

# Oak Ridge History Museum

(As published in The Oak Ridger's Historically Speaking column the week of October 7, 2019)

My involvement with the Oak Ridge Heritage & Preservation Association began several years ago, but not during its early formative years. I have come to respect the individuals who formed the organization in 1999, have served on the board of directors for multiple terms, a number of years as Vice President. Fanny and I remain active members and supporters.

The Oak Ridge History Museum is a recent endeavor that is getting rave reviews. The museum was just recently recognized by the East Tennessee Preservation Alliance, an organizational element of Knox Heritage, and will be honored at the Bijou Theater on November 14, 2019, with an annual East Tennessee Preservation Award for Museum development.

It is with a huge amount of pride that I bring you readers this update on the latest efforts of our local historical society, the ORHPA! The Oak Ridge History Museum is fast becoming a mainstay of Oak Ridge history and Science and Heritage Tourism. If you want to see the museum, come by the Midtown Community Center at 102 Robertsville Road on Thursday and Friday, 10am – 2pm, or Saturday, 10am – 3pm.

The following is written by Terry Domm, current President of ORHPA. As mentioned earlier, I have served on the board for several years and have seen several people serve in the role of President. Terry is among the most effective leaders we have had. Enjoy his update on the Oak Ridge History Museum.

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As a relative newcomer to the Oak Ridge Heritage & Preservation Association, I joined the Board just in time to be part of a very exciting new chapter in the history of the organization.

The Oak Ridge Heritage and Preservation Association was founded 20 years ago. After seeing a letter to the Oak Ridger from a concerned citizen, Bobbie Martin, expressing concern that Oak Ridge was losing its landmarks, Mick Wiest decided to act.

In late September of 1999, he convened a group of concerned citizens and ORHPA was born. The first officers were Mick Wiest (President), Steve Buxton (Vice President), Dean Novelli (Secretary) and Jim Kolb (Treasurer). The organization has continued to function effectively and grows stronger as time goes by.

Although not the first, (a local Oak Ridge Historical Society existed in the 1970's and others worked in the early 1990's to preserve Oak Ridge history through historical markers and historical district designation), ORHPA was the first organized group in Oak Ridge to maintain itself over the long haul and to successfully and continually promote Oak Ridge heritage and preservation on an ongoing basis.

When the Oak Ridge Senior Center (the historic Midtown Community Center and former home of the Wildcat Den) was deemed unsuitable for senior center use by the City and was sitting vacant and unused, ORHPA indicated its interest in saving the structure. The association sponsored a rally to create community awareness of the preservation attempt; members wrote letters; and meetings were held with Oak Ridge officials.

In the end, City Council offered ORHPA an option to purchase the former Midtown Community Center building for \$1 and in May of 2001 the association became the owner of this historic property. Over the past twenty years it has been a good steward of this valuable piece of Oak Ridge history, preserving the structure, making it available for community use, and providing numerous programs on the history of Oak Ridge.

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Moving forward to August of 2018. The events of twenty years ago and the monumental efforts to save the Midtown Community Center placed ORHPA in a position to respond to another emerging community need.

When the Department of Energy decided to downsize the popular American Museum of Science and Energy, resulting in significantly less focus on the history of Oak Ridge and the Manhattan Project, members of ORHPA and others in the community saw this as a void that needed to be filled.

The Oak Ridge History Museum was born, thanks to a dedicated group of ORHPA volunteers. Leading the effort to launch a new museum was Betty Stokes and Emily Honeycutt, assisted by a hard-working committee of volunteers. Bobbie Martin created extensive displays. Since opening over 1,300 visitors have come through the new museum, not counting the large attendance at the grand opening ceremony.

The new Oak Ridge History Museum is the perfect means to preserve the story of the life and work of the people in Oak Ridge who helped make the Manhattan Project a success. The primary purpose is to show the "human side" of the Manhattan Project in Oak Ridge, telling the story of the history of Oak Ridge through the day-to-day lives of people here during World War II.

In 2015, with strong support from the Atomic Heritage Foundation, the ORHPA and others, the Manhattan Project National Historical Park was created, providing an excellent framework for heritage tourism in Oak Ridge. The Oak Ridge History Museum is a valuable resource in support of this initiative.

The Oak Ridge History Museum is sometimes confused by visitors with the American Museum of Science and Energy, located three blocks down the Turnpike. Together AMSE, along with the Children's Museum and the Manhattan Project National Historical Park complement each other in telling the Oak Ridge story from many viewpoints.

Exhibits in the museum highlight the work of Ed Westcott, the only photographer allowed to document the Manhattan Project in Oak Ridge. The Oak Ridge History Museum has an extensive collection of his photographs. Emily (Ed's daughter) and Don Hunnicutt have led efforts to develop and present programs based upon Ed's work. Other current displays include Oak Ridge housing, pre-Oak Ridge history and the African American role in the Manhattan Project to name just a few of the museum's many exhibits.

Many facility improvements have been made to accommodate the new museum, including new flooring, painting walls and restroom upgrades. The progress made to date is truly impressive as those who have toured it have attested.

The Oak Ridge History Museum recently received validation of the excellent progress it has made. ORHPA was informed that it is the recipient of a State of Tennessee grant of \$80,000 to enhance the museum. Support by State Representative John Ragan and Lieutenant Governor Randy McNally was instrumental in obtaining the grant.

This grant will take the museum to the next level and will significantly enhance the museum experience for visitors. It will be used to greatly improve museum lighting, display, and security systems. The improvements will facilitate the display of many more artifacts and allow quick reconfiguration of the exhibits, providing an evolving educational environment. The enhancements are in the early planning phase, but improvements will be appearing soon with completion by July 1, 2020.

The Oak Ridge History Museum is open on Thursday and Friday from 10 AM to 2 PM and Saturdays from 10 AM to 3 PM. Admission is \$5. Special arrangements can be made for tours and other groups. The museum hours are currently limited because of the need for volunteers.

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Thank you, Terry, for an excellent update on the Oak Ridge History Museum. ***Readers, please contact the Oak Ridge History Museum if you are interested in volunteering to help expand the hours the museum can be open to the public.***

I have often been able to bring tour groups through the museum and have found without exception the response of the visitors to be most positive. The visitor's book is often filled with glowing compliments and appreciation for what has been experienced.

I am also on the board of directors for the East Tennessee Preservation Alliance but was unable to attend the meeting where the annual preservation awards were reviewed and voted on. It was a pleasure to see the minutes of the meeting reflect the Oak Ridge History Museum having been selected to receive an annual East Tennessee Preservation Award.

Having a regional organization recognize Oak Ridge's contributions to Heritage Tourism is a very good thing! Such recognition adds to the concept of Oak Ridge as a contributing factor in the history of the region, not just within Oak Ridge proper.

The three museums in Oak Ridge (Children's Museum of Oak Ridge – including the Manhattan Project National Historical Park Visitor Center, American Museum of Science and Energy, and Oak Ridge History Museum) along with the Y-12 History Center and the soon to be realized K-25 History Center as well as the K-25 Overlook/Visitor Center round out the various destinations available to all visitors who come to Oak Ridge. Additionally, the DOE Public Tours from AMSE are available to US Citizens and those over 10 years of age. These tours include the National Historical Landmark Graphite Reactor, among our most significant historic artifacts!

It is good to see Explore Oak Ridge working with the Manhattan Project National Historical Park to create signage and markers featuring the main aspects of Oak Ridge history. This compliments the museums and rounds out the story from different aspects. I understand we will soon have a brochure that includes all these aspects in a promotion of Oak Ridge tourism.

The soon to be expanded tours, some of which were successfully piloted in August, 2019, will also add to the overall experience of the Science and Heritage Tourism visitors to Oak Ridge. It is good to see all these aspects of tourism coming together and the individuals and teams working closely together to enhance the visitor experience.

Oak Ridge has a LOT of history to offer our visitors and we are doing it better and better all the time. I hope to see more living history become a part of our museums' featured attractions. Our Park Service folks know how to do this well, I look forward to their help as their influence continues to grow on our tourism efforts.

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The Oak Ridge History Museum often attracts tour groups



Ed Westcott takes a photo of the cutting of the Oak Ridge History Museum at the Grand Opening...Ed passed away within a week of taking this "famous last photo"

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State Representative John Ragan speaks to the full house Grand Opening crowd