

The Story Behind the Flatwater Tales Storytelling Festival

(As published in The Oak Ridger's Historically Speaking column the week of May 6, 2024)

Ram Uppuluri brings us the history of the Flatwater Tales Storytelling Festival. This festival has become not only a hit in Oak Ridge but is already widely recognized in the Storytelling community as a premier event. Bil Lepp said of the festival that it is already more professional and effective than most such festivals are in 10 years. And he said this in 2019, only the second year of the festival.

I am proud to be on the planning committee and especially happy to provide an Oak Ridge History Tour as part of the festival events. If you are not already a person who enjoys storytelling, don't wait any longer. See what those of us who love storytelling find so remarkable. But first, learn the history of how the Flatwater Tales Storytelling Festival came into existence. Enjoy Ram Uppuluri's perspective on our very own storytelling festival.

In the fall of 2017, a group of longtime friends in Oak Ridge were inspired on a visit to the International Storytelling Festival in Jonesborough, Tennessee. The festival brings together the very best storytellers in the world, every year, in one place. Jonesborough's Main Street is closed to cars, and visitors from all over the world converge on the small mountain town in the northeast corner Tennessee, where they are enthralled by the top talents in storytelling.

"Wouldn't it be great to bring something like this to Oak Ridge?" the friends started to ask each other, turning over the thought in their minds.

Earlier that summer, the City of Oak Ridge had put on the inaugural Flatwater Festival, on the shores of Melton Hill Lake, alongside the world-class 2000-meter rowing course so beautifully maintained by the Oak Ridge Rowing Association. The festival that year had featured cardboard boat races, music, beer trucks and food vendors, and other exhibitors.

"Why don't we add a storytelling component to the Flatwater Festival next year?" The friends - Emily and Charlie Jernigan, Pat Postma, and Martha and David Hobson - continued to ponder.

And so it came to pass that a storytelling component was added to the Oak Ridge Flatwater Festival the following year, in the summer of 2018. Three top-tier storytellers ("tellers") were selected from among the roster of featured tellers at the Jonesborough festival: Bil Lepp, Minton Sparks, and Tim Lowry.

"We held it at the Oak Ridge Playhouse," recalled Emily Jernigan, "and it was a big success." The 300-seat venue sold out, and the Flatwater Tales Storytelling Festival was born.

In 2019, the festival moved to the larger [Historic Grove Theater](#), which seats more than 500 people, again featuring Bil Lepp, along with Carmen Agra Deedy, and Bobby Norfolk. Festival organizers added a writing workshop at the University of Tennessee Arboretum on the afternoon preceding the festival, several family-friendly events in addition to the live performances at the Grove Theater, and once again, sold out the show.

With financial support from the East Tennessee Foundation, and its local affiliate, the Oak Ridge Fund for Achieving Community Excellence (ORFACE), as well as the three Oak Ridge Rotary Clubs – Breakfast, Noon, and Sunset – the Flatwater Tales Festival was able to partner with the Historic Grove Theater to enhance the front façade of the theater with a 65-foot-long mural featuring 21 iconic Ed Westcott photographs from the early, Manhattan Project days in Oak Ridge.

"The whole thing had turned into this labor of love for the community," Emily Jernigan recalls.

In 2020, the third annual Flatwater Tales festival had to be cancelled because of COVID.

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And in 2021, again, the festival had to be cancelled, though a virtual version was held, and tickets were sold on Eventbrite, and writing workshops were held via Zoom.

In 2021, as planning got underway for the 2022 Flatwater Tales festival, the planning committee had grown to include several prominent and active members of the Oak Ridge community. And one of those prominent members of the community was Charles Crowe – longtime Oak Ridge resident, retired DOE manager, Breakfast Rotarian, and involved in many other civic organizations.

Crowe was born in Johnston City, Tenn., just a few miles from the home of the International Storytelling Festival in Jonesborough. "I love storytelling," Crowe says. "I guess you could say that I have storytelling in my DNA."

As a manager at the Oak Ridge office of the U.S. Department of Energy in the 80s, Crowe had brought the renowned storyteller, [Jackie Torrence](#), to help celebrate DOE's Black History Month celebration. "Unfortunately, that event wasn't open to the general public, so not a lot of people in Oak Ridge were able to see it."

Crowe had also attended the Langston School, in Johnson City, the city's first African American public school, which dated back to 1893, and was closed in 1965, Crowe's junior year, due to Court-ordered school desegregation. Crowe had to do his senior year of high school at nearby Science Hill High School, where he played on the football team – which went undefeated that year.

But Langston High School was where his heart was. His father had graduated from there. His mother had been an elementary school teacher in Johnson City's all Black public schools prior to desegregation. "Langston was the only school I knew growing up," Crowe said.

Crowe was aware, in 2021, as planning was underway for the 2022 Flatwater Tales Festival, that efforts were underway in Oak Ridge to commemorate the 85 students from the Scarboro community, who, in 1955, became the first students in the Southeastern United States to desegregate a public school system, when they entered Oak Ridge High School and Robertsville Junior High school.

And he had heard of a teller who had told the story of the closing of his alma matter, Langston, at the storytelling festival in Jonesborough – Sheila Arnold. He reached out to her, to gauge her interest in learning, and telling, the Scarboro 85 story as part of the 2022 Flatwater Tales festival.

On Crowe's invitation, Sheila Arnold visited Oak Ridge in 2022, and learned the story of the Scarboro 85. She visited the neighborhoods, learned Oak Ridge's history, spent time with Oak Ridge Historian, Ray Smith, and inside the Scarboro community, where many of the original Scarboro 85 still reside.

And she was part of the lineup for the Flatwater Festival in 2022, which also included Bil Lepp, and Kim Weitkamp. The festival, which took place at the Historic Grove Theater again, was once again sold out.

"It turned out to be a good thing, both for the storytelling festival, but also for the Scarboro 85 project," Crowe said. "It breathed life into the story of the Scarboro 85."

"I was at a program for the Clinton 12 Project, at Pollard Auditorium, in Oak Ridge, a few years earlier, where they said the Clinton 12 were the first to desegregate their public schools in Tennessee. And (Oak Ridge resident) L.C. Gipson raised his hand, and said, 'I just want to go on the record that (the Scarboro 85) were first.'

"Sheila telling that story at the festival in 2022 was a 'Come to Jesus' moment, and a really meaningful moment for Larry (L.C). It was a very impactful moment for the city."

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In 2023, the Flatwater Tales Festival went back to a regular lineup, featuring Bil Lepp, Lyn Ford, and the Rev. Robert B. Jones, over two days of events from June 2 – 3, at the Grove Theater.

And this year, in 2024, festival events have already included 9 appearances over three days in February by Sheila Arnold, telling Part II of the Scarboro 85 story – the story of what was lost when 85 students left their school – the Scarboro School in the Scarboro community – to attend Oak Ridge High School and Robertsville Junior High School in 1955.

The regular Flatwater Tales Storytelling Festival this year will be held June 7-8, at the Grove Theater, and will feature Bil Lepp, Charlotte Blake Alston, and Josh Goforth. The festival will commence with a free program offered at the Oak Ridge Senior Center, at 11 a.m., Friday, June 7. Josh Goforth, a professional storyteller and musician from Asheville, NC, will open the festivities with a “Taste of the Tales” and will hold a workshop with the center’s guitar group.

At 1 p.m. Friday, June 7, Oak Ridge Historian Ray Smith, will lead a driving tour, starting at the Historic Grove Theater in Grove Center, of key historic sites in and around Oak Ridge, including the grave site of the original Oak Ridge teller, the prophet John Hendrix, who foresaw the development and unique story of Oak Ridge. The Hendrix story will be reprised by Bil Lepp at this year’s festival.

At 7 p.m. Friday, June 7, the festival will open with Charlotte Blake Alston telling the story of the Six-Triple-Eight, the first all-Black Women’s Army Corps battalion assigned to military duty in Europe during World War II.

At 10 a.m. Saturday, June 8, at the Oak Ridge Senior Center, teller Bil Lepp, known for his witty and tall tales, will offer a free program for families at the Senior Center.

And at 10:30 a.m. Saturday, June 8, teller Charlotte Blake Alston, will present a short program for children 5 and older and their families at the Oak Ridge Public Library.

At 2 p.m. Saturday, June 8, Josh Goforth will be the featured storyteller and musician at the Grove. He entertains with foot-stomping music and stories that come from his Appalachian roots. Goforth plays nearly 20 instruments, inspired by the musical heritage and stories of his native Madison County, NC.

At 7 p.m. Saturday, June 8, Bil Lepp will be the featured teller at the Historic Grove, presenting stories of adventure and mayhem involving his friend, “Skeeter.” He’ll again tell his story, “John Hendrix, Prophet of Oak Ridge,” but with a new twist to the story’s end. This will be Lepp’s seventh appearance at the Flatwater Tales Festival – he has been a featured teller every year since the festival started in 2018.

Tickets to each event are \$15 for adults and \$5 for children ages 5 to 17, and may be purchased at the Flatwater Tales website, <https://flatwatertales.com>. Thickets for the three shows may be purchased with cash or check at Calamatty’s Coffee, 219 Jackson Square, Oak Ridge.

“The Flatwater Tales Storytelling Festival aims to help bring our community together, introduce people to Oak Ridge, support local economic activity, and celebrate and support the three Rotary Clubs’ community projects,” Emily Jernigan said. “We expect to grow Flatwater Tales to include local and regional lore, music, and history, and to help share the Oak Ridge story – past, present, and future – with a wider audience.”

As the Flatwater Tales Storytelling Festival has grown, it’s left its mark, its changes for the better, on Oak Ridge.

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"That's what story telling does," says Sue Byrne, who along with Martha Hobson, is a co-chair of this year's festival. "Storytelling brings people together – people lean in to listen to the stories, and that brings them together. It heals. And it builds stronger communities."

The Flatwater Tales Storytelling Festival is led by volunteers and sponsored by CNS Y-12, Pinnacle Financial Partners, the Tennessee Arts Commission, and the three Rotary Clubs in Oak Ridge. For more information, see the festival website, <https://flatwatertales.com>.

Thank you, Ram! There you readers have the history of the Flatwater Tales Storytelling Festival. Many thanks to the group of friends, Emily and Charlie Jernigan, Pat Postma, and Martha and David Hobson.



2024 "Teller" Bil Lepp

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2024 "Teller: Charlotte Blake Alston



2024 "Teller" Josh Goforth

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2023 sold out crowd at the Historic Grove Theater for the Flatwater Tales Storytelling Festival



LC Gipson and Sheila Arnold at the February 2024 Scarboro 85 storytelling events

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The 2023 Oak Ridge History Tour stop at the John Hendrix gravesite