

Alvin Weinberg Papers Collection is going LIVE online!

(As published in The Oak Ridger's Historically Speaking column the week of March 1, 2021)

It is my pleasure to be on the Steering Committee for the Alvin Weinberg Archive Project led by Ronnie Bogard. I well remember the first time I was allowed to peruse the historic items in a small room at the Children's Museum of Oak Ridge, several years ago. I thought then, my oh my, how important these files are and there must be a way to digitize them, preserve them and make them available to the public.

Not knowing at the time that Alvin had thought of that well in advance of me! He had spoken with Selma Shapiro, the founder of the Children's Museum of Oak Ridge, and they had agreed he would donate the papers to the museum if she would preserve them and make them available to the public. Her daughter, Rhonda "Ronnie" Bogard, Selma's daughter, is carrying on the project and with her driving force is nearing completion.

I asked her to give us a bit of insight into her thoughts regarding the project which is going online effective March 1, 2021:

It has been a privilege and an honor to work on the Alvin Weinberg Archive Project the past three years. Over the last six months I have had the opportunity to look into his collection of recently digitized papers and I would describe it as vast and impactful. This has not only strengthened my resolve to preserve Alvin's legacy for the community, but it has become much more personal.

The experience has allowed me to know Alvin in a way that otherwise would not have been possible. I knew that he was an extraordinary scientist. I knew that he was transformative in keeping ORNL open with important missions after the war. I knew that he was widely honored with awards from across the nation and the world. But I had not understood what an extraordinary human being he was.

I have at times felt emotional seeing his character revealed in the memos and letters, some handwritten, that he kept from his decades at the Laboratory. The memos and papers vary from the mundane to the important, from funny to empathetic, from scientific achievement to the accomplished writer. His honesty and his desire to do good makes his legacy worth keeping and protecting. The pictures scattered throughout tell us a story.

What Weinberg chose to write about and speak about, resonates with me. I think it will resonate with many others. It is hard to pick just one aspect of the collection that stands out. The science will always be impressive, but his desire to have those outside the scientific disciplines understand the science so that they could appreciate it is what I experience so deeply.

I am at heart a writer, even though I never pursued it in any official capacity. I am not a scientist, though I worked in an applied science field. In my work I have seen how necessary it is to communicate effectively with the workforce, and with the population at large. We need to help those outside the technical disciplines understand basic science by making it understandable.

One of Alvin's manuscripts that moved me was "Technical Writing – A Lost Art". Here are a couple of excerpts:

"The path from scientist to written document to depository to retrieval and back to scientist (what I call the "information transfer chain") is not complete until a relevant part of the content of one person's brain cells becomes the property of another's brain cells. Language must be used in this last stage of the chain. Thus, the use of natural language, which has traditionally been the concern of English teachers, should be a matter of concern to those troubled by the scientific information crisis....

The style of American scientific writing apparently changed

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around the end of World War I. Before that time style was personal (with many "I's"); it was figurative (globes of lava falling from a volcano were likened to a sheaf of arrows sprinkling to the ground); it was active; it did not use nouns as modifiers. Around 1920, the style became impersonal, literal, passive, and peppered with strings of nouns modifying other nouns until by 1963 we find a sentence, "Boration was effected in the water", meaning simply, "We dissolved boric acid in the water."

He wrote those words in 1966 and the scientific information crisis has worsened over the years. I am dismayed at the number of people who don't believe in science, who don't believe we have gone to the moon, who believe that scientists are in cahoots with the government to control our minds, who are unable to evaluate risk based on scientific evidence. We have gone from bad to worse.

If even one person is able to peruse this collection and recognize not only how much Weinberg brought to the scientific community, but how his desire to integrate science with the humanities in order to solve some of the biggest societal problems was genuine and visionary. Oak Ridge is fortunate that Weinberg came here at a crucial time in the Manhattan Project and then stayed here and became part of the fabric of our community.

He is one of our most important local heroes. His words will live on through this collection for the next generations.

"At least as important, and perhaps much more important, is the analysis of how the syntactical structures of a language look to the neural network within the brain. Such an analysis would require psychologists, natural scientists, linguists, and writers with a feeling for style. I would hope that out of such studies would come a technical language that is at once graceful, easy to write and easy to comprehend, and whose general use would ease that part of the information problem which our present graceless, difficult, and ineffective style has helped to create."

Thank you, Ronnie, what an amazing effort! I am sure many generations in the future will benefit from the work of the past three years. Alvin is definitely one of our most important local heroes. I think we should have life-size statues of him and Ed Westcott as two of our local heroes who deserve such recognition.

The link to the online database for the Alvin Weinberg Archive Project collection is:

<http://7027.sydneyplus.com/archive/final/Portal/CMOR.aspx?lang=en-US>

Check it out. You will be amazed at what you find there. It is easy to use and is chocked full of interesting stuff! Researchers and general interest individuals alike will find this collection of value and great insight into the life of Alvin Weinberg.

Hint: Look for "Rickover" to learn more about the relationship between Alvin and Admiral Rickover, the person who attended the very first Nuclear Reactor Training program in 1946 at the Clinton Laboratories, now Oak Ridge National Laboratory.

From this experience, Rickover realized it was possible to build nuclear reactors small enough to fit inside a submarine if highly enriched uranium was used. Y-12 has provided that fuel to the US Navy ever since. Back to Rickover and Weinberg, they became friends and Rickover invited Alvin to attend the launch of the USS Nautilus, the nation's first nuclear submarine.

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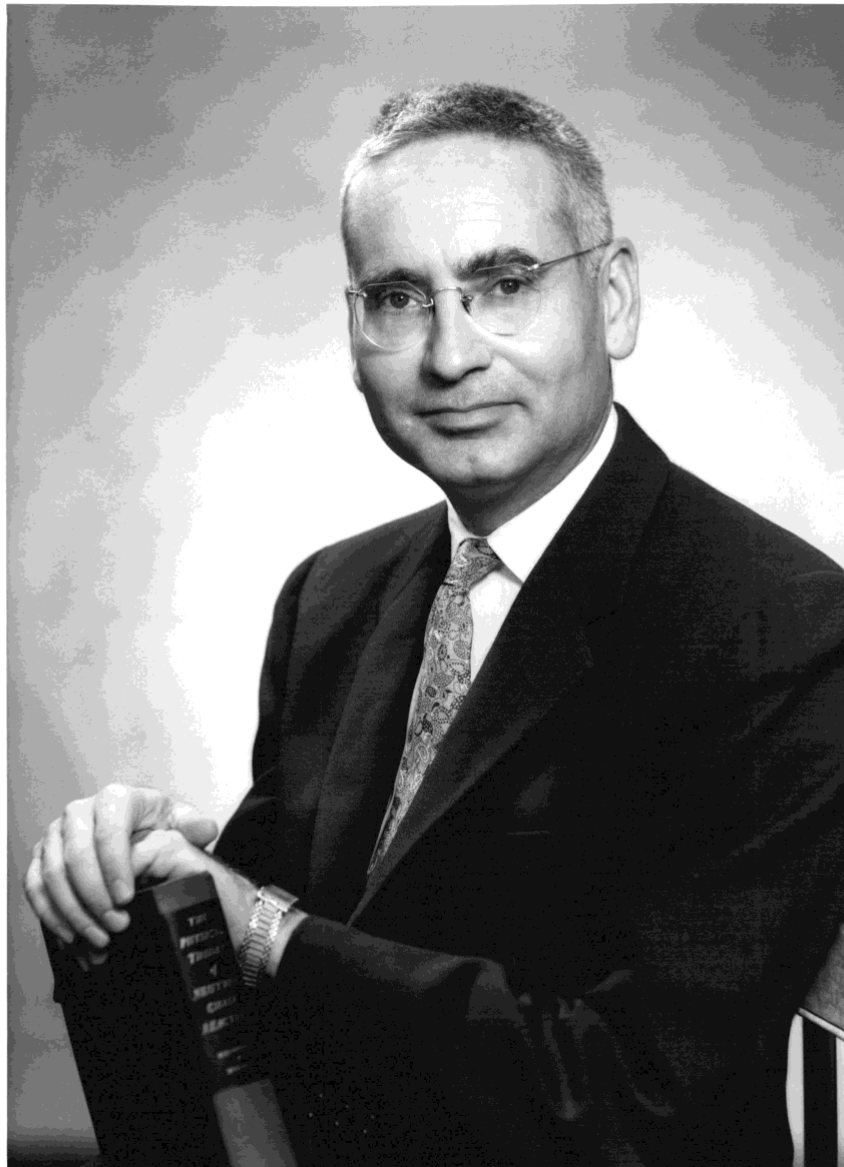
Here is what Beth Shea, Executive Director of the Children's Museum of Oak Ridge had to say about the Alvin Weinberg Papers Project: "The Alvin Weinberg Papers Archive Project team has made tremendous progress and I am very excited to see their work at this stage, where the public will now begin to have access to the digitized collection. I am so grateful to our volunteer project manager, Ronnie Bogard, and to all of the volunteers on the team."



Ronnie Bogard is holding a glass slide from the Alvin Weinberg Papers Project collection. Now you can view these images that have been digitized, scanned and placed online

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Alvin Weinberg, “one of Oak Ridge’s most important local heroes whose words will live on through this collection for future generations” – Ronnie Bogard