

The Historic Grove Theater and the Flatwater Tales Storytelling Festival

(As published in The Oak Ridger's Historically Speaking column the week of April 20, 2019)

Located at 123 Randolph Road, surely one of the storied addresses in Oak Ridge, TN, is a structure that serves as home to the Historic Grove Theater. The history of this unique structure reaches back to the Manhattan Project era.

Dave Hobson recalls that he more often went to the movies at Jefferson Theater, but occasionally was taken by his parents to the larger Grove Theater. There were seven theaters built as a part of the Clinton Engineer Works in the city of Oak Ridge during the Manhattan Project. The other theaters were the Center Theater and the Ridge Theater, both located at Jackson Square, and the Jefferson Theater located at Jefferson Circle.

There was also a Middletown Theater, a Happy Valley Theater, both built during the Manhattan Project as well. Later a Gamble Valley Theater (segregated and likely in use after the war ended), the Skyway Drive In, the Elza Drive In just east of Melton Lake Drive off the Oak Ridge Turnpike and the Solway Drive In just west of the Solway Bridge (not sure when these Drive In's were built). If you have information confirming these theaters (dates opened would be nice!) or adding more details or theaters, please contact me at draysmith@comcast.net.

The huge Grove Theater first opened on September 28, 1944, showing the movie, *Hail the Conquering Hero*, starring Eddie Bracken, William Demarest and Ella Rains. Admission tickets were 35¢ for an adult and 11¢ for a child.

The 1,000 seat Grove Theater structure also served extensively for live entertainment. The acoustics were great (and still are today!) and the large wooden stage served to provide a most unusual and large venue for war time entertainment.

David Allred, Pastor of High Places Community Church - the current owner and occupant of the structure - says that even violin virtuoso Isaac Stern once played on that stage during the war. I am sure there were many other examples of live entertainment held there.

Wally Fowler and the Georgia Clodhoppers frequently performed in the Grove Theater during 1944 and 1945. This group is the precursor group to the *Oak Ridge Boys* who today proudly proclaim Oak Ridge as the origin of their name.

The story of how that name came to be serves to speak volumes about the impact of Oak Ridge on many aspects of life. It seems that Wally Fowler created a quartet within the *Georgia Clodhoppers* group that he named the *Harmony Quartet*. They sang gospel music only. He was invited to bring the *Harmony Quartet* to the Grand Ole Opry in Nashville.

On their way to Nashville, Fowler said to the members of the quartet, "Boys, this Oak Ridge thing is huge. We should take advantage of our relationship with Oak Ridge and change the name of the quartet to the *Oak Ridge Quartet!*" And so, the name of the group that would eventually be *The Oak Ridge Boys* began right there.

Wally correctly thought it would be a good idea to capitalize on the publicity associated with Oak Ridge. Later, in the 1970's as they expanded their songs beyond gospel they also changed their name to The Oak Ridge Boys.

The Oak Ridge Boys returned to Oak Ridge in June, 2007, when they were the featured performers in the Secret City Festival. I was fortunate to be asked to provide them a tour of the Y-12 National Security Complex's historic Calutrons in Building 9204-3 (Beta 3). It is not uncommon for them to tell of that experience in their concerts even today when explaining the source of their name.

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While they were here in 2007 a street was renamed the *Oak Ridge Boys Way* in their honor, which runs in front of the Oak Ridge Public Library. That weekend stands out for me as they were so appreciative of getting to see what they determined were the "secret" Y-12 calutrons. I still maintain contact with the group and when they are close by Fanny and I attend many of their concerts.

On the web page for the Historic Grove Theater, <http://thegrovetheater.org/history>, is found much of the story of the historic theater. Here are some select quotes:

"In 1957, the theater was purchased by Oak Ridge Theaters, Inc. The years 1977, 1979 and 1998 saw growth for the complex with the addition of new theaters. The Grove Theater was purchased by Cinemark Inc. of Dallas, Texas, in conjunction with the construction of the Tinseltown Theater in the city center area in 1998. The building remained unoccupied and fell into a state of extreme disrepair until it was purchased by High Places Community Church on February 27, 2004.

"The Grove Theater has undergone massive reconstruction efforts since its purchase by High Places. Contributions of time, labor, and finances from High Places and the community have gone into restoring this wonderful piece of Oak Ridge history.

"...In its first years of operation, the theater was home to numerous concerts, and included a fine slate of performers, such as the Ukrainian-born violinist virtuoso, Isaac Stern.

"Over the years, the old hardwood performance stage at the front of the facility would be 'walled up' in order to project films, and the former use of the Grove as a concert venue would be almost forgotten. Many Oak Ridgers were unaware that a beautiful hardwood stage existed behind the movie screens, and the stage would not be seen again by the public until 2008.

"Today, through church and community partnerships, the stage has been uncovered and restored. It was lengthened to make room for the Oak Ridge Symphony when it needed a practice and performance hall during the renovation of Oak Ridge High School. Sound Company, an area wide children's choral group, had already made the Grove Theater their practice home; with the completion of the stage renovation, they officially moved in, making the Grove Theater their base of operations. They were joined by Dance with Me, a local dance troupe, and most recently by the Oak Ridge Youth Symphony Orchestra; all now consider the theater to be their primary home.

"Other user groups include the Oak Ridge Civic Ballet, which conducts an annual two-week ballet camp on the big stage; the Oak Ridge Playhouse Summer camp; and the Cumberland Music Association. The theater has also been home to several fund-raisers for local organizations, such as The Oak Ridge Ulster Project, Habitat for Humanity, Contact Helpline, Atomic City Sportsman Club, Second Harvest Food Bank, Children's Museum of Oak Ridge, and many others.

"All user-groups are offered use of the theater by High Places at no charge. It was decided early on that the theater would be treated as community space and High Places has worked diligently to keep the theater free and open to all. The theater depends solely on the generosity of the church, user groups and community donations.

What an amazing history this unique structure has enjoyed. Today it is a vital part of Oak Ridge and is becoming the home venue of what I consider one of the most significant additions to the Oak Ridge culture of late, **the Flatwater Tales Storytelling Festival**, coming very soon to the Historic Grove Theater:

Flatwater Tales Family Morning, June 1, 10 AM - 12 PM, 2A + 2C;

Flatwater Tales Family Morning, Adult, June 1, 10 AM - 12 PM;

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Flatwater Tales Family Morning, Child, June 1, 10 AM - 12 PM;

Flatwater Tales Afternoon, June 1, 2 - 5 PM;

Flatwater Tales Evening, June 1, 7 -10 PM.

Tickets are STILL available, but you need to hurry as I fully expect these programs to fill up!

<https://www.eventbrite.com/e/2019-flatwater-tales-storytelling-festival-tickets-53700981080>

There will also be a Flatwater Tales Writing Workshop, on May 31, from 1-4 PM at the UT Arboretum.

Make your plans NOW to be a part of this growing phenomenon, which features the same caliber of professional live storytelling performers as the famous Jonesborough storytelling festival. There will be three performances by three world-class tellers: Carmen Agra Deedy, Bil Lepp, and Bobby Norfolk. The tellers will share different stories at each show.

Our tellers have achieved international recognition with their mesmerizing performances that bring people together to share the magic of this time-honored, increasingly popular art form. See you at the Historic Grove Theater for a fun time of live storytelling!

Emily Jernigan, Flatwater Tales chair and former Breakfast Rotary president, said, "The Flatwater Tales Storytelling Festival aims to help bring our community together, introduce people to Oak Ridge, support local economic activity, and celebrate and support the three Rotary Clubs' community projects. We expect to grow Flatwater Tales to include local and regional lore, music, and history, and to help share the Oak Ridge story – past, present, and future – with a wider audience. We want to expand our storytelling training to include helping children find their voices using this age-old art form."

Emily also stated, "We chose the Historic Grove Theater as our community partner this year. Our goal has been to enhance and upgrade the front façade of the theater. Working in close collaboration with the Grove Theater, we are making a significant difference. Those attending the Flatwater Tales Storytelling Festival events there will be met with new signage, lighting, and a permanent display of Ed Westcott photos lining the 65-foot long wall facing Grove Center."

You will be amazed at the variety of artistic black and white images selected which represent a wide cross section of our community's history. The 21 images chosen are examples of Ed Westcott at his best!

This community project has engaged members of all three Oak Ridge Rotary Clubs as well as members of the Historic Grove Theater. It has truly been a community effort! One in which all Oak Ridger's can take great pride!

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Historic Grove Theater



Historic Grove Theater announcing "The Beginning or the End" movie created to tell the story of the Manhattan Project and featuring scenes of Oak Ridge

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Bill Lepp, performing at the 2018 Flatwater Tales Storytelling Festival



Full house crowd at the 2018 Flatwater Tales Storytelling Festival