

Oppenheimer Week in Oak Ridge

(As published in The Oak Ridger's Historically Speaking column the week of July 24, 2023)

The "Oppenheimer Week" began for me well before the actual activities in that I have been promoting the *Oppenheimer* movie on social media for several weeks, beginning with the visit by Kai Bird, author of *Oppenheimer: American Prometheus* on which the *Oppenheimer* movie is based. I was fortunate enough to spend about three hours with Kai at Calhoun's at the invitation of David Keim who was hosting him the evening before he was to be the keynote speaker for the American Museum of Science and Energy Gala.

I had also been engaged with Katy Watt deciding how to best preview the film for Oak Ridgers. I was so involved with promoting the movie that when the announcement was made that three theaters had sold out, I panicked because I thought, "Oh no! I do not have a ticket!!!" I sent Katy a text saying, "I hope you have some extra tickets!" She responded, "Ray, you were the first person to purchase a ticket!" I laughed and said, "Whew!" My memory is not what it used to be, huh.

To say I am excited about this movie is an understatement to say the least. The events of the past year since I first learned the movie by Christopher Nolan was being made have culminated in a groundswell of interest in the Manhattan Project and Oak Ridge was a significant part of that! When in December 2022 the Department of Energy "vacated" the process that removed Oppenheimer's security clearance one day before it would have expired that was a welcome action. It concurred with what most everyone if not everyone saw as a gross miscarriage of government action.

The flawed process was hidden from the public when it was done, and the full transcript was kept hidden for years afterward. A redacted version was released in 1954 and a publication was prepared in 2002 about which the Federation of American Scientists quoted the author as saying: "No document better explains the America of the Cold War — its fears and resentments, its anxieties, and dilemmas," according to Richard Polenberg, who produced an abridged edition of the hearing transcript in 2002 based on the redacted original. 'The Oppenheimer hearing also serves as a reminder of the fragility of individual rights and of how easily they may be lost.'"

The Federation of American Scientists published online on October 6, 2014, at the following link: <https://fas.org/publication/oppenheimer-declass/> that the full transcript had been released to the public. Good!

Many efforts have been made to correct the awful way Robert Oppenheimer's reputation was devastated. His family and many friends have asked for years that the situation be corrected. Thank goodness, it has at least been recognized formally as a flawed and terribly biased attack on an individual by powerful individuals who were personally (at least Lewis Strauss) desirous of ridiculing him.

Now that the Oppenheimer movie has been released, new light is shown on the affair in a most commanding and creative manner. I have watched it three times so far and each progressive time I have noted things I missed in the previous viewing. This movie is packed full of details that support the overall theme but also cause one to think about much that has happened with what has come from the Manhattan Project...that literally changed the world forever!

But Oppenheimer Week in Oak Ridge was so much more than just the movie coming to town. On Wednesday evening a most amazing event occurred in the Oak Ridge High School. I was honored to be included on a panel of a scientist, a college professor, students, a filmmaker, and a historian (me). I was asked to be the first speaker and given 10 minutes to lay the foundation for the panel's discussion. I was to tell how Oak Ridge came to exist and how Oppenheimer fit into the history of Oak Ridge...in 10 minutes!

Those of you who have ever been on a tour I have led or been in the audience when I made a presentation about the history of Oak Ridge know that I can talk constantly for an entire tour or for well over the time a normal presentation is intended and not be finished with all that can be said about Oak Ridge history. So, I had a huge challenge! But I finished with a minute to spare and even had the audience laughing with me about the S-50 Thermal Diffusion Plant incident when General Groves looked the contractor in the eye and said, "You've got 80 days!"

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Oppenheimer is the one who told Groves that a Thermal Diffusion Plant should be built in Oak Ridge to speed up the process of separating (or enriching) uranium to get the Uranium 235 isotope quicker that was needed for Little Boy, the world's first atomic bomb ever used in warfare. All the Uranium 235 came from Oak Ridge!

There is much that could be said about the students who prepared and presented as a part of the panel discussing how Artificial Intelligence is much like the discovery of nuclear energy, first used to make atomic bombs and how it was introduced to the world. AI is a newly developing technology that has potential for both good and bad. These students presented ideas about how the knowledge gained from looking back at the Manhattan Project can be used to further advance AI for the good and avoid the potential for applications that may be bad for the future.

The scientist, Prasanna Balaprakash, gave examples of what AI is being used for at the Oak Ridge National Laboratory. The University of Tennessee professor, Lynne Parker, encouraged everyone to learn the basic information about precisely what AI consists of and how it works. A course, AI 101, is being introduced at UT. And a filmmaker, Trent Di Giulio, brought us the documentary film, *Oppenheimer: After Trinity* which we enjoyed along with a large audience after the panel discussion.

The documentary is an exceptionally well-done film that has won 17 awards on the film festival circuit. The producer, Larry Sheffield, and director, Trent Di Giulio, are a team who have been friends since childhood. Trent called Larry and I spoke with him. He indicated he strongly desires to visit Oak Ridge and, of course, I offered to give him a tour when he comes. The documentary will be released to theaters in August and then will be on TV later.

It was my good fortune to get to spend the entire day with Trent on Thursday and to sit with him in the premiere of *Oppenheimer* that evening. I believe I have made a lasting friend!

We began our day at the Jefferson Soda Fountain for breakfast and had lunch at Big Ed's Pizza. I had agreed to be interviewed at 10 am by Forrest Sanders of Channel 5 in Nashville at the Oak Ridge History Museum, so I took Trent with me. Of course, Forrest was instantly interested in interviewing Trent! I did manage to get a word or two in and was pleased with the finished product shown in Nashville. I even had a text from someone in North Carolina who saw it. Amazing!

I must also tell you that Alan Williams contacted me weeks ago to do a program with him for *Going My Way with Alan Williams*, and Summer Dashe with the Department of Energy did an interview for online streaming (we are scheduled to do a follow up on Thursday, 7/27), and Leeann Bowman of Channel 10 did an interview of Mike Stallo and myself. The Oak Ridger ran two columns Carolyn Krause had published in *Historically Speaking* as did the Morgan County Today newspaper. Coverage has been good for Oak Ridge! I have just been invited to be on the Haller Hill radio show on Monday.

We also took Forrest to the Alexander Guest House to include the original location of the famous Oppenheimer photograph that Ed Westcott took where Oppenheimer is sitting in a chair beside the fireplace in the Guest House. The mantle is still there today, and I have framed a copy of the iconic photograph and placed it on the end of the mantle.

That photo was the lead that he used to introduce the interview. I am so pleased that the Alexander Guest House staff welcome my bringing tours and TV station interviews to their main lobby. You know the building is specifically mentioned in the legislation that created the Manhattan Project National Historical Park as being a part of the park!

We also toured other museums starting with the Y-12 History Center. By the end of the day, I gave him an hour to rest before the premiere of *Oppenheimer*. I was delighted when Katy asked me to announce to one of the theater audiences how much we appreciated them and the sponsors, the American Museum of Science and Energy Foundation, the East Tennessee Economic Council, UT- Battelle, United Cleanup

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Oak Ridge, and Explore Oak Ridge, which had helped raise over \$9,000 for the Oak Ridge History Museum!

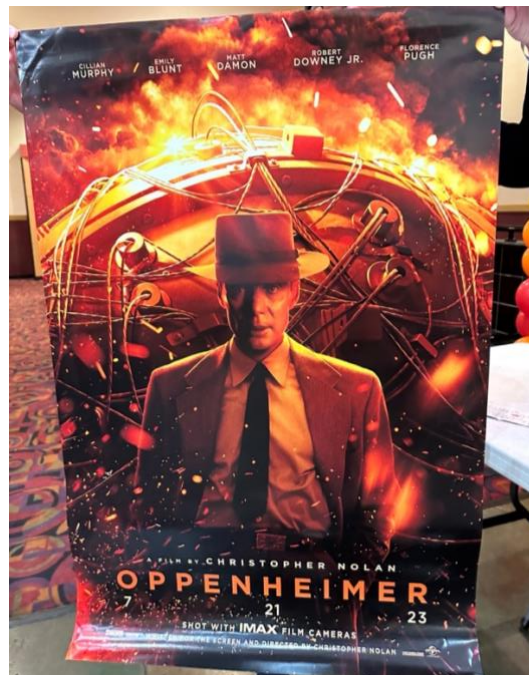
An interesting insight into the impact of *Oppenheimer* for me was Trent's response right after the movie ended. Sitting beside me and sharing popcorn throughout the movie, I wondered how a filmmaker might think about this movie. After the applause stopped, I turned to him and said, "Well, what do you think?"

His immediate response was "I am so emotional right now!" The movie had made a strong impression on him. I dare say he was not the only one to feel strong emotion because of Christopher Nolan's expert techniques and a strong highly charged story. I encourage all to see the movie for yourself. It is a story that is hard to endure when experiencing the cruel treatment of Oppenheimer, but also a relief to see the real history of such an awful abuse of power.

I will not reveal any of the story other than to say, Cillian Murphy (Robert Oppenheimer), Robert Downey Jr. (Lewis Strauss), Emily Blunt (Kitty Oppenheimer), and Matt Damon (General Groves), all do outstandingly in their portrayal of the characters. The movie is fast-paced, and the three hours pass quickly.

The "Oppenheimer Week" was a huge success. I believe tourism will increase because of the widespread interest in the movie. Keith McDaniel and I have Kai Bird scheduled to be our guest on *Hidden History: Stories from the Secret City* video cast on 7/29/2023. That will be an exciting interview for me!

I hope all of you appreciate the good that can come from being associated with such a tremendous high-profile movie. We are fortunate to be included when anyone thinks of the Manhattan Project!



Oppenheimer poster

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Oppenheimer: After Trinity documentary film poster



Trent Di Giulio and myself with the iconic Ed Westcott photo of Robert Oppenheimer