

Dave Hobson: Boy's eye-view of early Oak Ridge

(As published in The Oak Ridger's Historically Speaking column the week of February 4, 2019)

Dave Hobson is one of a few Oak Ridgers who can give you a "boy's eye view" of the Secret City during and after its Manhattan Project days. As a boy he and his parents moved to Oak Ridge twice and to six other cities once. It's not surprising he chose to stay here for most of his education, career and retirement.

An only child, Dave was born in 1934 in Pontotoc, Miss., 17 miles from Tupelo, where Elvis Presley was born the following year. Dave spent seven happy years there with his parents, Ernest and Jeanette Jones Hobson, until a radio announcement on Dec. 7, 1941, disrupted their lives.

"I do remember my parents' reaction," he said. "They told me that somebody had bombed our ships and that we were probably going to war. I went out to play and saw a small plane flying over the house. I ran inside crying – scared to death."

Dave's father, then 35, had the critical skills needed for the war effort. He could do the work of a millwright, carpenter, cabinetmaker and machinist. Both of Dave's parents had some college education. While still a second grader, Dave moved with his parents to Memphis, where his father helped build a gunpowder production plant. Before Dave finished second grade, the Hobsons had moved from Memphis to New Albany, Ind., to Birmingham, Ala., and to Leeds, Ala. (where he heard that his mother's brother had been killed during World War II while serving in the Air Force in Egypt). "We lived in rented houses, apartments and boarding houses during that time," Dave said. "We were uprooted repeatedly by the war."

Dave moved so much he didn't have time to make friends. So books became his friends. He said he attended 10 different schools through the ninth grade. But he credited his parents for "shielding him from the bulk of the stresses" they endured.

In 1943 Dave's dad announced they would be moving to Oak Ridge, a city not yet on a map. But first, Dave and his mother had to move to Forest City, N.C., to live with Dave's grandmother while his father found a place for them to live in Oak Ridge. Letters indicate that his father daily took a bus from a men's dormitory over a gravel road to Clinton Engineering Works (which five years later was renamed Oak Ridge National Laboratory), where he did construction work.

His dad attended ecumenical worship services in a little military chapel (later called Chapel-on-the-Hill) near Townsite (known as Jackson Square today). (Dave said that the U.S. Army opposed the proposal to name the chapel the "Oak Ridge Church" because of the national security need to keep the name Oak Ridge secret.)

In April 1944, Dave's dad found a new house at 109 Hunter Place, arranged to have the Hobsons' stored furniture moved from Memphis to Oak Ridge and met his wife and son in Forest City. They took a crowded train to Knoxville. "We didn't have a seat in the coach," Dave said. "Instead, we sat on our suitcase in the vestibule, over the couplings."

The Hobsons took a bus to Oak Ridge. After crossing the bridge over the Clinch River, the bus stopped at a wooden building. Dave, 10, was a bit scared when two soldiers boarded the bus and checked badges and papers. At Central Terminal, the Hobsons changed buses. At the time Dave did not know that Oak Ridge, with its 850 buses, was then the largest bus system in the nation. On their way past Townsite to Hillside Road and Hunter Circle, Dave saw a few soldiers and numerous men in khaki uniforms.

The Hobsons moved into a Type T duplex, which had a door at each end. "It was next to the last house on the dead-end street, a perfect place for a boy to play," Dave said, adding that the house on posts was far enough off sloping ground in the back so he could play underneath. He remembers swinging on a grapevine in his backyard and stepping from the front door to a boardwalk that ascended through a field to Waddell Circle. Walking barefoot on the boardwalk brought splinters and cuts (from raised nail heads). Running barefoot was hazardous for big toes that collided with warped planks.

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Dave and his friend, Jimmy Waters, who lived at the other end of the duplex, played together in the muddy field and took the boardwalk to Highland View Elementary School.

Dave described his first summer in Oak Ridge as "idyllic." He could go anywhere he wanted in town using the bus system and boardwalks. He could ride to any of the five movie theaters in town – the Center and Ridge theaters in and near Jackson Square, the Grove Theater in Grove Center, the Jefferson Theater in the Jefferson Shopping Center and the Middletown Theater in a shopping complex, where the Civic Center is now.

He could walk to Grove Center and the "lake" across Robertsville Road. "I remember seeing people fishing along the shore," Dave said of the lake. "The Army later cleaned up the shoreline and dumped sand along it so people could swim there." The lake was later turned into the city's spring-fed swimming pool, one of the largest pools in the Southeast.

When he was in fifth grade in the fall of 1944, Dave remembers kids reflecting their parents' political views as they yelled at each other, "Thomas Dewey" and "Franklin Roosevelt." FDR was re-elected to a fourth term and died in April 1945.

The Hobsons joined Chapel-on-the-Hill after receiving a visit and invitation from Bertram Larson, a Presbyterian minister who led the Protestant services at this military chapel designed for many faiths. "It had a cabinet for the Torah for the Jewish congregation, an altar and kneeling benches for the Catholic congregation and a pulpit and lectern for the Protestants," Dave said.

The pews, he added, formed a "lasting impression" literally for him because the seats were made of three planks separated by an inch, forcing parishioners to shift frequently to achieve short-lived comfort. Sometimes a Protestant would rest his feet on the edge of a kneeling bench, accidentally pulling it over. "The crash usually woke up whoever was dosing," said Dave.

In early 1945 the Hobsons again packed and moved, this time back to their hometown in Mississippi. Dave's father had received an offer the previous summer to become superintendent of a milk plant where milk was delivered from area dairies to be bottled or made into chocolate milk and ice cream.

They were away from Oak Ridge for about nine months. "In August the secret of Oak Ridge was revealed when the bombs were dropped on Japan," Dave said. "We became heroes because we had been in Oak Ridge, and I enjoyed the limelight at school."

An offer to work as a permanent employee at X-10 induced Dave's father to move the family back to the famous and exciting city of Oak Ridge. Dave was a happy camper because he liked the house and neighborhood and, now that he had turned 12, he felt proud to do what his dad and mom had always done in Oak Ridge – wear a badge. "Growing up in Oak Ridge was wonderful," he said.

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Dave Hobson and his parents, Ernest and Jeanette Jones Hobson

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