

An external look at Oak Ridge in 1949 part 1

**“Monument to Schizophrenia: Oak Ridge, A City of Death, Seeks A ‘Normal’ Civic Life”
(As published in *The Oak Ridger’s Historically Speaking* column on March 23, 2015)**

Sam Adkins, Staff Writer for the Louisville, KY, daily newspaper, The Courier-Journal, wrote a series of three articles about Oak Ridge with the first one being published on August 14, 1949, the fourth anniversary of the surrender of Japan. I was given the article by a coworker at Y-12 who found it in a yard sale. Like so many other artifacts that come my way, I am so thankful for friends who keep me in mind when they see things on sale that pertain to Oak Ridge history!

The editor of The Courier-Journal has given permission for Sam’s article to be reprinted in part here. I think you will appreciate seeing the view of Oak Ridge history from the perception of a reporter looking at us from one state away.

I think it is good for us to remember the importance of perception, but remember, this was written in 1949 when little was really known about Oak Ridge by the outside world...thus speculation led to misconceptions. Unfortunately the same remains true to some extent even today...we MUST take the initiative to be proactive and promote factual understanding and appreciation for Oak Ridge!

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Oak Ridge, Tenn., August 13, 1949 – This is a Jekyll-and-Hyde city. Here more than anywhere else on earth is epitomized the paradoxical duality of man, the schizophrenia which causes man on the one hand to seek to commit race suicide, and on the other to make himself immortal.

Oak Ridge, “Cradle of the Atomic Age,” as it calls itself, is a monument to man’s efforts to find newer, more efficient ways to destroy himself. It is the womb of the atomic bomb.

On the other hand, scientific discoveries and developments all but past the experimental stage here bid fair to add years to man’s life span, to make him stronger and healthier, and to make his life easier and more abundant.

The manufacture of Uranium-235 for fissionable material for atomic weapons still is the big industry and major preoccupation of this strange city – make no mistake about that. We are in an atomic-arms race with Russia, and every man, woman and child of the 32,400 living in Oak Ridge is always aware of it. But there also are two other major preoccupations, one in the field of science, the other in the realm of human relations.

Seems Fantastic

Perhaps a fourth of all the workers here are laboring directly or indirectly to find ways to make human beings live longer and better, to improve agriculture and to make industry more efficient – all on a basis of the by-products (both actual and intellectual) of the harnessing of atomic power.

To me, Oak Ridge probably seems more fantastic than it does to most persons coming here for the first time. You see, I was born in this Tennessee County (Anderson), little more than a stone’s throw from where the center of Oak Ridge stands today.

That was a few decades ago, of course. And Anderson and neighboring Roane Counties, in the foothills of the Cumberland Mountains, were largely country – in the broadest sense of the word.

But even if I had been born here only 10 years ago, Oak Ridge still would come as a shock to me, returning now for this first time. For, until September 19, 1942, this was just a quiet, rural valley sheltered on one side by long, towering Black Oak Ridge. On the other side was the beautiful, meandering Clinch River, by that time lifted to importance because the Tennessee Valley Authority had built Norris Dam on it, about 18 miles from where Oak Ridge now stands.

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As the result of a decision made on that September day in 1942, this quiet valley and three smaller, adjacent valleys are the sites of one of the most unusual cities and several of the most important industrial installations to be found anywhere in the world today.

Was Remote

For the record, the official name of the city and adjoining sites of the atomic-energy installations here of the Atomic Energy Commission is “The Oak Ridge Area.”

The Area covers 90 square miles, or approximately 60,000 acres. It is 17 miles long and about nine miles wide at its widest point. It is 20 miles almost due west of Knoxville. About half of it lies in Anderson County, the rest in Roane. The Area runs generally northeast and southwest, and it is bounded on the east, southeast, south and southwest for 35 miles by the Clinch River.

Back in 1942, the Government had decided secretly to push the development of atomic energy as a war weapon with all possible speed. The Oak Ridge section was chosen for the first huge installations for several reasons. It was remote. It had a main valley for the town and smaller valleys, separated by protective ridges, for the big and dangerous atomic-energy plants. The T.V.A. assured it plenty of power – and the word plenty can be used as both “abundant” and “a very great deal.” Transportation in all forms was available. And there was a large desirable labor force near at hand.

The Manhattan District of the U. S. Corps of Engineers went to work. It let the word leak out that his was to become a “demolition range.” So it had little trouble clearing 3,000 residents out of their homes on the big reservation. Then, with an organization designated as “Clinton Engineer Works,” work was begun in the deepest secrecy on the town and atomic plants.

Said He Didn’t Know

“Deep secrecy” is a mild term for what surely was the tightest security regime of the war. By 1944, more than 75,000 persons were working in Oak Ridge, on construction projects and in the plants. But only a very small handful had more than the faintest idea what it was all about. F.B.I. men and Intelligence agents abounded. Armed soldiers manned formidable fences, inner fences and inner-inner fences throughout the reservation. You couldn’t even get into the town of Oak Ridge, much less the plant area, without the most searching investigation. Workers were confined to small sections of buildings and never given a hint as to the nature of the project.

In the fall of 1944, I asked David E. Lilienthal (now chairman of the Atomic Energy Commission, then chairman of the Tennessee Valley Authority): “What’s really going on out there?”

“I honestly can’t tell you,” Lilienthal replied, “All I know is that they want a lot of electric power; and we’re going to supply it.”

That same fall, a favorite gag made the round of Oak Ridge workers. It went something like this: “Oh, we’re just making the front ends of horses. They ship ’em to Washington for assembly.”

Originally, plans called for Oak Ridge to be a community of only about 12,000. But plant plans were expanded, and a 75,000 peak had been reached long before the first A-bomb was dropped on Hiroshima in 1945. Now the population has leveled off at approximately 32,400, and is expected to stay about there.

Total construction cost for both the city and the atomic installations was \$1,106,393,000, of which approximately \$96,000,000 was for the town – housing, business centers, streets, playgrounds, utilities and everything that makes up a modern urban center.

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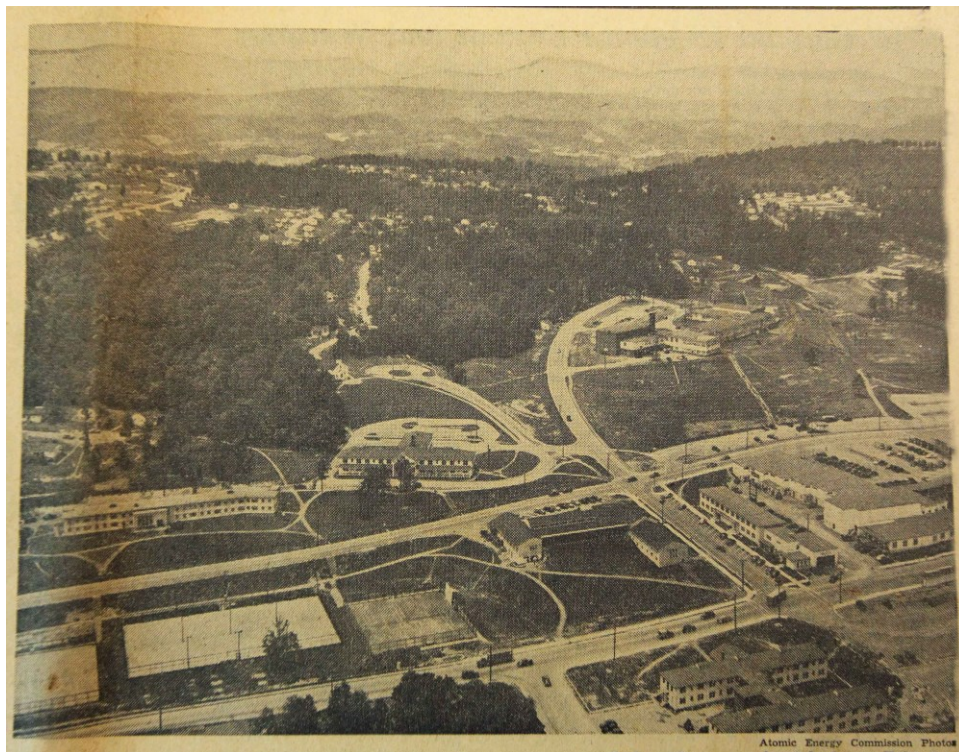
Oak Ridge isn’t exactly a pretty city. But it will be beautiful someday, if plans already in operation are carried to fulfillment. And meanwhile, it is absolutely unique among American municipalities.

A glance will tell any visitor that Oak Ridge was built in a great hurry. Until you stay around awhile and look closer, it resembles a huge Army camp. The buildings had to be put up in a hurry; and it was not known whether Oak Ridge would survive as a city. So the quickest and cheapest ways and materials were used. Many of the office buildings, apartment houses and dormitories look like Army barracks. Low-quality prefabricated houses, hutments, trailers – anything to provide shelter for the workers and their families was pressed in to service. So, in a really lovely setting, there sprang up a not particularly pleasing hodgepodge of architecture and materials.

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There you have the first installment of Sam Adkins’ perspective of Oak Ridge from afar (Louisville, KY). Thanks again to the Courier-Journal for permission to reprint this article of insight into Oak Ridge at the turn of the decade just after World War II and as the Cold War was heating up.

I think it is important for us to pay close attention to the perception of others regarding Oak Ridge. Yes, this was written in 1949, however, misconceptions about various aspects of Oak Ridge and its history continue to plague us even today.



Scenic beauty and excellence of planning and layout are marked in the atomic city of Oak Ridge. Buildings, however, are generally flimsy and not attractive; but this is being remedied. This air view shows one of nine business centers, Jackson Square, at the right front. Behind it is the high school, which is to be replaced. At the center is the Guest House, a wooden hotel. Dwellings are on wooded, hillside lots. All streets are paved.