

A love story set in Oak Ridge

(As published in *The Oak Ridger's Historically Speaking* column on July 15, 2015)

This story comes to us from Johnson City, TN. A friend sent it who knows Nell Phillips and had heard her story about how she met her husband in Oak Ridge. Here is the love story in Nell's own words.

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"But we had to find work. We went to Nashville. We had never heard of Oak Ridge. It was such a big secret, they were building the atomic bomb there. The employee office in Nashville said they would put us on a Pullman car there and someone would pick us up in Knoxville, didn't tell us what it was, it was top secret.

"We were single and daring, we went home and packed our clothes, went back to Nashville, and slept in the Pullman car to Knoxville, where we were picked up the next morning by a station wagon. They took us to lunch, then to the gates. Oak Ridge was all hemmed in by locked gates and guards. They took our luggage away and took us to an empty office.

"The company that had paid our way there didn't need us and sold our contracts to another company. They sent us down to a big warehouse, the shipping department. They kept our clothes three days. There were no paved roads, just mud, but the barracks were brand new and the furniture, beds were all new. They were the only decent looking things in the area, the only reason we stayed. We thought we'd see what it was like.

"The next day, we went to this huge warehouse, miles long, divided into sections, receiving and shipping. We had no idea what we were receiving or shipping, everything just had numbers. We liked it, liked the girls in the dorm. There was one big cafeteria in the center of everything, the only place to eat, with no air conditioning. The smell of the food there was awful. There were some apartments for married couples. Joe Phillips lived with Bonnie, Cate and Lee in an apartment. They were working there for awhile.

"I met him, he worked in receiving, I was in shipping. He would walk through fast. You could date anybody, men were there without their families. They'd take anybody to a movie. We didn't want to go out with married men. Girls kept telling me there's one that's not married. To me, he was the most handsome thing that I saw walking around. I loved him to death just looking at him. I'd say, 'you're crazy, nobody'd let him get away that old without marrying.' They'd say, 'we're not lying, we know he's not married.'

"He was dating a girl there, Sue Tubb, she'd come by and bring his lunch every day, but he needed riders, he had a car and you couldn't get gas rations unless you had riders. He was trying to get enough riders. She rode with him and a guy that worked with us, but he needed three more. He asked Lorelle and me if we'd ride. He went by our dorm on his way to his sister's. We said sure.

"He'd pick us up right behind the dorm. It was better than these old buses we had to ride, terrible, in the mud. It was good to have a car to ride in. I didn't know anything about him. Every day when we'd get to the car, we were about the last ones to get to where he parked.

"His girlfriend Sue would be sitting up front with the other guy, we'd get in back with the other person. Every day she'd just have her head over on his shoulder, just carrying on. We could tell he was embarrassed. We'd just sit back and giggle and stare because we thought it was funny how she acted around him.

"After we'd been riding two or three weeks with him, the phone rang one night in the lobby and they called me to the phone. It was Joe. He said, 'I just put Sue on the train to Nashville, can I come by and talk to you for a little while?' I said, 'Well I don't know, it's dark.' He said, 'That's okay, I've got Ash with me,' that was a friend of his, so I said, 'okay, Lorelle and I will come out and talk to you for a little while.' We went out to the car and just sort of talked about our home life.

"They convinced us both of them were single, but I didn't think anything about it because he dated Sue all the time and she was really a favorite of Joe's sister Bonnie. She wanted him to marry her so bad she

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didn't know what to do. One night he called and asked me to go to the movies with him. I said, 'Where's Sue?' and he said 'That's ok, I'm not going anywhere with her tonight. I want to take you to the movie.'

"So I said, 'okay.' When he came and got me he said if we meet anybody tonight you tell them you're my sister. I said yeah, that's funny, I guess you're my brother. So we just had nothing but friendship. I liked him, he liked me, I suppose but I didn't know it. Whenever we started really dating he quit dating Sue and it caused all kinds of trouble with him and Bonnie. Anyway I knew her and worked close to her but we never had any words or anything but she knew who he was dating.

"That's how I brought Jimmy into it. Joe and I'd gone out for a long time, but I was writing to Jimmy to where he was stationed. He was being shipped overseas. He called one Sunday afternoon and he said he was shipping out in the morning, was there any way I could catch a bus so we could go out that night.

"He was somewhere in North Carolina. I said I'd try, I found out we could get a bus out of Knoxville for the three or four hour trip. I had a date with Joe that night but had no way to call him. I didn't really think there was anything but a friendship there anyway. I told Lorelle she had to go with me, we both worked for the same guy and we just hoped he wouldn't fire us.

"So we got on a bus to Knoxville, got one to North Carolina and spent the night there. Jimmy and a friend took us to supper and we had a little time before they had to be back to camp. I think Jimmy thought I was more interested than I was. I liked him but didn't love him that much.

"When we got back to Oak Ridge, the boss was mad at us but didn't fire us. Joe wouldn't speak to me. By then he wasn't driving, we weren't riding together. He wouldn't come around. He'd had a birthday and I'd gone to Lawrenceburg to the jewelry store and got him a Ronson cigarette lighter and had his initials engraved on it.

"I didn't know it wouldn't work because I didn't smoke. Since he wasn't speaking to me I just left it on his desk. I couldn't give it to anybody else because it had his initials on it. This went on and on. One night he called, he was so mad. He'd never been stood up in his life - that was the first time ever. He was so macho. I said, well I'm sorry but I couldn't call you.

"He said 'Well I've gone down everybody in my little black book and called every name I have and they're all busy, and if you're not busy do you want to go to a movie with me?' I said, 'Well I guess I could afford that.' So that's what started back our friendship.

"We'd been dating for months, must have been June or July when Jimmy got back from overseas and called me from the base, said his sister had our wedding planned, and he wanted me to come and meet him. I said, 'Wait a minute, nobody plans my wedding but me!'

"He said she knew we were planning on getting married and went ahead and did some things. I said, 'I don't know, I've been dating somebody here since you've been gone. I don't know what I'm going to do, Jimmy, call me back later.'

"That's when I knew I had to tell Joe so that night when we went out I told him Jimmy called me and thought we were going to get married. That's when I got the most romantic, greatest proposal - he just looked at me, and said, 'I'll have you know you're not marrying anybody but me.' That was my great proposal from Joe Phillips.

"He meant it, so I guess when I found out he was mad at me it made me think, well I do really like this guy. This all may be funny to you, but I'm so happy that he turned out to be the love of my life and I loved him dearly all of the years we had together. I did not make a mistake. If I'd gone with any of the others it would have been a mistake.

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"After we decided to be married on August 11, 1945, the war had just ended and in Oak Ridge there was a little old church, called the little chapel on the hill and I wanted so desperately to be married there. Joe said, 'I can't, I can't face people.'

"He used to be real shy. He couldn't stand up and talk in front of people. He said, 'I'd turn red and I just can't do it. Please, please don't make me do that.' So we got our license and found a place we could live. The couple we were with a lot, GI and Sarah, didn't have children and had a two bedroom house. They would rent us their extra bedroom.

"We moved our stuff in there and on Saturday morning, they and Lorelle and us, we all drove to Rossville, GA. We found a little Church of Christ there with the minister Boyd D. Fanning living next door. Fortunately he was home and he came over and married us at the Rossville Church of Christ.

"Then Lorelle had to go back so we took her to the bus station and we had reservations and so did GI and Sarah at the Patton Hotel in Chattanooga. We stayed there the first night and went to Lookout Mountain and toured a lot the next day before they had to go home.

"Dad and I traveled around North Carolina with what little time we had as a honeymoon and came back by the home place and stayed there a couple of nights and met a lot of the family and then came on back to Oak Ridge to start our life there.

"We stayed in our room at GI and Sarah's for about a month till we got a two room house, then later we got a two bedroom house and could have visitors come to stay. Gary had his 2nd birthday there. We loved Oak Ridge and had so many friends there. Everybody was from somewhere else. We knew by then that we'd been making the bomb, but we loved it there.

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I wonder if this story is not typical of many others who met in Oak Ridge, fell in love and married while here. Hope you enjoyed Nell's telling of her Oak Ridge love story.



Nell Phillips today, still enjoying life and telling her story of finding love in Oak Ridge