

# Heritage Tourism: The American Museum of Science and Energy and the Southern Appalachian Railway Museum's Secret City Excursion Train

(As published in The Oak Ridger's Historically Speaking column on June 27, 2016)

Gordon Fee, retired President of Lockheed Martin Energy Systems, and presently chairman of the Oak Ridge Heritage Railroad Authority, recently said, "It would appear to me that the City of Oak Ridge is at a major crossroads with respect to figuring out a way to leverage the new Manhattan Project National Historical Park to build a robust Historic Tourism business."

On three Thursdays in June, Niki Nicholas, Superintendent of the Big South Fork National River and Recreation Area and the Obed Wild and Scenic River, as well as our manager for the Manhattan Project National Historical Park – Oak Ridge, and I are speaking to a large Oak Ridge Institute for Continued Learning class on the history of the new park. What fun! The class seemed quite interested in learning about the details of the implementation steps being followed.

I have written often over the past several years regarding the various attempts that have been made to define Heritage (or Historic, as Gordon termed it) Tourism. As early as Thursday, October 23, 2014, Lee Waddell Curtis, Director of Program Development and Legislative Liaison for the Tennessee Department of Tourist Development, discussed, at a public meeting in Oak Ridge, the growth and significance of heritage tourism in Tennessee. NUMBER TWO INDUSTRY in the state!

Yet, we in Oak Ridge cannot seem to effectively grasp the concept. Even with the success of rowing, human powered sports, The Secret City Festival and off-roading to our north and other opportunities that come our way.

Gordon continued, "On the positive side, a new Manhattan Project National Historical Park is up and running. It is in the formative state and crying for help in deciding what it is going to be when it grows up. The City of Oak Ridge is very close to getting a deal to revitalize the retail mall immediately adjacent to American Museum of Science and Energy and the increased traffic in that area should enhance attendance at AMSE, yet recent news seems to indicate that the Department of Energy may be considering action to significantly downsize AMSE."

More from Gordon, "The existence of a premier rowing site in Oak Ridge brings many visitors to town and they in turn attract visitors and guests who would be attracted to visit historic tourism sites in the city and region. Oak Ridge has an outstanding Children's Museum and a Railroad Museum that are both visited by many tourists from outside the City."

"The Great Smoky Mountain National Park and the towns of Gatlinburg and Pigeon Forge draw over 10 million visitors to the area and are growing every year. Tourism is the number two industry in Tennessee and those folks could be drawn to Oak Ridge if proper advertising is put in place. Even a very small part of the 10 million would be a huge economic benefit for our city."

Finally, Gordon concluded by saying, "Oak Ridge is in fact the Secret City. We are the birth place of Nuclear Medicine which has saved the lives of millions of people across the world, the birth place of the Nuclear Navy, the birth place of uranium processing without which there would be no nuclear electric power plants, we are the birth place of the machines which purify vaccines for human use, we are the home place of the individual who personally led the charge to eliminate polio across the globe, we are the birth place of the touch screen for computers, we are leading the world in introducing 3 D printing by manufacturing automobiles in a new and exciting way, we are leading the world in basic studies in computing and that mystery term "Neutron Scattering". Yet these facts are hidden from Joe and Sally Tourist who visit us. They learn we helped end World War II and we do a lot of great science using their money but we hide our accomplishments."

And just recently, "Tennesseine" was announced as the name for Element 117! The Oak Ridge National Laboratory played a HUGE role in that! It is good to see Tennessee so recognized and we in Oak Ridge

# Heritage Tourism: The American Museum of Science and Energy and the Southern Appalachian Railway Museum's Secret City Excursion Train

(As published in The Oak Ridger's Historically Speaking column on June 27, 2016)

should take great pride in that. Are we? What are we doing about it? What CAN WE DO ABOUT THAT? How would other cities capitalize on such a huge marketing opportunity? Yet, we can't seem to do it. Why?

As decisions are made regarding Main Street Oak Ridge, the American Museum of Science and Energy property and how to grow industry, retail business, AND tourism, we need to push all options. They are complimentary, not exclusive of one another. They are linked and one can serve as a catalyst for other methods and approaches. We need to think BIG. Reach out and claim our heritage, yes, but also move ahead into the future with eagerness for new approaches and unique opportunities.

A final thought from Gordon Fee: "With the new Manhattan Project National Historical Park we have a unique opportunity to grab the golden ring. Officials from other cities have told us they see Oak Ridge's unique history and ever-present scientific advancements as something they would certainly like to have for their cities." (NOTE Chattanooga's recent successful efforts to put an ORNL presence there!)

Gordon continues, "Will we do it or let it slip through our hands? That is up to the leaders of our city, certainly the elected leaders, but maybe even more so, the major contractor management teams.

Here he recalls a time when he and his peers worked hard to promote and help lead Oak Ridge, "We had top managers actively performing on boards and functioning as catalysts for growth in the city. We need to rejuvenate that type approach again!" Gordon is correct, key leadership positions filled by competent experienced managers can add greatly to our ability to implement an effective and progressive vision as a city.

And his concluding thought, "Oak Ridge needs to embrace the historic tourism as a major economic development thrust to help solve the cities tax revenue problem which is very serious. Every potential source of revenue must be pursued if we are to turn the tide!" Wow, what will we do with that challenge?

The American Museum of Science and Energy and the Secret City Excursion Train are two of our most effective heritage tourism attractions. The sad news that the train was forced to stop operations is not helpful. The future of AMSE is still to be determined. It is time for serious consideration be given to build Heritage Tourism. What can we do? What can you do? Readers, pitch in and help where you can.

Encourage our leaders as they deliberate the future of Oak Ridge.

I know I have not said much of anything about rowing, Secret City Festival, Lavender Festival, the Children's Museum of Oak Ridge, The Oak Ridge International Friendship Bell, The K-25 historic site with its planned history center, and many, many, many other wonderful aspects of our city. My focus has been narrowed to the recent issues surrounding Heritage Tourism. If this has caused you to think about Oak Ridge and our potential for the future, then my efforts have been successful.

The real result is what are we (the collective citizens of Oak Ridge) going to do? What is next for Oak Ridge?

# Heritage Tourism: The American Museum of Science and Energy and the Southern Appalachian Railway Museum's Secret City Excursion Train

(As published in The Oak Ridger's Historically Speaking column on June 27, 2016)



American Museum of Science and Energy and the Manhattan Project National Historical Park – potential for a winning combination!



Gordon Fee wearing a red bow tie in honor of Bill Wilcox, former City of Oak Ridge Historian, as he speaks a few years ago at a celebration of the life of our beloved Bill Wilcox who was also a staunch proponent of Heritage Tourism