

# Ed Westcott: by Pat Hope

(As published in The Oak Ridger's Historically Speaking column on December 13, 2017)

Pat Hope wrote about Ed Westcott in her church Newsletter and I asked her if she would modify the article to fit into *Historically Speaking*. She agreed.

So, enjoy an article featuring Ed Westcott from Pat Hope's perspective.

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James Edward (Ed) Westcott was born in January 1922, when Warren G. Harding was president and World War I was still fresh on the minds of Americans. Yet, Ed's life would be dominated by World War II, and he would eventually meet seven Presidents. He is probably one of the most famous people alive from early Oak Ridge. The internet describes him as "a photographer who worked for the United States government in Oak Ridge, Tennessee, during the Manhattan Project and the Cold War."

According to the International Encyclopedia of the First World War, professional documentary photographers required permits and "were often restricted to working in designated areas." Even when they complied with regulations, photographers were vulnerable to arrest and harassment by state authorities, but during World War II, Ed had unprecedented access to a place dubbed the "secret city."

Known for his striking black and white photographs that documented early Oak Ridge and that can be seen, literally, all over town, Ed, now 95, came to Oak Ridge in 1942. I sat down to talk to Ed a couple of weeks ago, along with daughter Emily and his son William, both of Oak Ridge. Not surprisingly, all of Ed's children — Emily, William, and their siblings Jim, John, and David love photography. Emily said Ed's paternal grandmother was a photographer, as well, and Ed's grandson Phil worked as a photographer in Alaska for the National Park Service and held other photography jobs.

Ed's dad was a bookkeeper with the L&N Railroad and when the family moved from Chattanooga, where Ed was born, to Nashville, Ed, then a young teen, started his own business developing film for people out of his first dark room, a converted pie wagon. His dad would bring film home from his co-workers for Ed to develop and they'd pay him for it. This early interest in photography would direct the rest of the young boy's life.

As an adult, Ed worked for the Army Corps of Engineers in Nashville, taking photos of dams, air strips, even a POW camp in Crossville. Then in December 1942, he transferred to a site near Knoxville, where he was to take pictures of everything concerning a new secret place that had to do with the war. Ed was the 29th person hired for the Manhattan Project, and what would become Oak Ridge.

Following the war, Ed transferred to the Atomic Energy Commission (AEC). Under AEC, he traveled to nuclear sites like Three-Mile Island, and went to Puerto Rico twice, to photograph the construction of a prototype nuclear reactor there. He has not traveled internationally, but his photos have been all around the world.

He has photographed kings and queens and people from all walks of life, including seven U.S. Presidents — the first one being Franklin D. Roosevelt when Ed was a boy in Nashville. Later as part of his job, he photographed John F. Kennedy as a senator, and presidents Richard Nixon, Gerald Ford, Jimmy Carter, Ronald Reagan and George H.W. Bush. He also photographed Queen Frederica of Greece, King Hussein bin Talal, "the father of modern Jordan," famous Grand Ole Opry stars like Roy Acuff, and movie stars such as Rita Hayworth and Patricia Neal.

Also, Ed photographed autopsies for the government hospital here and took aerial photos, including aerial pictures of the Oak Ridge site. Once, officials came to have Ed develop film at his office at the Administration Building known as "Castle on the Hill," while they waited with a guard outside his door.

His photos are stored in the national archives in Maryland for years 1942-46, and for his years with the AEC, they are stored in the national archives in Atlanta. He retired in 1977, after 36 years with the government. Emily and William say he is still taking photos of family, which means he has been doing it some 84 years.

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A friend of Ed and author of the weekly *Oak Ridger* Column – “Historically Speaking,” Ray Smith says, “Ed is more than a friend, he is also my hero, and I consider him a mentor in the realm of photography.”

“Without his photographs, I could not tell the history of Oak Ridge nearly as well. His photographs are so much more than just historical images. They tell independent stories of a time in Oak Ridge that literally changed the world we live in. Images of the never before existing equipment are amazing documentary images, but the people Ed included in most of his iconic images are the keys to communicating the history.

“An example is the image of the young girls right out of high school shown operating the cubicles of the Calutrons. This image is so powerful that I use it to tell the story of Gladys Owens, the most prominent young lady in the image. This photograph is also the one Denise Kiernan saw on the internet that caused her to decide to write the New York Times bestselling book, *The Girls of Atomic City*.

Ed told me his favorite pictures were the ones with “people.” His secret to getting a great photo, he believes, is his ability to frame the subject. “He has a God-given talent, Emily told me.

Ray, a historian and great photographer in his own right, says, “There are 15,000 of Ed's negatives on cold storage in the nation's national archives. We have several hundred of his photographs here in Oak Ridge. You can find them in many locations around town and at several places on the internet.

“There are two published books of his photographs. Baldwin Lee, University of Tennessee professor, has written and spoken about Ed's uncanny eye for artistry in his photographs. Y-12 has a traveling show of 44 of his images that have been displayed at the National Archives in Atlanta, the East Tennessee History Center in Knoxville, and the US Space and Rocket Center in Huntsville, AL.

“They are also on display at the East Tennessee Economic Council meeting room here in Oak Ridge. His images have also been the primary source material in several documentary films made on the history of Oak Ridge.

Ray says he appreciates the time he has been privileged to spend with Ed. “It was my pleasure to drive him to the exhibit of 90 of his photographic images presented in the Downtown Gallery, Knoxville, TN, by the University of Tennessee and to meet him when he returned from his HonorAir flight to Washington DC as a Manhattan Project Veteran.

“Ed continues to be a resource I use when I need accurate details about Oak Ridge during the Manhattan Project. Ed is most deserving of the many awards that have been bestowed on him. He is an amazing icon of Oak Ridge!

Awards for his photography, include Department of Energy (DOE) Outstanding Achievement, Rotary Outstanding Achievement, East Tennessee Historical Society (ETHS) awards and he has been given the key to the city. The Oak Ridge Kroger Marketplace shopping center, which opened in 2014, is named the “Westcott Center” in his honor.

R&R Realty offices, the Secret City Café in the Methodist Medical Center of Oak Ridge, Soup Kitchen, Precision Printing, American Museum of Science and Energy's main lobby, the Children's Museum of Oak Ridge, and the recently renovated Alexander Inn, now the Alexander Guest House, are just a few of the places with Ed's photos prominently displayed.

Even a beer has been named for him at Crafter's Brew in Oak Ridge, and Ed “tried it and liked it,” said William.

Ed said his favorite picture from early Oak Ridge is the one of the crowd holding up a newspaper that says “War Ends.” Also, this photo is the cover of Ed's 2005 book, *Images of America Oak Ridge*.

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After the war, Ed became interested in using amateur radio. William said his dad would talk to people all over the world, sometimes doing phone patches. If someone wanted to reach a person in another country, Ed would reach them by amateur radio, and the person he reached would then phone whoever it was to find out how they were doing. Ed's first conversation on the radio was a ship in the Atlantic. He got his license in 1951 and his "call letters" W4UVS.

In the 19th century, amateur radio operators were sometimes called ham operators, which was a derogatory term in those days, used in connection to telegraph operators that were poorly skilled, according to research Emily did. But, by the 20th century, operators became proud of the term, and so they are often called "ham" operators.

William says to be an operator you have to know Morse code and be able to code five words per minute (wpm).

William remembers sitting on his dad's lap when he was in first grade and learning to code. He didn't get into it seriously until he was in his twenties but he said it was surprising what he had retained just being with his dad every day. According to William, there are five levels of competency. His dad was at the Advanced Level and could code 24 wpm or more, while William was on the third level - General at 13 wpm.

Starting with a set-up in his bedroom, Ed would use surplus army equipment like radios, table power supply, and other components. Later, when they moved to a "D" House on Georgia Ave., Ed was able to use the closed in porch on the back side of the house as his radio room. He also erected a 50-foot tower in his yard so he could transmit and receive the radio signals.

William recalls there were several antennae that had to be used and "if you walked near a dipole wire antenna with a fluorescent bulb, it would light up if the signal was putting out," he said.

In the early 70s, Ed and other ham radio operators overheard a conversation between two members of the People's Temple Christ Church of Redwood Valley, CA (better known as the Jim Jones church). The two women were talking in code and did not identify themselves properly with their call letters.

Eventually, the FBI, the Federal Communications Commission (FCC) and MARCO became involved. The ham operators tried to gain as much info as possible to help authorities stop Jones, whom they already suspected of holding people at his South American camp against their will. Ed even talked to Jones on the radio who asked him to come to Jonestown Guyana to photograph their compound for a recruiting brochure.

As part of the radio operators gathering evidence against Jones, it wasn't long until U. S. Congressman Leo Ryan of California led a delegation to the commune to investigate claims of people being held against their will by the Peoples Temple Church. Ryan's party (himself and three reporters) along with one defector from the church, was murdered by gunfire while boarding a return flight on November 18, 1978.

A few hours later, Jones committed a mass murder-suicide of 918 of his followers, including nearly three hundred children. Most of the murders were by cyanide poisoning mixed with Kool-Aid punch.

Ed played a vital role in the subsequent investigation when he provided the FBI with numerous radio conversations he had recorded.

Ed is still a member of the Medical Amateur Radio Council (MARCO) and a founding member of the Oak Ridge Amateur Radio Club, and he is also a founding member of the Oak Ridge Heritage and Preservation Association (ORHPA).

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He was married to wife Esther Seigenthaler for 56 years until her death in 1996. Ed suffered a stroke in 2005 that impaired his speech, but, he is still active on the computer, his kids say and likes to read emails. He is a "news junkie," William says, and Emily calls him a "very humble man."

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Thanks to Pat Hope for a wonderful article on my friend and one of my very favorite people in the world, Ed Westcott.



Ray Smith and Ed Westcott in front of the huge display of Ed's framed photographs at the American Museum of Science and Energy

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Ed Westcott being awarded the Muddy Boot award