

Atomic Integration – a great photo show!

(As published in The Oak Ridger's Historically Speaking column on March 2, 2017)

Ed Westcott shines again! Oak Ridge's favorite photographer and my hero, Ed Westcott, was on hand Thursday, 2/24/17, when the Manhattan Project National Historical Park along with Explore Oak Ridge and the Oak Ridge Chamber of Commerce held a reception opening the month-long display of Ed's photographs of African Americans during the Manhattan Project at Oak Ridge.

I never cease to be amazed at the high quality of prints made from scans of Ed's negatives. The digital files hold the image beautifully. You must understand what Ed did to assure this high level of quality some 70 to 75 years later! His equipment was the best available in that day and he cared for it well. His process for developing the negatives and printing the images was clearly superior.

But even more astonishing than the quality of the images is the art. And yes, the storytelling quality of Ed's photographs is beyond amazing. For example, a photograph of two outhouses, one with a "Colored" sign and another with a "White" sign. Wow, that speaks volumes.

Other photographs show African Americans in various settings and each one conveys some aspect of the story. It is often difficult to explain today the difference then and now regarding how African Americans were treated. It is even hard to tell the historical facts...one is tempted to soften the language and leave out the most difficult to comprehend behavior.

No African American children were allowed in the city during the Manhattan Project. Husband and wives were not allowed to live together. There were many other things that were routine given the culture of the era. Not something acceptable today, but times were different then.

The Oak Ridge Public Library's Oak Ridge Room is a treasure trove of information. Teresa Fortney, the research librarian, sent me an article by Nancy Prince published in The Oak Ridger on February 23, 1977, with the following information included, "When Oak Ridge was first settled, schools for white children were organized in September 1943. Schools for black children were non-existent, and in 1945 some black children were bused to Clinton elementary schools. However, Mr. and Mrs. Robert Officer were hired to organize a black school to serve grades one through eight, and in the fall of 1947 the school opened at the former pre-Oak Ridge white Scarboro School on Bethel Valley Road..." (Note: my research indicates the Scarboro School was used from 1946 to 1949)

Prince went on to say, "Transportation to the school was a problem, so black students were allowed to ride plant buses that passed the building. In 1948 (Note: my research indicates 1949) the school was moved to the school building previously used as a school by the white children of the white trailer camp in Gamble Valley, as the whites vacated the area. The black population also moved to Gamble Valley, as their temporary 'boom-town' housing was torn down."

Prince continued, "During this period black students of high school age were bused daily to attend Austin High, a black high school in Knoxville. Scarboro School, the black school, educated students in grades one through eight. Gradually a ninth grade, kindergarten, and night school were added."

Finally, Prince said, "in 1950 a group of concerned citizens opened a volunteer high school for black students, supported by city school officials who promised to provide rooms in Scarboro School for the classes, and to hire two and a half teachers. The high school section of Scarboro opened in the fall of 1950, and black students were no longer sent each day to Knoxville. The 'Volunteer Group,' as it was known, taught black students free of charge in the new high school."

As you may know, Oak Ridge High School and Robertsville Junior High School were the first white schools in the south to integrate when in 1955, some 100 black students began the school year on September 6, 1955, with little fanfare and no controversy. A reporter from Life Magazine was there to document what The Oak Ridger called a "calmness" that accompanied the first day,

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Attempts to integrate the schools started in 1953 and there was initial resistance. Waldo Cohn was the chairman of the City Council and was subjected to a recall vote which failed. But he resigned from the chairmanship to avoid further controversy. Two years later, after Brown versus The Board of Education, and after a series of events in Clinton, TN, as described in Historically Speaking article published on January 1, 2011, <http://smithdray1.net/historicallyspeaking/2011/1-21-11%20A%20look%20at%20the%201950%20integration%20story.pdf> Oak Ridge schools were integrated.

Here is an excerpt from the above mentioned Historically Speaking article: "The McSwain versus County Board of Education in Anderson County, Tennessee, lawsuit was not heard by Judge Robert L. Taylor until February 13, 1952. At which time, he upheld the practice of separate but equal as he claimed to not be able to see any terrible inconvenience caused by busing black high school students to Knoxville."

"After Brown versus the Board of Education was ruled upon by the U. S. Supreme court in 1954, the U. S. Court of Appeals, Sixth Circuit, overturned Judge Taylor's 1952 ruling. McSwain versus County Board of Education in Anderson County, Tennessee, was returned to Judge Taylor's district court for a new decision. That decision would ultimately result in the Clinton High School's integration."

Now back to Ed's photos and the wonderful exhibit in the Oak Ridge Chamber of Commerce lobby.

If you look closely at Ed's photographs, there are many things that pop out. The designers of the *Atomic Integration* photo show wisely decided NOT to add textual captions to the photos but rather to allow the viewer to discern for themselves what is being conveyed visually in each photograph.

Some are simple. Others more complex. The one photograph printed in color is an image of a fire truck and kids holding signs about playing with matches. The first child is obviously upset by being in that picture and having to hold that dumb sign...or at least that is how he appears to me.

Another image of several white men and a single African American did not mean as much to me as when I was told the situation. It is a union vote and the white men are obviously uncomfortable with the African American being there. You see, African Americans were not normally union members. So this one was an exception. How did that happen? Was he a craftsperson rather than a laborer?

The nurses seem natural, but think about it. Were they really trained nurses? Yes, I think so. How about the African American men in suits? Why were they dressed up so? Important meetings, obviously. The white men seem to me to be trying to convince the African Americans they were getting a good deal in the housing being planned.

I may be biased by knowing that the African Americans were first planned to have homes built in what is now Woodland, but a decision was made to put housing for whites there and to move the African American housing to Gamble Valley.

Then there is the story of the Scarboro School in Gamble Valley. A photograph of that school is included in the photo show. It had been a white school. When the school was moved from Scarboro to the Gamble Valley location the name came with it. That is how the Scarboro community got its name.

So, these are just a few of the stories I was reminded of when I saw the *Atomic Integration* exhibit at the Oak Ridge Chamber of Commerce. It will remain on display for a month. Please take the time to drop by and enjoy the wonderful photography of Ed Westcott. But that is not all, the stories told by these photographs may well outweigh the importance of the technical quality.

When you view the framed photographs in this photo show you will undoubtedly be drawn into the African American story of their opportunities at Clinton Engineer Works and later Oak Ridge. Even if we have difficulty understanding it all today, these jobs were the best paying work they had ever had. You will appreciate the story and the art.

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Go to the Oak Ridge Chamber of Commerce and enjoy the *Atomic Integration* exhibit which will remain there for at least a month.



Ed Westcott, famous photographer and my HERO!

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Niki Nicholas, Park Superintendent of the Big South Fork National River & Recreation Area, the Obed Wild & Scenic River and the Manhattan Project National Historical Park (Acting Manager for Oak Ridge Site)

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Ed Westcott and Lynn Freeny – two exceptional photographers



Larry Gipson admires one of the many framed photographs