

# How Bil Lepp re-interprets Oak Ridge prophet John Hendrix's life story

(As published in The Oak Ridger's Historically Speaking column the week of July 15, 2024)

I was pleased to introduce highly acclaimed storyteller, Bil Lepp, to Dennis Aslinger, John Hendrix's great grandson. I also provided Bil a copy of Dennis' book, *The Prophet of Oak Ridge Revealed*. It was exciting to know that Bil had continued researching the John Hendrix story and he told me he thought he had a better ending than when he first told the story in 2023.

It was my pleasure to be available to Bil for his original early research on John Hendrix. He soon picked up details I had either overlooked or never knew. I tell an abbreviated version of the John Hendrix story to every tour group to which I provide tours of the history of Oak Ridge.

I have provided tours to 20 busses of tourists since the Oppenheimer movie came out last summer. Every one of them were told the John Hendrix story.

Last year Carolyn Krause wrote a summary for this column of Lepp's version of the Hendrix story that he told at the 2023 festival. Bil was a bit concerned about his lack of a strong ending for the story at that time.

This year she also reported on a talk by Dennis Anslinger of Oak Ridge, who is John Hendrix's great-grandson and author of the well-researched new book "The Prophet of Oak Ridge Revealed." Early in his talk, Lepp said that "there's an author of a new biography of John Hendrix in the audience somewhere, who promises not to yell out if I'm wrong."

Here is Carolyn's summary of Lepp's 2024 interpretation of the Hendrix story (with some corrections and observations inserted based on Anslinger's book)

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During his June 8 performance for the seventh annual Flatwater Tales Storytelling Festival in Oak Ridge's Historic Grove Theater, renowned storyteller Bil Lepp reprised his 2023 interpretation of the story of John Hendrix, the legendary prophet of Oak Ridge. Lepp conducted some of his own research but benefited from the knowledge, writings and a video by D. Ray Smith.

Bil Lepp started his story about John Hendrix (1865-1915), the prophet of Oak Ridge, by stating that the Black Oak Ridge area was once occupied by Native Americans and then by white farm families, including a few wealthy families that owned enslaved Black people before the Civil War. After that war, the residents of Black Oak Ridge were mostly white farmers, loggers, store owners and their families.

By 1942, when World War II was underway, some of the men in the area had "joined the military to go fight the war" and some women may have left the area to work in factories or joined the war effort. But some 3,000 people lived in the area, mostly on farms.

"But I doubt very many people expected World War II to come all the way to Oak Ridge, Tennessee," Lepp said, referring to the Manhattan Project. "Of course, it wasn't Oak Ridge, Tennessee yet. Oak Ridge is a manufactured city. It didn't grow organically."

The Army Corps of Engineers "needed a place to build the components for the nuclear bomb," he noted, adding that the area had important advantages for the secret war project. "It was sparsely populated. It was remote. There was a river, so they had a great water supply. And there was plenty of electricity because of the Tennessee Valley Authority.

"And because of the ridges, they could put the factories in separate valleys. If there was a catastrophe and one of the factories blew up, the other plants wouldn't go off like a chain of firecrackers."

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In the fall of 1942, Corps of Engineers personnel came to Black Oak Ridge and nailed on residents' front doors "a declaration of taking that said that the United States government is taking your property," Lepp said, adding that residents had up to six weeks to leave the area and were likely not paid for the real value of their property.

He noted that some families had been displaced previously because of government actions in the 1920s and 1930s creating the Great Smoky Mountains National Park and Norris Dam, the first hydroelectric dam built by the Tennessee Valley Authority.

"They might not like the government very much," he observed. But, he added, "They wanted America to win the war. They probably would have willingly given up those houses. It was just kind of a nasty way" that the government seized their property. The actions taken included tearing and burning down houses, leaving crops to rot in fields and flattening "haystacks because they didn't want people hiding in or behind haystacks."

Lepp said the only ways that an evicted Black Oak Ridge resident could return to the area were to get a job with the Manhattan Project or to die and have your coffin brought back to one of the cemeteries inside the fence the Corps built.

He talked about the area's construction projects including roads, railroad tracks, housing units, nuclear fuel plants and the world's largest building (the K-25 uranium enrichment plant using gaseous diffusion), which he said was the size of "47 Lowe's Superstores." He added that Oak Ridge in the 1940s had 17 churches of different denominations and 17 cafeterias or restaurants, surmising that "each church was assigned a different cafeteria every Sunday, so there wasn't this great overlapping of people trying to get to the same place to eat."

Lepp said the government brought in 75,000 people to Oak Ridge in three years (1943-45). Thinking of the 3,000 residents of Black Oak Ridge and nearby valleys and other ridges displaced in three months in 1942, he said, "If only someone knew that this eviction was going to happen, maybe those people that lived here could have been better prepared to deal with it."

Then he launched into the story of John Hendrix, born in 1865 to a hard-working family that he believed was "not well off."

He joked that it used to be in the old days that many people who were not well off did not know they were poor. But today low-income people know they are poor because a Dollar General store is nearby.

Lepp then told the story behind the murder charge leveled against John Hendrix. "He and his father were bullied and beat up by a rich guy (John Gallaher) who had been a Confederate soldier. As a kid John swore that someday he would kill that guy.

One day as an adult John waited for him to come back from an errand and sort of provoked a fight. The guy pulled out a whip to beat John Hendrix (Anslinger wrote that Gallaher used a gee stick). John shot him two times, murdered him and left his body lying in the street.

"John ran away, and four days later, he turned himself in. He was accused of murder, went to court, but was acquitted because the shooting was called self-defense."

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A year later, in 1888, John married Julie (Julie Ann Griffith) and they had five children. "Two days before the young daughter died (in 1897), probably of diphtheria, John had disciplined her," Lepp said. "Maybe she was screaming, and he shook her to quiet her. His wife blamed John for her death.

So, she took the four children and she moved to Arkansas." (According to Anslinger, Julie and the children fled to her mother's house in Morgan County, got divorced from John in 1900 after he followed her there, and with her brother rode in a train with the children to Arkansas, where she and the kids remained.)

"At some point, John got committed to the poorhouse," Lepp said, noting that this Anderson County complex had a building called the insane asylum where John was perceived to be mentally ill and was locked in a cage.

"He was probably dangerous to himself or other people. He managed to escape by digging under the fence. He told the guards, 'Don't chase me. This is an evil place. Within 30 days, God will burn it to the ground.'

"Within 30 days, lightning struck that building, and it burned him to the ground. This may have been John's first prediction. John was not hailed as a genius. People thought he was a witch.

"He got heavily into religion. He asked God to see the future, and God told him to go into the woods and sleep with his head on the ground for 40 days. And God would show him the future."

He obeyed the order, went into the woods without a pillow or blanket and lay on the ground for 40 cold, rainy or snowy days. (According to Anslinger, at that time probably between 1909 and 1912, John was married to his second wife, Martha Jane Whitehead Gregory; their son Curtis was born Sept. 9, 1909.)

But as the story goes, according to Lepp, "a neighbor said she found him in the woods. It was so cold that his head was frozen to the ground. She felt bad for him, so she brought him a quilt. She said that his praying and wailing made the hair stand up on her arms."

Lepp mentioned the series of prophecies John made after "he came out of the wilderness. He prophesied that the L&N Railroad would come into this area. He prophesied where every stop would be. He prophesied that there would be a tunnel in the Black Oak Mountain, and that the making of that tunnel would cause the spring to go dry. He also predicted that there would be airplanes. Those things happened."

Lepp paraphrased John's biggest, best-known prediction. "He prophesied that in Black Oak Ridge there would be tremendous factories, that the construction would make the earth shake, and that the buildings would help the United States win the biggest war that had ever happened."

But Lepp noted that "People didn't really believe him. They thought he was crazy. They thought that he definitely had mental problems. Then he got pneumonia or tuberculosis, probably because he had spent 40 days in the woods and became malnourished."

His wife told him to live in a shack; she did not want to care for him for fear of getting sick. But her daughter Paralee Raby cared for John. She had no fear of exposure to disease, so she cared for several neighbors. Lepp called her "an absolute saint" for that reason and because she "had adopted this child that didn't have anywhere else to go."

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Perilee was married to Perry Raby, so Lepp joked that had they lived 100 years later, Perilee and Perry would have made a great "social media handle." He then noted that John "was so taken by her kindness" that he deeded to her 15 acres of land he owned. John died on June 2, 1915, at the age of 49.

"We don't know a lot about John," Lepp said. "He might have been an abusive person. He may have had mental illness. But he was definitely a hard worker." Hard work enabled him to buy the 15 acres on which he is buried.

Almost 27 years after his death, Paralee received her declaration of taking, meaning that the 15 acres she received from John was taken away from her. His son Curtis later purchased 60 acres in Black Oak Ridge but had to leave it in 1942 when he received his declaration of taking and the government payment of \$865 (\$16,500 in today's money, which is not enough to buy a single acre in many areas).

Trying to make sense of the Hendrix story, Lepp asked, "What if Oak Ridge area people had listened to John and if they had believed" that all this construction was coming to help win "the greatest war that ever will be" that seemed to be underway in 1942? "Maybe they could have organized a little bit,"

Lepp suggested. "Maybe they could have had a class action suit ready to go (so they could get more money for their confiscated property). Of course, they were probably patriotic people who still would have given their land to the government for the war effort." (Anslinger noted in his book that John made no prediction about the eviction that affected his son and Paralee.)

"Maybe what we need to take away from this story is that there are people in our communities who may seem mentally ill so we don't pay attention to anything they say," Lepp concluded. "We avoid them because they are hard for us to deal with."

Lepp, a former pastor who admitted that such people can make him uncomfortable, praised pastors, social workers and health care personnel who "get involved with these people and listen to what they are saying. Maybe we can help them, and maybe they have something useful to say that we should be paying attention to."

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Thank you, Carolyn, for yet another excellent review of a famous Oak Ridge story retold with a definite and exceptional ending. Bil Lepp did good to add to the phenomenal John Hendrix story. It was a personal delight to get to connect Dennis Aslinger and Bil Lepp!

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Bil Lepp tells the John Hendrix Story

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Dennis Aslinger and Bil Lepp