

Hidden History: Stories from the Secret City

(As published in The Oak Ridger's Historically Speaking column the week of January 2, 2023)

In June 2022, *Hidden History: Stories from the Secret City*, was recognized with the History in Media Award of the East Tennessee Historical Society. Keith McDaniel and I were honored to accept that award at the Annual meeting of the Society in Knoxville's East Tennessee History Center.

So how did this adventure begin for Keith and me? Like many things, we just kind of fell into it.

In early 2020, the world changed rapidly with most of us not realizing what was happening. However, by March 2020, we were amid a shutdown unprecedented in history. We are still feeling the effects of that economically, mentally, and physically.

The last week of February was an amazing last trip for Fanny and me and we did not realize that either. We were invited to Vail, CO, to participate in a most unusual "roundtable" of some 20 people with amazing stories. Ranging from a young Russian girl just 16 years old who had her legs amputated at the knees but who is a challenged athlete, to the first American to win a downhill skiing gold medal in the Olympics, to doctors who perform cataract surgery in the mountains of Himalaya, to a shark scientist, magicians, film producers, a Blue Angel pilot, a Navy Seal, and Ray and Fanny Smith. See what I mean? Oak Ridge history ranks right up there in the minds of the people arranging this three-day adventure.

The same week Fanny and I were in Vail, CO, the K-25 History Center opened as a roaring success. However, it closed just two weeks later and remained closed for the next year and a half. We hated to miss that opening, but you must understand we had a once-in-a-lifetime adventure that we just could not miss. We stayed in touch with those people via Zoom all through the pandemic.

It was then that Keith McDaniel and I were discussing the idea of a Podcast about Oak Ridge history. We were almost ready to record the first program when the COVID shutdown occurred. We were then unable to travel to record it together. I am not sure which of us first mentioned Zoom. It was available and just becoming a tool for communicating remotely. Rapidly it became common practice for people to use some form of group meetings online. We decided to give it a try. And that is how we "fell into it."

I think Keith said, why not make it a video cast since we are going to be using Zoom anyway. I agreed and off we went. We recorded the first program and Keith started a YouTube channel dedicated to the video cast. In late April 2020 the first two programs were posted. Since then, we have produced 63 programs each lasting some 40 minutes or so.

We began with the thought of featuring some local people who might have insight into Oak Ridge history that might not be well known, and thus the name Keith chose for the program became, *Hidden History: Stories from the Secret City*.

Mike Stallo was our first guest and we have had him on the program a few times since. Terry Domm was next, and he introduced the Oak Ridge History Museum that was just in the beginning stages when COVID delayed progress, but the museum is now one of Oak Ridge's featured attractions and among the most popular destinations for visitors.

From there we featured Steve Oliphant, the person who formed Secret City Hikes, a social media-based group that routinely hikes the 85 miles of greenways and the 40 or more miles of woodland hiking trails in Oak Ridge. Now, that is a hidden jewel enjoyed by many but unknown to others. Keith and I were still forming the idea of hidden history stories and began to realize just how easy it was to interview folks on Zoom. Steve was in North Carolina!

Next, we had Katatra Vanquez to introduce her book, *Atomic Hope*. And we interviewed Alan Lowe and Matt Mullins about the American Museum of Science and Energy. The Manhattan Project National Historical Park's manager, Niki Nicholas, was an early guest and she provided information about what the Park Service was doing during the COVID shutdown.

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We will have Niki on again in 2023 as the Manhattan Project National Historical Park is rapidly becoming a huge attraction for bringing visitors to Oak Ridge. Some things Niki has planned will enhance that even more and we will bring that story to you viewers.

Niki and Katy Watt of Explore Oak Ridge have already installed over 20 wayside markers around town. Have you found them all? More are coming. Also, the K-25 History Center's Viewing Platform will be coming in a few months and Niki and her staff are working with the wayside markers that will be installed around the K-25 Building footprint, which is designated as part of the park.

From there we began to expand our guest list significantly, always keeping a connection to Oak Ridge hidden history. Alan Carr, historian at Los Alamos National Laboratory was a guest, as was Richard Rhodes, author of *The Making of the Atomic Bomb*, Stan Norris, author of *Racing for the Bomb*, Clifton Truman Daniel, grandson of President Truman, Richard Groves, grandson of General Groves, and, even Todd Rider, who has an amazing online reference work on Germany's nuclear program during World War II and the scientists from Germany who have been key individuals in many of the scientific discoveries we take for granted today.

As we have continued the program every two weeks with just a few gaps when schedules prevented us doing a program or two, it has become our normal pattern to have invited guests from as far away as the Netherlands. We have also featured stories that I believe would not be known otherwise. Such things as what is happening nationally with Cindy Kelly of the Atomic Heritage Foundation and in Albuquerque with Jim Walther who is soon to retire from his position as director of the National Museum of Nuclear Science and History. And we hope to continue featuring individuals with unique expertise from around the world.

I recently met Don Farrell, who lives on Tinian Island. He was working the Stephen Ambrose Tours of the Manhattan Project sites and their first stop was Oak Ridge. I spoke to them the evening they arrived and gave them a tour of Oak Ridge history the next day. It was a delight to meet Don and you can be sure he will be one of our invited guests on the program next year.

Another subject we will cover is the phenomenal short videos "Katie the Calutron Girl" that is being produced by Katy Watt of Explore Oak Ridge. That series of short videos was just honored with the 2022 Excellence in Tourism Award. So, Katy will be featured early in 2023 telling the story of how the videos came to be. If you want to see them now, go to: <https://exploreokridge.com/katie-the-calutron-girl/>

And you know we could not miss Denise Kiernan, author of *The Girls of Atomic City*. She worked us into her busy schedule (again because of Zoom we can do wonders with special people and their busy schedules). She is not speaking of it yet but has told me an announcement may be forthcoming soon and promised I would be among the first to know...stay tuned!

We even had a Russian on the program. Alexei Dmitriev is a travel writer whom I met when he and his daughter came to visit Oak Ridge and I gave them an Oak Ridge history tour. As a result, he agreed to be on our program later. On February 6, 2021, he showed us the difference between what he saw in the United States versus Russia regarding once secret cities such as Oak Ridge. He also had an insightful comment regarding the Oak Ridge International Friendship Bell. Here is the link to that program: <https://youtu.be/YgBDCFe92Ms> He speaks about the Bell at 19:00 to 23:30 minutes.

Our most recent guest was Kyle Carpenter, Medal of Honor recipient injured in Afghanistan in 2010. Kyle has a most sincere positive attitude about his presence on earth after almost dying at least twice, once on the battlefield and again while in the hospital where he was for three years recovering along with some 40 surgeries. He is an amazing individual, so humble, yet so insightful. He has published a book, *You are Worth It, Building a Life Worth Fighting For*. I am purchasing several as Christmas gifts for family and friends.

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Should you want to view that episode with Kyle, here is the link: <https://youtu.be/T0tfq6DBZS0>

I am also honored that Kyle asked me to be interviewed on his Podcast, one of his methods to promote understanding and appreciation for our history. Here is the link to that episode:

<https://podcasts.apple.com/us/podcast/the-kyle-carpenter-podcast/id1632678407>

The Facebook page, *Hidden History: Stories from the Secret City*, can be found at:

<https://www.facebook.com/search/top?q=hidden%20history%3A%20stories%20from%20the%20secret%20city>

The YouTube archive for *Hidden History: Stories from the Secret City* is located here:

<https://www.youtube.com/@keithmcdaniel1364>

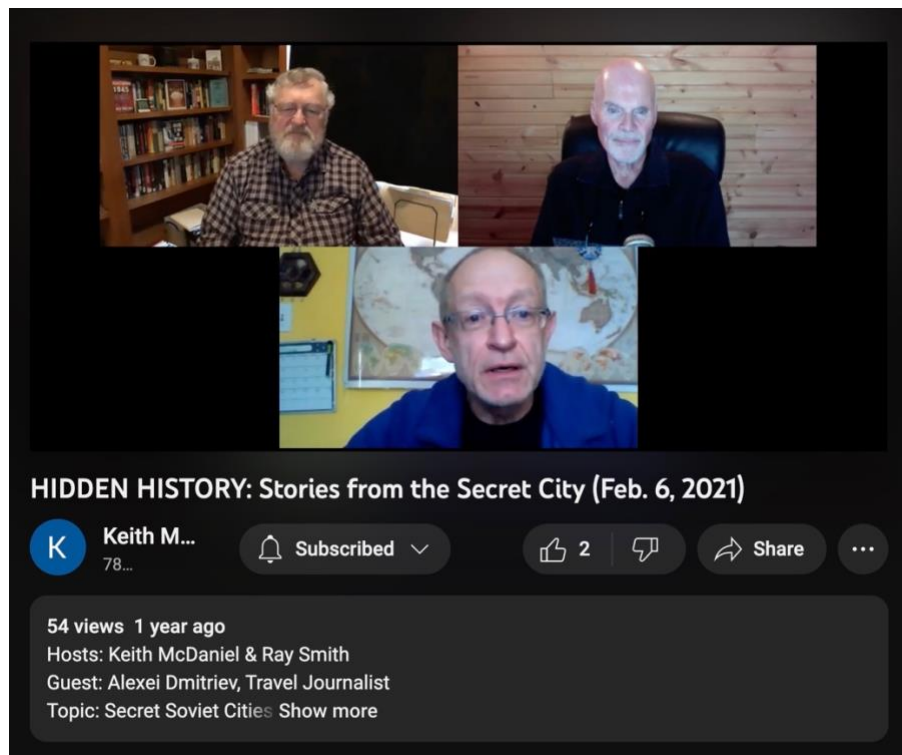
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Kyle Carpenter with me at the Y-12 History Center where we recorded the blog.

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Alexei Dmitriev, Russian Travel Writer who toured Oak Ridge to write a story for publication in Russia and agreed to tell us about the secret cities in Russia