

Lester Fox, a legendary and iconic storyteller

(As published in The Oak Ridger's Historically Speaking column on March 15, 2017)

Many of you may know that I am proud to be known as a storyteller. Just as Ed Westcott is my hero for photography and I am proud to be a photographer who admires Ed's amazing photographs of our history, I am also an admirer of Lester Fox, master storyteller.

As I make presentations on Oak Ridge history to groups ranging from school students, to professional societies, senior living centers, civic clubs, historical societies, conferences, and even college classes for technical editors, there are stories that I always use. Many of them are stories Lester Fox has told me.

Lester's life experiences make wonderful stories and they are excellent methods to convey the essence of our history. Here are some examples of Lester Fox stories.

When I tell the Senator McKellar story of how Oak Ridge was selected, which was also a favorite story of Senator Howard Baker, Jr., who asked me where I got that story after we had conducted an oral history of him in his office in Huntsville, TN, up in Scott County. We began by Jim Campbell asking the senator, "Senator, let's begin by you telling us about your connection to Oak Ridge."

Senator Baker said, "First let me tell you how that place was chosen," and he went into telling the Senator McKellar story with tremendous enthusiasm waving his arms and obviously enjoying himself. When he finished, I said, "Thank you Senator, for telling the story on video that I tell everyone who comes to Oak Ridge." He said, "Where did you get that story?" I replied, "I got it from Dick Smyser." He said, "That's where I got it, too!"

You will recall the story, "When Albert Einstein signed that letter to President Roosevelt that Leo Szilard drafted stating Germany was buying up uranium ore and was feared to be attempting to build a bomb out of it, President Roosevelt knew it would be an expensive undertaking. He put General Leslie Groves in charge of the Manhattan Project and he also called in Senator McKellar. He said, 'Senator, I need to put a large amount of money against the war effort and I can't let the press or anyone know how much it is or what it is being used for, can you help me with that?' Senator McKellar replied, 'Yes, Mr. President, I can do that for you, just where in Tennessee are you going to put that *thang*?'"

I always follow that story with a Lester Fox story and I begin by saying I know this one is true because Lester told it to me and it happened to him. I begin by saying, "Lester is the patriarch of the Fox family today, but in 1942 he was a sophomore in high school in Oliver Springs, a little town just north of Oak Ridge. He was skipping school. Him and his buddy were playing the pinball machine. When they finished playing the pinball machine, they were walking down the main street of Oliver Springs when they walked by the telephone office. The telephone operator leaned her head out of the door and shouted to Lester saying, 'Lester, go get the principal, he has an important phone call.'

"Now, Lester was skipping school, but he did go and get the principal. The principal went to the telephone office and took that call. He returned to the school and called all the students together into an assembly where he said, 'I have just gotten a phone call from Senator McKellar. He wants me to tell you to go home and tell your parents that they are going to have to find another place to live, the government is going to take your property for the war effort.

"Many of the families did not have an automobile or a truck to move their belongings. If they did have a car, they might not be able to buy gasoline for it, or get tires for it, those things were rationed. But what they did have were young men in the military who were getting killed. And, they wanted to end the war and stop the killing.

"So, they got off their property, many of them in a matter of days, to make room for the Manhattan Project in Oak Ridge. Lester says that was the way some 3,000 people first learned they were going to have to get off their property.

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Then I transition into the John Hendrix, Prophet of Oak Ridge, story, by saying, "One of those families who had to find another place to live in 1942 was descended from a man named John Hendrix."

"John was born in 1865, Civil War time, in Bear Creek Valley. In 1900, his youngest daughter died. His wife accused him of being the reason she died as he had corrected the child the day before. She got mad and left him. She took the rest of the children and went to Arkansas and never came back. This really upset John, so he prayed to God wanting to know why this was happening to him.

"During one of his prayers he heard a loud voice telling him to go sleep on the ground for 40 nights and he would learn the future of this place. It must have been in the winter time because, as the story goes, his hair froze to the ground.

"Now let me interrupt my story to tell you that there were communities before the Manhattan Project like New Hope, Scarboro and Robertsville. Some still have annual reunions, some 75 years later. A couple of years ago I was speaking at one of them and I was telling this story about John Hendrix when a little old lady held up her hand out in the audience. I said, 'Yes ma'am.' She said, 'My grandmother put a quilt on John Hendrix when he was sleeping on the ground and fed him chicken soup because he was about to freeze to death.'

"Now you keep that in mind while I finish my story. When John got through sleeping on the ground he had tremendous stories to tell and he would tell anyone who would listen. He would tell them, 'There is going to be a huge factory built in Bear Creek Valley that will help win the greatest war there will ever be, there is going to be a city on Black Oak Ridge, there is going to be a railroad spur run right by his property line, and the seat of power for all this is going to be right between Pyatt's place and Tadlock's farm.

"Now John died in 1915. In 1942 when the Manhattan Project came here the first shovel full of dirt they dug was right between Pyatt's place and Tadlock's farm. That is where they put the administration building. That is where the Federal Office Building is today. That city on Black Oak Ridge is Oak Ridge. That railroad spur runs right down beside his property line in Hendrix Creek Subdivision, where John Hendrix is buried, and Y-12 is in Bear Creek Valley where the uranium was separated for Little Boy, the world's first atomic bomb ever used in warfare and which did help win World War II.

Later in the presentation I show an Ed Westcott image of several buses. I tell folks that there were 850 buses here in Oak Ridge, the ninth largest bus system in the nation. That leads to another Lester Fox story. Lester and his older brother saw an opportunity and bought several buses. Lester said the buses broke down every day.

One day he was driving the wrecker with one of the buses behind it over in Clinton when he saw another of their buses broke down by the side of the road. Lester stopped and tied the second bus behind the first one with a log chain.

When he pulled out on the road with two buses behind the wrecker, he saw a highway patrol officer hurrying to stop him, "Lester, you can't do that. Leave one of those buses and come back and get it." He also told Lester, "I want you to meet me Monday in the Courthouse. I am getting a lot of questions about you driving this wrecker without a driver's license."

So, come Monday Lester went to the courthouse. The highway patrol officer was already there. He said, "Lester, come with me."

The policeman took Lester to the County Clerk's office and said, "Give this boy a driver's license." Lester was 14 years old when he got his driver's license.

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Another Lester Fox story always follows that one. As I said, Lester said those buses broke down every day. He would have to go to Knoxville to get parts for them. One day when he got to the parts store he could not find a parking place. He went around the block and still could not find one.

So, he just pulled the pickup truck he was driving up on the sidewalk right in the front door of the parts house. He went in and got the parts he needed and when he came out the door a policeman was writing him a parking ticket.

Lester said, "No, no, no, you can't give me a ticket. I am from Oak Ridge and we are trying to win the war over there!" After some discussion about him driving without a driver's license as he was so young and Lester telling him he would call Oak Ridge if he needed to as he was helping win the war and they needed those buses running. The policeman tore up the ticket.

The very next day Lester had to go back to that store for more parts. He did not even look for a parking place, he just pulled right up on the sidewalk in front of the door. When he got out of the truck, he looked up and saw that same policeman writing tickets. Lester waved at him and the policeman waved back. Lester never parked anywhere else but right in the front door of that store.

So, you see, Lester Fox is a key element in the stories I tell. Not only that he is a really neat person with whom to just talk. You can find him most any day at the Fox Brothers Ace Hardware store in Oak Ridge. Just drop by and say hello and I promise you he will start telling you a story!

On Thursday, March 9, Lester was the featured speaker at the Wildcat Den in a "Fireside Chat with Lester Fox" led by Don Hunnicutt. He regaled the large audience for well over an hour with nonstop stories from his past ranging from the facts about the unsolved murder of the Richards sisters in Oliver Springs to the real story of how the Oak Ridge Marina was formed.

That happened when Woodland subdivision and Rolling Hills Apartments were constructed. Dirt from what is now the Marina was hauled in as fill dirt. Lester was one of the truck drivers.

One of his most enjoyable stories is how he came to obtain the Oldsmobile dealership in Oak Ridge. Then an equally powerful story is the dream he thought he was having when he heard that General Motors was closing the Oldsmobile department.

You can find Lester's stories online at the Oak Ridge Public Library's Center for Oak Ridge Oral History. <http://www.oakridgetn.gov/departments/Library/Departments-%26-Services/COROH>

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Lester Fox, Master Storyteller extraordinaire!



Lester Fox and Don Hunnicutt have a "fireside chat" to the Oak Ridge Heritage & Preservation Association's monthly membership and public meeting in the Wildcat Den