Gordon Fee: My good friend and respected leader/manager as well as a partner in preserving Oak Ridge history, and himself a Giant of Oak Ridge History

(As published in The Oak Ridger's Historically Speaking column the week of November 16, 2026)

Some friendships begin at work. Others develop through a shared interest or a common cause. My friendship with Gordon Fee began in the workplace, grew through our mutual commitment to preserving Oak Ridge history, and continued for years over breakfast at Burchfield's Restaurant.

Gordon was much more than a colleague or a fellow preservationist. He was a personal friend whose influence on my life and whose contributions to Oak Ridge deserve to be well remembered.

Our professional relationship began when Gordon was the Y-12 Plant Manager. I was temporarily assigned to Human Resources, where I introduced two programs to Y-12 management: Targeted Selection and Interaction Management.

When it came time for me to return to my Maintenance Manager position, Gordon had other ideas. He would not let me return until I had fully implemented Targeted Selection.

That decision told me something about Gordon. He believed in the importance of what we were doing, expected people to follow through on their commitments, and understood the value of developing better management practices. He was determined to see the program successfully implemented before releasing me to return to my previous responsibilities.

I have always remembered that experience, and it was an early indication of the kind of leader Gordon was. He also amazed me at how many things he could keep in his mind accurately and his recall of facts was always remarkable. Stories he told me were such that I could publish most of them in Historically Speaking and quite often I did.

After Gordon retired, our relationship took a different direction. He and I joined Bill Wilcox in efforts to preserve the history of the K-25 Gaseous Diffusion Plant. We recognized that the story of K-25 and the people who worked there were important parts of Oak Ridge history that deserved to be preserved and shared.

Our meetings were usually held over breakfast at Burchfield's Restaurant. Those breakfasts became an important part of our work and our friendship. We discussed history, preservation opportunities, and ways to make certain that the contributions of the people who built and operated Oak Ridge's facilities would not be forgotten.

After Bill Wilcox passed away, Gordon and I continued those regular breakfast meetings, almost every week. What began as meetings about historic preservation had become something much more meaningful. They were opportunities to catch up, exchange ideas, discuss Oak Ridge, and continue working on things we both cared deeply about. Those breakfasts are among the memories I will treasure most.

Our shared commitment to preservation resulted in several important projects that recognized the people who helped make Oak Ridge what it is today. Many of our initiatives have been taken up by others and made realities.

One was the Giants of Oak Ridge statue initiative which when presented to Mark Buckner and the Wildcat Manufacturing at Oak Ridge High School quickly grew into a catalyst for fully developing the advanced machining and manufacturing capability at the school. Literally one of the best in the nation!

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The vision was to recognize the pioneers who helped build Oak Ridge into the scientific powerhouse it has become by creating 3-D printed statues that could withstand being displayed outdoors. Among those recognized will be Major General Kenneth Nichols, Bill Wilcox, Alvin Weinberg, Liane Russell, and now I think we should consider adding Gordon Fee among the others who might be considered.

Each represented a different part of Oak Ridge's remarkable story. Their leadership, scientific achievements, and dedication helped establish a legacy that continues to influence the world.

I think it is especially appropriate that Gordon be included among these Giants. He was not simply someone who wanted to preserve the accomplishments of others. He has made his own important contributions to Oak Ridge and deserves recognition as well.

Another important project is the USS Houston sail, featuring statues of Alvin Weinberg and Admiral Hyman Rickover. These two individuals represented the giants who helped build America's nuclear navy. Weinberg's scientific leadership at Oak Ridge and Rickover's vision for nuclear-powered naval vessels connected the scientific accomplishments of the Secret City with an important chapter in American naval history.

The submarine sail will be located on a grassy area between Wilson Street and the American Museum of Science and Energy. I think it would be appropriate to place the statue of Gordon there at the entrance to that small park where the sail and two other statues will serve to remind all that the birth of the nuclear navy was here in Oak Ridge. It is also fitting to honor him there as the USS Houston sail was his very last big idea.

We also shared in efforts to recognize Bill Wilcox through the naming of the William J. Wilcox, Jr. K-25 Interpretive Center. Bill had devoted much of his life to preserving and interpreting the history of K-25. Naming the interpretive center in his honor was a fitting way to recognize his contributions and ensure that his name would remain connected to the story of the facility he knew so well.

Naming the facility in Bill's honor was Gordon's idea. Bill hired Gordon in 1956 and served as a mentor and fast friend for the rest of Gordon's career. I could tell Gordon felt a sense of pride when all who knew of his idea to name the building for Bill enthusiastically agreed with Gordon.

It was particularly meaningful to me that Gordon and I continued our preservation efforts after Bill's passing. The work we had begun together was important enough that we wanted to see it continue.

Looking back, I realize that these projects represented much more than statues, monuments, or the naming of a historical facility. They reflected a shared belief that Oak Ridge should recognize the people who made its history.

The Manhattan Project brought Oak Ridge into existence, but it was the people who followed who transformed it into an internationally recognized center of science, engineering, and technology. Their accomplishments deserve to be remembered, and preserving their stories is an important responsibility. Gordon understood that responsibility.

I will miss our almost-weekly breakfasts at Burchfield's, our conversations about Oak Ridge, and the opportunity to work alongside him. I will miss having a friend who shared my enthusiasm for recognizing the people and preserving the places that make Oak Ridge special.

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When we began the Giants of Oak Ridge project, we wanted future generations to know the names of those who helped build this remarkable community. Gordon Fee's name belongs among them.

There is an irony in writing about Gordon in a column about preserving Oak Ridge history. We spent so much time making certain that others would be remembered that it is now my privilege to write about him.

I am grateful for the professional relationship that became a lasting friendship, for the preservation work we shared, and especially for those many breakfasts when history and friendship came together.

Some people make history. Others make certain it is remembered. Gordon Fee did both.

I am proud to have called him my friend.



Gordon Fee as he was recognized at the Children's Museum of Oak Ridge with the Selma Shapiro Friend of the Child Award