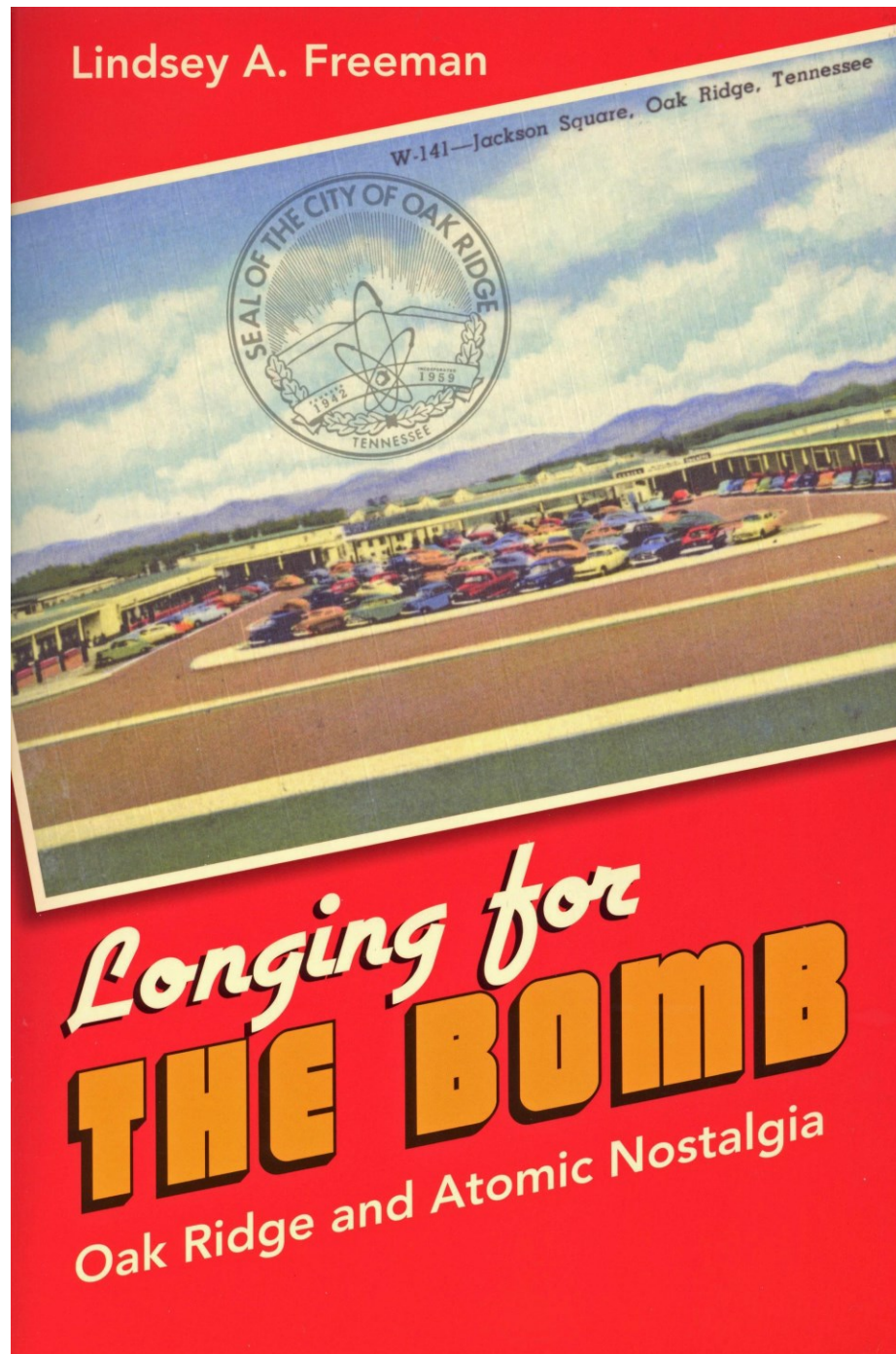
Finally, she recognizes the adverse impact of the event on July 28, 2012, that rattled the confidence of Oak Ridge when an octogenarian nun, a Vietnam veteran and a housepainter cut fences to gain access to the most secure part of the Y-12 National Security Complex. "What if they had been terrorists," she reminds us as she concludes her brief mention of this chapter of our history.

In a concluding statement she says, "The Manhattan Project swiftly and permanently altered the culture of the area, ushering in a culture of Brahms and bombs, nuclear science, and techno-security. The question is what will happen next for the first city of the Atomic Age? Oak Ridge is caught in a purgatorial state: no longer what it was historically, yet not quite anything else so easily defined as beyond that, either."

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As I said in the beginning, this book certainly brings a fresh perspective to how we see our city. She writes with a kinship but at the same time a keen objectivity that I believe we who want to promote our city and see the Manhattan Project National Historical Park succeed, should read with attention to the aspects of interaction she describes. She points out things about us that we may not see for ourselves as we are so close to the reality of today and so caught up in our struggle for tomorrow.



Lindsey A. Freeman's insightful book on Oak Ridge, "Longing for the Bomb" – a fresh perspective on how we see our past, present and future