

An example of Heritage Tourism in Oak Ridge

(As published in The Oak Ridger's Historically Speaking column during the week of November 29, 2021)

This historically speaking column is intended to give you readers a real-life experience of what Heritage Tourism looks like in Oak Ridge. Yes, we certainly are a destination sought after by many who are looking for historical information and want to see the authentic structures where the Manhattan Project occurred.

They want to see the museums, historical exhibits, original churches, alphabet houses, commercial districts, and tour the historic district where the alphabet houses are located even today. You will recall the recent Historically Speaking column where Jim Grant found Ed Westcott's call sign for ham radio in the Oak Ridge History Museum and realized he had to have taken his test at the same location and on the same day as Ed. And the visit by a relative of Major General Nichols was also a recent highlight.

Usually, they have a vague idea of what they want to see and what they want to learn more about. Rarely do they understand enough to appreciate the significance of Oak Ridge, both during the Manhattan Project and in the years afterward during the Cold War and even to today. It is a pleasure to be able to tell them about Oak Ridge and see the amazement in their eyes when the new information is being absorbed.

Many of these experiences begin with a phone call, email, or text to me after someone has recommended that they contact me. I welcome these contacts and am pleased to be able to help make their visit to Oak Ridge as rewarding as possible.

As is often the case, a few weeks ago I received a phone call asking about Oak Ridge history and tours of the various heritage tourism museum sites. Clara Turner Culnon indicated she and a friend were planning to visit Oak Ridge and had been directed to me as the Oak Ridge City Historian by folks at Explore Oak Ridge.

I told her of our the four of our seven museums (American Museum of Science and Energy, Children's Museum of Oak Ridge and Manhattan Project National Historical Visitor/Contact Center, the K-25 History Center, and the Oak Ridge History Museum) now available for public access. I also recommended they see the Secret City Commemorative Walk, the Oak Ridge International Friendship Bell, and the Oak Ridge Public Library.

On the second day of their visit three-day visit, Clara called again. They had been to AMSE and the Oak Ridge History Museum and had additional questions for me. She began by telling me about her reason for coming to visit Oak Ridge.

Clara said, "My trip to Oak Ridge has a two-fold purpose. One to explore a town where my mother-in-law worked in 1943 after performing in Nashville on the Grand Ole Opry, locate the community center where she met her husband who had returned from World War II and Prisoner of War camp and find the church where they married. The other purpose is to run the Secret City Half Marathon."

Well, I could help her with the first purpose, and I felt sure she had the second well in hand. After all, Katy Watt had just told me via text that she was busy setting up for the marathon.

I began by helping her understand that even though a Presbyterian minister conducted the marriage ceremony, it was likely done at the Chapel on the Hill. I also pointed out that the Oak Ridge History Museum was in the Midtown Community Center which would have been typical of other community centers during the Manhattan Project.

I wished her luck in the marathon and asked permission to publish a Historically Speaking article about her visit to Oak Ridge. She readily agreed and was anxious to collaborate on the article. After finishing the marathon, she wrote the following:

"I completed my marathon today with a time of two hours and 36 minutes! I received a first place for my age group.

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"The course and marathon were well organized and staffed with lots of friendly volunteers from teenagers to Oak Ridge Police officers. Although a somewhat hillier course than I anticipated, the temperature and blue skies made for perfect conditions. So far it is one of my favorites. I'm on a quest to complete one in each state and have only completed eight so I have a long way to go.

"My good friend Derry Bush, willingly agreed to accompany me on this road trip and we left from Hickory, NC, to explore each museum in Oak Ridge on Thursday and Friday. It helped that we each had read the book, *The Girls of Atomic City*, by Denise Kiernan.

"We quickly learned a lot of interesting history about the town but could not locate any missing pieces to the puzzle of which dance club Evelyn Elizabeth Carlton met Harold Roy Culnon, where they lived, and did they actually marry in the Presbyterian church or Chapel on the Hill. They both worked at Carbide Carbon Chemical Corporation according to the newspaper article from the Oak Ridge Journal about their wedding."

I need to add that Harold Roy Culnon was in the U. S. Air Corps in World War II. He was shot down over Germany in 1944 and then spent a year in a German Prisoner of War camp. He was among those who left Camp Lucky Strike (where prisoners of war were staged to return to the states after Germany surrendered) and returned home by boat. He then went to Oak Ridge to visit family.

Clara continued, "I met so many nice people at the library, visitor center and museums who were friendly and willing to hear my story. I would like to give special recognition or thanks to volunteers at the AMSE and Alisha Moore at the visitor center. And, of course Mike Stallo and Katy Watt whom I spoke with prior to race and day of the race as well as volunteers at the Oak Ridge History Museum. Everyone I met were extremely helpful and friendly. Oak Ridge was a fascinating town to explore!"

While Clara may not have yet gotten all the details for which she sought, she did learn a lot about Oak Ridge because of her interest in learning about her in-law's time in Oak Ridge. And she expressed her appreciation for the help received from all the people with whom she came in contact. Good for us!

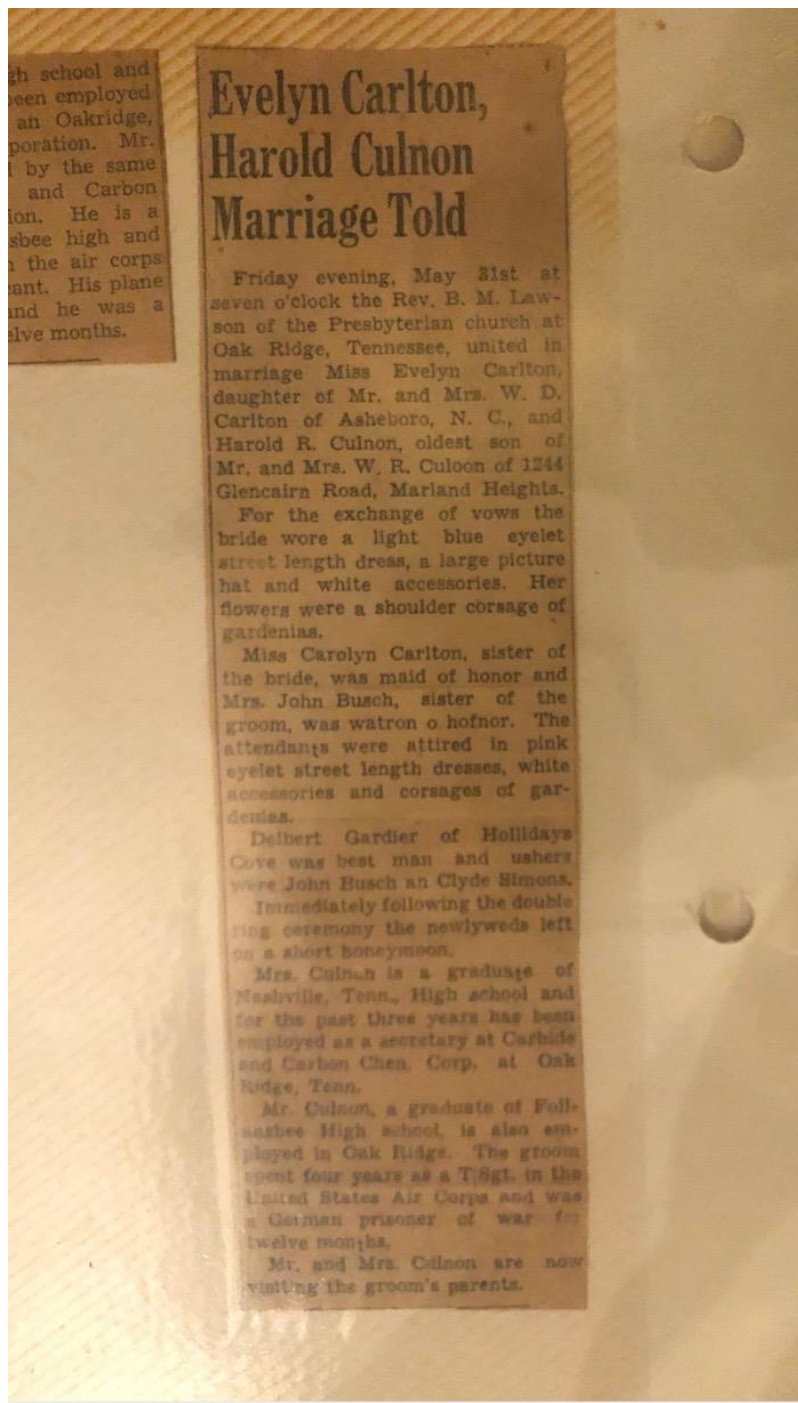
One person she found most helpful was Mike Stallo, Reference Librarian at the Oak Ridge Public Library. Mike said, "I've often seen people looking at the Memory Wall and wished I could help them out, but not wanting to be intrusive I typically let them look and enjoy the experience. The day before the Secret City Marathon I met Clara Culnon who came to library looking for the Memory Walk, we had an enjoyable conversation about her family who had worked here during the war. I hope to find out some information about them soon".

Heritage tourism varies from the historian author writing a book about Oak Ridge, such as Dan Zulli, Lindsey Freeman, Dan Zak, Diane Fanning, and Danny Thomas, all of whom have contacted me while doing their research, to a wide range of people with varied interests in our history. Meeting these people are highlights of being the Oak Ridge City Historian.

One very special tour group who came to Oak Ridge resulted in Fanny and me getting invited to a private roundtable event in Vail, Colorado! We were included in a group of 20 people with unique stories that a man and his wife found interesting enough as they traveled around the nation to provide an expense paid four-day stay in Vail. The purpose of the roundtable was to let us share our stories with one another in formal presentations. We also got to enjoy skiing, snowmobiles, and dogsleds each afternoon and entertainment each evening. What a tremendous trip!

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Announcement of marriage of Evelyn Elizabeth Carlton and Harold Roy Culnon

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Clara Culnon at the Oak Ridge International Friendship Bell



Clara Culnon at the Secret City Commemorative Walk