

20 years supporting the Great Smoky Mountain National Park

(As published in The Oak Ridger's Historically Speaking column on April 25, 2016)

On Saturday, April 16, 2016, a large group of 30 volunteers from Oak Ridge's Consolidated Nuclear Security at the Y-12 National Security Complex and UT- Battelle employees at the Oak Ridge National Laboratory as well as friends and family of some Y-12 retirees spent their day at Elkmont Campground's Amphitheater. They replaced the wooden benches and repainted the projection building.

This is the 20th year of volunteer gatherings that have come to be known as "Help the Smokies!" What has become a staple in the volunteer program of Y-12 began in 1996 when then superintendent of the Great Smoky Mountains National Park, Karen Wade visited Oak Ridge to confirm the location was suitable for storing several of the park's historic artifacts.

Gordon Fee was the President of Lockheed Martin Energy Systems and according to him, it was during a conversation with Superintendent Wade that the subject of the maintenance costs of the park came up. That is when the idea of a program whereby the contractor in Oak Ridge could contribute financially to the maintenance of the park and their volunteers could provide the needed labor to do the things the park staff could not do alone.

Over the years, the successive contractors at the Y-12 National Security Complex have continued to support the "Help the Smokies" program financially and volunteers from both Y-12 and the Oak Ridge National Laboratory have continued to provide the volunteer workers. Usually the volunteers spend at least a couple of Saturday's a year in the park doing special projects planned by the park staff.

Most of the picnic areas and campsites in the Smokies have been refurbished by the "Help the Smokies" team of volunteers. While this has been primarily a Y-12 initiative, it began before the contracts were separated and the Oak Ridge National Laboratory and other Oak Ridge folks who became aware of it have pitched in from time to time to help. After the fun of working in the park, it is easy to convince volunteers to return on the next semi-annual work day.

Lunch has been provided at each work day, and the camaraderie grows during that wholesome meal. Louise Presley has been the primary coordinator of the lunches. This past Saturday was no exception.

The lunch was great but even more important was the recognition provided for the 20th anniversary of the program. Gordon Fee returned to thank the volunteers, a resolution from the Senate of the State of Tennessee was presented along with a plaque from the Park Service commemorating 20 years of successful partnership.

The State resolution begins by noting that "this General Assembly takes great pleasure in paying tribute to one of the finest examples of volunteerism in the Volunteer State of Tennessee," notes that Bob Presley was instrumental in organizing and facilitating a group of volunteers from Oak Ridge and that twenty years later, "a new generation of volunteers and some of the originals are still the unsung heroes of the park under the continuing leadership of Bob Hawthorne and Al Roberson, the current Help the Smokies Volunteer Team coordinator.

That first Smokies Volunteer Day in April 1996 attracted 125 volunteers and focused on the Metcalf Bottoms picnic area. Since then most every picnic area in the Tennessee portion of the park has been improved by the volunteers from Oak Ridge as well as a number of very special projects such as the orientation shelter at the entrance to Cades Cove loop road and the addition of two ADA handicap-accessible campsites at the Cades Cove Campground.

Additional awards have been provided to recognize the volunteers over the years with a highlight being the Hammer Award of Vice President Al Gore in 2001. Several expressions of gratitude and respect from the management and staff of the Great Smoky Mountains National Park have also been received by the volunteers.

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Stephanie Sutton, a member of the park staff said, "In the past twenty years, over 14,000 volunteer hours have been provided and corporate funds of over \$100,000 have been invested in the park." The partnership started 20 years ago continues to produce positive results.

Paul Bogart, another park staff member expressed his confidence in the ability of the "Help the Smokies" volunteer team in that when a suggestion was made that the park could provide more educational programs if the Elkmont Campground Amphitheater was refurbished, he said, "I know just the group that can do that!"

A few years back the "Help the Smokies" volunteer team was recognized for their volunteerism with an award from the park service in honor of 10,000 volunteer hours, becoming one of only 11 such groups to receive that award at the time. The team is well on its way to the next milestone of volunteer hours and the partnership shows no signs of losing its momentum.

Thanks to the continuing corporate financial support of Consolidated Nuclear Security and the next generation of volunteers, the Great Smoky Mountain National Park will continue to reap the benefits of the volunteer workers and the volunteers will continue to better appreciate the park.

Of course, Oak Ridge now has its very own Manhattan Project National Historical Park and volunteerism from Oak Ridge and surrounding communities supporting that park is off to a great start. Over 125 volunteers attended the first Volunteer Orientation held in Oak Ridge and the volunteers are already at work supporting that park staff's efforts to initiate activities and tours.

With a Park Ranger stationed daily at the American Museum of Science and Energy, Oak Ridge is fast seeing the benefits of being a national park. Recent initiatives such as the Junior Ranger Program and the display placed in McGee Tyson Airport are just examples of the type of things to come.

The "Help the Smokies" project has become an example of the powerful combination of corporate sponsorship and volunteer workers and how the combination can accomplish great things together with the National Park Service. Plus, the volunteers have taken on an added special interest and pride in one of "our" national parks.



Gordon Fee, retired President of Lockheed Martin Energy Systems, thanks the volunteers for 20 years of supporting the Great Smoky Mountains National Park

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"Help the Smokies" volunteers and Great Smoky Mountains National Park staff make a winning team!



Scott Underwood focuses on aligning the bench while George Dailey looks on

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Al Roberson is the volunteer leader of the "Help the Smokies" program



George Dailey hammers the bolt home to secure the bench seat