

Ed Westcott, my hero and friend

(As published in The Oak Ridger's Historically Speaking column the week of April 9, 2019)

What do I say about my good friend that has not already been said numerous times? What can I say that will convey my feelings and that of so many more who knew him? Is attempting that even of any added value for me or others...yes, I think so, if for no other reason than my own need to express the frustration and pain experienced at his passing.

James Edward "Ed" Westcott 1922-2019. The 29th person hired for the world's greatest military industrial endeavor, the Manhattan Project, was a Photographer. Twenty-year-old Ed Westcott brought his already and naturally developed creative genius to the task of documenting the science and the people who came to Oak Ridge, Tennessee to work at the Clinton Engineer Works. No small task by any means! Yet this young man did a tremendous job of it!

His talent and unfailing dedication resulted in the large collection of over 15,000 negatives. These valuable artifacts are preserved to help future generations to understand the magnitude and complexity of this world changing accomplishment. Ed did that in spades! We have access to a few hundred of those images and good use has been made of them to tell our history.

His largely black and white images are tightly composed and finely tuned to convey a complete story in a single photograph. His ability to realize what would be meaningful and how to set up a photograph to convey his intended meaning was exceptional. The history of Oak Ridge is documented in these images and they are used in many documentary films, displayed in many venues as well as published in books and online sources.

Ed has been recognized for his talent through various proclamations, awards, honors and even been nominated for a Presidential Medal of Freedom. My personal involvement to help gain recognition for Ed is something of which I am profoundly proud and believe even with all the efforts of myself and many others, we have failed to adequately acknowledge his true greatness and superiority as a giant among us!

Yes, a true giant in the world of photography and a man of utmost integrity, humility and friendliness, Ed spent his life doing what he did best, photography. Yet, he also was a strong presence in the world of amateur radio.

Even to the personal involvement for over a year monitoring radio traffic and even interacting with Jim Jones in Guyana leading up to the incident where on Nov. 18, 1978, U. S. Representative Jackie Speier was shot five times on a remote airstrip in Guyana, South America. U. S Representative Leo J. Ryan and four others lay dead nearby, killed by gunfire as they tried to escape Jonestown, the commune built by cult leader Jim Jones.

The official FBI report quotes Ed Westcott, Oak Ridge Photographer, as saying the transmissions – some of which he alleged were illegal - ended three weeks before U.S. Rep Leo Ryan, D-Calif., and four other persons, including three journalists, were slain at an airstrip eight miles from the People's Temple camp at Jonestown, Guyana. The report stated, "a large antenna is visible from outside the sect's compound in San Francisco, and an NBC-TV news report Sunday said the People's Temple members there kept in contact with the agricultural settlement in Guyana via radio."

The report continued, "On Sunday, Westcott said transmissions he heard apparently were in code. 'They were using cryptic and cipheric messages - that's illegal - and they were operating outside the amateur frequencies or bands which is a violation of international treaties,' Westcott said. 'And they were operating unidentified for long periods of time, which is also a violation.'"

He added: "A great deal of the communications weren't coded, but when something apparently secretive came up, it was in code and there were never any last names, just code names. Jones went by the name of 'Al' and no one could make any decision until 'Al' OK'd it."

Ed actually talked to Jones about the settlement - which had a goal of becoming self-sufficient - but declined an offer to do some photography work in Jonestown.

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Now, did you know that about our Ed Westcott? Likely not as he never made a big deal of himself or what he did. He just was Ed. Kind, generous, unassuming Ed. What a great model for others to follow!

I am sure there are other things about Ed's life we don't know as he spent several years working in Washington, DC, and living in Bethesda, Maryland. He was the head of photography for the Atomic Energy Administration and Department of Energy. We do know he photographed eight presidents and I am sure there is so much more. But what we do know of the man tells us lots and makes us proud to have known him.

He returned to his beloved Oak Ridge in 1977 after retiring at age 55. He is quoted as saying, "just because I could," and he also wanted to do more with his family as well as do other things. An example is becoming a renowned amateur radio operator for which he received two prestigious awards.

Ed will be missed by Oak Ridgers and many others. He was an icon of Oak Ridge, a man who loved the city and even more so the people. His winning smile was known by all who met him...I am convinced that smile helped him win the confidence of many who became willing subjects of his photographs.

To personally be acquainted with someone as famous as Ed is to realize the value of being in the right place at the right time with the inherent skill to accomplish effectively the task at hand. His demonstrated ability to capture the essence of people and the task they were undertaking resulted in a body of photographs that has lasting value for many generations.

A man of Ed Westcott's caliber is a rare thing indeed. Oak Ridge is the beneficiary of his enormous ability and dedicated skills.

His long life filled with the joy of living and his easy-going style made him a pleasure to know. His place in history is secure and his legacy will benefit generations to come.

As Cindy Kelly, Atomic Heritage Foundation President, said, "Ed Westcott's perceptive and artful photography gives us a sense of the youthful energy that characterized life in Oak Ridge. Ed will be greatly missed but his photographs will endure for generations to come. He was the Ansel Adams of the Manhattan Project."

Cindy quoted me in a recent memorialization of Ed and I want to include it here: She said, "Oak Ridge city historian Ray Smith [commented](#):

"The story of the Manhattan Project would be lost to history without the work of Oak Ridge's own renowned photographer Ed Westcott. The city has gained international recognition for its work in the top-secret assignment — and continues to solve some of the world's critical challenges to this day with our innovations — yet none of this would have been as well-known without Ed's photographs helping to seal the Secret City's rightful place in history and science."

In addition to the nomination for the Presidential Medal of Freedom, Bill Henry recently suggested Ed be nominated for a state award, the Governor's DISTINGUISHED ARTIST AWARD, which is presented to Tennessee artists of exceptional talent and creativity in any discipline whose work has significant and lasting impact on a state or national level. I believe Ed sure meets those criteria.

Of course, Ed has received numerous awards and citations over the years, all of which were richly deserved, can't you just see him looking down, saying "Awww pshaw" as award after award was given him... But I believe one of the proudest awards he has been given were the testimonies of his children, including his son in law, at his funeral where they spoke so graciously of their love for him and his love for them.

One last thing I am proud to remind you readers. The documentary film *Ed Westcott, Photographer*, can be seen [here](#) and you can see many of his photos [here](#).

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The memory of Ed Westcott will live on in his body of photography for ages to come. His smile and good humor will be missed, but the photographs, Ah... the photographs, they live on!



Glad to have captured this image of Ed Westcott, Keith McDaniel, myself on the last Saturday he was with us and enjoying his celebrity status at the Grand Opening of the Oak Ridge History Museum



Fanny's favorite photo with her friend, Ed Westcott

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One of my proudest moments when I was allowed to present the East Tennessee Economic Council's Muddy Boot to Ed Westcott