

Meet Kenneth D. Nichols, the Father of Oak Ridge - Behind Every Great Man ...

(As published in The Oak Ridger's Historically Speaking column the week of September 9, 2024)

Barbara Scollin, grandniece of Major General Kenneth D. Nichols continues her series on the life of the person we in Oak Ridge know as Colonel Nichols. Please enjoy learning more about this unique and most effective man who was one of the leaders of the Manhattan Project and more.

Ample reasons, most notably leadership skills, personality traits and qualifications, led to choosing General (then Colonel) Kenneth D. Nichols as Deputy District Engineer and subsequently as District Engineer of the Manhattan Engineer District (MED). In this capacity he had supervision of the research and development connected with, and the design, construction and operation of all plants required to produce plutonium-239 and uranium-235, including the construction of the towns of Oak Ridge, Tennessee, and Richland, Washington.

The responsibility of his position was massive as he oversaw a workforce of both military and civilian personnel of approximately 125,000; his Oak Ridge office became the center of the wartime atomic energy's activities. He also was responsible for internal security operations in the production facilities that helped keep the development of the atomic bomb secret.

In this third installment of several articles covering the life and accomplishments of Kenneth D. Nichols, we learn of his relationship with Jacqueline Darrieulat Nichols, the love of his life, his wife and partner before, during and after his work for the Manhattan Project.

Returning from Nicaragua to the United States in the midst of the Great Depression in 1932, Kenneth Nichols had a month "to reacclimate to civilization" before attending Cornell University for post-graduate study, as was the Corps of Engineers' policy for junior officers after their first tour of duty. Soon he fell in love with Jacqueline Darrieulat, also a Cornell student, who majored in education and language.

Early in the courtship, Jackie was "fed up with Nicaragua officers who knew little about local events, didn't know the latest songs, hadn't seen the newest movies. They only talked about snakes, jungles, rain and earthquakes." Nevertheless, "Nick" (as Ken would be known the rest of his life) won Jackie's heart and by December 1932 they were wed. Their marriage was marked by teamwork, love and respect.

Just as Nick's mother made a deep and lasting influence on his life, Jackie had a lifelong influence on Nick. When Jackie walked into a room, Nick's eyes lit up. They held hands even as an older couple and clearly adored each other. They died within just days of each other in 2000 and were buried together in Arlington National Cemetery with full military honors.

A lifelong friend of the Nichols recalled at their joint memorial service, "I believe that when Nick arrived at the pearly gates to negotiate arrangements, he gave St. Peter the same ultimatum that he gave the Knollwood [residential care] management when they decreed that Ken and Jackie would have to move from their apartment into two assisted living units located on separate floors – In his erect and very proper manner he commanded that – 'We've been sleeping together for sixty years, and we are not stopping now!!'"

Jackie's background was quite different from Nick's. Her parents immigrated from France, and they lived in Annapolis and upper Montgomery County at the foot of Sugarloaf Mountain in Maryland. Jackie was the oldest of three daughters. Jackie's father was fencing master to Teddy Roosevelt, he coached the 1920 and 1924 Olympic teams and was the Maitre d'Armes at the U.S. Naval Academy at Annapolis and coach at Cornell University. Jackie's mother taught French in the United States and tutored Alice Roosevelt as well as Woodrow Wilson before he attended the peace conference in Versailles.

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As an army officer's wife, Jackie learned to move often, adapt to new circumstances, and speak easily with anyone no matter their social rank or culture. Nick recalled Jackie "always went with me... we added up that in the first 17 years of married life, we had moved 19 times, moved our furniture."

Their first home as newlyweds was in Vicksburg. Shortly after, they lived in Germany followed by various Army construction installations. During this time Jackie studied at Iowa and Columbia Universities and the University of Berlin for post-graduate work.

In 1942 Jackie and Nick were among the first to live in Oak Ridge, TN as the Manhattan Engineer District was in the early stages.

Jackie recalls: "Until all the building was complete, the noise, mud and traffic was unbelievable... Ours was the first house to be completed at 111 Olney Lane. It was no larger than 700 others of the same style and had no special amenities that might be expected in the home of the Commanding Officer. ...When Nick was home on weekends, he stacked firewood on the covered screen porch so the children and I could spend many contented hours in its glow – especially on rainy winter days. By Christmas, all the houses on our road were occupied."

In 1995 and 1997 Jackie collaborated with June Adamson (an Olney Lane neighbor) to write their memories of Oak Ridge because "Ours is the last generation to give a firsthand report on what we lived through in a secret city founded to build a secret weapon. We share the responsibility of portraying history in the proper context of the times." In 1995, at age 85, Jackie wrote that her "most significant recollections are of Nazi Germany and Oak Ridge, Tennessee – both eras of uncertainty and danger." The quotations included here are from those writings.

With Nick Nichols as the Commanding Officer of Oak Ridge, Jackie had a unique position among the residents. The secret town of Oak Ridge built in 1942-43 started from scratch, literally from the ground up – infrastructure, factories, businesses, churches, schools, fire and police departments, theaters, libraries, offices, cafeteria, hotel, laundry service and every organization that the new residents were willing to roll up their sleeve and create. Jackie was the top military wife residing in Oak Ridge, 'The Colonel's Lady', and was in high demand to serve on various originating committees.

She recalled: "After I came to grips with the situation, I knew I needed to determine how to fit in and contribute to the religious, cultural and recreational activities of this town that had sprung into full being overnight. As groups assembled for planning sessions, and as organizations were established, I was often invited to be the honorary chairman. In some instances I accepted, and in other cases I sought someone who had the qualifications."

Jackie did agree to serve as chairman of the Red Cross, the Officers' Wives Service Committee and as Program-Section chairman of the Oak Ridge Women's Club.

Jackie wrote: "Organizing the Officer's Wives Service Committee (OWCS) was my most gratifying endeavor. I wrote the Constitution and By-Laws which I copied from a club I had belonged to. Mrs. Stafford Warren became the first president, and my friend and neighbor, Frances Gates, was secretary. At a large luncheon, we identified skills and talents of willing and able service wives who could contribute to the Oak Ridge community. Almost all of the one hundred officer's wives appeared eager to help and make friends. They volunteered to serve in the Red Cross, Girl and Boy Scouts, cultural and social activities."

Jackie's "most appreciated invitation ever received" was to sponsor the thirtieth Liberty Ship to be launched from the Brunswick Shipyard in Southern Georgia. It was a memorable day if only to be away

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from the rain, mud and worries of Oak Ridge. She duly christened the bow of the SS *Isaac Shelby* on March 6, 1943, in honor of Kentucky's first governor.

But Jackie's foremost priority while in Oak Ridge was supporting her husband and raising her children. Nick remembered, "Jackie ... kept a watchful eye over my well-being."

She shared, "Housewives and mothers of that generation looked upon caring for children – and their men – seeing that they came home to decent meals and as much comfort as possible, as their war jobs. Newspapers and radio told adults enough war news to make them very afraid, and what they didn't know was even more frightening. Care was taken to avoid conveying fears to children, because they always need extra comfort to keep from being frightened of things they don't understand. Even then, many parents knew children were more vulnerable to adult moods than was generally recognized."

And,

"... those who lived here were working toward the end of the war with hopes for a future of peacetime uses of the result of the work, whatever it was."

Aside from having an impactful career dominated significantly around the peaceful and wartime use of nuclear power, Nick was the loving husband of Jackie for sixty-seven years. As a couple they loved to travel, entertain, work on home upgrade/remodel projects, and most importantly raise their two children, Jan and David. They were always there for them – helping with homework, helping establish childhood friendships, taking family trips to the Florida beaches, providing tennis lessons, and never too busy to attend to their needs or offer constructive guidance.

They were always focused on assuring that their children would get the best education, and enthusiastically encouraged them to be and do their best. They both lovingly welcomed Jan and David's choice of spouses, treating them as family, and deeply loving the two grandchildren resulting from each marriage.

At the end of his career, General Nichols was awarded the *Chiefs of Engineers Award* for Outstanding Public Service. His acceptance speech listed the many people impacting his career, especially the US Army Corps of Engineers and his wife. He said, "And finally let me emphasize that the family, particularly the wife, is an important part of the Corps of Engineers. My wife ...has played an important role at all times, and has been most cooperative and understanding, particularly when the going was a little rough."

Grateful acknowledgements to K. David Nichols, Jr.; Ray Smith; Sandy Fye; Dr. Bianka J. Adams, Alisa Whitley, Douglas J. Wilson and the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers Office of History; Michael S. Stallo and the Oak Ridge Public Library staff; Emily (Westcott) and Don Hunnicutt; Diane Gulley; Gerald A. Potts; and Bruce W. Scollin for their assistance with this article.

Thanks to Barbara Rogers Scollin, grandniece of General Kenneth D. Nichols for this very informative column. She participated with K. David Nichols, Jr., General Nichols' son, on a video cast. You can watch that video cast here: <https://youtu.be/EBH7dhtasUc>.

An added note regarding the Chief of Engineers Award. It was presented to Nichols in 1984 as only the fifth individual to receive the prestigious award. Next Barbara will bring us a column titled, Honing Engineer Qualifications (1932-1941).

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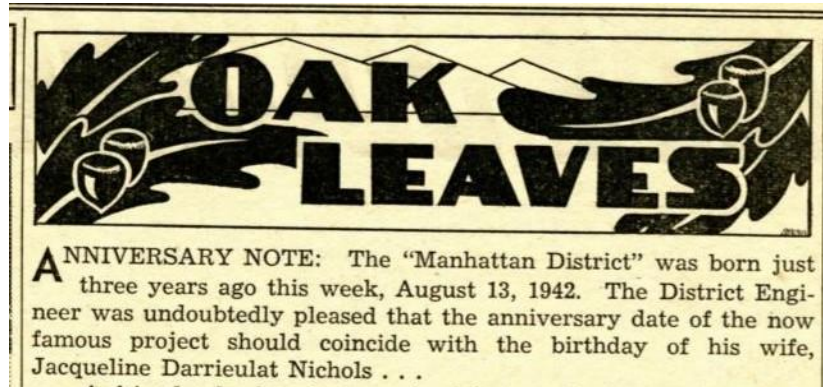
1st Lieutenant Kenneth D. Nichols (Courtesy K. David Nichols, Jr.)



Col. Nichols and Jacqueline with their children [K. David Nichols, Jr., and Jacqueline Ann Nichols] at their home 111 Olney Lane, Oak Ridge, TN, August 26, 1945. (Photo by Ed Westcott. Courtesy Emily (Westcott) and Don Hunnicutt)

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Oak Ridge Journal, August 16, 1945. (Courtesy Oak Ridge Public Library)



Jacqueline and General Kenneth Nichols at the Alexander Inn, Oak Ridge, TN 40th Anniversary of Oak Ridge, June 11, 1982 (Photo by Ruth Carey. Courtesy Oak Ridge Public Library)