

Pat Postma – Oak Ridge pillar for years – part 1

(As published in The Oak Ridger's Historically Speaking column the week of November 10, 2025)

Carolyn Krause has written three articles on Pat Postma, a well-known Oak Ridger who has contributed much to the community, and the two important men in her life. She will be moving away after having grown up and lived in four houses since 1943. The articles are based mostly on Carolyn's interview with her in September this year and a 2011 oral history interview with her by Keith McDaniel, a filmmaker and film instructor who lives in Oak Ridge. Carolyn has also referenced her Historically Speaking article on the late Herman Postma, Pat's husband and director of Oak Ridge National Laboratory from 1974 to 1988.

Patricia Dunigan Postma is a pillar of the city of Oak Ridge. Pat Postma, as she is known, has been a prominent, respected and active supporter of and advocate for our community, a leader of initiatives, and a highly successful fundraiser who has provided Oak Ridge with resources that have improved our quality of life.

Except when she attended Duke University for four years to earn a bachelor's degree in mathematics, lived in The Netherlands with her physicist husband for a year and visited 67 countries, many more than once, Pat has lived in Oak Ridge since the age of 4 when her parents moved here in 1943. That will change later this year; at the age of 87, she is preparing to move from Oak Ridge and live near her daughter Pamela on Kiawah Island near Charleston, S.C.

Pat, who has a Ph.D. in economics from the University of Tennessee, was an assistant dean and administrator at the UT College of Business. She has flourished from her relationship with two wise and vigorous men in her life, both deceased. One was her father, Thomas Dunigan, a local high school principal, and the other, her locally famous husband, Herman Postma, the director of Oak Ridge National Laboratory for 14 years.

Thomas Dunigan was a town fixture as a popular principal of Oak Ridge High School for 20 years, including the year when ORHS was the first public high school in the city and in the Southeast to be desegregated (by at least 40 of the 85 students from Scarborough High School in 1955).

Her dad was a great role model for her. He taught her to be honest for the rest of her life after she found a chocolate bar in the master bedroom, ate it, and then lied about what she had done when challenged. She admired him because he was "unflappable" even when a burning cross appeared in the yard in 1955 and during his worst year as principal – 1968, when Martin Luther King was assassinated, greatly upsetting the Black students at ORHS. Some Black students recalled as adults that he had a calming effect when he spoke with them.

Dunigan was teaching high school and the Army Signal Corps in Kentucky, where Pat was born, when he was recruited during the war to Oak Ridge. He worked as an electronics foreman at the Y-12 Plant. After the war, because he was one of the 22,000 workers laid off in Oak Ridge, he decided to apply for a teaching job. "They hired him with the proviso that he had to get a master's degree," she told Keith McDaniel. Many of the teachers hired by Alden Blankenship since 1943 were from Columbia University, and all teachers hired had to have master's degrees.

"My dad taught algebra and physics in the old high school on the hill above Blankenship Field, and in the summer, he attended UT working on his master's degree," Pat said. "I remember my mother typing his thesis. There was a card table set up in the middle of the living room floor in our B house at Fairview and Tennessee avenues, and it was kind of sacred. We sort of tiptoed around it." By "we," Pat, the middle child, meant her sister Mary, the oldest of her siblings, and her brother Thomas.

Pat attended high school while her father was the principal there. At that time, the Dunigan family was living on New York Avenue, right next to the family home of William J. Wilcox, for which a new museum in Oak Ridge is named. She said she is the only one in her family who has no musical or athletic talents. But she turned out to have a love for art and a gift for photography; she became president of the Oak Ridge Community Art Center and a leader in the Camera Club of Oak Ridge, which named her "photographer of the year" in 2019.

She said she wasn't popular in high school and didn't date much. At her 50th high school reunion, she introduced herself as Pat Dunigan, and one man said, "I spent some time in your dad's office," and another said, "I know who you were. You were the principal's daughter. That cost you a lot of boyfriends, girl."

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But, as she thought about her childhood in Oak Ridge, she appreciated the freedom from parental control that she and her peers had in walking to school and around the neighborhood, as well as strolling often to the public library and reading books, even ones from the adult section.

She has heard “Camelot” and “A Fairy Tale” as descriptors of the lives of white children in the 1940s and 1950s in Oak Ridge. Later, she learned that while many white people of all occupations felt like they lived in a “classless” society in Oak Ridge, Black workers and their spouses and children here felt oppressed and discriminated against especially from the 1940s through the early 1960s. Decades later, she became aware that the children and youths who desegregated ORHS and Clinton High School had many uncomfortable school and after-school experiences.

The second influential man in her life was her husband, Herman Postma, director of ORNL from 1974 to 1988 and previously director of ORNL's old Thermonuclear Division, later called the Fusion Energy Division. An extraordinarily brilliant man, he had earned a physics degree from Duke University and then a Ph.D. in physics from Harvard University. Neither one of his parents, both farmers of Dutch ancestry who lived in North Carolina, had a high school diploma.

While working at ORNL on plasma physics with the goal of achieving fusion power, Herman met Pat when she had a job at the Y-12 Plant library during the summer between her junior and senior years at Duke. By that time Herman had been hired by ORNL to work as a staff physicist. Many young single people in Oak Ridge were meeting each other at social gatherings at churches, Pat said. “Herman dated everybody in Oak Ridge by the time he got around to me,” she added. “But we were pretty serious.”

By April of her senior year, she and her roommate, who also had majored in math, were both offered jobs at Bell Labs in New Jersey. “Herman would call every now and then, and it was getting time when I had to give Bell Labs a yes or no,” Pat said. “Nothing had been said about getting married.

“When he called again one night, I said something about having only a week to decide if I'm going to go to New Jersey. And he said, ‘If you go to New Jersey, that'll be the end of us.’”

Spontaneously, she responded, “Are we going to get married or not?” After a long silence, he said yes. She and Herman were married in November 1960. As for her roommate, Pat said that “she spent her whole career at Bell Labs, and she did very well.”

Herman and Pat had two children, Peter and Pamela, two grandsons and two very successful careers. One bump in the road in their early years as a couple was that their house on Berea Road burned down in 1972. It was rebuilt in less than two years, and Pat is still there until she moves in December.

Herman had an impressive legacy at ORNL. He unknowingly saved the troubled Thermonuclear Division of which he became director by successfully convincing management that the division staff could build a version of the doughnut-shaped tokamak fusion device (called ORMAK) that he had learned about during visits to the Soviet Union, where the “tokamak” was invented.

When he was promoted to ORNL director, he handled the problems he faced when his predecessor, Alvin Weinberg, was fired. “Herman was a real character, very bright, but with a really goofy sense of humor, and sort of uninhibited,” Pat told McDaniel. “I remember when his boss Clyde Hopkins, president of Martin Marietta Energy Systems, decided to have staff meetings at 7:30 in the morning. Herman went to the first one in pajamas!”

Herman initiated important, lasting changes. He created two career paths for researchers and managers so that the highly accomplished senior researchers could also earn the highest salaries; Eugene P. Wigner Fellowships, to bring the best and brightest young scientists to the lab, and the Seed Money and Laboratory Directed Research and Development (LDRD) programs to fund innovative research that could later attract external funding.

He helped ORNL inventions become known and made useful for society by encouraging innovative researchers to try to win R&D 100 awards (and they have won hundreds) and by establishing a technology transfer program that has resulted in many ORNL inventions becoming licensed to industrial firms.

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Working with his friend Jack Reese, UT chancellor, Postma created the UT-ORNL Distinguished Scientist program, which brought brilliant scientists to both institutions for many years. In this way, Postma built a bridge between Oak Ridge and UT in Knoxville, opening new opportunities for both cities.

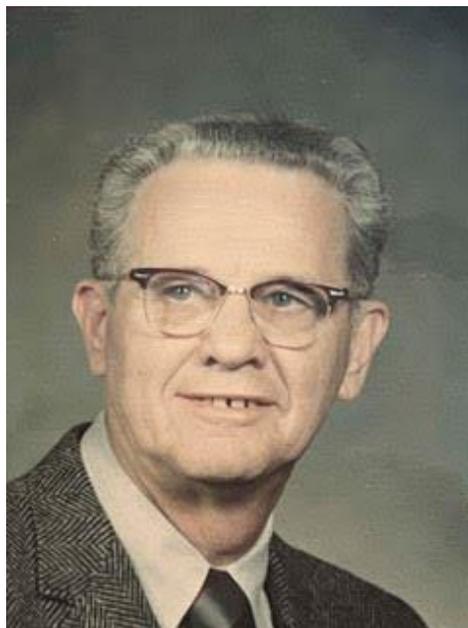
Postma finished his career as senior vice president of Martin Marietta Energy Systems in 1992, and after 12 years of retirement died in 2004 in Hawaii from a rare form of muscular dystrophy. He was memorialized with the renaming of the Solway bridge over the Clinch River between Anderson and Knox counties. It is appropriately called the Dr. Herman Postma Memorial Bridge.

Pat said that Weinberg wrote to her in a sympathy note after Herman died that he had “chosen Herman to be his successor because of his emotional maturity,” suggesting that he had a high emotional quotient (EQ) such as is described in a 1995 book by Weinberg’s nephew Daniel Goleman titled “Emotional Intelligence: Why It Can Matter More Than IQ.”

Speaking about Postma, Robert Hart, former general manager of DOE’s Oak Ridge Operations, told McDaniel that “it was really rare to find someone who had excellent technical understanding and management skills.” And many others would say, the wisdom to marry Pat.

SIDEBAR: Pat Postma represents the epitome of everything that I grew up believing - and still believe - that Oak Ridge stands for - a sense of pride in our history and what was accomplished here, but also, a sense of adventure, curiosity, and openness to the outside world, and a certain idea that Oak Ridge is connected to that outside world, is a participant in it, and that we would always be this special place full of so many special people from near and far, from all over the country, and from all over the world. Pat epitomizes the broad spirit of Oak Ridge. At the same time, no one has a deeper connection to Oak Ridge than Pat, who recently remembered walking with her mother across the boardwalks built over mud that was everywhere in Oak Ridge during the war. The year was 1943, the year Pat entered Oak Ridge schools. We will miss Pat. – Ram Uppuluri

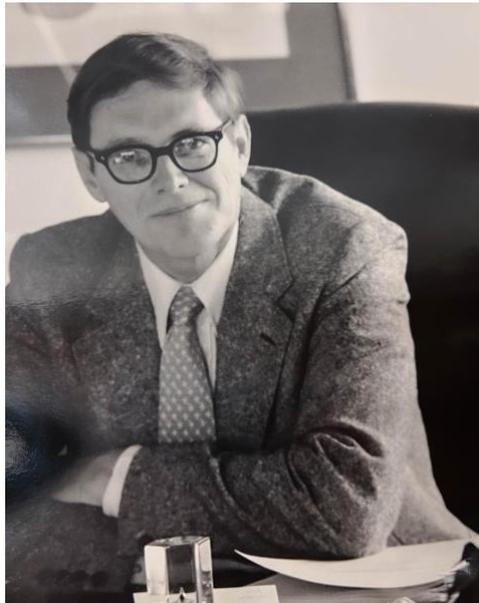
Thanks, Carolyn. The next column in this series of three will continue to bring out the impact Pat Postma has had on Oak Ridge.



Thomas Dunigan, Pat's father and the principal of the Oak Ridge High School (Courtesy of Pat Postma)

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Herman Postma (Courtesy of Pat Postma)



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