

# Giants of fast food have early connections to Oak Ridge

(As published in The Oak Ridger's Historically Speaking column on January 2, 2018)

My friend and co-researcher of Oak Ridge history, Mike Stallo, has prepared the following story of three famous people in the world of fast food restaurants who lived in Oak Ridge during the Manhattan Project. He is also researching the locations where many of the more prominent scientists lived while in Oak Ridge. That will come later in Historically Speaking, but now, enjoy Mike's story about fast food restaurateurs.

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Enrico Fermi, Eugene Wigner, J. Robert Oppenheimer- all well-known names associated with Oak Ridge, Tennessee and the "Big Science" of the Manhattan Project. That story has been told time and time again. So today, I'm going to tell you about some other big names. Names that tie this small East Tennessee town to the titans of fast-food.

During the war-time era, the Roane-Anderson Company operated several public cafeterias in Oak Ridge. Serving Manhattan Project workers and their families, they were kind of the fast-food restaurants of their day. During peak operations in 1945, they were serving 36,000 meals a day with gross sales of more than \$11,000. To put this in perspective, that would be the equivalent of \$145,000 per day today. Two of these cafeterias were managed by none other than Mr. Harland Sanders, Colonel Sanders, the father of Kentucky Fried Chicken.

Like many Americans, Sanders wanted to do his part to contribute to the war effort, but at 52, he was too old for military service. Having worked in the restaurant business during the 1930's, he already had restaurant experience, so serving as a cafeteria manager seemed like a natural fit. The Colonel worked in Oak Ridge from 1944-45. He opened his first Kentucky Fried Chicken 7 years later and become one of the most successful fast food entrepreneurs of his day.

Another big name in fast-food with a connection to both Oak Ridge and Colonel Sanders is Wendy's founder Dave Thomas. When Dave was around 12 years old, he lived in Oak Ridge at the J.A. Jones Construction Camp. This temporary village - also known as Happy Valley - was set up for the construction workers and laborers that were building the massive K-25 plant on the western edge of town. Dave's adoptive father Rex Thomas was one of those workers.

While living in Happy Valley, Thomas took a bus every day into Knoxville to work at the Regas Brothers Restaurant. Dave went on to work for Colonel Sanders at Kentucky Fried Chicken. Sanders was so impressed with young Dave's work ethic and knowledge of the restaurant business, that Thomas moved quickly into management. Dave went on to own several KFC franchises of his own, before eventually selling them and founding Wendy's in 1969.

The last fast-food mogul on our list may not be as much of a household name as Colonel Sanders or Dave Thomas, but his contributions to the culinary world are no less impressive, and his ties to Oak Ridge are even more significant.

Tom Forkner, the co-founder of Waffle House, worked in both Oak Ridge and New York during WWII. He was a security agent for the Counter Intelligence Corps, and was tasked with testing security in sensitive areas of the various Manhattan Project facilities. Mr. Forkner was headquartered at the K-25 plant during much of his time in Oak Ridge and he played a crucial role as a courier for classified material.

During the wartime era, Forkner made several trips from Oak Ridge to Los Alamos, carrying secret packages and materials.

After his Manhattan Project service, Tom met his business partner Joe Rodgers, Sr. and they opened their first Waffle House in 1955. It grew into one of the most successful regional restaurants in the country.

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Tom died in 2017 at the age of 98. He was able to tell his incredible story in his own words during an interview with The Atomic Heritage Foundation in 2014. His interview includes a lot of very informative details about his work during the Manhattan Project.

You can find the entire interview online at: <https://www.manhattanprojectvoices.org/oral-histories/tom-forkners-interview>

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Thanks Mike! I am always amazed at the connections that can be made to Oak Ridge from people all over the world. Many, many people have lived in Oak Ridge for a time and have gone on to other areas and accomplished much.



Harland Sanders, founder – Kentucky Fried Chicken

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Dave Thomas, founder – Wendy's



Joe Rodgers, Sr. (left) & Tom Forkner (right) co-founders – The Waffle House