

## North Ridge Trail

(As published in The Oak Ridger's Historically Speaking column the week of February 14, 2022)

Steve Oliphant contacted me asking if I would be willing to give a talk on Oak Ridge history to a group of hikers as a part of an Oak Ridge High School reunion. I agreed and asked him more about what he had in mind. I was a bit surprised when he said he wanted the talk given in the Oak Ridge Turnpike Checking Station. I said, "Sure, I can do that." I think he was excited and am not sure he really expected me to get him access inside the checking station. However, I knew how to do that and arranged to check out the key for the date Steve specified.

I used to work for Steve's dad at Y-12. George Oliphant was a department head over the electrical department, and I worked in his department. George always started meetings exactly on time. I mean precisely on the hour! I think Steve has a bit of his dad's penchant for preciseness and he demonstrates that in his ability to know and tell of the history of Oak Ridge while leading Secret City Hikes members on trails in Oak Ridge.

He and I have come to be good friends and I have used Steve in the *Stories from the Secret City* Oak Ridge Institute for Continued Learning classes and with Keith McDaniel have had him as a guest on *Hidden History: Stories from the Secret City* video cast we do twice a month. Here is a link to the program featuring Steve: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-wL56CVmDak&t=1267s>

Recently, I asked Steve to share his knowledge of Oak Ridge history along the trails of Oak Ridge in a series of Historically Speaking columns. This is the first of that series. Enjoy!

\*\*\*

The milkshake coupons were too good to pass up. It was 1972, I was finishing some light tree and yard work for Ed Spitzer, helping maintain his splendid patio view of the Windrock Mountain Range. Ed and Peggy Spitzer were best known for founding the three Dairy Queens in Oak Ridge: East, Middle, and West. They were popular in town as the experts of the DQ ice cream curl cone, an art that takes time and practice to master. The conversation turned to hiking as we were hanging the pruning tools on the pegboard.

As the last lopping shear was positioned, Ed was listening keenly to a step-by-step playback of a recent overnight trip to LeConte Lodge with my family. I told Ed I thought I was hooked; the hike strengthened my legs and knees; my spirit was telling me I would be going back to LeConte hundreds of times for the next 50 years or more. With a hopeful, cautious, and somewhat worried look, Ed gave me a smile . . . and a challenge.

I had just recovered from lengthy bouts of strep throat relapses, dangerous high fevers, and severe headaches that doctors couldn't seem to knock out, the ensuing rheumatic fever left me with a serious heart murmur and little hope of a lifetime of physical exertion. The Spitzers, long term family and church friends, visited me most days during the sidereal month I spent in the Oak Ridge Hospital and would leave a coupon for a free milkshake. I think the anticipation of redeeming those coupons kept me alive!

The North Ridge Trail is celebrating its 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary as a National Recreation Trail. It was the oeuvre of Dr. Liane Russell and her friends and neighbors. In 1965 some residents noticed surveying crews blazing the route for what was to be a 200 ft-wide swath for a powerline running along the entire length of the beautifully wooded northern greenbelt in Oak Ridge. The same greenspace that ran through Ed Spitzers back yard, where I pruned trees, the same greenbelt in my nearby parent's backyard.

It is where I grew up and spent most hours between the end of the school day and dinner time with the neighbors' collies as my woodland guides. After mobilizing an effort that relocated the powerlines to the developed Oak Ridge Turnpike, in 1969, this group of prescient citizens built an 8-mile-long hiking trail across the greenbelt with lopping shears, spades, and hand saws and presented it to the City of Oak Ridge as a gift.

## North Ridge Trail

(As published in The Oak Ridger's Historically Speaking column the week of February 14, 2022)

"Steve, if you want a trail that strengthens your knees and ankles, that's perfect training to hike to Mt LeConte any time you want, we have the trail for you in the backyard. If you hike it, I will give you a milkshake coupon you can use at Dairy Queen East, at the finish, 9 miles away." Ed Spitzer was intrigued by this new trail that started a block from his patio view at the Mississippi Avenue Cold War era evacuation road, and most thankful there would not be another powerline by the house.

As an eleven-year-old, I was intrigued there was a hiking trail that would go to a Dairy Queen, despite an 18-mile round trip. That was the first of my now golden jubilee annual hikes on the North Ridge Trail.

The late Julia Watson McClanahan was my lifelong school and church friend. She loved seeing my hiking pictures from all over East Tennessee, despite not being able to enjoy the spots in person due to health issues developed in childhood. She encouraged me to start a hiking group in Oak Ridge where members could post pictures, trail details, pointers, and information for the hundreds of miles of trails in Oak Ridge, Tennessee.

You could feel Julia's face light up through her enthusiastic comments when our first 25 members started posting beautiful photos from Haw Ridge, Melton Hill Greenway, North Boundary Trails, Gallaher Bend, and the North Ridge Trail. Sadly, we heard the news that Julie passed away a couple of years ago as a group was starting a North Ridge Trail fall colors hike. That day I named my favorite North Ridge Trail view: Julia's View. We have 450 members now in our Oak Ridge hiking group named Secret City Hikes.

That brings me to the patches. But first, a few of my NRT favorite places.

The Lee Russell Trillium Patch is at the top of the Stairway to Heaven. There is a beautiful lengthy wooden staircase, built as a community project, near the eastern trailhead. In mid-April, at the top, there is a dense red and yellow trillium patch that is one of Tennessee's best. The petals appear as ballerinas dancing on top of each other for a hundred feet or so on both sides of the trail. Dr. Russell was best known for groundbreaking work in genetics in Oak Ridge including discovering the Y chromosome and the dangers of x-ray radiation on embryos.

She is equally remembered for groundbreaking environmental advocacy in East Tennessee and as a founding member of the Tennessee Citizens for Wilderness Planning. The trillium patch is a wonderful place to stop and be thankful for her contributions, that is what I do when leading group hikes here, members in one of our groups said it should be named for her.

Julia's View can be found just east of the Old Batley Road access near Illinois Avenue. The trail crosses a perpendicular powerline cut that affords vast Cumberland Mountain views from Big Brushy Mountain to Vowell Mountain including a vantage point into Frozen Head and the Crab Orchard Mountain Range at the Obed River. This is Oak Ridge's best evening and sunset view and the view similar to the Spitzer's and my parents' backyard.

Just east is a unique rock formation at the Walker Lane access and one of Tennessee's best mid spring wildflower patches. The route is just wide enough to walk single file which gives the hiker a feeling of being close to nature with the least disturbance to the land. When the leaves are off the entire route has impressive views of the Windrock Mountain range.

In addition to the 8-mile linear trail (though far from straight or level) there is a spot I call the Dairy Queen Junction with trails blazed in white, red, blue, and yellow. The colors of vanilla, cherry, blueberry, and banana milkshakes, all available at 1970s Dairy Queens.

Like the Appalachian Trail, the main trail is blazed in white. Access trails are blazed in blue. A middle loop trail near the eastern section is blazed in yellow. The Delaware access is blazed in red; this is the trail that went to Dairy Queen. A hiker can take it up to Outer Drive, catch today's Pine Grove Greenway to

## North Ridge Trail

(As published in The Oak Ridger's Historically Speaking column the week of February 14, 2022)

California Avenue, from there it is a 15-minute walk to the corner of California Avenue and the Oak Ridge Turnpike, where Oak Ridge's original Dairy Queen was located (today it is a dental office).

I redeemed my milkshake coupon, and a hiking career was born. I have since hiked over 15,000 miles in the Great Smokies, and am a 900 Miler, having hiked all the trails in the GSMNP at least 4 times. But it was here I learned to train for strong ankles and knees, which not only contributed to an injury-free basketball career through college, but likewise important for safe hiking. My heart murmur slowly disappeared at the bemusement of cardiologists; hiking has tremendous health benefits.

The trail is maintained by the City of Oak Ridge and Tennessee Citizens for Wilderness Planning Volunteers. There is Adopt-Section information on the TCWP web page. Maps can be found online at Oak Ridge Parks and Recreation, Oak Ridge Greenways, the Oak Ridge Visitor's Center, and Explore Oak Ridge.

The main trailhead is 105 Endicott Lane, there is signage designating the route as a national and state recreation trail. There are 9 other access points and parking areas that can be found on trail maps. The trail is day use only; pets are permitted, cell service is excellent. It is recommended to hike or shuttle with someone else for your first hike. Shuttle cars can be dropped at Key Springs Road or Mississippi Avenue. Residents are highly supportive of this backyard trail; however, it is a good reminder to not block mailboxes or driveways when parking cars.

As the milkshake coupons motivated me to get started on a lifetime hiking journey, the City of Oak Ridge and Oak Ridge Greenways award a Secret City Trekker Patch for hiking the original 11 trails in Oak Ridge. Our Secret City Hikes group has over 30 members now that have earned the patch.

As a way to commemorate what the Spitzers did for me, our hiking group also develops patches. One for each trail in Oak Ridge that hikers can earn when completing trails. In fact, the North Ridge Trail patch has become a collector's item, it is the only patch that has been fully distributed. That is fitting, the NRT is one of the USA's most impressive and historic trails.

\*\*\*

Thank you, Steve Oliphant! Readers, you are in for more of the same from Steve as he has agreed to write about other Oak Ridge trails. So, look forward to more of his extensive knowledge of our history and enjoy the trails with Steve.



Steve Oliphant

## North Ridge Trail

(As published in The Oak Ridger's Historically Speaking column the week of February 14, 2022)



Liane Russell Trillium Patch – the largest one I have ever seen



Steve at the Key Springs Road entrance to the North Ridge Trail

## North Ridge Trail

(As published in The Oak Ridger's Historically Speaking column the week of February 14, 2022)



Steve and I at the first presentation in the Oak Ridge Turnpike Checking Station



Priscilla Spitzer, Ray Smith, Jennifer Miller, Wiley Peck, Sharon Rivers, Richard Baylor, Becky Gibson, and Steve Oliphant at the Mississippi Road access to the North Ridge Trail