

Alan Lowe demonstrates how to do a podcast live on “The Women of Oak Ridge”

(As published in The Oak Ridger's Historically Speaking column the week of October 19, 2026)

Carolyn Krause writes about Alan Lowe. She describes his penchant for podcasts and how he has become adept at bringing the content to listeners while making the guest feel at ease. She shows us how he demonstrated his skill recently with my friend, Michelle Shocklee.

Enjoy learning from Carolyn about the Alan Lowe that his podcast guests see and fully understand.

When he is not busy as director of the American Museum of Science and Energy (AMSE) and two other museums in Oak Ridge, Alan Lowe spends some of his time doing podcasts, audio recordings of interviews he conducts with authors of books. The recordings can be downloaded or streamed on a computer or mobile device. The first one was AMSE Cast (visit <https://AMSE.Cast.libsyn.com/>); it features his interviews with authors of popular books on science, technology, scientists, inventors and the history of science.

An expert on American presidents because of his experience administering presidential libraries, Lowe later became a host of podcasts on presidents (americanpotus.org) and First Ladies (americanflotus.org)

In October 2025 as part of Nuclear Science Week organized and hosted by Alan Lowe and his Oak Ridge Discovery Foundation colleagues, he demonstrated how he does a podcast to a live audience at the Oak Ridge Playhouse. Sitting on the Playhouse's stage with Michelle Shocklee, he interviewed her on her historical novel “The Women of Oak Ridge” and the personal, historical and emotional paths that led her to her story of the Secret City during the Manhattan Project.

According to the book cover, “The story follows Maebelle Willett in 1944 as she takes a secretive government job and uncovers a life-altering secret, and her niece Laurel in 1979, who investigates her aunt's past for her psychology Ph.D., uncovering a mystery involving a missing woman and the atomic bomb.”

“Welcome to AMSE Cast,” Alan said as he greeted Shocklee in the chair beside his. “It's my real pleasure to introduce our guest, Michelle Shocklee.”

In their exchange it was revealed that she was raised in Santa Fe, New Mexico, but now lives in the Nashville area. “Her love of Tennessee and Appalachia really shines through in many of her terrific books,” Lowe said to the audience.

“She's author of works such as ‘Under the Tulip Tree,’ which was a CELA and Christie Award finalist back in 2021 and ‘Counting the Night by Stars,’ which received a star review in the ‘Library Journal.’ And last year, she published ‘All We Thought We Knew’ to great acclaim yet again.

“But today we're going to discuss her recent book, ‘The Women of Oak Ridge,’ a story that's held as gripping and powerful by reviewers. It's a fascinating look at Oak Ridge and the Manhattan Project through the lens of a truly gifted novelist. What led you to the topic of Oak Ridge and the Manhattan Project?”

Shocklee mentioned many connections to the Manhattan Project. Her father was a World War II veteran; she was a Santa Fe resident who saw the lights of Los Alamos from her home as she grew up; she has a brother who worked at Los Alamos National Laboratory (which built atomic bombs using nuclear fuel from Oak Ridge and Hanford, Washington); she learned about the Manhattan Project in schools and has toured Department of Energy labs, and “my grandmother saw the flash from the very first atomic bomb” on July 16, 1945, that was detonated as a test by Los Alamos researchers over a New Mexican desert.

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“I am just in awe that my grandmother witnessed this slice of history that not very many people saw. All these little connections convinced me that I knew the Manhattan Project history.” She then told Lowe that she moved to Tennessee three years ago.

She said that during a book signing after her talk on her novel “Under the Tulip Tree,” a woman asking her to sign her book suggested that she write a novel on Oak Ridge where her mother worked during the Manhattan Project. When she and her husband drove past the I-40 exit to Oak Ridge, she decided to Google the history of Oak Ridge during the Manhattan Project after thinking more about the fact that all the uranium for the first atomic bomb built in Los Alamos came from this Tennessee city.

Lowe then asked this question: “When you said you planned to write about Oak Ridge and the women of Oak Ridge in this novel, how did you conduct the research?”

“Since that drive home and my Google searches, I have been a student of Oak Ridge history,” Shocklee replied. “When I write all my historical novels, I write two different histories, so I call them dual-time novels.”

She said she does research for two months before starting her next novel. One of her best sources for this novel, she said, was Denise Kiernan’s 2013 “The Girls of Atomic City: The Untold Story of the Women Who Helped Win World War II.”

Other sources she said she used were “City Behind the Fence” by Charles Johnson and Charles Jackson and “Sleeper Agent” by Anne Hagedorn, which is about a Russian spy in Oak Ridge. Shocklee was familiar with stories about spies at Los Alamos. The photos of Ed Westcott showed her what buildings in Oak Ridge looked like and what clothes people wore during the Manhattan Project.

She said she has saved on her computer links to 133 websites containing Westcott photos and information on Oak Ridge history, including the K-25 Virtual Museum (<https://k25atomichistorycenter.org/>). She said that a video on the site showed her the four levels of the K-25 uranium enrichment plant, detailed information she needed because her “main character in the book, Mae, works at K-25.”

She said she also benefited from watching interviews with and reading transcripts of the oral histories of the people who had worked in Oak Ridge during the Manhattan Project.

Lowe then reminded the audience that Westcott photos can be seen at AMSE and the books she mentioned can be purchased at the AMSE shop. Then he said, “I love to write. What was your strategy for incorporating Oak Ridge history in the story format of your novel without it becoming a textbook?”

Shocklee replied, “I put myself into the shoes of my main character Mae. She came from Kentucky to work at K-25 and doesn’t know anything about the secret and science” behind the work at Oak Ridge, which was to produce nuclear fuel for the first atomic bomb developed for wartime use. “I never want my novels to read like a history textbook, but I do want all that wonderful, rich history to be included and to be as accurate as I can possibly make it.”

Lowe asked, “Were any of the main characters inspired by anyone you found in your research?”

Shocklee answered, “They were not inspired by any one specific person. But as I watched all those wonderful oral histories, read the transcripts and stories in Denise Kiernan’s book, I would take little bits and pieces from a lot of the different women’s stories and put them into Mae’s character.”

“As I ask these questions, I’m trying not to give away the plot,” Lowe said. “Why did you introduce the characters of Velvet and Rooney?”

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“Velvet and Rooney are a married African American couple who had to deal with segregation in Oak Ridge,” said Shocklee, who noted that her birthplace Santa Fe is “a very diverse city” and that her father’s family is Hispanic. “As I was reading about the Manhattan Project in Oak Ridge, I was really disappointed to find out that segregation was still in place here where they were developing something that was going to help win this war against this evil across the ocean.”

“What did you learn about women’s opportunities and the challenges they faced here in Oak Ridge?” asked Lowe.

“In my research, I read that in 1920, there were eight million women in the American workforce. By the end of World War II, there were 19 million. So, the number had more than doubled. Most of the young women who came to Oak Ridge had no experience in the work world.

“They came just because they wanted to help win the war, to bring the boys home. And then after the war, many women stayed in the workforce. Some probably would never had gone to work had it not been because of the war.”

“What effects do you think the constant need for security and secrecy had on people’s daily lives?” asked Lowe.

“I do touch on that in the book through the character of Mae’s niece Laurel,” Shocklee said. “I write dual-time history novels. So, the second part of the story takes place in 1979. Laurel comes back to Oak Ridge because her Aunt Mae worked at K-25. She is doing her dissertation for a psychology doctorate, and she wants to know how the secrecy affected the people then and how it affects them now.

“So many of the people in the oral history interviews I read and heard talked about the stress of the secret even if they didn’t know what it was. And if they knew it, they couldn’t talk about it or their jobs even to their family. We have that in our lives.

“I had to read about the psychological effects of stress. We know now that stress can affect your physical, mental, emotional and even spiritual health. The Manhattan Project leaders tried to get people’s minds off the secret by offering them recreation opportunities and counselors in the dorms.”

“What did you learn about how relationships developed or could not develop because of the secret during the Manhattan Project in Oak Ridge?

“Even in my research about roommates, I learned you were not supposed to talk about your job to even your roommate. It was a huge social experiment.”

A question from the audience in the Playhouse was this: “During your research, how did the Manhattan Project advertise jobs that would attract women to work in Oak Ridge during the war?”

Her answer: “One of the surprising things I learned was that they sent out recruiters to get young women from high schools and junior colleges to come work in Oak Ridge, and they put advertisements in the newspaper as well.” Thanks to a fictional recruiter in her book, she said, that’s how her main character Mae came from Kentucky to work in Oak Ridge.

For his last question, Lowe asked, “As you did this research on Oak Ridge and the Manhattan Project, is there anything that really surprised you or most impressed you about this city and its early history?”

Shocklee answered, “Three years ago, I didn’t even know Oak Ridge existed, other than that this might be where the Oak Ridge Boys came from. But the fact that the government created an entire town out

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of nowhere within just such a very short time and kept it secret from most of the world is just astounding to me.”

Thank you, Carolyn, for the insight into the intricate details of podcast interviewing. Alan Lowe is certainly a skilled interviewer. And you have brought that out well in this Historically Speaking column.



Alan Lowe interviews novelist Michelle Shocklee on the stage of the Oak Ridge Playhouse, showing the audience how he makes a podcast (Courtesy of Carolyn Krause)