

# Dan Zulli, author of *Terror On Black Oak Ridge*, remembers St Mary's

(As published in The Oak Ridger's Historically Speaking column the week of December 20, 2019)

What a joy it was to meet Dan Zulli. He contacted me saying he was coming to Oak Ridge and would appreciate a tour. We enjoyed sharing our common interest in Oak Ridge and also the honor of both of us being Chaplains. He for the US Air Force and me for the Oak Ridge Police Department. We also had the Air Force service in common. While his service was much longer than mine, we did share our pride in choosing that branch of service.

He purchased one of my Historically Speaking books and I have a signed copy of his new novel set in Oak Ridge during the Manhattan Project, *Terror on Black Oak Ridge*. A few words about his novel. It is based on his memory of growing up for the first 11 years of his life in Oak Ridge, Norris, Oliver Springs and Coalfield. He has had a life-long interest in Oak Ridge history.

The story is a gripping mystery with believable and likable characters who fit right into the scene of the war years in Oak Ridge. Dan's knowledge of the area enables him to take his characters into places anyone familiar with Oak Ridge will readily recognize. If the reader is not familiar with Oak Ridge, the description of the scenes will enable them to get a good idea of Oak Ridge.

*Terror on Black Oak Ridge* is available on Amazon.com. Several reviews there strongly recommend the book and it is noted by Amazon.com as similar to *The Girls of Atomic City* by Denise Kiernan, I also highly recommend Dan's book to you.

At my suggestion Dan agreed to write about his early years in Oak Ridge for Historically Speaking. You will enjoy reading about his experiences in St. Mary's school! Go back in the years with Dan Zulli:

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I always found it convenient that my school years coincided with the calendar years. I started first grade at St. Mary's Catholic School in 1961; second grade in 1962, etc.

My very first day, I was prepared for anything. I had every instrument and implement possible in order to be a successful student: every type of folder, binder, writing utensil, ruler, paper conceivable. Imagine my chagrin when, on that very first day, my teacher (Sister Mary Herman) coldly told me, "You won't need all that here."

Despite my crushed spirit, I persevered and first grade went well. My older brother Mike was in third grade, and when the bell rang to go home, I simply found him and got on the same bus he did. This process worked flawlessly

Until the day he stayed home sick.

I went out to the seemingly hundreds of yellow busses all lined up and pondered exactly which one took me home. They were all identical. I went to a bus that was sort of in the place my bus was and gambled this was the one as I hopped on it. That was a bad bet.

As the bus went on its route, I noticed students that I had never seen before, driving in neighborhoods I had never seen before. Conclusion: I was on the wrong bus.

I told the driver to stop and let me off, wherever that was, and I would walk home from there. Only problem was: I didn't know where "where" was. I was hopelessly lost in Oak Ridge. Like any 6-year old, I started to cry, not knowing how in the world I would ever get home.

A kind man noticed me, stopped his car and asked what was wrong. I told him and he offered to take me home. (Note: this was 1961 and was a much different time.)

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I knew my address: 101 Ogden Circle. When he got close enough for me to recognize the neighborhood, I told him I had it from here, which I did. I walked into our home, went up to my brother Mike and said, "Don't you ever get sick on me again!"

1962: Second Grade. This was when the Love Bug first bit in the form of an adorable blond named Sharon Mahoney. Oh, was she a dream.

My first overture of love came when she walked down the aisle to her seat, passing me as I sat in mine. I happened to have an extra lollipop somehow, and when Sharon reached me, I thrust it in her face and said, "This is for you!"

But this wasn't enough. I had to tell Sharon of my true feelings. The opportunity came when we were out in the playground at the far left end (as you look at the main entrance) of the school. She was there. I was there. The time was now.

I approached my Sweet Baboo and said I had something to tell her, but she *mustn't* tell *anyone*. I then leaned in low and said: "I love you." *And then I turned around and ran for dear life!* (I didn't know what else to do, so this totally seemed like the best thing.)

As I ran, I turned to see Sharon, and she was telling fellow classmate Una Lane what I had said. She was whispering in Una's ear and they were both looking at me. I felt so betrayed! I told her not to tell *anyone!* Fortunately, I don't recall any razzing from Una or any other classmate about my true feelings for Sharon. Nor, for that matter, do I recall ever talking to Sharon Mahoney again, or her me.

Guess the whole experience was too traumatic. As you can tell, it's still with me today.

1963: Third Grade. Mrs. Luck was our teacher. Her daughter (can't remember all the names) was in the class with us. One Friday afternoon, Mr. Luck was outside the classroom waiting to take them both home. (This was near where my ill-fated attempt at love happened with Sharon Mahoney. Our classroom was on that end of the school.)

Right before the bell rang, Mr. Luck came into the classroom, which was odd; he never did that. He looked noticeably distraught. It was Friday, November 22, 1963. He told us that President Kennedy (our first Catholic president) had just been shot in Dallas. The world changed that day.

1964: Fourth Grade. This was the scene of my greatest school triumph, my ultimate moment, even through my Master's Degree. Sister Mary Victor was our teacher. She was my favorite teacher during my five years at St. Mary's. (I've forgiven her for saying on my Pupil Permanent Record that I was only "an average student.")

Our classroom had blackboards on two walls; the room entrance bisecting them. St. Mary Victor had about six to eight students at a time go up to the blackboards, face her as she would call out a times table equation. We had to turn around, write our answer on the board, then turn around and face her again. The first one with the correct answer won a holy card (a laminated card with a saint on it).

My turn came to take my place at the blackboard. Sister Mary Victor called out: "8 times 8!" I was stunned: I had absolutely no earthly (or any other planet) clue as to what 8 times 8 was. I drew a complete and total blank.

But I said to myself that despite not knowing what 8 times 8 was, I'm going down in flames, in a blaze of glory. In a milli-second, I told myself that I was going to turn around and slap up the first number that came to my mind, never minding the consequences of being so incredibly not even near the correct answer. I didn't care. I was going for broke. Darn the torpedoes.

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I whirled around in a heartbeat, wrote "64" so fast that Sister Mary Victor must have been very impressed, and turned around to face my fate. Low and behold. Miracle upon miracles. Be still, my beating heart. I was right. *I was right!* I had no idea at all what 8 times 8 was, but I pulled the biggest rabbit out of my hat known to man.

Sister Mary Victor gave me my holy card, and I never—*never*—let on that I didn't know the answer, that I purely guessed on it. I soaked up this moment by looking oh, so cool in front of my classmates and have cherished the memory ever since. For one brief but very shining moment, this average student was top dog in his class. And it happened at St. Mary's.

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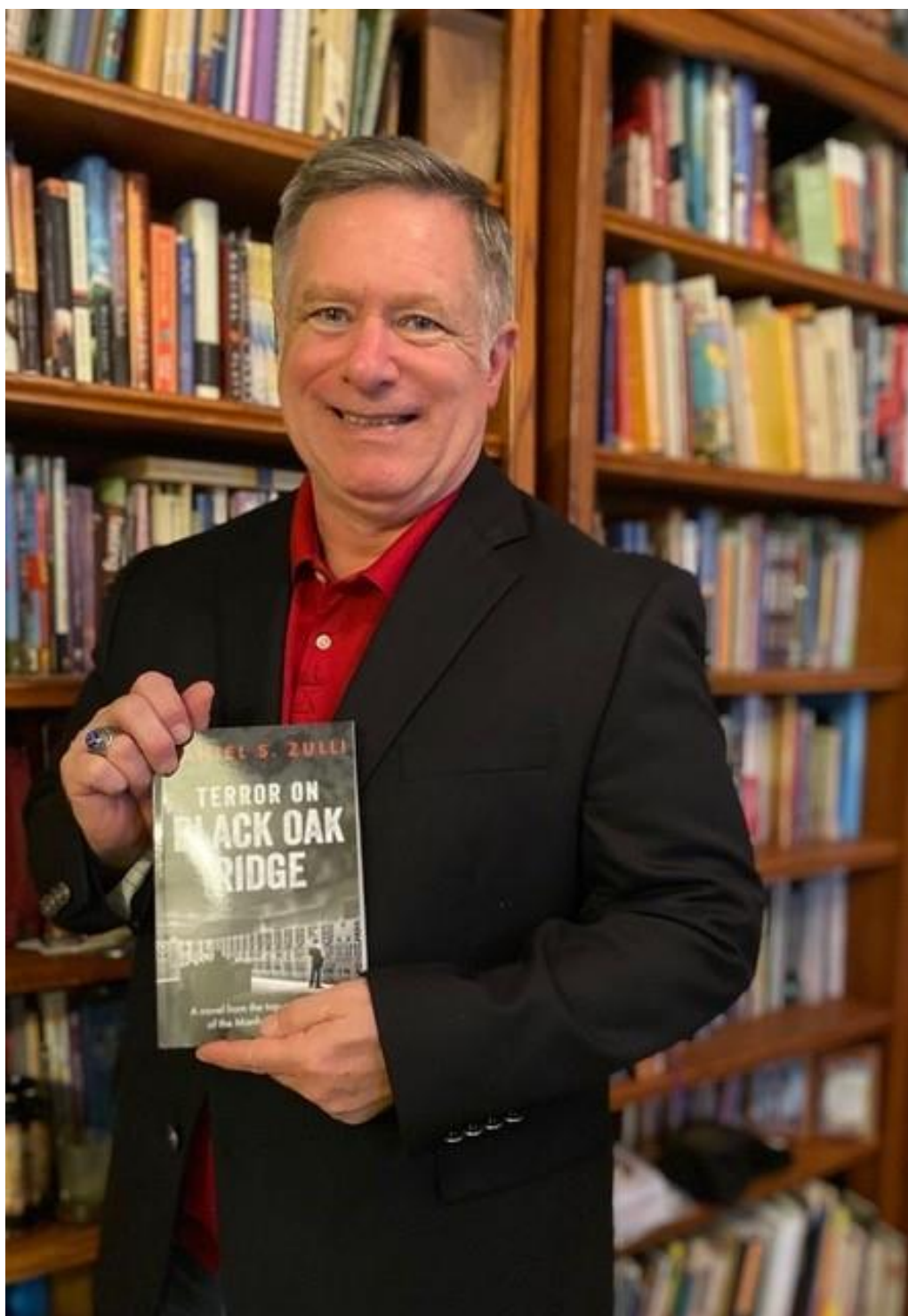
Now what do you think of that? Dan Zulli's telling of his young life at St. Mary's School is a delightful read! I am sure you agree... You will enjoy reading his novel, *Terror on Black Oak Ridge*, set in Oak Ridge during the Manhattan Project as well.



Dan Zulli and I visit the Alexander Guest House, a stop that is a regular on tours I give of Oak Ridge

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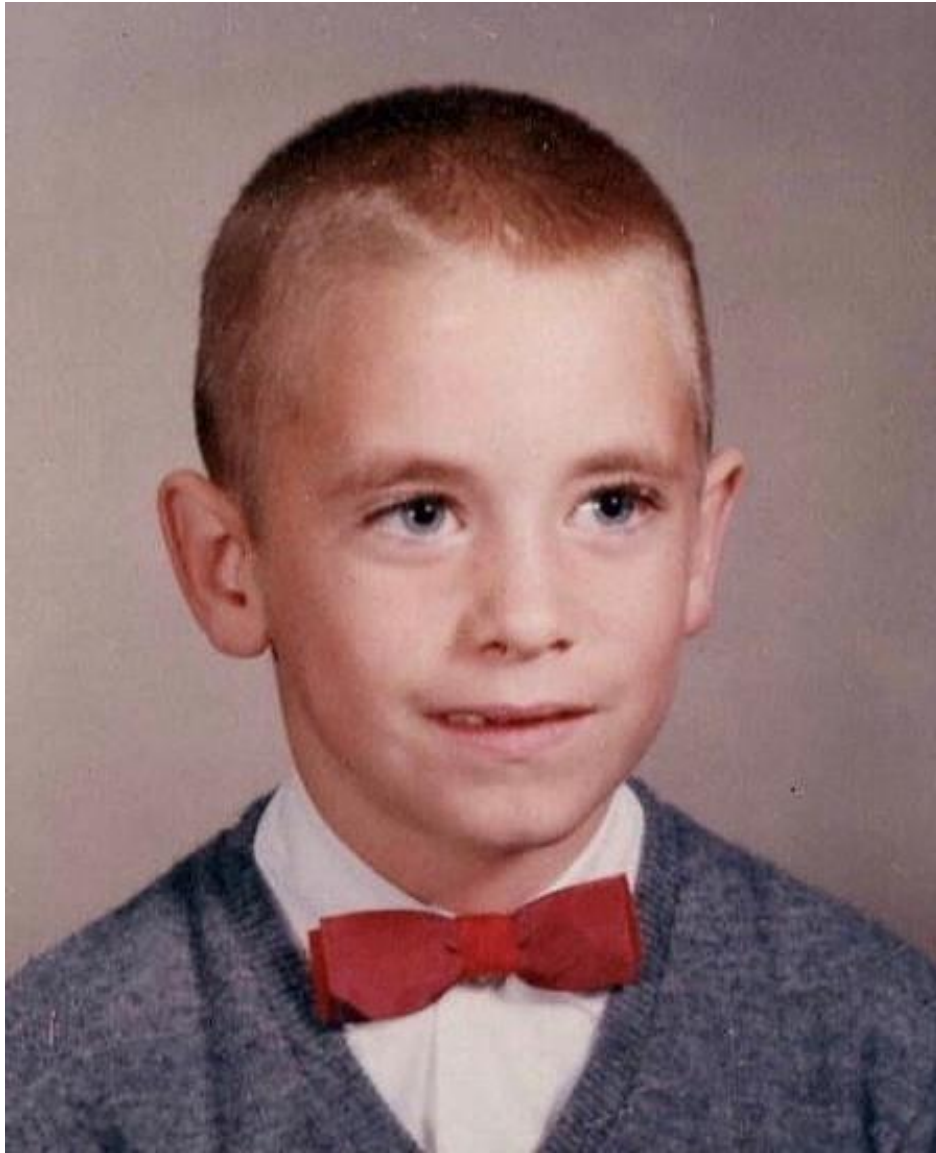


Dan Zulli with his new novel, *Terror on Black Oak Ridge*



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2nd grade picture, St. Mary's Catholic School. Dan said, "Maybe Sharon Mahoney didn't go for me because I was lacking my two front teeth."