

A history of Oliver Springs – Part 3

(As published in The Oak Ridger's Historically Speaking column the week of October 6, 2025)

Carolyn Krause concludes a three-part series on the history of Oliver Springs based on a book by a former reporter for The Oak Ridger.

The grand 150-room, five-story Oliver Springs Hotel, built in 1895 next to the mineral springs on 500 acres, had been called an elegant "watering place" as good as the famous spa in Saratoga, N.Y. Unfortunately, this resort that attracted many hundreds of wealthy patrons from New Orleans to New York and that made Oliver Springs famous did not last very long because of a lack of firefighting equipment. The hotel, which had been called "the diamond in the coal fields," apparently burned down when flames flew over to it from its nearby power plant.

The long Georgia pine structure "went up in spectacular flames in 1905 after only 10 glorious years," according to Augusta Grove Bell in her 1998 book "Circling Windrock Mountain: Two Hundred Years in Appalachia."

Bell learned about the Oliver Springs resort, built by the four sons of the Welsh coal magnate Joseph C. Richards, from Mamie Richards Sienknecht, granddaughter of Joseph and daughter of his son John Richards, the Oliver Springs postmaster and manager of the Joseph Richards and Sons store. Bell described what she learned in the "Mineral Waters Plus Black Gold" chapter of her book.

She wrote that well-to-do folks from other states were able to travel by train to the resort and spa, which was advertised to be similar to an Alpine village because of its proximity to the Cumberland Mountains. Many hotel guests arrived by train, thanks to the Southern Railway, which in 1894 took over the failing East Tennessee, Virginia, and Georgia Railroad; ETV&G had previously bought out the tracks and trains of the Walden Ridge Railroad.

Let's do a time travel exercise. Imagine that you and your partner live in Knoxville in the year 1899, that you both are aspiring journalists in your early 20s, and that you both love to take the train and attend the wildly popular Saturday night dances at the Oliver Springs Hotel's pavilion, accompanied by an Italian orchestra. Thanks to your wealthy parents, you and your partner are given a treat. In late October, you and your partner arrive on Saturday, go dancing, and stay overnight in an elegant hotel room. On Sunday, you stay long enough to chat with the staff and guests and participate in activities.

In the \$40 room that night, you appreciate the carpeting and the steam heat. You are surprised to learn that the hotel generates its own electricity, which powers not only its lights but also an elevator that allows you to quickly get to your fourth-floor room. You and your partner enjoy falling asleep on a bed with a fine-hair mattress. The next morning, you notice that your room, like all the others, affords a lovely view of the mountains surrounding the town and the trees with leaves of many colors.

To get an even better view, you and your partner ascend to the hotel's 50-foot-high observation tower rising from the center of the main roof. Then you both enjoy reading novels while sitting in rocking chairs on the hotel's double-decked veranda. You learn that some young men from the area who dance until the music stops end up sleeping in these rocking chairs before going home.

At noon, you and your partner enjoy a gourmet dinner at a damasked table set with china and silver. The new hotel manager, N. F. Powel, who is a friend of your father's, recognizes you and sits at your table while dessert is being served. He shows you his new 20-page advertising booklet announcing the upcoming tourist season. He proudly reads his favorite descriptive sentence: "This magnificent and justly celebrated watering place is surrounded by lofty mountains whose summits are companions of the clouds."

"Where do all these well-off tourists come from?" you ask Powel. "Well, in the summertime, they come from cities where it gets really hot, such as New Orleans, Memphis, Chicago, and even New York," he answers. "We are lucky that Joseph Richards, whose sons built this place, sold the railroad right-of-way for Southern Railway's train stop at our hotel. And we are lucky that his sons built the hotel near the mineral springs on the original land tract owned by Moses Winters, who 100 years ago founded Winters Gap, the first name of what became Oliver Springs."

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"The food is really good here," your partner chimes in. "I haven't eaten this well in a long time." Powel was quick to comment on the cuisine by reading from his promotional booklet: "My table will be supplied with the richest milk and the best butter together with all the fruits of the surrounding country, with nice, fresh, crisp vegetables and melons in season."

According to Bell, "So important to the local growers was the hotel that when it burned the farm economy was actually depressed for a time."

In the afternoon you and your partner play tennis on a resort court and later croquet on the lawn. Then you both ride horses along a bridle path on wooded Walden Ridge. Later, Powel asks a staff member to give you a tour of the wine cellar.

When you see him again after the tour, you ask him: "What are the health-giving properties of the mineral springs here?" Powel is ready to answer, having written extensively about the springs in his tourist brochure. He said the springs can alleviate or eliminate the symptoms of 78 ailments and serious diseases. The brochure, he added, contains six pages of testimonials.

The booklet states that the spa has nine kinds of mineral water. In addition to the smelly white, yellow, red, and black sulphur waters, there was chalybeate with its iron salts, along with manganese, lithium, magnesium, and epsom.

According to Bell, "Dr. A.K. Shelton, resident physician, promised hope for all kinds of conditions, everything from tonsillitis to what he unflinchingly called drunkard's liver. In addition, he said the mineral waters 'could also improve the complexion and curing of various cutaneous eruptions,' not to mention complications from gonorrhea and syphilis. The good doctor did not mince words."

Joseph's son William Richards built what Bell called "a magnificent mansion" in 1893 that outlasted the Oliver Springs Hotel by almost five decades until it was sold to the Oliver Springs American Legion in 1940, only to burn down four years later.

"This Victorian castle, topped with a cupola like a Prussian war helmet, may have been the finest home ever built in Anderson County," wrote Bell, noting that it had handcrafted staircases imported from England, leaded windows of stained glass, and fireplaces with carved mantelpieces. She reported that the mansion "came to a bad end" in 1940 because "it was the scene of the unsolved murders of William's unmarried daughters Margaret and Ann, a crime making headlines for weeks."

In 1904, the Windrock Mine was opened by Bessemer Coal and Coke Company of Alabama. White and African American men dug the coal using picks and shovels, not machines. Many miners lived in the segregated, now-vanished towns of Upper Windrock (on the mountain top) and Lower Windrock.

The Southern Railway turned "the prosperous coal town into a freight distribution center," Bell wrote. "Not only was there coal to be shipped out, but also bricks from the new kilns up in the Big Mountain mining area. One of the mines there had turned out to be more valuable for the fire clay that overlaid the coal seam than for the coal itself, so a brick business sprang up," producing thousands of bricks and jobs until the 1940s.

Most Oliver Springs families "still raised much of their own food in spite of the availability of Keebler's and Sienknecht's (stores)," she stated. "It was not a bit unusual for a family to have a cow and a barn in their backyard near the outdoor toilet and maybe even a pigpen."

By 1917, bridges had been built over the Clinch River, and Anderson County residents were starting to buy and drive Ford automobiles, such as Model T's, being sold by a dealer in Clinton. The first group of 18 registered car owners included two women from Oliver Springs. One woman was Mrs. C.J. (Tilda) Ladd, who drove a Ford touring car three years before American women were granted the right to vote. The Ladds' daughter Dora was to become the mother of former U.S. Senator Howard Baker, who served as Senate majority leader and White House chief of staff during President Ronald Reagan's second term.

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Although Oliver Springs was long considered a coal mining town, the availability of and demand for coal have plummeted greatly in recent years. But many of the town's 3000 residents have made a living through farming and jobs in manufacturing, health care and social assistance, construction, transportation, warehousing, and utilities.

Historic preservation has been important for Oliver Springs residents. The town still has pre-1900s buildings such as a former hospital, a family general store, and a train depot that now serves as a library and the restored Oliver Springs Museum.

Its African American residents, who make up only 3% of the population, have opened the Tri-County African American Cultural Museum and preserved the "colored school" in which Mayme Carmichael taught numerous African American children of coal miners, farmers and loggers, some of whom went to college and became doctors, lawyers, engineers, ministers and professional athletes or held other professional positions in large organizations.

The town is also proud of Ben Diggs and Walter Stripling, two soldier sons of Oliver Springs who in 1918, because of their heroic efforts in World War I, received the Distinguished Service Cross, an honor second only to the Congressional Medal.

Fast forward to Saturday, Oct. 19, 2024, when the annual October Sky Festival will be held at Arrowhead Park in Oliver Springs. The public is invited to see more than 100 vendors, the Kids Zone, the "Heritage at the Depot," the Main Street Classic Car Show, and the restored Oliver Springs Museum. The festival celebrates the 1999 film that tells the true story of Homer Hickam Jr., a coal miner's son in West Virginia who was inspired by the launch of Sputnik 1 in 1957 to take up rocketry against his father's wishes; he eventually became a NASA engineer. Principal photography for the film took place in Oliver Springs and two other Roane County cities – Harriman and Kingston.

Thanks, Carolyn, the history of our closest neighboring town, Oliver Springs, is a most interesting one. As it dates before Oak Ridge, the history goes back much earlier, and it reflects early East Tennessee history much as other communities in this area experienced.



The 150-room Oliver Springs Hotel (Courtesy of the Chattanooga Public Library)