

A Marker of Alignment, Community, and What Comes Next

(As published in The Oak Ridger's Historically Speaking column the week of March 30, 2026)

This was written by Brad Parish, past Community Reuse Organization of East Tennessee (CROET) Chairman (2023). Brad gives unique insight into Oak Ridge and especially K-25 history. He has personally lived it, and his ancestors were here before Oak Ridge was created as a part of the Manhattan Project. Brad also enjoys a unique perspective regarding the present transition at the Heritage and Horizon Centers because of the nuclear renaissance.

The land at the former K-25 site has been part of my family's history long before it became part of my own working life. I mean this very ground, the soil where the Department of Energy reservation now stands.

My great-grandparents were poor sharecroppers here. They worked this land by hand and raised their families through hard seasons and uncertain harvests. My grandmother grew up here before everything changed.

When the land was taken for the Manhattan Project during World War II, my family was moved off and resettled in Kingston, just 15 or so minutes away. They settled on a hill once covered in peach orchards.

That is the same hill where I live today. It was not far in distance, but it marked a turning point for our family.

One of my grandfathers later returned to work in the rock quarries that supported the site's early construction. That part of the story is clear in our family. He was involved in the hard labor that helped shape what was rising here. My mother's father passed away when she was still young, long before I was born, so much of what I know about his time comes from family memory.

He was a local sheet metal worker and given the demand for skilled trades during those early years, it is a reasonable assumption that he likely spent some time helping with construction here before moving on. He later continued his trade in Atlanta and other major cities. Neither grandfather remained long in that first wave of work. They did what was needed and moved forward. The land stayed the same. The work changed.

My own path here began with environmental research. Some of my earliest work in Oak Ridge focused on environmental health connected to the site. I later worked in site operations managing training programs and helping prepare workers for the responsibilities they carried each day. I still remember early mornings in the PA room, knowing thousands would hear the safety messages. The instruction was simple. Follow procedure. Respect the hazards. Go home safe.

At that time more than 4,000 people worked on the site. It functioned like a city inside the larger Secret City. Welding arcs flashed. Railcars moved in and out. And everywhere there were drums. Drums of waste from decades of production. Drums from demolition as buildings came down. Rows of them staged, labeled, monitored. The legacy of speed and secrecy was not abstract. It sat in steel containers across the landscape.

I was one of many involved in cleanup efforts. I helped take down structures that had once defined the mission. I also helped remove sections of the old perimeter fencing that had long marked the boundary of the site. By then, the fence no longer served a primary security function. Security had evolved beyond that line. But the fence remained a visible reminder of separation and secrecy. Removing it was practical, but it was also symbolic.

There was controversy. Some believed the pace of visible change was too fast. Others believed renewal required visible movement. In that season, some saw us as change agents pressing for acceleration. Change is rarely comfortable where history runs deep and risk has been real. Removing that fence did not reduce security. It marked a shift in how this place understood itself.

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Over the years, I have watched many from my generation who worked here begin to pass away. Some battled illnesses later recognized through the Department of Labor's sick worker program. Those programs exist because exposures were real. The costs were real. The lessons were learned slowly.

A couple of years ago, I was honored to help organize the first reunion of former workers from the site. Nearly 500 retirees came back to see the progress, to walk the ground again, and to reconnect with one another after many years. Some of those who attended had been here during the original Manhattan Project era. They had witnessed the earliest days of this site's mission. Others came from later generations of work. It was a powerful reminder that this place is not just infrastructure and industry. It is people.

Since that reunion, we have lost many more. Time continues to move forward. If this land is to continue producing opportunity, we must do better in protecting the people who do the work.

My connection to this site unfolded in several seasons. After my early years in operations and training, I again returned as an employee, this time serving as a manager supporting reindustrialization efforts.

Older facilities were being evaluated, repurposed, and positioned for new uses. Cleanup was progressing, and private industry was beginning to reenter the landscape.

As the site moved away from its original Department of Energy gaseous diffusion mission, it became part of the larger East Tennessee Technology Park. The former K-25 footprint evolved into what is now known as Heritage Center. The name itself reflects the arc of this place. It acknowledges that this ground holds history while also pointing toward renewal and future opportunity.

Old facilities were reindustrialized with cutting-edge research and development. Work moved into advanced battery development, materials science, plastic injection molding, and other emerging technologies. Tool and die operations relocated and began producing components for companies like BMW and Mercedes. Automotive dashboards were manufactured in buildings that once supported entirely different missions. Private industry stepped into facilities that had stood quiet and gave them new purpose.

At the same time, transportation infrastructure was reactivated to support the cleanup effort itself. Rail lines that had once served earlier production missions were brought back into service so trains could again move materials in and out of the site. I was involved in supporting portions of that rail system work as it came back online. The infrastructure remained. The purpose changed.

During that period, I also had the opportunity to meet with delegations from Russia to discuss how they might transition aspects of their federally owned enterprises into private sector structures. This was at a time when there was genuine hope for collaboration and shared learning between our nations.

Years later, I returned, this time as a board member and eventually as chairman. By then, the long arc of cleanup was nearing completion, and renewed nuclear investment was beginning to take shape in the region. Serving in that leadership role during such a transitional moment was not simple. It was at times fraught with controversy. There were difficult debates about whether the organization should conclude its mission or attempt to continue forward and embrace the rapidly expanding nuclear energy sector. Ultimately, the organization completed its work, and in time other organizations formed to reinvigorate collaboration within the community.

For me, the purpose was clear. As a long-term member of this community, rooted here for generations, I wanted to ensure that real stakeholders were represented. My goal was to make sure our voices were heard as decisions were being made about our future.

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Even after that chapter closed, my involvement did not end. As a broker, I assisted in the transition of former facilities into private hands, including the sale of buildings to publicly traded nuclear companies listed on the New York Stock Exchange.

Just yesterday I was back on the site providing plutonium sources to help new nuclear facilities calibrate their instruments. Standing there decades after my first days on site, I felt the span of it. From quarry labor to waste drums to rail restoration to private manufacturing to advanced nuclear calibration. The work changes. The responsibility remains.

Next month there will be an event marking the renovation of Portal 4, the entrance where much of the plant workforce began each day, including Esther and me. It is now a place where memorials are displayed in art, connecting the past to the present.

This land shaped my life beyond work. It was here that I met my wife. We were both working on site when our paths crossed. Today she continues contributing to this region as a scientist at Oak Ridge National Laboratory. In another generation, our son worked out on this site as well, right out of college, helping maintain roads and grounds before moving on to his own path.

From sharecroppers to quarry labor. From sheet metal to environmental research. From cleanup crews to scientific research. From roads and grounds to advanced energy. The land remains. The roles change. The sculpture stands near the center of the former K-25 site. Its upright form resembles a marker, almost like a surveyor's pin set firmly in the ground. It holds a line between what this place has carried and what it is preparing to become.

This land has produced crops, wartime materials, private industry, scientific research, and now new energy technologies. Each chapter has asked something of the people connected to it. Prosperity has come from here. So have risks.

The sculpture stands as a marker of continuity. It holds memory and possibility in the same line. It reminds us that the story of this place is not finished, and that our responsibility to it continues.

Thanks, Brad, for a very interesting look at your experiences and insights.

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Recognizing Brad Parish for his dedication to strengthening community ties



Sculpture located in the Heritage Center, bringing attention to the work done by CROET to transition land to the community