

Kentucky newspaper's 1949 look at city, part 2

Monument to Schizophrenia: Oak Ridge, A City of Death, Seeks A 'Normal' Civic Life, part 2
(As published in *The Oak Ridger's Historically Speaking* column on April 6, 2015)

Here is the second installment of the series of articles Sam Adkins, Staff Writer for the Louisville, KY, daily newspaper, The Courier-Journal, wrote about Oak Ridge. The first article in the series was published on August 14, 1949, the fourth anniversary of the surrender of Japan.

The editor of The Courier-Journal has given permission for Sam's series of articles 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. Remember, this is 1949!

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Can Hold Office

Oak Ridge was – and still is, for that matter – a city in only name and size. It wasn't – and still isn't – a real municipality. Nor was (or is) it a community like Washington, where all the people are residents but not citizens.

Here's the way it still works:

All the land and buildings in the Oak Ridge Area belong to the Federal Government (all except a few small parcels recently made available to various religious organizations as church sites). Therefore, since Oak Ridge residents pay no taxes and own no real property in the town, they do not elect a City government.

However, unlike the case of Washington, they are bona fide residents of Anderson County and the State of Tennessee, and can vote in the elections of both. As a matter of fact, more than one Oak Ridger has held office in Anderson County.

The way the Government has chosen to operate the city is unique, too. And explain it requires a bit of detail.

First, the top boss of everything in the Area – city and plants alike – is Richard Cook, acting director of the Office of Oak Ridge Directed Operations.

Under Cook are four department heads for the Departments of Engineering and Production, Biology and Medicine, Administration and Finance, and Community Affairs.

Advisory Council

The Department of Community Affairs headed by Fred W. Ford, is in charge of all the facets of City management. Under Ford is a City manager, and under the City manager are directors of education, public safety (police and fire departments), health, welfare, recreation, roads and streets and utilities.

There also is a council composed of citizens, a group with no authority, but which gives advice.

All that sounds familiar enough; but that's where the familiarity ends.

For the City officials don't hire their staffs and don't exercise immediate control over most of what normally would be City employees. Instead, the A.E.C. hires the Roane-Anderson Company, a subsidiary of the Turner Construction Company of New York, to serve as City "housekeeper."

For a fee of \$192,000 a year, Roane-Anderson really runs Oak Ridge. Following City-management policies, it mans all the various departments, keeps up the streets and housing, operates the several bus lines and utilities – and does just about everything else.

Both Oak Ridge's school systems and its police department also contain queer quirks.

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7,000 In School

The town has nine elementary schools, a junior high school and a high school, with a total enrollment of more than 7,000. Technically, this system is part of the Anderson County school system. Actually, this is so in name only, Oak Ridge pays all its own school expenses and sets its own standards – well above Anderson County standards, by the way. The technical hookup with the County was made so that teachers can transfer into and out of Oak Ridge without losing out on seniority and pensions, and in order to gain automatic admission to an accredited school system.

The Oak Ridge police department is unusual in that all its more than 90 members are Anderson County deputy sheriffs, and not municipal policemen at all. The town doesn't even have a jail, but boasts one of the lowest incidences of criminal activity in the United States.

There is one fly in this ointment, though, according to Ford, the community-affairs director.

"Since we aren't an incorporated city, we can't make any municipal ordinances," he explained. "So, our policemen can make arrests only for violation of State laws. There are a number of things usually covered by municipal ordinances that we can't do much about. Parking violations and the like, for instance."

Be that as it may, Oak Ridge's traffic operates smoothly and safely. It has been more than 1,300 days since there has been a traffic fatality here; and that's something for a city of 32,000. The town has won traffic-safety awards for the last three years.

One of the most amazing records, though, has been set in the field of fire safety. Remember, this is a city of frame buildings and little fire-proofing. Well, the per capita fire loss here in 1947 was 53 cents, and in 1948 it was 64 cents. The average last year for 28 cities in Oak Ridge's population category was \$4.43 per capita.

The foregoing background was necessary in leading up to one of the three major preoccupations here at Oak Ridge – a preoccupation with plans to turn this into a "normal" city just as quickly as possible, as Ford put it.

A survey already has been made of the problem of removing the city from Government control, incorporating it and turning it into an ordinary municipality.

"The problems in such a change are stupendous," Ford declared. "But we think they can be solved. And, actually, we already are doing a great deal to force Oak Ridge residents to help shoulder municipal responsibility." The community-affairs director went on to explain that the A.E.C. is giving the city a face lifting, to make it more normal in appearance – physically, as well as municipally.

Given Services

Within the next three months, he said, 781 new dwelling units will be completed to take the place of the same number of temporary, substandard houses and apartments built during the wartime-rush period. In addition, families in 422 other substandard dwellings have been given notice to move out, since their homes are to be torn down and replaced. It is planned to spend quite a few millions of dollars within the next few years to "permanentize" all dwellings (9,600 of them) and business structures in Oak Ridge.

Meanwhile, the entire rent structure and maintenance picture here are being changed.

"In the early days," Ford explained, "this was a pretty dreary place. The streets were all mud. There weren't too many conveniences and comforts. But we had to entice thousands of people to come here and live and work. So we had to give them inducements."

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Two of those inducements were exceptionally low rents and complete maintenance. Until recently, if an Oak Ridger poked out a window pane, blew a fuse or got his plumbing stopped up- or anything else went wrong around the house – he just telephoned Roane-Anders. A man hurried over and fixed things up, free of charge.

Don't Want Change

"That's all over now," Ford said. "The lessee has to assume the maintenance responsibilities that a lessee in an ordinary town assumes. He has to fix it, or pay for having it fixed, himself."

In the early days, rents ranged from \$12.50 a month to \$73 a month. The \$12.50 renter got a one-bedroom, substandard dwelling and all utilities except heat. The \$73 man got three bedrooms in a good house with everything furnished – even heat. This scale has been increased to \$33 to \$90, with the renter paying for maintenance and with substandard housing eliminated.

These and other changes mean, Ford said, that the 1950 budget for Oak Ridge will be much less than this year's \$7,000,000, and that the 1951 budget will be still lower.

How do the people like these changes? Well, most of those with whom I talked, at least, don't like it. They frankly don't care if Oak Ridge is never incorporated. They like the low rents, good service and lack of responsibility they've been enjoying for so long.

And this, by the way, in a community which likes to reflect that its average per capita income – more than \$3,300 a year for all workers – is the highest in the United States.

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Wow, what a treat to read 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. Oak Ridge has remained a key element in the nation's defense and has continued to lead the nation's basic materials research over the years.

Again, within months, the Oak Ridge National Laboratory will have the world's most powerful open science computer. ORNL also has the Spallation Neutron Source which remains the world's most powerful pulsed neutron source. The High Flux Isotope Reactor, also at ORNL, boasts one of the highest flux reactor-based sources of neutrons in the United States, and has one of the highest steady-state neutron fluxes of any research reactor in the world.

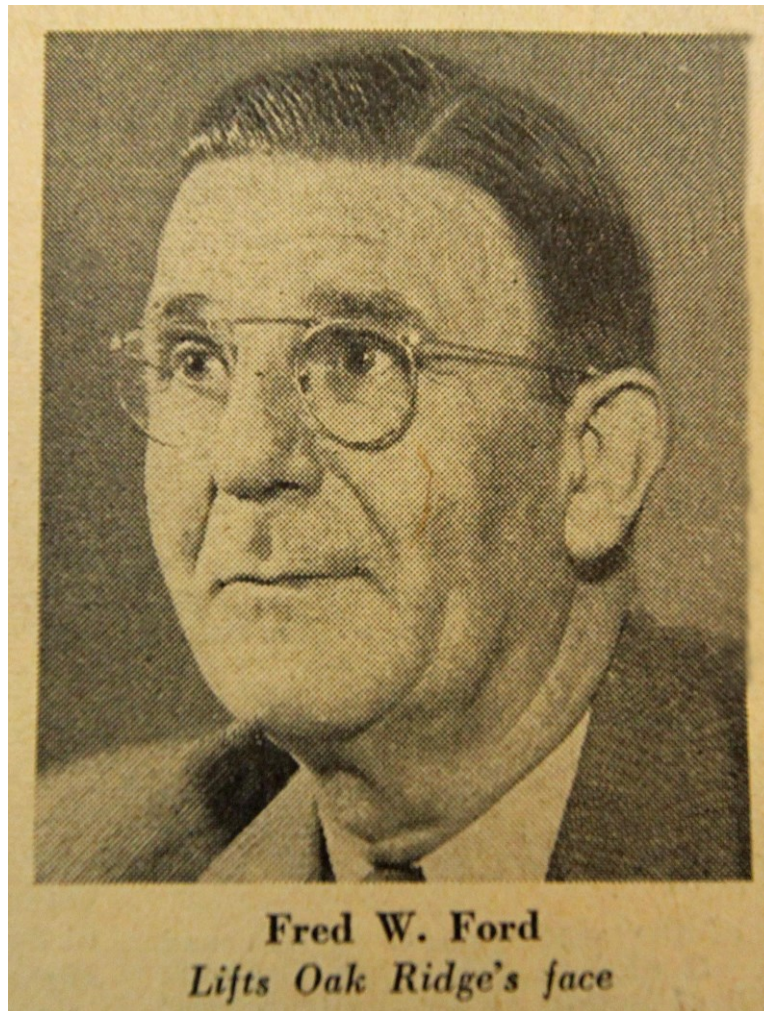
And recently ORNL and Local Motors of Knoxville just 3D printed a car! Not to mention the carbon fiber demonstration plant in Horizon Center. And the East Tennessee Technology Park's Heritage Center where industrial development is underway and set to take off at an even high pace with the planned airport for corporate and small airplanes.

Finally, the Manhattan Project National Historical Park, when passed by the Senate, will bring even more attention to our history and heritage. And then there is State Senator Ken Yager's promotion of Adventure Tourism that surely matches Oak Ridge to a tee!

Oak Ridge has come a long way since Sam Adkins' view of us on August 14, 1949!

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Fred W. Ford *Lifts Oak Ridge's face*