

70th Anniversary of the Manhattan Project Reunion and Symposium

(As published in *The Oak Ridger's Historically Speaking* column on June 22, 2015)

On Tuesday, June 2, 2015, in Washington, DC, at the *Carnegie Institution for Science*, the *Atomic Heritage Foundation* held a unique and ever increasingly difficult to arrange gathering. A reunion of a group of veterans of Manhattan Project provided those of us who attended a glimpse into a most unusual set of experiences. The people who actually lived the Manhattan Project that led to the end of World War II shared what that amazing era meant to each of them. Most of the audience could only guess at what that was like before hearing these true to life sagas.

Two of the veterans were Bill Tewes of Oak Ridge and Lawrence O'Rourke, friends who worked together some 70 years ago at Columbia University and had not seen each other since. What a great reunion! Bill talked to me about the anticipation he held for the reunion. I am so pleased that Bill was able to attend.

The stories shared by each of the veterans made the experience come alive as they spoke of "creating the 'special barrier' that could separate the fissionable isotope uranium 235 from uranium 238" and other first of a kind endeavors that often were not fully understood at the time. Although they did not know what their work was really intended to accomplish, they were proud of their efforts then and now. What an awesome experience to see the sparkle in their eyes as they relived what for most of them were the most exciting memories of their working careers and for some the highlight of a lifetime.

After an afternoon of stories shared, a reception was held in honor of the Manhattan Project veterans. Several interested reporters were there to interview them. They took the interview questions in stride and continued to tell their stories over and over as requested by the media. CNN reporters and several Japanese television stations were represented.

On Wednesday, June 3, 2015, in conjunction with the reunion and at the same location, an outstanding symposium was held that featured discussion of the new Manhattan Project National Historical Park. The symposium's first speaker was Richard Rhodes, historian and author of the Pulitzer Prize winning book, *The Making of the Atomic Bomb*.

Rhodes said, "These Manhattan Project historical sites are among the world's most significant places where work was done that changed the human world forever." He specifically stated, "In the fullness of time that change may well lead to the prevention not only of world war but of all war. When science demonstrated that matter, properly arranged, is all energy, it revealed a natural limit to national sovereignty that made unlimited war suicidal. No one had conceived of such a limit before. War had seemed to be, and had grown to be, effectively unlimited. We have been forced by a new knowledge of the natural world to find less destructive methods of settling disputes, and if less destructive methods can be substituted, by necessity, for world war, there's no reason why such methods can't substitute for limited war as well."

He went on to stress that, "The places and structures that the Manhattan Project Historical Park will preserve embody the social reality of that millennial transformation. That's what we're here today to celebrate and discuss." What an excellent start to an awesome day!

Senator Martin Heinrich of New Mexico cited the significance of the newly forming Manhattan Project National Historical Park and recognized the contributions of the veterans in attendance at the symposium. He thanked them for their service to the nation and the world by reflecting on the profound comments of Richard Rhodes relative to the world changing impact of the Manhattan Project. I am proud to note that our own Senator Alexander (his staff has taken the lead for us in the Senate), Senator Corker, and Congressman Fleischmann have all been staunch supporters of the Manhattan Project National Historical Park.

Patrick Gregerson, Chief of Planning, National Park Service and Jaime Shimek, Deputy Assistant Secretary for Senate Affairs, Department of Energy, talked about implementing the new park with units at Los Alamos, NM, Oak Ridge, TN and Hanford, WA. The one-year timeline for formally establishing the

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park has December 19, 2015, as the date for completing the Memorandum of Agreement between the two agencies. They both assured the audience that public participation would be included in the planning of the balanced interpretation of the Manhattan Project sites and their history. Once the Memorandum of Agreement has identified the facilities to be included in the park, the National Park Service will begin the process known as the Management Plan. Among other things regarding the management of the three park sites, what to do about designating a "headquarters" will be among the most important considerations. This three-site concept will cause considerations that have not been addressed in other park management plans.

Alex Wellerstein, Professor of Science and Technology Studies at the Stevens Institute of Technology in Hoboken, NJ, provided insight in to the incredible and fascinating innovations resulting from the Manhattan Project. He cited over 5,600 inventions discovered and 2,100 patent applications filed as evidence of the magnitude of discovery associated with the world-changing Manhattan Project.

Rosemary Lane and Isabella Karle spoke of the role of women in the Manhattan Project and reflected on the meaning their experiences have had on their lives. As Denise Kiernan in her New York Times bestselling book, *The Girls of Atomic City*, points out, these women played an important role in the winning of the war!

Next Robert "Stan" Norris, author of *Racing for the Bomb: General Leslie Groves, the Manhattan Project's Indispensable Man*, took the audience through a description of what General Groves did to introduce enhanced security measures still in place today in an attempt to protect the secret activities of the Manhattan Project. Even with the strict security requirements, spies managed to transfer information about the atomic bomb to the Soviets. Manhattan Project veterans, Ben Bederson and James Schoke joined Norris in a panel to share their personal experiences with several spies including Klaus Fuchs, Ted Hall, David Greenglass and George Koval.

It was rewarding to see what was described in this discussion coinciding with the series on spies in Oak Ridge that had been published earlier in *The Oak Ridger's Historically Speaking* column that I had written. I kept my thoughts to myself, but I do admit to feeling a sense of accomplishment.

It was good to see Charles Oppenheimer, who is Robert Oppenheimer's grandson speak on his behalf and share some personal memories and comments. He spoke along with Robert Norris and Robert Oppenheimer's biographers, Kai Bird and Martin Sherwin. Caroline Groves Lewis, General Leslie Groves' granddaughter rounded out the panel and also provided personal memories of the General as a doting grandfather who dearly loved his family.

While the panel ostensibly was intended to debate "who was the 'indispensable man' of the Manhattan Project, Groves or Oppenheimer, in the final analysis, the audience and panel both agreed that they two great men were opposites in many ways but also complimentary as well. Thus, they were both determined to be indispensable.

In private discussion with Kia Bird, I was delighted to learn that the effort to correct the mistreatment of Robert Oppenheimer is gaining steam. The way Oppenheimer was treated when his security clearance was revoked after the war is an example of injustice and unethical treatment if there ever was one.

Closing remarks to the symposium were provided by General Frank G. Klotz, the Department of Energy's Undersecretary for Nuclear Security and National Nuclear Security Administration Administrator. He drew on the successes of the Manhattan Project to point out that the present day nuclear security enterprise continues to practice some of the very same principles used in that world changing military industrial scientific accomplishment.

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Many of the technological advances we enjoy today have their origin in the Manhattan Project. The Manhattan Project National Historical Park will include much of those outcomes and outgrowths of the greatest release of energy at the atomic level ever achieved. The park will celebrate those successes but will also put the atomic bomb in perspective to present a balanced review of the history of nuclear energy.

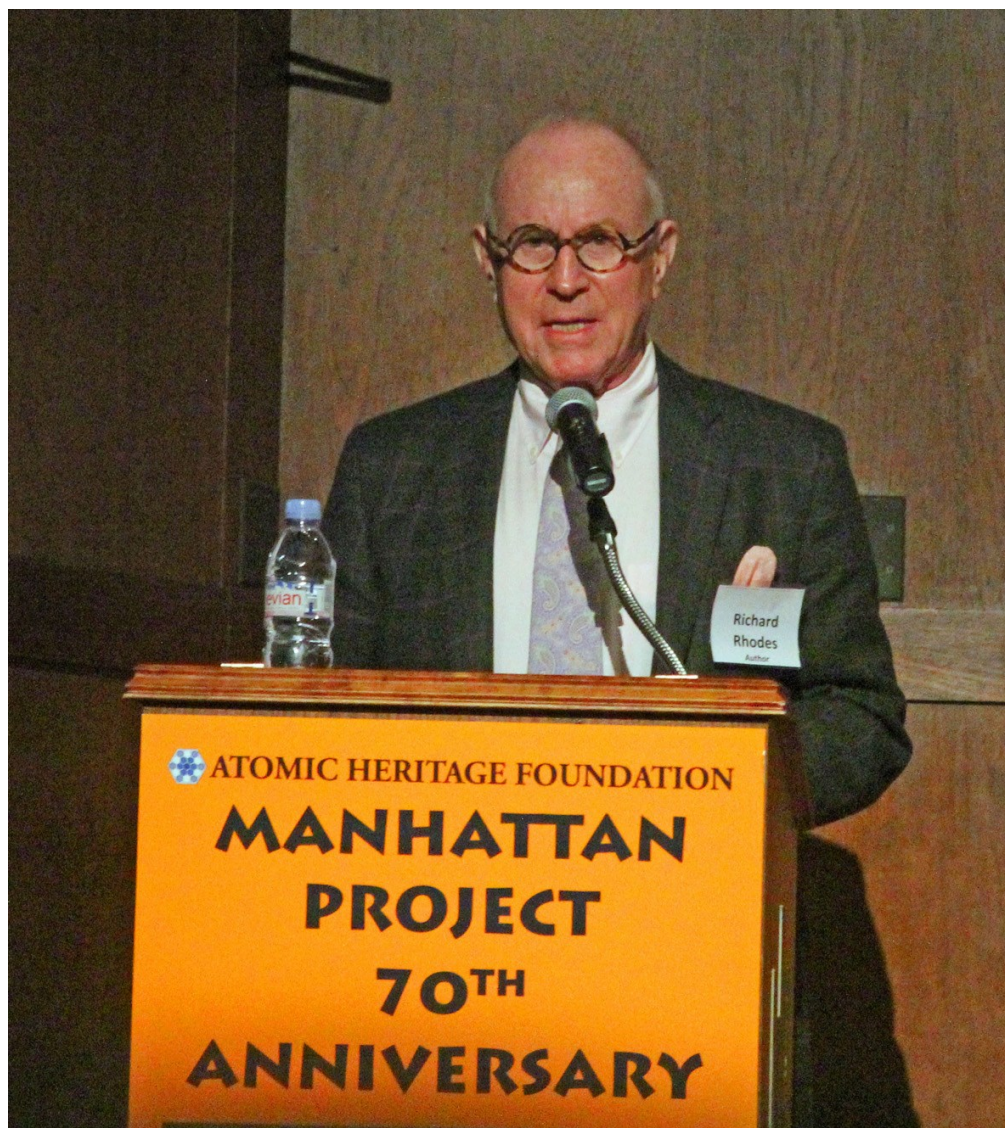
It was certainly a pleasure to be in the midst of such great authors as Rhodes, Norris, Bird and Sherwin, such historians as Wellerstein and the officials of the Park Service and Department of Energy, but the highlight of the event were the Manhattan Project veterans! Especially my good friend, Bill Tewes. It was good to see him get to share the limelight and to bring attention to his beloved Special Engineer Detachment.



Bill Tewes and Lawrence O'Rourke, friends who saw each other again for the first time in 70 years at the reunion

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Richard Rhodes, whose remarks set the tone for the rest of the day and established the magnitude of the Manhattan Project. Rhodes is working on his next book, "The History of Energy starting with Fire" (my working title for his upcoming book)

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Cindy Kelly, President of the Atomic Heritage Foundation, who conceived of the idea of a symposium to recognize the Manhattan Project veterans and to promote better understanding of the Manhattan Project National Historical Park