

Murray Rosenthal: Selecting and assisting a new ORNL director

(As published in The Oak Ridger's Historically Speaking column on September 27, 2017)

In 1988 Herman Postma, director of Oak Ridge National Laboratory, asked Murray Rosenthal to organize and chair a search committee to look for a new laboratory director. Postma had accepted the offer to move to the Y-12 Plant to serve as senior vice president of Martin Marietta Energy Systems, the government contractor that replaced Union Carbide Nuclear Division. Clyde Hopkins had agreed to become president of MMES only if Postma joined him on the executive staff. Alex Zucker, associate lab director for the physical sciences, was appointed acting ORNL director.

"The search committee work turned out to be an awfully interesting exercise," Rosenthal told ORNL's Steve Stow in an oral history interview. "Because the members of my committee were George Jasny, who had been a classmate of mine at MIT and vice president over all engineering in Oak Ridge; Jack Reese, who was chancellor of the University of Tennessee at the time; ORNL scientists and managers Dave Reichle, Mike Wilkinson and Loucas Christophorou, who was the head of the Corporate Fellows, and Beverly Wilkes, a very bright woman who worked in planning and served as our secretary.

"We met weekly in my office. We made a list of attributes of what we wanted in a director, such as scientific ability and integrity. We invited people to suggest names and searched around ourselves. We set up a very rigorous and formal way of making sure we were fair to all candidates."

One person the committee considered a strong candidate for the job was Al Trivelpiece because of his recent role in Washington as head of basic energy research at the Department of Energy (the Office of Science). "He was near the top of our list because he was someone who knew the Washington scene and had the ability to bring new research facilities to the laboratory," Rosenthal said.

Unfortunately, Trivelpiece had just taken a new job as head of the American Association for the Advancement of Science.

Even so, a friend of Trivelpiece brought word that if the ORNL search committee would approach him, he might be interested in becoming ORNL director. So, we introduced him into our system. And, of course, Trivelpiece was picked to be the Lab director.

"Our committee offered our recommendation to Hopkins and Postma, who did not veto it. And they in turn got the approval of DOE. I made some great friends in that process. It was a marvelous occasion for us, and we felt very good about what we did. It took at least half a year to get a new director."

Trivelpiece became ORNL director in January 1989. He quickly surprised Rosenthal by asking him to assume the role of deputy director. "I oversaw both the scientific and administrative activities at ORNL," Rosenthal said. "We hadn't had a deputy for some time. But, as an outsider, Al felt that he needed a deputy director.

"What I wanted to do was take a strong interest in scientific affairs at the laboratory because that's what I had done for years," Rosenthal said. "But I found very quickly that I was going to be dealing mostly with operating issues, so I had almost no time for the research programs. That was a stressful period because of fault-finding Tiger Teams and audits.

"I hate to say it, but being deputy director was the least fun of anything I did at the laboratory because we were constantly under pressure to look at environmental and safety issues. About 150 audit groups visited ORNL and checked out things, and I had to learn how to talk to them."

The Tiger Teams that DOE sent to all the national labs were formed as a result of a problem

Murray Rosenthal: Selecting and assisting a new ORNL director

(As published in The Oak Ridger's Historically Speaking column on September 27, 2017)

discovered at the Rocky Flats arsenal, a plant near Denver, Colo., which handled plutonium for the weapons program. The serious safety and environmental issues at Rocky Flats prompted DOE to look for environmental, safety and health (ES&H) problems at all its labs. DOE found that conditions at the labs were not up to its standards.

"We hadn't had the resources for years to upgrade our facilities, but we were told we had to fix the problems even though no federal money came to us for this work," Rosenthal said. It was an unfunded mandate.

"So, we had to take the money to meet DOE's ES&H standards out of our overhead, which cut into the research funds and made our employees very unhappy," Rosenthal recalled. "One of my jobs was to tell the research divisions you've got less money and then constantly figure out how to deal with all our health, safety and environmental issues. So, that wasn't a very enjoyable period. We felt we were retreating all the time rather than advancing. But we made it through and provided the base from which the lab could spring forward."

Rosenthal found most of his ORNL jobs exciting except for the last one as deputy director. But after he retired, he found new excitement in his life.

In 1997, he founded the highly successful Oak Ridge Institute for Continued Learning (ORICL), which celebrated its 20th anniversary this year. In 2009, he researched and wrote a history of all of ORNL's 13 reactors, which is available on the www.ornl.gov/content/seventy-years-great-science website.

At 91, he has taken more than 300 ORICL courses, taught a course on ORNL's reactors at ORICL and is still continuing to read, attend classes and learn. (What a great tribute to a good life in retirement! – Ray)

Rosenthal's honors and contributions to the nuclear and Oak Ridge communities

From 1970 to 1973 Murray Rosenthal was a director of the American Nuclear Society and served on the society's executive committee. He was named a fellow of the American Nuclear Society in 1977, and in 1982 was named to the Engineering Hall of Distinction at Louisiana State University. He was elected to the National Academy of Engineering in 1990. In 1993, he received the Fusion Power Associates' Distinguished Career Award, and in 1994 received a Distinguished Service Award from the National Management Association.

In 1955-56, Rosenthal served as vice chairman of the committee that drafted the Oak Ridge charter, and in 1962 he was elected to another Charter Commission and served as its chairman. He was a member of the Oak Ridge Human Relations Advisory Board from 1963 to 1965.

Rosenthal was founding president of the Oak Ridge Institute for Continued Learning (ORICL) and served on the board of directors from 1997 to 2002. He was a director of the Gene Research Access Corporation from 1997 to 2000. From 2012 through 2014, he was a member of the board of the American Museum of Science and Energy Foundation.

...

Thanks Carolyn for an exceptionally well-done series on Murray Rosenthal, one of the jewels of Oak Ridge. Murray has had a distinguished career and also a very productive and fulfilling retirement, both of which were captured concisely in this series.

Murray Rosenthal: Selecting and assisting a new ORNL director

(As published in The Oak Ridger's Historically Speaking column on September 27, 2017)



In this 2002 photo, Murray Rosenthal, who had been retired from ORNL for eight years, appears with ORNL Director Bill Madia, left, and his predecessor, Alvin Trivelpiece

Murray Rosenthal: Selecting and assisting a new ORNL director

(As published in The Oak Ridger's Historically Speaking column on September 27, 2017)



Murray and his friend, Alvin Weinberg