

# Ed Westcott is 97 years of age Sunday

(As published in The Oak Ridger's Historically Speaking column January 18, 2019)

My hero, Ed Westcott, Manhattan Project Photographer, turns 97 years of age on Sunday, January 20, 2019. Ed first came to the Clinton Engineer Works and the city soon known as Oak Ridge, in 1942. He was the 29<sup>th</sup> person hired here, at 20 years of age, and the only person allowed to take a camera into the government facilities being built to help end World War II.

Even at the young age of 20, Ed was an experienced photographer. He had been working for the US Army Corps of Engineers in Nashville. His assignments there included photographing military camps, airports, dams and even a secret mission to photograph a classified location in middle Tennessee that was intended to become a prisoner of war camp.

Upon his arrival here, he began immediately to document the full story of how Oak Ridge sprang up in the ridges and valleys of East Tennessee. The rural areas of Bear Creek Valley, Bethel Valley and East Fork Valley were quickly transformed from farm land into three huge industrial sites and a townsite that grew to 75,000 residents by August 1945. Oak Ridge was the fifth largest city in Tennessee and it was not on a map!

From the electromagnetic separation calutrons at Y-12 to the Graphite Reactor at X-10 to the Gaseous Diffusion Plant at K-25, Ed photographed the key industrial and scientific equipment and all the government facilities as they were rapidly being completed. Additionally, he captured the workers at their jobs as well as the city of Oak Ridge and its residents doing many activities and in various situations.

Some of his best-known images are of people doing routine things such as standing in line, dancing in recreation halls, enjoying interactions in a soda fountain, or just being themselves in their normal day to day lives. These images enable us and those who will see them in the future to better appreciate what life was like back then.

He captured the essence of all aspects of life in this new pioneering city. His photographs tell the history of Oak Ridge in a way that nothing else could ever attain. His meticulous attention to detail and his intrinsic artistic abilities produced a body of work that is unsurpassed.

In his book, *Through the Lens of Ed Westcott*, Baldwin Lee, expresses admiration for Ed's inherent artistic skill. Many of Ed's photographs go well beyond merely documenting a place and time, they often tell a comprehensive story in the placement of objects and expressions of the people in the photograph.

You know these images were not just lucky shots, Ed posed them and worked hard to get the proper inflection in the image to convey what he saw best. Ed Westcott is a natural artist and a true national treasure.

Over 15,000 photographic negatives reside in the National Archives in cold storage made during the Manhattan Project. Many of his images can be seen in various locations around Oak Ridge. There are two traveling exhibits of 44 framed images that have been displayed in Huntsville, AL, Knoxville, TN, and Atlanta, GA, as well as here in Oak Ridge.

A recent request has come from Ed's son, David, who has an exhibit space in the entrance hallway of his workplace where special art exhibits are shown. He would like to see some of his dad's work line the walls for a bit. Good idea!

Without Ed's photography, our story would be incomplete, leaving a great void in the history of Oak Ridge during World War II. His images accompanied the official press release that informed the world about Oak Ridge and the uranium that was separated here and used in the Little Boy atomic bomb. Ed also processed the first images from Hiroshima showing the damage resulting from the first use of an atomic bomb in warfare.

Ed went on to become the official photographer for the Atomic Energy Commission and traveled widely photographing sites, workers and equipment across the country. He retired from the Department of

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Energy and returned to his beloved Oak Ridge where he soon was again recognized because of his fine photographic skills.

He has become an iconic personality revered by all the citizens of Oak Ridge. There are numerous locations around town which proudly display his photographs. He has a shopping center named for him as well as a street in a local subdivision. Oak Ridge is proud of our celebrity, Ed Westcott.

We have submitted him for consideration to receive the Presidential Medal of Freedom. This nomination is widely supported by all the local, state and national elected officials. Because of Ed's photographs of the equipment, secret operations, and groundbreaking science taking place during the Manhattan Project, as well as daily activities in the rapidly growing city of Oak Ridge, his contribution to history is certainly worthy of national recognition. Recently staff from both Congressman Chuck Fleischmann's office and Senator Lamar Alexander's office checked to assure the nomination is still under consideration.

The American Museum of Science and Energy's community gallery has an exhibit dedicated exclusively to Ed. There you'll find photos of what everyday life was like at Oak Ridge. There are amazing images that tell the story of a city bustling with activity while working hard to end a war!

His photographs are also on display in the Children's Museum of Oak Ridge and the Oak Ridge History Museum in the Midtown Community Center. They can also be seen in the East Tennessee Economic Council's meeting room as well as the restaurant in the Methodist Medical Center and several other locations around town.

I was asked by Ryan Chinn to write captions for the several Ed Westcott images hanging in the R & R Properties offices, and most recently I provided a current image of the Alexander Guest House along with an original Ed Westcott image of the Guest House to the Y-12 Federal Credit Union and they hang side by side in the entrance lobby on the first floor.

A documentary film, *Ed Westcott, Photographer*, can be viewed online at:  
[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=U0O\\_07swEY](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=U0O_07swEY)

This 15-minute documentary film is running constantly in the Children's Museum of Oak Ridge, is included in the films shown at the American Museum of Science and Energy and will also be shown at the Oak Ridge History Museum on a continuous basis. I am proud to say that this was the last film I worked on at Y-12 and when we could not complete it before my retirement, I was allowed to take the raw footage and with Keith McDaniel's help complete the film. It is my most favorite film on which I have worked!

Happy Birthday Ed! You ARE MY HERO!!!

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Ed Westcott and Ray Smith, good buddies and Ray's hero (this photo was made during the filming of the documentary)