

Lydia Simpson's presentation More Trouble that its Worth? The economics of historic preservation Part 1, by Pat Hope

(As published in The Oak Ridger's Historically Speaking column on January 10, 2018)

Sue Frederick has provided a review of the visit to Oak Ridge by Lydia Simpson, Program Manager for Middle Tennessee State University's Center for Historic Preservation,

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Many Oak Ridgers believe that the importance of heritage and science tourism for Oak Ridge cannot be overstated. I concur that the story of our once secret city is one that many other cities would love to have, as we have been told numerous times.

Yet even as we celebrate the milestone 75th anniversary of the selection of the site for the largest portion of the technology developed by the Manhattan Project, we still can't seem to capitalize on the tremendous story that is Oak Ridge! Why? What are we missing?

Lydia Simpson, program manager for Middle Tennessee State University's Center for Historic Preservation, attempted to guide the Oak Ridge citizens who viewed her presentation at the August 10, 2017, meeting of the Oak Ridge Heritage & Preservation Association. Lydia first came to Oak Ridge at my invitation in July.

At the end of that first visit, her first "exposure" to our illustrious past, she told me what a friend had asked her, when she told him she would be spending some time in Oak Ridge for work. Her friend said, "Are you sure you want to go there? I mean, isn't it full of radiation and stuff?" [Unfortunately, this is an all too frequent frame of mind. I have heard of people in Nashville who, out of totally unfounded fear, will not spend the night in Oak Ridge! Sad!!! – Ray]

After enjoying lunch at Birchfield's with Oak Ridge Historian Ray Smith, Marc DeRose, President of Explore Oak Ridge, and myself, Oak Ridge history enthusiast and Explore Oak Ridge Board Member, Lydia was more than reassured. She was convinced that her visit would be very safe, and professionally and historically enlightening. So, she was anxious to venture out into the environs of our formerly secret city.

As Lydia herself admitted in a post she made to the Middle Tennessee State University Center for Historic Preservation website after her August visit, "My friend's reaction reflects the mysterious aura that still surrounds the 'Secret City' tucked into the mountains of East Tennessee, despite the fact that the community opened its gates to the world almost six decades ago."

Lydia, continued, "Going into my first meeting in Oak Ridge, I knew little more than most people do about the city. Basically, I understood that Oak Ridge had once had something to do with the Manhattan Project and that its original purpose had been so highly secret that members of the public were not initially allowed inside."

When I drove Lydia around town, generally with Ray in the lead car, she was able to gain a first-hand appreciation and better understanding of our city's origins. We were able to show her how it has changed over time, what has been preserved and what has been lost.

Ray started by leading us to the Chapel on the Hill, then down to the refurbished and repurposed Alexander Inn Guest House, whose lobby and hallways prominently feature many of Ed Westcott's original photos. A long gallery of photos is interspersed on one lobby wall with snippets that tell the three-year Oak Ridge origination story, from its selection as the site for development of the first nuclear fuels to the dramatic revelation of the project's purpose that brought World War II to its end in 1945.

This unique facility really provided a spark for Lydia's imagination and highlighted the purpose and desired end result of her visit. [The Alexander Guest House is a main stop on all tours I provide of Oak

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Ridge. It is a part of the Manhattan Project National Historical Park and is a tremendous asset in our community that I proudly take people to see. – Ray]

Our tour on that July afternoon essentially extended to all four corners of the Reservation, from the K-25 Overlook and the K-25 gatehouse on the Oak Ridge Turnpike to the Scarboro Road gatehouse and from the New Hope Visitor Center's Y-12 History Center to Blankenship Field. We crisscrossed the current concentrated retail developments along the Turnpike and South Illinois Avenue, and ending in the pending redevelopment area around Main Street Oak Ridge.

Our final stop was at the American Museum of Science and Energy where Lydia viewed the original cemento Flat Top house on the museum site. She also purchased *The Girls of Atomic City* in the Discovery Shop, the museum's gift shop.

I had recommended Denise Kiernan's book as a starting point for her further study of the Manhattan Project and its importance in the early development of our town, with the hope and expectation that she would see in this story, as I had, the importance of maintaining as much of historic Oak Ridge as possible. My own goal is to be able to tell the Oak Ridge story in a hands-on and modern presentation, highlighting both its past importance to our country as well as its continuing milestone achievements in both a scientific and sociological sense.

Lydia quickly made the connection between the plight and status of her own hometown of Rome, Georgia, a 20th century rayon-mill community and the subject of her pending Ph.D. dissertation, to that of Oak Ridge. Both regions have suffered through economic downturns, generally precipitated by the obsolescence of what were once cutting-edge technologies that had built company towns around manufacturing plants until the products they made were no longer required and indeed had become toxic, both individually and environmentally.

Still, many of the people who had grown up in these areas wanted to see them preserved so that present and future generations could appreciate the sacrifices their predecessors had made "for the greater good." The sacrifices were really balanced against the community spirit that had developed among the diverse groups of people that had worked and lived in these towns. Also the values that defined America in sometimes perilous times that many of us hope continue to define the American spirit.

It was against this experiential background that Lydia Simpson prepared the well-directed and purposefully targeted presentation that she shared with many interested Oak Ridge citizens in the historic Wildcat Den.

Titled *More Trouble that its Worth? The economics of historic preservation*, the presentation included a range of thoughts and data supporting the diametric opposite of a negative answer. More directly, Ms Simpson made and supported the point that investments in historic preservation produce a quantifiable return of greater than 100%, in addition to other non-quantitative benefits.

After defining the term "historic preservation" as "the identification, evaluation, conservation, and use of historic properties so they will continue to play integral, living roles in communities," we were asked the question "Why do it?"

Here are some of the answers that we heard throughout the evening. "The man-made physical environment gives us a sense of history, a sense of place, a sense of our values. When we raze buildings that provide that sense we have tacitly decided that those values are not worth saving. Buildings tell stories and connect people to places. "

These areas provide a community Identity and sense of place for residents and visitors alike. Each historic community has its own unique past which is reflected in the built environment. No two historic

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landscapes are alike and in each community the landscape can be viewed and appreciated as a shared experience.

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Part two of this series will continue the perception of Lydia Simpson, professional Historic Preservationist as she looks at the potential for historic preservation in Oak Ridge.



Lydia Simpson, Professional Historic Preservationist speaks on her perspective of the potential for historic preservation in Oak Ridge