

The Integration of Oak Ridge: A unique perspective, part 3

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Rachael Colby continues her series on the integration of Oak Ridge during the 1960's. In this installment we learn more of the details leading up to the desegregation of the Multi-Matic laundromat. And thanks to Mike Stallo, we learn the date it happened. Great to see the teamwork between Rachael and Mike as well as the many people who have agreed to be interviewed by Rachael.

Those who contacted her are helping a lot. Her website is: <https://tattooitonyourheart.com/>
Reach out to her! You will be delighted at her interest in our Oak Ridge history. She would be glad to speak with you!!!

Now learn the insights of the desegregation of the Multi-Matic laundromat from her unique perspective based on research and interviews of people who remember the time and who lived it:

Dr. Spicer tells in his accounts entitled, *An Oak Ridge Story* of him and Mayor McNees, hearing rumors that the West Side Mall was owned and operated by an East Coast Mob with an active membership in Knoxville. The word was that "Red," manager of the West Mall facility, was the Mob's man in Oak Ridge. The Multi-Matic Laundry was located at the end of this complex.

Mayor McNees and Dr. Spicer invited Red to breakfast at the best restaurant in town, the Holiday Inn. Dr. Spicer told Red they wanted to discuss and solve the problems of the laundromat. Red countered with a brazen bribe: They would integrate the laundromat if Mayor McNees and Dr. Spicer would first pledge that there would be no police interference with the high-stakes poker game they ran upstairs in the conference room. Second, Red asked that they allow high school children to play billiards at the Oak Ridge Billiards Hall they owned, even though the city laws did not allow players under 21-years-old.

Dr. Spicer said he thought the mayor was going to throw Red out the front window.

"Red, you are telling us you are operating an illegal activity at the place for which you are responsible," Mayor McNees said. "In addition, you are breaking the law by denying citizens access to the laundromat. I don't want to hear another word from you, and the promise I will make is that you cannot continue to break the law. Now leave!"

Red fled.

On Sunday morning, Dr. Spicer had preached his "usual zamzowie sermon" at Chapel on the Hill and gathered his family to go home when he received a phone call. Police Chief Charles (Ted) Vettel told him there was trouble at the West Side laundromat and suggested it was a good idea for Dr. Spicer to head over. Several frustrated looking Black women were attempting to open the laundromat door when Dr. Spicer and his family pulled in.

Apparently, someone had locked it. Dr. Spicer approached the two men who sat with rifles pointed out the window of a car parked in the middle of the lot. "I thought about what might happen to me, my family, and the Black ladies who just came to wash their clothes."

Dr. Spicer recalled. "I put on my best East Tennessee brogue and said, 'Hey, Fellers, I bet you came to discourage these ladies from using the laundromat.'" He reminded them that Oak Ridge was a federal facility, and the laws had changed so anyone could now use public facilities.

Dr. Spicer recounted he then took a little liberty with the truth. "The Chief of Police called me to come down here and try to make things right," Dr. Spicer said. "But before he called me, he called the FBI. If you look closely up on that wooded Hill in front of us, you can see some agents watching, some with cameras and guns. If I were you guys, I would call it a day. This is no place for the Klan!" Dr. Spicer recalled he wondered with every step back to his car if they were going to shoot him.

"Much to my relief, the two men left," he said. "Someone magically opened the laundromat door, and suddenly, it was Sunday morning again."

On Monday morning Dr. Spicer called Red. "Red, you know Oak Ridge is a federal compound and has contact with all government agencies. Tell your friends in Knoxville that unless they get out of Oak Ridge, we will ask the Internal Revenue Service to audit them immediately and examine their business practices. They will, of course, begin with your operation. Do you understand me?"

"Yes sir," Red said.

"There was no more trouble with the poker game, billiards hall, or the laundromat. I never saw Red again," Dr. Spicer said.

I aim to uphold truth, share the stories and messages entrusted to me, to build bridges. I must steep in my interviewees' words, become sensitive to the subtext, wait until they echo, before I tell the stories. I must weigh the words before I write and respond to the issues they represent.

Oh, the power of story, of many voices, the influence of words. It matters how one states things. It's terrifying. But the stories must be told! — I'm looking for you with your stories of life, and segregation and integration in Scarboro and Oak Ridge in the 60s to share. Your voice matters. We need you.

It's paramount to maintain the trust and safety of those who share their stories. I respect and understand why some prefer to remain anonymous for part or all of what they share. Sometimes wisdom warns to focus on the message rather than point out people. At other times, it's profitable to know names. The goal: work together toward solutions—not bring division or discomfort to those who endured much hardship, but rather, awareness, understanding, healing and needed change in our nation.

It's crucial we learn the lessons of history and respond with compassionate care to the stories of our brothers' and sisters' hurts and struggles of past and present. We can't afford to get so caught up in our own lives that we become ignorant of others' struggles and fail to do our part to support each other.

Let's celebrate with gratitude the brave ones who broke ground and the great strides they made to bring about desegregation, implement integration, and open equal access and opportunity for all. But yes, as Dr. James Spicer said in his recent article, I'm "calling us all back to a very important job that we have not finished."

"The best thing is for everybody to take a piece of the action. If we all do our part, we can perhaps make a society that is a little more loving and understanding and not suspicious of Blacks or minorities." Mrs. Fran Silver said.

"Everybody has a part to play.... If Black people had worked alone, we would not have made the progress with integrating. It's much more effective when we have other races working together." the then young Black man said. — He has contributed much to his community and country by knowing what he could handle and faithfully fulfilling his call.

Dr. Spicer stated that in a civilized society, clean clothes are a necessity. Yes. Even more so are minds and hearts washed clean of hate and fear and dressed in truth and peace.

May the lives of the courageous souls who endured and overcame adversity, who warred peaceably and won, inspire, instruct, and illuminate the way to a brighter, kinder future. It starts with listening and that call to love one another. And this one too: bear one another's burdens.

Rachael has again brought to life the 1960's turmoil in Oak Ridge. Remember, much of East Tennessee and the Southeast dealt with many of the same integration issues. In looking back at the time, I am amazed at the involvement of many people in Oak Ridge to help overcome segregation.

Special thanks go to Mike Stallo, Research Librarian at the Oak Ridge Public Library. He has provided Rachael many newspaper articles of the 1960's. He even helped her determine when the Multi-Matic was first desegregated...well, almost. He provided this: "The Oak Ridger ran an article on July 17th, 1964, announcing that the Multi-Matic Laundry was now accepting all customers regardless of race and had been for 'over a week,' according to Joe Young the owner." Dr. Spicer's *An Oak Ridge Story* and the newspaper article Mike located shows the laundromat desegregated after June 3, 1964, and by the first week of July.

As evidenced by the date mentioned in the newspaper image Mike provided regarding the picketing "in the summer of 1963" this was a long-time issue. I am convinced we can't really appreciate the dedicated efforts of many that lasted for months to bring about change.

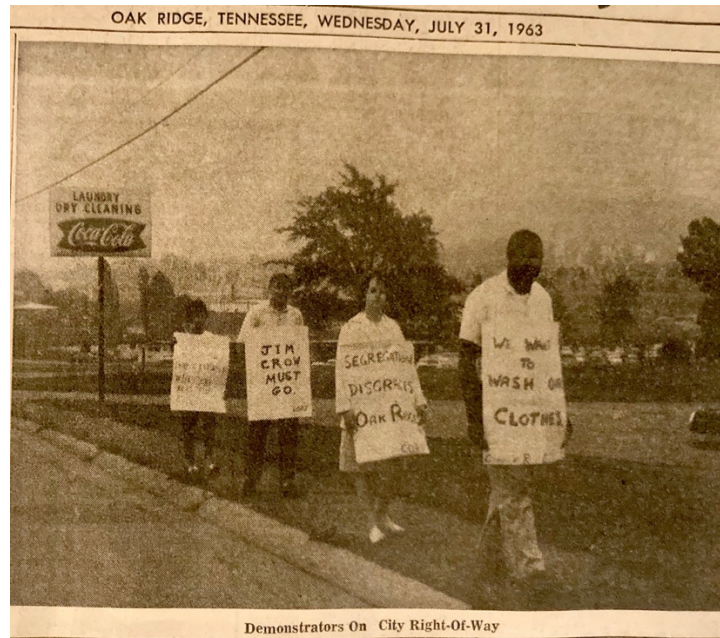
I recall conversations with Roger Cloutier, who first caused me to look more closely at the integration issue in Oak Ridge history. He was involved in many of the "behind the scenes" actions to encourage desegregation. If you knew Roger, you would not be surprised that he operated that way.

Fanny worked for Evelyn Watson, who worked for Roger, but Roger treated Fanny as if she worked for him. Even after he retired from Oak Ridge Associated Universities, he continued to call on her. She even helped him arrange things just so without being in the forefront of the action. A good trait.

Look for even more insights into the history of integration in Oak Ridge in the upcoming installments in this Historically Speaking series.



Rachel Colby is the daughter-in-law of Rev. Roy D. Colby Sr., who became co-minister of United Church Chapel on the Hill in 1962, and who, along with Dr. James E. Spicer, worked to desegregate Oak Ridge during the mid 1960's. You can connect with Rachael on her website, TattooltOnYourHeart.com and on [Twitter](#), [Facebook](#), [Instagram](#), and [YouTube](#).



Demonstrators seeking to desegregate the Multi-Matic laundromat



Oak Ridge's largest and most modern self service laundry and dry cleaning establishment is boasting a new look. A white all metal carport surrounds the two sides of the front of the brick MULTI-MATIC building enabling the patron to drive in out of the weather. With this new addition, the pleasure and convenience of this preferred coin operated laundry-dry cleaner is just the beginning. for inside, MULTI-MATIC offers the ultimate in this type service. And their many services don't stop with just convenience, for comfort is also a big item at MULTI-MATIC with adequate lounge chairs, divans, hairdryers, magazines, as well as being completely air conditioned. MULTI-MATIC is located on Robertsville road in the old Paragon building, and is open seven days a week.

The Multi-Matic laundromat on Robertsville Road



Pickets resume this morning.

Picketing continued for months