

# Dave Hobson: A teenaged boy's life in early Oak Ridge

(As published in The Oak Ridger's Historically Speaking column the week of February 18, 2019)

Upon moving back to Oak Ridge with his parents right after the atomic bombs were detonated in August 1945, Dave Hobson, 12, settled into what became his hometown for life.

He loved his family's new Oak Ridge house—a Type TDU duplex at 204 Illinois Ave., at the intersection of North Illinois Avenue and Robertsville Road. His mother was not so positive at first. TDU stands for Tandem Dwelling Unit, but she claimed it meant “tacky, dull and ugly.”

Because the house was built on posts, Dave strung a hammock between them, creating a summer vacation retreat. It was a great place for him to read the books he had started to borrow from the library in the basement of the Ridge Recreation Hall on Kentucky Avenue, down the hill from the Guest House and near Jackson Square. He read George Robinson's The Oak Ridge Story and another book to learn about the science behind the atomic bomb.

On Saturday mornings, he walked to the Jefferson Theater for a movie. A double feature cost a quarter, and popcorn and a drink cost five cents apiece. “The movies were usually cowboy films, with the news, a comedy and a serial,” he said.

Sometimes the telephone rang in the night. The caller was usually the plant shift supervisor at X-10 asking Dave's dad to respond to an emergency at the Graphite Reactor, where he worked. At the time the reactor, which had been used to prove that plutonium could be produced in nuclear fuel rods, was being readied for production of radioisotopes.

An emergency call to 204 Illinois Ave. usually meant that a bearing for a fan that drew cooling air through the reactor core was failing, threatening to damage the 700-horsepower electric motor driving the fan. As an experienced millwright, Dave's dad had the skills to replace and align a bearing quickly and properly. “Dad had to suit up in protective clothing before he entered the fan room,” Dave said. “The reactor off-gas passed through that room. I wonder to this day if his exposure there was a cause of his lung cancer.”

In the 1946-47 school year, Dave began attending Jefferson Junior High School (now Robertsville Middle School), which was just across the intersection from his house. “Junior High opened up another whole world for me,” Dave said. “Friends I had met in church but who attended other grammar schools were now in seventh grade in the same school with me.”

For Dave, a memorable character at the school was Alice Lyman, a music teacher and leader of the JJHS band (and later the first female concertmaster in the Oak Ridge Symphony Orchestra). “She had a reputation back then of being a no-nonsense, hard-nosed disciplinarian,” he said.

“I remember one assembly in the gym when the students sat on two sides of the bare floor, leaving an aisle in the center and waiting for the band to play. I walked Alice from the back of the room in her bright blue uniform and visor. As she strolled past, you could see the kids leaning away from the aisle like stalks of wheat blown by the wind. Many years later, when Alice was organist at Chapel-on-the-Hill, I found out how wonderfully kind and caring she really was. Back then, you really didn't want to mess with her.”

Dave's eighth-grade teacher, Miss Ted Raines, greatly influenced him. “A caring person, she saw to it that I became involved in something that changed my life,” he said. “She helped me get into the string program taught by Donald Grieser.” Dave became interested in the viola. He played it in both the junior-high and high-school orchestras and ended up playing in the Oak Ridge Symphony Orchestra, along with violists Jacinta Howard and Ray Blanco, under the baton of the distinguished biochemist, Waldo Cohn, founder of ORSO. One of the pieces played was “Overture to a Nuclear Reactor”; the composer was in the audience, Dave said. In high school, Dave played trombone in the band.

“In the ninth grade I was fortunate to have a great English teacher, Alice Edwards,” Dave said. “She was the mother of Douglas Edwards,” who became network television's first anchorman in 1948. She helped lead the field trip of the ninth-grade class to New York City, where the class visited CBS Anchorman Edwards and his family in their elegant Manhattan apartment.

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Dave saw housing at the other end of the spectrum in Oak Ridge—hutments. These small, windowless boxes, each with a pot-bellied stove in the center that vented through a pipe sticking through the top of a pyramid-shaped roof, were occupied mostly by black people. Usually husbands and wives were forced to live in separate hutments. Many of the hutments were located on streets named after birds, where the Oak Ridge High School tennis courts are now.

Dave has said that Oak Ridge in the 1940s seemed to him to be a classless society because all residents, regardless of their positions, were focused on working together to end the war. However, he acknowledges that the black workers did not live as well as the whites back then.

In January 1947, he joined the Boy Scouts, and his father, who had sold Victory bonds during World War I as a scout, was a scoutmaster as an adult. For 12 years Dave's father was the scoutmaster for Troop 129, of which Dave was a member (he achieved Eagle rank). Their meetings were held in a set of four joined hutments behind the old Eagles lodge, which was located where Willow Brook Elementary School is now.

Another hutment where Dave hung out was The Hobby Shop, which was in easy walking distance of his house. It was located at the northeast corner of North Illinois Avenue and Oak Ridge Turnpike, where The Westcott Center, anchored by the Kroger Superstore, is. "The shop was run by a very friendly, gracious lady who walked with a limp," Dave said, claiming he "drooled" over the shop's Lionel train sets and bought a number of its balsa-wood gliders, called Interceptors.

One Interceptor that he launched from Jefferson Junior High School with a rubber band and stick surprisingly glided over the hill where the Garden Apartments were later built and disappeared toward Scarboro and the Y-12 Plant. "I wondered if the guards shot it down," Dave said.

Although the lake across from Grove Center had been converted into one of the Southeast's largest chlorinated swimming pools by 1948, Dave and his adventuresome friends sometimes enjoyed swimming in East Fork Poplar Creek, just west of the intersection of South Illinois Avenue and the Turnpike where the electrical substation stands. "The water was about nine feet deep in this great swimming hole," he said.

In 1949, the last year that Oak Ridge was a secret city (and on no maps), Dave was a tenth-grader in the old high school above Jackson Square and up from Blankenship Field. During football games, he and other scouts had to wear uniforms and keep rowdy kids from climbing on the scoreboard on which score numerals were placed by hand. During the Gate Opening Ceremonies, he and other scouts sold for \$1 apiece silver-plated badges that had been worn by security guards. "I don't recall selling many," he said, "and I wish I had some today."

He graduated from Oak Ridge High School in 1952 as a member of the first senior class to go through the "new high school building" on the Turnpike. Most of the teachers had master's degrees from Columbia and other universities. The reason: the Army had told Alden Blankenship, superintendent of Oak Ridge schools, to hire the best teachers.

Dave happily remained in the Oak Ridge area. "I was tired of moving," he said. "Psychologically, I didn't want to move." The government wanted Oak Ridgers to be happy, so they were given amenities, such as free seeds and rakes so they could start their own gardens. As a result, residents of surrounding communities resented Oak Ridge because Oak Ridgers seemed to have special privileges and occupied land from which other folks had been displaced. Dave said that after every Oak Ridge-Clinton football game, players and fans engaged in fist fights.

Dave earned B.S. (chemical engineering) and M.S. (metallurgical engineering) degrees from the University of Tennessee at Knoxville, joined the Metallurgy Division at Oak Ridge National University,

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married Martha (an English and journalism teacher at Oak Ridge High School) in 1961, has children and grandchildren and retired 18 years ago after working 43 years as a metallurgical engineer at ORNL.

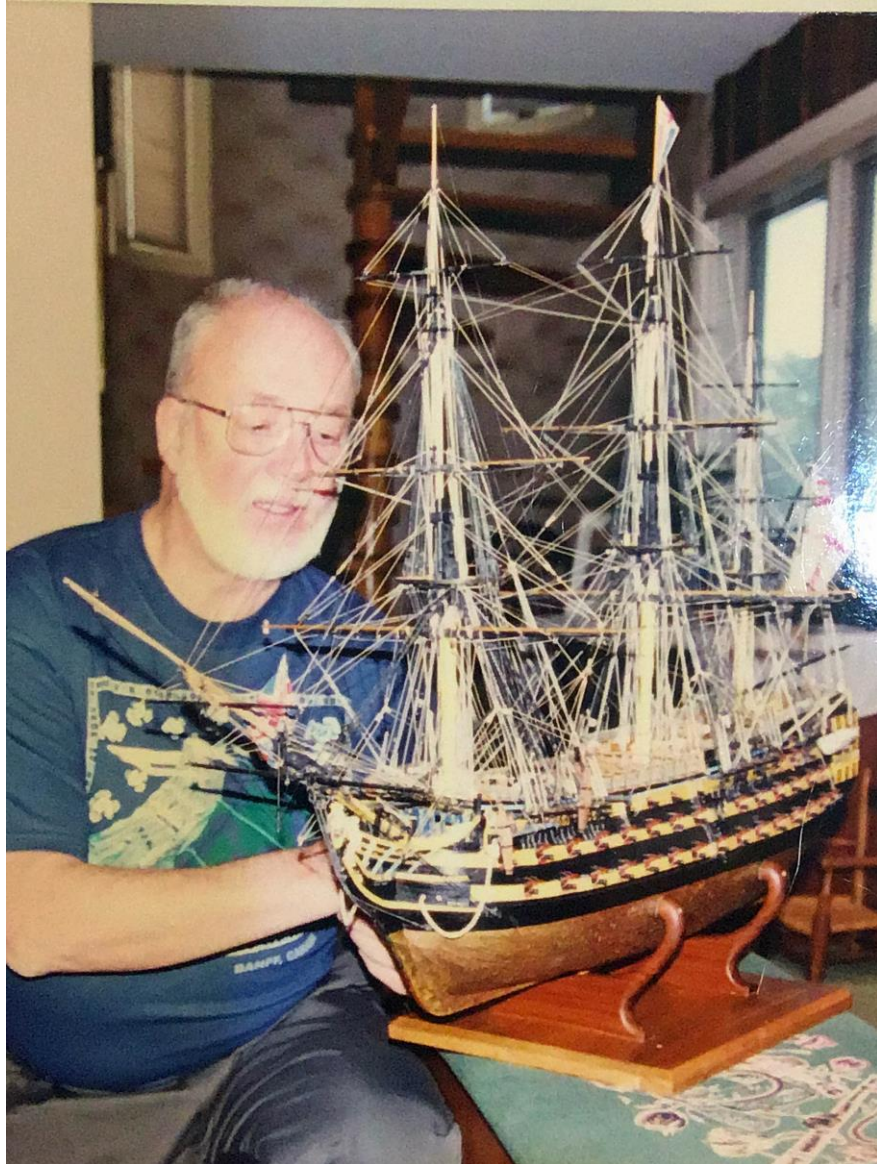
For Dave, moving to Oak Ridge permanently was the best decision his parents ever made on his behalf.



Dave and Martha Hobson's wedding at the Chapel on the Hill

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Dave with a model ship he built