

Richard Rhodes recently visited Oak Ridge and Knoxville

(As published in *The Oak Ridger's Historically Speaking* column on November 2, 2015)

Bringing Richard Rhodes to Oak Ridge has been a great experience. It all started when Leigha Edwards and I teamed up on him when we all attended a meeting in Washington, DC, for the Atomic Heritage Foundation's 70th Anniversary of the end of World War II. He was a featured speaker at the event.

I had spent a day working with him and several others on a project for the Atomic Heritage Foundation the day before the event. I was also fortunate enough to be invited to dinner with him and several others, where I was able to spend even more personal time with him. He is a gracious and down-to-earth person who is easy to engage in conversation. It was a delightful dinner.

So the next day, I introduced him to Leigha. She did the rest. He agreed to come to Oak Ridge and to be a featured speaker at Nuclear Science Week in the Knoxville Convention Center. So our thanks goes to UT-Battelle for being a major sponsor of his visit to our area.

Richard Rhodes is the author or editor of 25 works of fiction, history and memoir including *The Making of the Atomic Bomb*, which won a Pulitzer Prize, a National Book Award and a National Book Critics Circle Award; *Dark Sun: The Making of the Hydrogen Bomb*, which was one of three finalists for a Pulitzer Prize in History; *Arsenals of Folly*, about the last years of the Cold War; *The Twilight of the Bombs*, about the post-Cold War challenges of nuclear weapons and international policy; and, most recently, *Hell and Good Company*, a history of the Spanish Civil War which focuses on breakthroughs in military technology and medicine.

On Thursday, Oct. 22, 2015, he was given a tour of the Oak Ridge National Laboratory and the Y-12 National Security Complex. At ORNL, he was shown the Spallation Neutron Source, the Super Computing Center and the Graphite Reactor. At Y-12, he was taken to Building 9204-3 (Beta 3) where he was shown the Beta Calutrons and then given a bird's eye view of the site from the Chestnut Ridge overlook.

This was not the first visit to Y-12 for Rhodes. He had visited here in the 1980s while researching his Pulitzer prize-winning book on the Manhattan Project. He actually observed the Beta 3 Calutrons in operation separating stable isotopes. He reminded those of us on the tour of that earlier visit and said he was pleased to see the historic Calutrons had been preserved. While at Y-12, Rhodes took time to sign books for Y-12 employees who met him at the New Hope Center.

Rhodes also spoke at the American Museum of Science and Energy for a special Dick Smyser Community Lecture Series co-sponsored by the Friends of ORNL and the Oak Ridge Heritage & Preservation Association. The auditorium was full, and chairs had to be placed to accommodate the number of attendees. He also signed books there after the lecture.

He next spoke at the East Tennessee Economic Council on Friday morning before appearing on the Hallerin Hilton Hill Morning Radio Show and speaking at the Nuclear Science Week "Big Event" in the Knoxville Convention Center Friday at noon. This event was attended by a broad range of ages from school kids to retired individuals. Again, at both these events on Friday he captured his audience and reflected on the broad implications of the Manhattan Project history.

All of the events were well attended, and the information shared by this prestigious author was helpful as he included discussion of the Manhattan Project National Park as well as deep philosophical thoughts about nuclear weapons and the change brought to the world by their use to end World War II.

Rhodes pointed out that a graph of the number of deaths caused by war had risen exponentially until peaking in 1943 at 15,000,000 per year. The number then took a nose dive, and, by 1946, had reached less than 2,000,000. He attributed this lack of a world war since World War II as primarily being because of the existence of nuclear weapons. He quoted Robert Oppenheimer as saying that the atomic bomb

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not only ended World War II—it would also prevent additional world wars because such wars would no longer be considered as a means to resolve conflicts.

His talk on Thursday evening was titled, “The Light of New Fires: Energy Challenges Yesterday and Today,” and he discussed the history of energy. He identified nuclear power as ultimately the most viable option while recognizing the fossil fuels and other sources as likely to be used until exhausted.

At the East Tennessee Economic Council, he featured the Manhattan Project National Historical Park and cited the importance of telling our story to the next generations. He also answered many questions from the audience, including one from Thom Mason on cyber warfare to which Rhodes answered, “I don’t know much about that subject,” which elicited laughter from the crowd.

At Nuclear Science Week, the feature history section was introduced with stories by Ray Smith about the history of Oak Ridge including how this area was selected, the early construction and first missions of the sites in Oak Ridge. Rhodes then broadened the joint discussion to include the whole history of the Manhattan Project and explained how it began well before the actual project came to be. He also included the conversation about the number of deaths caused by war to that audience as well.

The visit by Richard Rhodes served to educate several hundred people about the basics of the Manhattan Project. As he said several times, the present younger generation has never experienced anything close to the horror of World War II, and many of the youngest don’t even recall the Cold War or Vietnam. They are blessed with that, but understanding how the existence of nuclear weapons contributed and continues to contribute to this lack of world war is more difficult to explain to these generations.

Having him speak to these audiences was helpful, especially at the Nuclear Science Week’s “Big Event,” which had a younger audience. All of Rhodes’ talks were informative and well received.



I was pleased to introduce Richard Rhodes to our local celebrity Ed Westcott

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Richard Rhodes spoke to a full house at the American Museum of Science and Energy



It was good to show Richard Rhodes the historic Graphite Reactor – here he explores the area where the isotopes were inserted and removed from the reactor to produce radionuclides – photo by Carlos Jones of ORNL Photography

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Showing Richard Rhodes the Beta 3 Calutrons - photo by Lance King of Y-12 Photography