

Heritage Tourism in Oak Ridge

(As published in The Oak Ridger's Historically Speaking column the week of November 15, 2021)

Mike Stallo, Reference Librarian at the Oak Ridge Public Library brings us insight into the Heritage Tourism destinations in Oak Ridge. I wonder if we do well when it comes to promoting Oak Ridge as a Heritage Tourism destination.

Occasionally I see comments on social media stating that Oak Ridge is not focusing enough on the city's history, or not trying to preserve its legacy. While I acknowledge some historical preservation decisions have been made with which I have disagreed, including the loss of some World War II era buildings, I strongly disagree with the idea that little effort is being made, however, I do wonder how effective our efforts are at drawing actual Heritage Tourism visitors. Do we target the right audiences? What mediums work best for which age groups?

Undoubtedly, the methods of historical preservation should evolve to reflect both the needs of the community as well as to reflect ways in which the community itself has changed. While historic preservation and economic progress might sometimes seem at odds with each other, I don't think this has to be the case. History can be preserved along with economic development, and both can be done in a manner that will complement their needs. Heritage Tourism is one example.

From my perspective, there has never been a time when so many people have been involved in telling our history. We have come a long way over the past 20 years or so regarding the importance of historic preservation and telling our story. This is most evident by the many resources that now exist to tell Oak Ridge's story.

In 2015, The National Park Service and the Department of Energy joined together to create the Manhattan Project National Historical Park, which included historically significant sections of Oak Ridge, Tennessee, Los Alamos, New Mexico, and Hanford, Washington. Although these things take time to have an impact, I feel National Park status will be a boost to Oak Ridge's economy. (I agree, but we must admit that significant economic impact has been slow in coming. This November is six years later...However, I still have high hopes. If we could capture even one or two percent of the traffic to the Smokies... - Ray)

The headquarters for the Oak Ridge portion of the Manhattan Project National Historical Park is located inside the Children's Museum of Oak Ridge which is in an original World War II era building, the former Highland View Elementary School. The museum offers classes for children kindergarten through fifth grade, with hands-on learning about plants and animals as well as arts and crafts. They also have colorful, fun rooms to celebrate birthday parties, which include a Sea Life room and a Discovery Lab room. Other features include a solar house, rainforest, and model railroad exhibits, as well as a gift shop.

The Children's Museum of Oak Ridge also has a unique collection of historical artifacts with over 20,000 total items of various types. An Ed Westcott collection is housed there, along with one of Ed's original cameras he used to take many of his iconic World War II photos. Pairing well with the Westcott collection is the original 1940s flat top house located on the grounds of the museum. The Flat top is furnished with original furnishings of the era. (A hutment is being planned now by the Oak Ridge Breakfast Rotary Club and will be located near the Flat Top house – Ray)

The museum's recently digitized Alvin Weinberg Collection is a treasure of both Manhattan Project history as well as of Weinberg's correspondence during his tenure as laboratory director for Oak Ridge National Laboratory. This collection can be viewed on the museum's website:

<https://childrensmuseumofOakRidge.org/weinberg/>

A visit to the Children's Museum will also give you the opportunity to speak with the park rangers about history as well as current happenings around town. It's not just for kids and has a lot to offer people of all ages. The Children's Museum is a must see for anyone interested in exploring Oak Ridge history.

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The particular areas in Oak Ridge which make up the national park are the X-10 Graphite Reactor, buildings 9731, and 9204-3 (Beta 3), located at The Y-12 National Security Complex, and the footprint of the K-25 building Located at East Tennessee Technology Park, as well as The Alexander Guest House main lobby which has a large historical exhibit along with the famous Ed Westcott photograph of Robert Oppenheimer sitting near the mantle over the fireplace in the main lobby. A small, framed copy of the Ed Westcott image of Oppenheimer sits atop the mantle.

A National Historic Landmark, the X-10 Graphite Reactor, located at Oak Ridge National Laboratory, is the second man-made nuclear reactor in the world, and the first designed for continuous operation. The reactor served as the pilot project that led to the first production of plutonium and is world's oldest nuclear reactor. It also served to produce the first radionuclides for medical purposes and operated 20 years producing many such isotopes.

The Y-12 buildings included in the park are buildings 9731, the first building completed on the Y-12 site in 1943 and building 9204-3 (Beta 3). Both buildings still house Calutrons used for enriching uranium during World War II and maybe more importantly used to produce stable isotopes from all elements in the periodic table until 1998. The buildings are being submitted for National Historic Landmark status.

Visitors can check out the Y-12 History Center located in the Y-12 National Security Complex's New Hope Center. The Y-12 History Center is not available to the public because of COVID-19 restrictions for access to the Y-12 Visitor Center. However, it was recently upgraded in preparation for and anticipation that it will soon again be available for public access. The History Center has a nice collection of artifacts to help tell the story of Y-12's history and mission. It also has brochures and other learning materials available.

The footprint of the former K-25 Gaseous Diffusion Building is at the East Tennessee Technology Park's Heritage Center. The former K-25 Building site is where the gaseous diffusion process was used to enrich large quantities of uranium. The K-25 building was the largest building in the world under one roof at the time it was built in 1944-45.

The new K-25 History Center is located on the grounds near the historic footprint of the K-25 building. The museum was fortunate to have some of the original K-25 workers like John Shoemaker and historian Ray Smith as well as Steve Goodpasture and others working to help the museum become a reality. The K-25 History Center opened the last week in February 2020 but was only open a short time before Covid 19 required it to be closed in mid-March 2020. It has since re-opened and is popular with tourist as a Heritage Tourism destination.

Another resource to get a quick overview of the history of Oak Ridge is to visit Explore Oak Ridge's website. <https://exploreoakridge.com/oak-ridge-history/> Explore Oak Ridge is in the Oak Ridge Chamber of Commerce building and operates the Oak Ridge Visitor Center in the main lobby. It has a very attractive website, with beautiful photos, and concise, informative descriptions of attractions here in town. The website covers the details of historical sites, outdoor activities, places to eat, lodging, and more. This is a real asset to travelers or people new to town.

The Oak Ridge Heritage and Preservation Association has created one of our newest museums: The Oak Ridge History Museum. It is housed inside an original Manhattan Project building called "The Midtown Community Center." ORHPA has done a remarkable job improving the building and creating new displays to tell the story of the city. They are well equipped with a network of knowledgeable volunteers, many of whom are lifelong citizens of Oak Ridge. The museum includes many original artifacts, and a wide variety of displays highlighting what life was like in early Oak Ridge.

The American Museum of Science and Energy has a long history in Oak Ridge, having origins with the original American Museum of Atomic Energy. The current location of the AMSE opened October 18, 2018

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in Main Street Oak Ridge. The museum has fresh new displays: Manhattan Project history, National Security, Big Science and Nuclear Power, and Environmental Management. There are also temporary exhibits and interactive exhibits that attract children and adults alike.

Also at AMSE, the Ed Westcott exhibit features photos taken by our own Manhattan Project photographer, Ed Westcott. These photos offer a fascinating glimpse into daily life in the 1940s in the gated town of Oak Ridge, Tennessee.

The Art of Science exhibit is a striking collection of science themed images, and includes photos taken of microscopic images and more traditional photos. The "Moon Box" that brought back 840 pounds of lunar material for the NASA Apollo space program is located along with other more recent examples of Oak Ridge support of our nation's space initiatives.

For more hands-on activities the Exploration Zone is a fun feature of AMSE. You can challenge yourself with brain buster activities, or learn about robots or how batteries work, and more. These activities can be enjoyed by individuals or can be a fun family activity. AMSE also has an excellent gift shop with unique science themed items for visitors of all ages.

AMSE has an informative website to help give you a more detailed idea of what they have to offer. The staff at AMSE is friendly, and knowledgeable. It is an ideal experience for someone interested in science and technology. <https://amse.org/>

The most up to date information, hours, programming etc., can be found on AMES's Facebook page <https://www.facebook.com/35829893689/photos/p.10160010736593690/10160010736593690/>

And finally, The Oak Ridge Public Library has always been one of the best places to find out more about the history of the city. The Oak Ridge Room was created in September 1986 as part of the library's celebration of Tennessee's Homecoming '86. This unique collection was established to gather, catalog, and preserve the records and history of the "Secret City," and to aid the public in researching Oak Ridge history. Special collections, documents, reports, and artifacts reveal what life was like in the 1940's when Oak Ridge was a brand-new city built to government wartime specifications.

In addition to historic photograph collections, the Oak Ridge Room also contains a large collection of books on the development and history of the Manhattan Project, including many biographies of some of the key scientists and military personnel. The collection also includes telephone directories from the 1940's-2000's, maps, floor plans, and blueprints. This digital collection highlights many of the popular, informative, and unique items at the library. Current information about our city government and issues important to citizens today are also included.

Stop in and explore the newly expanded Oak Ridge Room. This extension area adds additional storage for archival documents and historical items, areas to display historic documents, and will soon have a computer containing databases of historical information and photos for research purposes. The library has created a new position dedicated solely to Oak Ridge history and has expanded the hours of availability and access to archival materials. <http://www.oakridgetn.gov/department/Library/Home>

Whether you want to dig deep and spend months researching the history of Oak Ridge, or just need some general information, there are many rich resources available to help you achieve your goals. So go out there and show your support.

Thanks Mike, you point out many of our Heritage Tourism destinations. I would add the Secret City Commemorative Walk, the Oak Ridge International Friendship Bell, the Emery Road Rock Pillar Bridge, the Birth of the City monuments, the Chapel on the Hill, the Alexander Guest House, the K-25 Overlook

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and Visitor Center, the many park ranger led hikes, bike rides, kayak explorations, and talks at the Turnpike Checking Station.

I would also point out our Greenways which are also locations of pre-Oak Ridge history of foundations for homes and a silo from the Manhattan Project, to name only a couple of the highlights the Secret City Hikes group explore and provide patches for people who hike portions of the well over 100 miles of trails in Oak Ridge. These trails range from easy short walks on paved greenways to moderate hikes in the forested areas of Oak Ridge.

To return to my premise that we should do more to promote Heritage Tourism in Oak Ridge, I must compliment AMSE on recent online outreach activities such as *AMSECast*, Riley the intern videos, the *AMSEQuiz*, debut at Crafter's Brew in September, short educational programs online and in person, even the appearance on WBIR TV 10 at Jackson Square showing off the *Super Cool* liquid nitrogen experiment.



American Museum of Science and Energy Heritage Tourism tour bus stop

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AMSE featured at the WBIR TV 10's Hometown Spotlight in Jackson Square



Manhattan Project National Historical Park tour of Building 9731 at the Y-12 National Security Complex

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Oak Ridge History Museum Heritage Tourism tour bus stop



Teachers from across Tennessee led by Bill Carey visit the K-25 History Center

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Children's Museum of Oak Ridge and Manhattan Project National Historical Park Visitor Center



Manhattan Project National Historical Park Ranger giving a talk at the Oak Ridge Turnpike Checking Station

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The K-25 Overlook and Visitor Center