

Dave Nichols (Kenneth David Nichols, Jr.) July 7, 2016

(As published in The Oak Ridger's Historically Speaking column on August 1, 2016)

Recently we were visited by the son of the Major General Kenneth D. Nichols. Colonel Nichols (his rank when he lived in Oak Ridge in the 1940's) was second in command to General Leslie R. Groves and ran the day to day activities of the Manhattan Project (except for Los Alamos, which Robert Oppenheimer ran) from right here in Oak Ridge. He lived at 111 Olney Lane.

I was delighted to meet Dave and to get to know him while he was here for a visit. I asked him to write his thoughts about the visit. Here is what he sent:

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First let me express my sincere appreciation for the warm and welcoming hospitality offered by you and Ken Mayes. Since the family moved from Oak Ridge in 1946, I have only been back to the Secret City twice, with the most recent visit on July 7, 2016.

My wife, our grandson, and I started our visit by visiting the home site my sister and I lived in during some of my Dad's tenure at Oak Ridge. When we pulled up to 103 Olney Lane, having only known it as an infant, we observed a nice well-kept "modern day" home. Coincidentally the owner was out front, and after introductions she explained her knowledge of the expansion history of the home. I must say I was really taken to be able to be there after 70+ years.

The following day we spent the morning at the American Museum of Science & Energy walking through the "Manhattan Project" wing of the museum. When we previously visited the museum, probably 30 years ago, our recollection was it was in a different building [AMSE has been in the current building since 1975 - Ray]; however, we observed that many of the artifacts were obviously still being displayed.

Mr. Mayes, Deputy Director of the museum, was nice to have collected some items from the archives in the form of some documents penned by my Dad as well as a selection of photos taken by Ed Westcott during his service as District Engineer of the Manhattan Project.

Our visit to the museum was followed by an interesting and informative bus tour of some of the major sites including: Y-12 New Hope Visitor Center, Bethel Valley Church, the Granite Reactor, Spallation Neutron Source, and the East Tennessee Technology Park: Heritage Center, formerly K-25. The guide was very informative, and clearly was familiar with the sites as well as their importance.

It was at the Y-12 New Hope Visitor Center where I had the occasion to meet you and be informed by your brief discussion of the Y-12 site and how important it was as the Atomic Bomb was being developed.

The highlight for me was walking past the Major General Kenneth D. Nichols Conference Center. I was not aware of this room named for my father and I was very touched to see how the Y-12 Visitor Center recognized his contribution to the Manhattan Project.

When the bus tour was over the Museum was beginning a demonstration of the Van de Graaff Generator, which was extremely informative, interesting, and hands on. That was probably the highlight of our grandson's day!

We were invited to attend a presentation at the Midtown Community Center provided by Don and Emily Hunnicutt displaying and discussing many of Ed Westcott's "official" Manhattan Project photos. It was such an added treat to get to personally meet Mr. Westcott, and offer my gratitude and appreciation for the wonderful photos he had taken of my Dad.

Our day was filled with many emotions and significant additional information about the Manhattan Project and its place in history. More people need to take the trip to Oak Ridge to see how important the facility was in the 1940's and more importantly to see the tremendous importance of the many projects it has embarked upon since then that geared to keep our country safer and healthier.

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I admired my Dad not only as a father, but also as a gentleman who spent well over 30 years serving his country in the military and government, followed by 30 more years working in the field of nuclear science seeking ways to improve the peaceful use of atomic energy. When we finished our tour of the Manhattan Project section of the museum, there was a photo of Robert Oppenheimer and Leslie Groves with the caption – “Leaders of the Manhattan Project.”

All of my life I was led to believe through family, friends, and readings, that the project was run by General Groves, and Oppenheimer and Nichols reported directly to him representing the scientific and military/engineering responsibilities.

After touring the project last week and having my memory refreshed of what was done under my Dad's leadership during such a short period of time, it was curious to me why his role was not recognized as that of a significant leader in the Manhattan Project.

When I briefly spoke to the 100+ people at the Midtown Community Center meeting, following Mr. Hunnicutt's comments introducing me as the son of Colonel Nichols, I shared the story of my Dad's recognition by the United States Military Academy, as a Distinguished Alumni. He was recognized by the Academy for his significant contribution in bringing an end to World War II.

There were three other graduates on the parade field receiving recognition for their service to the country – William Westmoreland, Al Haig, and Frank Borman. West Point's recognition of my father's place in history was a significant honor.

As the biased son, I have been and always will be proud of his significant contribution to our country.

Dave Nichols

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There you have some truly unique insight into the perspective of someone who has close ties to Oak Ridge's origins. We should pay attention to his chastisement of our lack of proper recognition for his father. While Los Alamos has life size statues of General Groves and Robert Oppenheimer standing just across the street from Ashley Pond and near the entrance to the historic Fuller Lodge. Where are our statues of General Groves and Major General Nichols?

Thank you, Dave, your keen observations are welcome and we are pleased that you found our city where a small portion of your young life was spent still holds such fondness in your heart. Come see us again and maybe, just maybe, you will find us showing more recognition for the contribution your father made to what is now our joint heritage!

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Dave Nichols standing outside the Major General Kenneth D. Nichols Conference Center at the Y-12 History Center in the New Hope Center