

Oak Ridge celebrates 75th Anniversary

(As published in The Oak Ridger's Historically Speaking column on August 16, 2017)

The city of Oak Ridge as well as the government installations located within the city limits have existed now for 75 years. It has been said of Oak Ridge, regarding anniversaries, that it may well be the city with the most anniversary dates.

There are several different dates that can be noted as milestones. There is one for the selection of the site (September 19, 1942), one for the start of construction (November 1942), one for the start of construction in each of the government sites, Y-12 (February 1, 1943), X-10 (February 2, 1942), and K-25 (June 1, 1943), and there are more dates of note such as when the X-10 Graphite Reactor "went Critical" on November 4, 1943 and when the first shipment of Uranium 235 left Y-12 (March 1, 1944).

The first anniversary date is significant in that General Leslie Groves was told he had been selected for the atomic bomb project on September 17, 1942. He then authorized the purchase of 59,000 acres in East Tennessee on Saturday, September 19, 1942.

While credit is often given to Groves for making this decision quickly, it actually had been considered for months and Groves' predecessor, Colonel Marshall, had not moved forward with the purchase of the land. But Groves was not one to delay decisions, so he authorized the purchase.

He was Colonel Groves at the time he was selected, being promoted officially to Brigadier General on September 23, 1942, as it was thought the title "General" would have more effect when dealing with the scientists needed for the upcoming effort to create an atomic bomb. He left a meeting with his superiors early on September 23, 1942, a rare thing to do, saying he had to catch a train to Knoxville. He was anxious to inspect right away the plant site for which he had already authorized purchase.

The next day he came to Elza and viewed the northeast corner of the 90-square mile area for which he had authorized to be purchased to locate his "plant." This area had been visited in the summer but no action had been taken. Groves had already quickly changed that! Don't you know he was pleased to see the land he had already purchased was suitable.

Groves had authorized the acquisition of some 59,000 acres along the Clinch River. This area, some 20 miles west of Knoxville, Tennessee, was home to 3,000 individuals living on approximately 1,000 farms. This came as a surprise to most of them, even though the area had been under consideration since the summer.

Lester Fox tells the true story of Senator McKellar making a phone call to Oliver Springs. Lester and his friend were skipping school, playing the pin ball machine. They were walking down the main street by the telephone office when the telephone operator leaned her head out the door and said, "Lester, go get the principal. He has an important phone call!"

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

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Lester swears this is how the 3,000 people first learned they were going to have to move off of 59,000 acres to make room for the Clinton Engineer District. Many of them did not have automobiles or trucks, but they did get off their property in a matter of days.

Over the next several months, intense construction by unionized labor working for the Stone and Webster engineering and construction company built a city that eventually had a population of 75,000. Stone and Webster also built Y-12. J. A. Jones built K-25 and DuPont built the X-10 site, also with unionized labor. These three sites housed four different facilities employing some 80,000 operations and construction workers in June 1945. The sites produced materials and conducted research that helped the United States win World War II.

In the decades that followed, the City of Oak Ridge and its three major government sites contributed significantly to the winning of the Cold War, ensured our national security, shared ground-breaking science such as nuclear medicine and nuclear power and continues today to produce substantial breakthrough achievements such as the collaboration that created the new element 117, Tennessine.

As Oak Ridge celebrates its 75th anniversary of substantial contributions to the Nation through an integrated effort by the City of Oak Ridge, Department of Energy, and major DOE facilities and contractors, many events are being anticipated. The events will be scheduled over the latter part of 2017 and throughout 2018.

This opportunity presented by the 75th Anniversary will be used to recognize not only the history of Oak Ridge but the future as well and will provide insights into the modern missions of the DOE sites. Plans are just getting underway. Mayor Warren Gooch is currently forming a 75th Anniversary Committee.

While there may be many small celebrations, including employee and public events at the DOE facilities, the city and DOE facilities there will also be city-wide grand-scale events to mark the 75th Anniversary.

Themes and focus areas will be incorporated into the celebration activities. More details will be forthcoming as planning begins to take place. The mayor's committee being formed will serve to guide the process and will provide an online calendar to help schedule the events.

Recalling earlier anniversaries, the 25th Anniversary was the first large scale event held in 1967 and coins were minted, a book published, a musical "One-Thousand Suns" was produced, next was the 50th Anniversary and the highlight there was the creation of the Oak Ridge International Friendship Bell as well as another coin.

An interesting addition to the 75th Anniversary is the new Peace Pavilion for the Friendship Bell will be completed in 2018. The original bell housing had to be removed because it became structurally unsound. A new design is being completed and a new location as the center piece of the A. K. Bissell Park has been identified.

Groundbreaking for the Peace Pavilion is scheduled for September 21, 2017, International Peace Day. Also unofficially known as World Peace Day, this holiday is observed annually. It is dedicated to world peace, and specifically the absence of war and violence. A fitting day for this event!

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The Oak Ridge Police Department has taken the lead in recognizing the 75th Anniversary. They have created a new badge that includes the historic "A pin" in the design. This "A" pin was given to individuals who worked on the Manhattan Project and has become an iconic symbol, with originals being sold on eBay for several hundred dollars.

The Oak Ridge Heritage & Preservation Association has recently published a new *Secret City Pocket Guide*. A 75th Anniversary commemorative automobile license plate is also available for purchase.

A special 75th Anniversary Birthday Celebration is scheduled for September 15, 2017, at the Historic Grove Theater. It begins at 2PM with historical displays. At 4PM a photo slide show presented by Don and Emily Hunnicutt honors our celebrity photographer, Ed Westcott. At 6PM New York Times Bestseller author, Denise Kiernan, will speak on "The Legacy of Place." Denise is the author of "The Girls of Atomic City" and has a new book, "The Last Castle." She will autograph her books. There will be a closing reception with a 75th Anniversary Birthday cake.

The annual selection of the Oak Ridge Heritage & Preservation Association's Historic Preservation Award will be presented on September 19, 2017.

The Oak Ridge schools is preparing a special edition book commemorating the schools through capturing memories of alumni from the Oak Ridge city schools. This project is well underway.

The Oak Ridge Playhouse is celebrating its 75th Anniversary year with some excellent plays. Fanny and I have season tickets and have enjoyed "Mame" and are looking forward to "Lend me a Tenor" next.

And other organizations will identify similar projects, I am sure. Likely some are already working on their projects and I am just unaware of them. If you or your organization is planning something special for the 75th Anniversary, please make the Mayor's 75th Anniversary Committee aware. Marc DeRose, Explore Oak Ridge, is the mayor's lead on the committee. He is also creating the web page and calendar.

So, the city of Oak Ridge and its government sites with many anniversaries are embarking on a series of celebrations recognizing the 75th year of their existence. Visitors will be welcomed and excitement is expected to build throughout the various celebrations.

If you are an Oak Ridge citizen, join in the fun and enjoy our birthday celebrations. If you leave nearby, plan to visit Oak Ridge often and enjoy our 75th Anniversary Celebrations during 2017 and 2018!

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