

The Opening Gates Celebration – 60th Anniversary

(As published in *The Oak Ridger's Historically Speaking* column on March 24, 2009)

Last week's Historically Speaking column featured the details of the original Opening Gates Celebration codenamed *Operation Open Sesame*, which allowed public access to the city of Oak Ridge for the first time. The Secret City had been gated for seven years when, on March 19, 1949, four of the main gates were opened allowing unrestricted access for the public to the city and visits to a brand new museum featuring the *Man and the Atom* exhibit.

Bill Wilcox's *The Opening of the Gates to the Secret City*, served as the primary resource for the information on the original opening of the gates information. The book is available at www.secretcitystore.com. The information for this column comes from my personal experience at the various events during the day on Saturday, March 21, 2009. If you were there, you may recognize some of what I recall.

The attendance at the early morning, 32 degree, reenactment on Saturday, March 21, 2009, did not nearly equal the estimated 10,000 people who gathered at the Elza gate near the intersection of Melton Lake Road and the Oak Ridge Turnpike for the original event. Yet a good time was had by all, estimated at 200 people who did attend. The special speaker's stand was not swamped as was the original and there were no roofs of the guard structures full of photographers. However, a red ribbon was stretched across the east-bound lane of the highway with an unusual looking section near the center.

At 8:30 AM, the Rev. Mark Walton, 2009 Pastor of Glenwood Baptist Church (representing Rev. Roy C. Arbuckle, 1949 Pastor of Glenwood Baptist Church) gave the invocation. Gerald Boyd, 2009 USDOE Manager, Oak Ridge Office (representing John C. Franklin, 1949 USAEC manager, Oak Ridge Operations), welcomed the crowd on what he declared an auspicious occasion just as was done in 1949. Gerald reiterated the "secret is out" about Oak Ridge.

2009 Oak Ridge City Manager, Jim O'Connor (representing 1949 Community Affairs Director Fred W. Ford) gave the keynote speech. Thanks to B. B. Blevins, who recognized the small stack of 3" X 5" cards he found as being the original notes for Ford's speech, we have the content of this speech today. Blevins recognized the tremendous value of such a find. Such actions determine what the next generation knows from primary sources.

As promised last week, here is the original text of Fred Ford's speech as presented word for word by Jim O'Connor, Oak Ridge City Manager on Saturday, March 21, 2009:

Today marks the commencement of another era in the history of Oak Ridge – a city known through-out the world for its part in the development and application of atomic energy. It is with deep pride, and a sense of humility that I greet – for the City of Oak Ridge and the sponsoring citizen's committees – our neighbors in East Tennessee and the distinguished guests who are honoring us with their presence. Our kind greetings go also to those former residents and friends whose radios may be bringing then to today's events.

Two eras have passed in the seven years since the Army quietly moved into this valley and established the security gates. The First Era transformed the farm lands and wooded hillsides of the peaceful rural community into a city of 75,000 population – complete with laboratory and plants.

It was only after the news of the first explosion in the Far East that the people of Oak Ridge – including most of those working in the pants – learned of the truly important part that they had played in the development of that bomb.

The Second Era commenced after the cessation of hostilities when the responsibility for the Oak Ridge operations was transferred from the Army to the Atomic Energy Commission. This Era has two prime objectives [1] the more economic and effective

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production of fissionable materials, and [2] basic research that will give ever increasing applications of this force to the benefit of mankind.

Progress has been made here in Oak Ridge – in the development of radioisotopes, valuable in the fields of medicine and agriculture. A constantly widening variety of isotopes are being furnished to hospitals and research centers, and group after group of scientists from the North, east, South, and west – including some from foreign countries are (coming here and) being training in their use.

We are now entering the Third Era in the life of Oak Ridge. You are here to assist us in one of the first steps on the road to the “Oak Ridge of Tomorrow.” In a few minutes the symbolic tape will be severed by energy produced at our plants, and no longer will there be any barriers between us and our neighboring communities.

Step by step – in the democratic way, we will move forward to prepare ourselves for incorporation and self-government.

We are proud of our mission in science – we are also proud of our community – its schools and the other municipal services that are being provided to our citizens. Permanent housing is beginning to take the place of our temporary war homes. We are selling our land for the construction of churches, and are training our sights to provide the ways and means whereby one will be able to buy or build his own home and his business enterprise.

May I repeat a remark I have made frequently – this is the most friendly city in which it has been my pleasure to live and work. Mrs. Ford loves it too! We are certain that you who are visiting us today as well as those who will follow on all the tomorrows will share our enthusiasm.

*Oak Ridge is honored in having you – and we welcome you most cordially to our midst. We hope you will be as happy in visiting us as we are in your coming. And when it comes time to leave, won't you please carry with you the friendly parting words of this locality – “THANKS FOR COMING – HURRY BACK!”
Now we are ready for the impulse from the pile.*

My thanks to Bill Wilcox for converting these note cards into text in his *The Opening of the Gates to the Secret City*.

2009 Oak Ridge City Historian, Bill Wilcox (representing Dr. George T. Felbeck, the 1943-1945 Head of K-25 for Carbide Carbon Chemical Company), was next on the program. Much like the original “burning of the ribbon,” he orchestrated, by a phone call, a remote signal that resulted in a loud bang and a cloud of white smoke mushrooming skyward as the ribbon fell to the ground, cleanly burned into two sections.

Wilcox, faithfully reenacting Felbeck's call, held the crowd silent in expectation for a full 35 seconds (seemed longer) before he gave the signal to “fire” the charge burning the ribbon. Although the original wait was a full three minutes, we modern-day folks, with our propensity for instant response, grew quite uneasy when our historian waited as long as he did. Bill told me later that those 35 seconds seemed much longer.

We photographers would have appreciated a two-step process whereby we could have been warned when the event was to occur, but that would have spoiled it for the rest of the crowd. If you are a photographer using a single-lens reflex camera and you see the event you are attempting to capture, then you have just missed it! I heard some folks exclaim that they had just looked up from their camera when

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the explosion occurred and some, in pure reflex action to the noise, may have snapped the camera just after the explosion and got the cloud as it was rising.

As did the original crowd at the first ribbon burning, our crowd recoiled with surprise at the noise of the small explosion and mouths gaped wide with wonder as the small white, but still mushroom shaped, cloud quickly rose and dispersed. And with that climax, the first event of the historic day of celebration ended.

The day was off to a really good start!

The crowd quickly left the cold morning air for warm cars and refreshing coffee served near the parking lot. All who were at the reenactment of the ribbon burning were joined by even more people at 10:30 A.M. at the American Museum of Science and Energy auditorium for the next event of the day.

Before going to that next event, however, as promised, I took Jane Greer Puckett and her daughter, who had travelled from Tullahoma for the day's events, to see the Y-12 History Center at New Hope. She was delighted and is anxious to come back and see Building 9731 when it is open to the public at some future date. That is where she got her start at Y-12.

Then it was back to the American Museum of Science and Energy by 10:00 A.M. as I wanted to get a photograph of Bob Presley at the new Flattop exhibit. There is a great story there that I wanted to capture in photographs and get the details you to read in this article.

First some background from Jim Comish, Executive Director of AMSE:

AMSE has just opened a new exhibit featuring an original B-1 model house, known as a flat top because of its flat, tar roof. These houses were one-story, prefab single family houses containing a living room, two bedrooms (some had 3 bedrooms), bathroom, kitchen, storage closet and furnished with plywood constructed furniture. The houses were factory constructed in three 8 ft by 24 ft sections and bolted together on site.

The houses were manufactured of plywood over a wood frame with insulated walls. The flat roofs were composition roll roofing over plywood sheathing. The units were furnished with electric water heater and kitchen stove. The heating source was a coal burning heater.

The museum's house was originally located at 68 Outer Drive and occupied by Charles and Charcie Presley and their son, Bob. The Presley family lived in the house from 1945 until January 1950, when a nearby water tower failed and damaged the timber foundation of the house. Roane-Anderson Company sold the house at auction to Thaddeus Fitzpatrick in March of 1950 for \$828.75.

The Fitzpatricks moved the house to Norris Lake near Tazewell, TN, where it remained as a vacation cabin for the next 60 years. In summer of 2008, Thaddeus Fitzpatrick's daughter, Isabelle Fitzpatrick Smith, visited AMSE and was intrigued by the section on early Oak Ridge housing. Mrs. Smith contacted AMSE and offered to donate the house. AMSE accepted the house along with her very generous offer to pay the \$13,000 cost of relocating the house back to Oak Ridge.

*On March 19, 2009, at the 60th anniversary of AMSE, Ken and Isabelle Smith met Bob Presley and his wife, Louise. Bob Presley and Isabelle Smith recalled their childhoods living in **this exact house** and were impressed with the realism in which the restoration was completed. They explored the newly restored house and their excitement identifying personal memories and unique details of a time long ago was evident. The two families spent a good part of the day enjoying their shared memories of their distant youth in a very special house, although at slightly different times.*

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The Smith's daughter, Rachel Smith-Jones, plans to visit AMSE at Easter to see the house that her mother grew up in and that she also enjoyed during her youth on the shores of Norris Lake in the foothills of East Tennessee where 60 years before, scientists worked around the clock to build a device to end World War II. If you have not seen this new addition to AMSE, please put it on your list of things to see in Oak Ridge.

Now for the rest of the story, Louise Presley, Bob's wife, and Lissa Clarke are the two who put the facts together and came to realize that this particular Flattop house was Bob's home. Louise found a wooden box that Bob had been keeping tools in but was originally a shipping box for encyclopedias. On the end of the box was a mailing address – 68 Outer Drive!

When Louise was telling Lissa about this box they wanted to donate to go in the house, a look of surprise came on Lissa's face and she exclaimed, "68 Outer Drive was the address for this very house." Well, Louise just couldn't wait to tell Bob what she had found. You can see the wooden box on display inside the first room of the house now...it has been returned to its original home as well.

So, Bob and I made some photographs and still made it back to the auditorium in time for the next event. David Bradshaw introduced the Girl Scout Honor Guard in original uniforms and set the stage for the premiere of the new Keith McDaniel film, *Operation Open Sesame*. The 30-minute feature delighted the audience. Then the audience in the standing room only auditorium enjoyed the recollections of individuals who participated in the original opening of the gates celebration.

At noon, it was off to the sold out luncheon at the Midtown Community Center where Bill Landry reminded us how much Oak Ridge meant to him. He got his start here educating people through entertaining them and that led to a long and fulfilling career with his one man play, *Einstein the Man*, and later the long-running *Heartland Series*.

Homer Fisher was the featured speaker and his recounting of the history of Oak Ridge Institute of Nuclear Studies and later Oak Ridge Associated Universities was enlightening, educational, yet entertaining. His sincere and humble presentation style conveys information in an easy to understand yet profound manner. He reminded the audience of the importance of storytelling and through recounting the details of how Dr. Pollard started ORINS and how ORINS began the first atomic museum in Oak Ridge, he demonstrated the value of storytelling.

Homer is a true patriot for Oak Ridge and among our strongest proponents of the value of Heritage Tourism as one of the economic development strategies Oak Ridge must pursue if we are to take full advantage of our unique heritage. His tireless support of AMSE through the AMSE Foundation and his personal dedication to many other Oak Ridge initiatives make him a valuable leader as Oak Ridge remembers the past and moves to the future.

As a special treat for those at the luncheon, Jim Cole and Gordon Lindner shared their unique experiences with the *Man and the Atom* exhibit. Each of them described the exhibits they designed and operated.

Jim telling of making the model for demonstrating gaseous diffusion through the use of blue and red ping pong balls and a screen. The blue balls were made heavier by injecting them with a liquid so that when a fan blew air on them the lighter red balls would tend to float up through the screen demonstrating what would happen with uranium 235.

Gordon told of making the model for demonstrating electromagnetic separation through the use of magnets and steel balls, some of which were hollow. The magnetic field would more easily deflect the lighter hollow balls than the heavier solid ones, thus demonstrating how the lighter isotope of uranium would be caused to change directions more readily than the heavier isotope when passing between the magnets.

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But the more humorous story Gordon told was that of learning to operate the mechanical hands in the museum so effectively that he was asked to light a cigarette for Marie “The Body” McDonald at the opening of the American Museum of Atomic Energy. The set up worked, the cigarette lit and later on Gordon realized that he was actually shown on film doing that trick. So, he proudly told us that he was the only Oak Ridger who was in a movie with Marie McDonald!

The activity-packed day ended with tired but delighted ORHPA and AMSE committee members. Many participants left with new treasures of the historic documentary film and the 227 page book of historic photographs. Oak Ridge celebrated another of its uniquely historic anniversaries.

If you were unable to attend the celebration, you can still take advantage of the AMSE Flattop display, purchase the movie and book there, and of course, you may join ORHPA as a member and help plan the next event!



Ribbon burning at Elza Gate reenactment

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Bob Presley stands at the door of the house his family occupied at 68 Outer Drive when he was a boy