

General Assembly met in Oak Ridge 40 years ago

(As published in *The Oak Ridger's Historically Speaking* column on February 26, 2015)

Gordon Fee brought this story to my attention by asking if I remembered the Tennessee General Assembly meeting in Oak Ridge. I did not. His comment sent me researching the history of just where the legislature had met over the years. I knew of the 1807 meeting in Kingston when the Tennessee State Capital was moved from Knoxville to Kingston for one day as a part of the farce the settlers pulled on the Cherokee to get the land on which to build Fort Southwest Point.

I soon found that the Capital had been in Knoxville twice, 1796 – 1811 and 1815 -1817, in Nashville 1812 - 1814 and then from 1826 to present. It was in Murfreesboro from 1818 – 1825. So bringing the legislature to Oak Ridge must have been something special, and as you will see from the story below, it was special indeed.

Carolyn Krause brings us the story Gordon suggested and Tom Hill encouraged us to capture again.

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Forty years ago, on Feb. 5, 1975, two-thirds of the legislators in the Tennessee General Assembly visited Oak Ridge. It was the third time that the General Assembly had met outside Nashville since the Civil War; previously it had met in Kingston in 1807 and Murfreesboro in 1973.

According to Tom Hill, former publisher of *The Oak Ridger*, "Speaker of the House Ned McWherter had visited Oak Ridge National Laboratory previously and was so impressed by what he learned that he decided to ask the Tennessee General Assembly to meet in Oak Ridge" to learn about nuclear and other energy issues. [McWherter, who had the longest tenure as Speaker of the Tennessee House of Representatives (1973-1987) served as governor from 1987 to 1995.]

A few weeks earlier, the U.S. Atomic Energy Commission had been split into the Energy Research and Development Administration and the Nuclear Regulatory Commission. These changes were partly in response to the 1973 energy crisis, in which the price of imported oil quadrupled and gasoline "rationing" on weekends generated long lines of cars at gas stations.

Also, new concerns had arisen about the safety of nuclear power plants, which had been raised by ORNL researchers at an AEC hearing in 1972 near Washington, D.C. Anti-nuclear sentiments had pervaded Middle Tennessee.

Many legislators and Nashville area residents were concerned about the Tennessee Valley Authority's plans to start building the Hartsville nuclear power plant in 1975 in Middle Tennessee. The four boiling-water reactors were intended to meet demand for TVA's electricity in the 1980s. As it turned out, two reactors were canceled in March 1983 and two others were scratched in August 1984.

The 91 legislators toured the three government plants in Oak Ridge and ate box lunches on their bus rides between the plants. They met at the old Holiday Inn for a briefing and heard local, high-profile speakers.

They included Bob Hart, manager of ERDA's Oak Ridge Operations; Roger Hibbs, president of Union Carbide's Nuclear Division; Tom Hill, publisher of *The Oak Ridger* and head of the Roane-Anderson Economic Council, a cosponsor of the meeting with Union Carbide Corp.; Oak Ridge Mayor A. K. Bissell, who was a supervisor at the Oak Ridge Y-12 Plant; Herman Postma, director of ORNL; Gordon Fee, director of ORNL's Reactor Division who later became manager of Y-12, and later President of Lockheed Martin Energy Systems, and Ben Adams, head of Crouch and Adams, a local architectural and engineering firm.

Fee recalled that Hibbs had hired Paul Ebert, founding director of the Oak Ridge Playhouse, to rehearse and coach the designated ORNL speakers at the Holiday Inn "to make sure the

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scientists spoke in a language that the legislators could understand. I remember Paul spent hours getting the slide show screen just right.”

The event, which ended with a dinner at the new American Museum of Science and Energy, was thoroughly covered in *The Oak Ridger* by Linda Pearlstein and Carolyn Krause in the front-page, lead article, *Controversy not ducked as 91 legislators briefed*.

Here are some quotes that indicate what the legislators heard in Oak Ridge: McWherter: “We’re going to be faced with some important environmental questions. And I want every member of this House to be as knowledgeable as possible.” Hart: “If you think our presentation is one-sided, ask the right questions, and it won’t be one-sided.” The legislators wrote their questions on cards.

Bissell: “We do hope to firm up your backbones against the swan songs of those who want to turn back the clock.” Fee: “No one is claiming that a nuclear reactor is not potentially dangerous. It is, and this fact has been recognized by the technical community from the inception of the industry.” Adams: “We want our legislators to vote their minds, but we want them to vote on the basis of the facts and not out of fear. We have lived around nuclear plants most of our lives.”

Hart: “Fossil fuels can’t do the job alone. We are convinced that nuclear energy is safe; we believe this as informed advocates, not as glassy-eyed zealots.” He pointed out that both coal and enriched uranium had been major Tennessee products.

Postma: “For the last 15 years, we have diversified our work from nuclear exclusively.” He added that ORNL is becoming a national center for research on conservation, solar, geothermal, and other non-nuclear aspects of energy. The laboratory, he noted, does a significant amount of work studying the safety and environmental impacts of reactors.

“The laboratory is an independent group, and we protect that with a fierce pride. We have suffered a great deal for the way we have tried to express ourselves. We were instrumental in recommending changes in the safety of the emergency core cooling system of reactors, and we recommended that the Indian Point, N.Y., reactor needed cooling towers, pitting us against the utilities.”

Hill: “We are a great resource to the whole state. We attract industry and spawn jobs.” Hart stressed Oak Ridge’s economic importance to Tennessee, noting that the local energy facilities represented the state’s largest employers in a single location, that Oak Ridge workers were paid salaries totaling \$200 million in 1974, and that the money went to 25 counties and accounted for \$2 million in state revenues. In 1974 Knoxville workers alone took home salaries totaling \$40 million.

At the time the U.S. was earning almost \$1 billion a year from the sale of enriched uranium produced at plants in Oak Ridge, Paducah, Ky., and Portsmouth, Ohio. “We are the only significant source of enriched uranium in the free world,” Hart said. Of course, that’s not the case anymore.

Another energy situation that’s changed is the availability of natural gas. When Postma outlined the energy issues the General Assembly might face in upcoming legislation proposals, he mentioned “the dwindling supply of natural gas.” With hydrofracture technology, natural gas is abundant and cheap today.

Other proposals Postma mentioned were improved conservation practices, strip-mining control, an increase in the severance tax on coal and the establishment of a state energy office at the cabinet level. He also alluded to attempts by environmental groups to halt the construction of TVA’s Hartsville nuclear power plant. And the rest is history!

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Additional story from feedback on the above article from Fran Silver:

What happened over 40 years ago, on Wednesday, Feb. 5, 1975, was more than a piece of Oak Ridge history. The picture is not complete without "herstory."

The Historically Speaking column on "Legislators '75 road trip to Secret City recalled" in the Feb. 26, 2015, issue of *The Oak Ridger* focused on the key points made by the speakers. But Fran Silver, who started the Creative Catering business in 1975, told me last week that the most important event of that day was probably "The Dinner at the new American Museum of Science and Energy." (which was actually still named the American Museum of Atomic Energy in 1975 as the name was not changed until 1978 – Ray)

"It was a festive occasion," she said. "Some 300 to 400 people attended."

She credited several people who helped her pull it off: Ben Adams of Adams Craft Herz Walker; Eugene Joyce, a renowned local lawyer, and Tom Hill, publisher of *The Oak Ridger*.

Many of the 91 legislators from the House side of the Tennessee General Assembly attended the dinner, along with local, state and federal government officials and the speakers from Oak Ridge National Laboratory.

The Historically Speaking column stated incorrectly that a dinner was held at the "old American Museum of Atomic Energy," (corrected above in this revised version – Ray). It was in the new museum on South Tulane Avenue, which was later called the American Museum of Science and Energy. (this new location for the museum had just opened in 1975 – Ray)

Hill likes to relate a story about the dinner. Fran Silver's husband Ernie, an ORNL scientist, was slicing meat for the guests when two legislators approached him with their plates. Hill was behind them. He heard one legislator say to the other in front of Ernie, "I understand fusion but I don't understand fission."

So Ernie patiently explained nuclear fission to them while continuing to slice meat. Then Hill followed the two and heard one say to the other, "Gee, even the waiter here knows about fission."

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Thanks Carolyn for first reporting this significant event in Oak Ridge history in 1975 and for again researching the facts and bringing the details to *Historically Speaking*.

As far as "the rest is history..." it is significant to note what happened four short years after this session with the legislature in Oak Ridge. With the partial meltdown of the Unit 2 reactor at Three Mile Island, near Middletown, Pa., on March 28, 1979, what was to become the most serious accident in U.S. commercial nuclear power plant operating history, changed the face of nuclear power. Although only a small amount of radioactive releases resulted which had no detectable health effects on plant workers or the public, the perception of nuclear power the potential for accidental releases prevailed.

Nevertheless, the aftermath of Three Mile Island "brought about sweeping changes involving emergency response planning, reactor operator training, human factors engineering, radiation protection, and many other areas of nuclear power plant operations" according to the Nuclear Regulatory Commission's online "Background of Three Mile Island" - <http://www.nrc.gov/reading-rm/doc-collections/fact-sheets/3mile-isle.html> The site also concludes, "It also caused the NRC to tighten and heighten its regulatory oversight. All of these changes significantly enhanced U.S. reactor safety."

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Forty years ago, Oak Ridge led the way to help educate our state leaders. We have continued to produce scientific advancement in areas well beyond nuclear power to include neutron science, advanced materials research, life sciences, supercomputing, additive manufacturing, carbon fiber, isotopes, and nuclear weapons among other significant achievements. All the while continuing to be a resource to our elected officials. Oak Ridge truly is a Science City for the state, nation and the world.



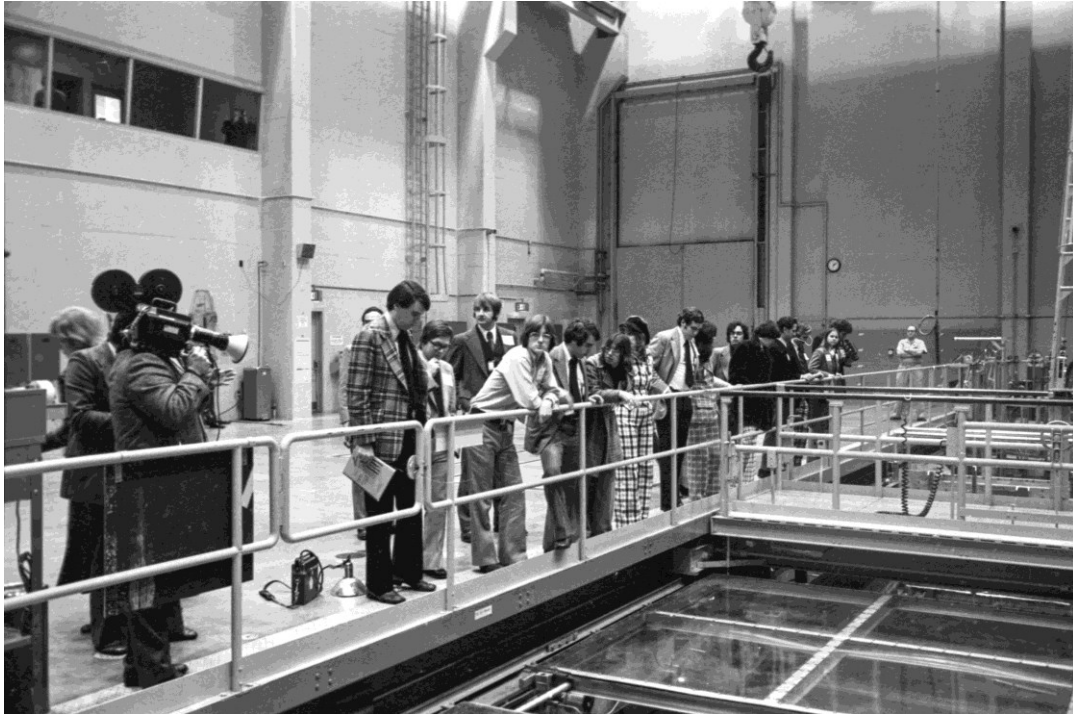
The Oak Ridger headline for February 5, 1975



Legislators listening to Oak Ridge leaders

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Legislators view a reactor core while on their tour of the Oak Ridge National Laboratory (photo courtesy of ORNL)



One of the briefings at the Oak Ridge National Laboratory (photo courtesy of ORNL)

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ORNL Director Herman Postma makes a point to the legislators (photo courtesy of ORNL)



Lieutenant Governor John Wilder, who served in this position from 1971 to 2007, possibly the longest time anyone has served as lieutenant governor in the history of the U.S., listens to a briefing (photo courtesy of ORNL)