

## General Groves and Oak Ridge, by Robert S. Norris, Part 3

(As published in The Oak Ridger's Historically Speaking column the week of 10-12-2020)

Robert S. "Stan" Norris, author of *Racing for the Bomb*, has graciously agreed for us to publish his lecture created for the 2020 Secret City Festival. When he was unable work the event into his schedule or even to travel because of the COVID-19 crisis, he sent the content of his prepared lecture for us to use. What follows is part three of the content of his lecture.

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### Groves' visits to Oak Ridge

Let's look for a moment at Groves' work habits and what he did on his visits to Oak Ridge. Groves had amazing stamina. His workday was normally twelve to fourteen hours long. Six-day weeks were routine and an occasional Sunday was not infrequent. Groves was extraordinarily effective in using his time to full advantage, awake or asleep.

There was barely a minute wasted throughout the day. Just reading the daily log of calls, visits, and visitors in his appointment book makes one weary. Part of his secret — one that he no doubt shares with other leaders who have huge responsibilities — was his ability to focus on an issue or problem and work through it until it was solved or a decision was made.

Groves was faced, of course, not with just one issue, problem, or decision but with dozens of them in a never-ending stream. His ability to compartmentalize them in his mind, making a decision and then moving on, kept the long list from overwhelming him.

Over a period of seven years Groves did not take a vacation and was never sick. There was an occasional day off here or there, but certainly not anything serious or sustained in the way of rest and relaxation. The intense period of mobilization and early wartime construction work from 1940 to September 1942 was followed by the even more intense three years that it took to build the bomb.

Throughout the latter period Groves was out of Washington more than half of each month. Initially he had to familiarize himself with the status of the project, mainly at university campuses. The next step was to decide upon the location of the major sites.

In addition to selecting Oak Ridge he also chose the two other main sites in New Mexico and Washington State. By the spring of 1943 construction was well under way everywhere, and the purpose of his visits was to speed the projects' completion through constant, unrelenting pressure.

Much of his travel was by railroad aboard some of the celebrated trains of the day. Washington's Union Station was his point of embarkation to Chicago, Knoxville, San Francisco, Pasco, Washington, Santa Fe, Detroit, Boston, New York, Wilmington, Pittsburgh, Montreal, and elsewhere. A transcontinental trip could take three or four days.

According to Groves' appointment book, meticulously kept by his able assistant Jean O'Leary, he visited Oak Ridge 36 times from September 1942 until the summer of 1945. After the initial visit in late September 1942 he came to Oak Ridge 11 times in 1943, 18 times in 1944 and 6 times in the first half of 1945b, by my count. Normally he would spend just one day, but occasionally he would stay overnight and either return to Washington the following day or continue on to points west.

Groves used the train as his mobile office. He normally traveled in civilian clothes, and his roomette became the temporary headquarters of the Manhattan Project. To cram more work into a day, upon leaving Washington Mrs. O'Leary or another aide would occasionally accompany him partway while he dictated letters, gave instructions, and kept on top of his busy schedule. After an hour or two the assistant would get off, take another train back to the office, send off the letters, file the reports, and schedule his future appointments. Sometimes an aide might travel to meet him as he was returning. If he had been in Los Alamos an aide might meet the General's

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train in Chicago, and return with him the rest of the way to Washington, briefing him on developments while he was gone, bringing him reports, mail, and news from the office.

By the time the train pulled into Union Station, many hours of work had been accomplished. Another time saver was to schedule short meetings at the railroad station while en route to somewhere else.

For example, the train trip to New Mexico went through Chicago; a brief meeting there with the Area Engineer could be used to solve problems and make decisions. When he could, Groves used Sundays to travel. To save valuable time on weekdays the general left in the late afternoon or evening and traveled overnight, arriving at his destination in the morning fresh and ready for action.

His usual routine when coming to Oak Ridge was to take the 4:30 P.M. train from Washington's Union Station and arrive in Knoxville at 6:55 A.M. the next morning. A car and driver would meet him and they would quickly proceed on Route 62 probably passing through the Solway gate and be in Oak Ridge by 8 o'clock.

He would then spend the next eight hours or so conferring with District Engineer Col. Kenneth D. Nichols at the administration building, known as the "Castle," and with scientists, engineers and corporate officials and with army personnel. He might consult with Town Manager Capt. P. E. O'Meara or Roane-Anderson project manager Clinton Hernandez to see if things were running smoothly for, by the summer of 1945, Oak Ridge's 75,000 inhabitants.

He would often visit Y-12, K-25, X-10 and S-50 urging everyone to work harder and faster to produce the ingredient that might help shorten the war.

As he drove around he might see the Pine Valley Barber Shop at New York and Utah, Foster's Beauty Shop on Outer Drive, the Cafeterias for the Colored Hutments and the White Hutments, the Tulip Town Super Market in Grove Center, the five theaters, the nine schools, and Reeder's Service Station and Garage on the Oak Ridge Turnpike.

He drove past the Type A through F modular houses, that had shot up like mushrooms, based on Skidmore, Owings and Merrill designs. And if he looked carefully, he might notice Mr. William J. Wilcox, Jr. working for Tennessee Eastman at Building 9203 or see James Westcott taking photographs.

If it was a one-day trip he would take the afternoon train back to Washington, arriving early the next morning and headed directly to the office for a full day of appointments. If he stayed overnight it was either at the Brannon house at 151 Oak Ridge Turnpike or at the Guest House, later known as the Alexander Inn.

Groves was a fervent tennis player and it is possible that he might have played a set or two on the courts in front of the Guest House. It is also possible that he spent a night or two in the Oak Ridge Hospital, for security purposes possibly in the maternity ward, under the care of Dr. Charles Rea who tried to prescribe a short rest for him from the demanding pace he maintained.

In conclusion I have argued that Groves was the indispensable man in building the bomb. There have been few people who equaled his genius for getting things done. If time permitted, I could have also presented Groves at Hanford, Groves at Los Alamos and Groves in Washington, DC to round out the tale.

His skill at organizing this gigantic industrial, engineering and scientific project and bringing it to a successful culmination in a little over 1,000 days is truly impressive. Our nation needs such

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people from time to time and it is clear in Groves' case that he was the right man at the right place at the right time.

In coming to know Groves, as I have in writing his biography, he strikes me as distinctively American, exhibiting qualities that we like and prize. He is the can-do, no-nonsense individual who gets the job done no matter what.

By the same token his success in building the bomb has left us with numerous challenges of our own; threats of terrorist A-bombs, environmental problems without easy solutions, new aspirants and new arms races. Mastering these will require special skills. It would be good to have the General here to help.

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Now you have the facts from likely the most knowledgeable person about General Groves. He was indeed a hard driving individual who was in the right place at the right time and who knew how to make the most of the opportunity. This even though his original desire was to be more engaged in the war on the ground.

What resulted is that he managed what is said to have been the world's most significant military industrial scientific achievement. The Nuclear Age General Groves helped usher in has brought us more than just the end of the world's most awful war. I think he knew instinctively that was the case and that is why he made many special efforts to document the details including historians, photographers and filmmakers.

While it would have been good to have Stan Norris come to Oak Ridge and deliver this presentation in person, I hope you appreciate him sharing the content with us through *Historically Speaking*.

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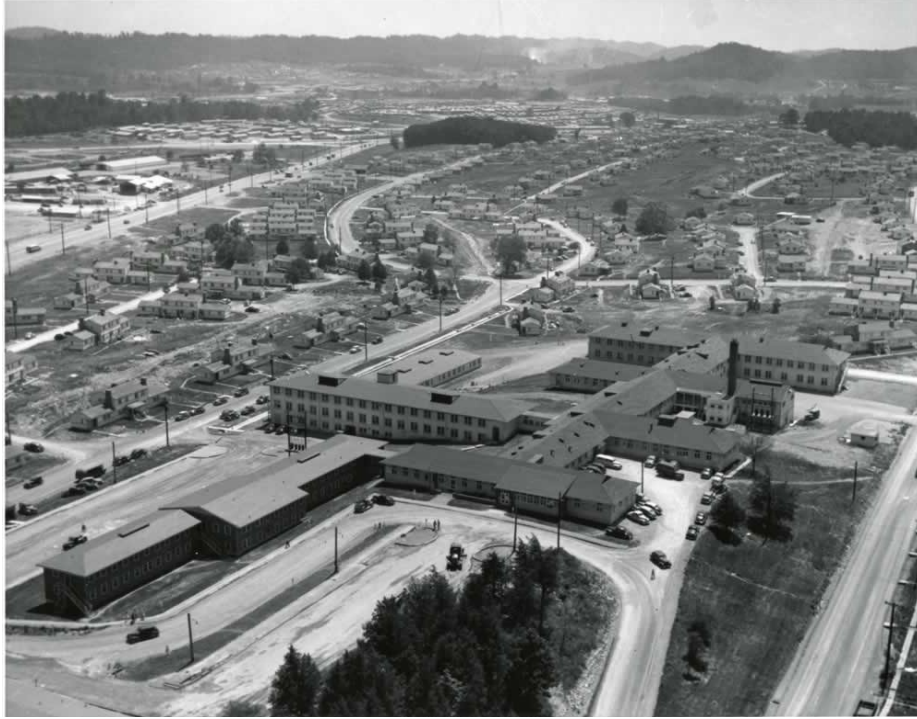
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General Leslie R. Groves, the indispensable man

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The Oak Ridge hospital where General Groves stayed overnight in the maternity ward to get some rest