

## Explore Oak Ridge history and future

(As published in The Oak Ridger's Historically Speaking column during the week of December 6, 2021)

The Oak Ridge Convention and Visitors Bureau was formed by City Council on June 1, 1981. The purpose of the Bureau was to market and promote Oak Ridge as a travel destination, promote the City's natural resources and sports facilities and unique history. The CVB promotes all events that happen in the City as well as the museums, Manhattan Project National Historical Park and attractions in town.

The activities and promotions of the Visitors Bureau are funded from a portion of hotel occupancy taxes. That means that no tax dollars are used to promote tourism because our hotel guests pay to help promote the city to future guests. The other sources of revenue for the CVB are state tourism grants and proceeds from the Secret City Half Marathon.

In June 2015, the CVB began using the name "Explore Oak Ridge" to market the attractions and outdoor activities within the City and increase hotel occupancy and local spending. The Oak Ridge Breakfast Rotary Club paid to design and trademark the Explore Oak Ridge logo and it has been incorporated into all promotion of Oak Ridge Tourism.

My first interaction with ORCVB was in 2006 when Keith McDaniel involved me as a coproducer for the Secret City documentary films. Joe Valentino was the director at that time as was also being interviewed by Keith for the documentary. Those documentaries are still currently used today to help promote Oak Ridge and can be found here: <https://www.y12.doe.gov/about/history/video-gallery>

Over the years since, I have remained closely associated with the efforts of the organization to promote Heritage Tourism in Oak Ridge. Many opportunities for involvement have been enjoyed ranging from the Secret City Festival to other city-wide events. I have been pleased to be asked to be a step-on guide for tourist buses as well as a tour guide for families and individuals visiting our city. Often, I was able to interact with travel writers and tourism professionals.

These interactions with people in the tourism industry are very important as often they write for national tourist travel publications and websites. It is important to have Oak Ridge featured in these publications and media to spread the word about the great things we have to offer visitors of various ages and interests. Whether it our unique history, our world class rowing venue, or the amazing outdoor activities we offer, Oak Ridge can fill up several days full of fun and activities for most visitors.

The Explore Oak Ridge website and social media presence are also important elements that help promote Oak Ridge. The website was re-designed 18-months ago to make it easier to navigate and provide a location where all events in the City can be located for both visitors and residents. I am glad to have been included in the content development of these key media outlets. Videos and blogs are among the many features of the website, and I have been able to offer content that provides information about our history, hiking, photography and much more.

"The social media presence of Explore Oak Ridge allows for the ability to tell the story of the Manhattan Project and our unique history in a way that encourages the viewer to search for more information and dig deeper into planning a trip to a one-of-a-kind location," said Katy Watt, Explore Oak Ridge President. "The staff of New Frame Creative has been instrumental in enhancing the online presence of Explore Oak Ridge in a fun and exciting manner."

Most recently, a new series of short films featuring *Katie the Calutron Girl*, began being created to provide a spokesperson to "Share the Secrets" of the Secret City. See Episode 1, located on the Explore Oak Ridge home page, introducing the K-25 History Center: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=aF5VHiz1iWQ>

The idea of *Katie the Calutron Girl* as a spokesperson was the brainchild of the staff at New Frame Creative. They thought putting a face with the story was a way to bring the past and present together in an informative and engaging way. After working with the Oak Ridge Playhouse to locate an actress to fill the role, Kadi Brazil was selected to be *Katie the Calutron Girl*.

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Explore Oak Ridge in partnership with the Manhattan Project National Historical Park are responsible for the many interpretive historical wayside markers located at historically significant structures and sites. Again, I have been pleased to be asked to help support this effort as the Oak Ridge City Historian. These wayside markers help our visitors quickly understand the various aspects of the amazing story of Oak Ridge's rich heritage and assist in telling the story of the Manhattan Project. See the interpretive markers here: <https://exploreoakridge.com/wayside-markers/>

According to the State of Tennessee, Tourism is the second largest industry in the state and Explore Oak Ridge provides an element of economic development that creates jobs and generates tax dollars for the City of Oak Ridge and Anderson County. In 2020, each household in Anderson County saved \$326 in taxes because of tourism dollars that were spent in the county.

So next time you have visitors come to town or you are looking for something to do one weekend, be a tourist in your own hometown. Visit the Explore Oak Ridge website at [www.exploreoakridge.com](http://www.exploreoakridge.com) and check out the attractions in town that help tell the history of Oak Ridge or get out and enjoy the great outdoor activities around town like the 14 Greenways around the City or bike trails around town.

Oak Ridge has so many secrets that are ready for us to share with the world, so we all need to start telling everyone about our city that was born in war and abundant in natural beauty, unique shopping, great food, and numerous family activities.

Here is what one Oak Ridger told me after choosing to explore Oak Ridge rather than take his college friend from Minnesota somewhere else. He was so impressed with his experience that I asked if he would record a video for me. He agreed. You can see that short video here and you just might find yourself interested in exploring our city: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=EjpuRIjb2Y>

There are several videos on the video gallery of Explore Oak Ridge's website that might help you learn about our history, and you might share them with visitors who are coming your way before they arrive to whet their appetites for exploring our city, our "Secret City" which is becoming more and more well-known in the East Tennessee region. See: <https://exploreoakridge.com/video-archive/>

Oak Ridge is among several Heritage Tourism destinations located within short driving distances such as: Green McAdoo Cultural Center in Clinton, Museum of Appalachia in Norris, Coal Mining Museum in Rocky Top, the Temperance Building/Harriman Heritage Museum in Harriman, and of course, the East Tennessee History Center in Knoxville.

We are also on the Tennessee Top Secret Trail: <https://www.tnvacation.com/articles/uncover-top-secret-trail> You may have noticed the small brown signs along the roadways.

Should you want to know more about Explore Oak Ridge from Katy Watt, Explore Oak Ridge President, I had her as a guest on a recent Oak Ridge Institute for Continued Learning class of *More Stories from the Secret City*. She begins at 12 minutes into the class and continues until 58 minutes doing a presentation on Explore Oak Ridge and answering questions from the class members. See Katy here: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vPFCn3itBFE>

Keith McDaniel and I produce a video podcast, *Hidden History: Stories from the Secret City*. We produce the program every other Saturday and usually have a guest on the program. Katy was our guest some time ago. You can see her on that program here: [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=r3\\_Y-bj5mas&t=88s](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=r3_Y-bj5mas&t=88s)

If you want to see other episodes of *Hidden History: Stories from the Secret City*, see: [https://www.youtube.com/channel/UC52Ainl\\_FiRCGMvZdLEvWg](https://www.youtube.com/channel/UC52Ainl_FiRCGMvZdLEvWg) Keith and I have done this program for over a year and a half now every other week and collected them on a YouTube channel. There are 37 episodes, all of which focus on some hidden history and have special guests.

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And finally, let me come back to the most recently launched video series, *Katie the Calutron Girl*. Be on the watch for more episodes of this short video series featuring Kati Brazil that will help promote the heritage of our Secret City.



Katie the Calutron Girl. Photograph provided by Explore Oak Ridge



Chapel on the Hill is an example of one of the interpretive historical markers. Photograph provided by Explore Oak Ridge

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Clara Culnon, who has a goal of running a half marathon in each of the 50 states checked off Tennessee by running the Secret City Half Marathon