

Education in Oak Ridge – Pre-Oak Ridge and Early-Oak Ridge Schools

(as published in The Oak Ridger's Historically Speaking column on November 14, 2006)

Let me first note the changed date for the DVD Release Party for "SECRET CITY: The Oak Ridge Story 1945-2006" as mentioned in the last *Historically Speaking* column. The release is now scheduled for Tuesday, November 21st at the American Museum of Science and Energy (AMSE) from 4-6 pm and the public is invited. Now let's continue the amazing story of the history of education in Oak Ridge.

We have looked at Dr. Alden H. Blankenship, Ph. D., from Columbia University and traced his ancestry as well as a bit of his endeavors after leaving Oak Ridge. We have looked at the "Genesis of education in Oak Ridge" through the research of Bill Wilcox and the resulting increased knowledge of our history brought to us by those readers who knew additional details. Please know that your feedback is very much appreciated.

In an earlier column I mentioned the school buildings that existed in the area when the Manhattan Project caused them to be closed and the people living here to vacate the schools and their homes. Let's take a brief look at these pre-existing schools and how some of them continued to be used as schools during the Manhattan Project era and in the case of the old Robertsville School, continue to serve as a portion of an Oak Ridge school today.

As was noted in a recent *Historically Speaking* column, the pre-Oak Ridge Wheat community had a strong emphasis on education having a four-year accredited college (Roane College) and also a much respected accredited Wheat High School. Other schools in the area prior to the Manhattan Project were located at Scarboro and Robertsville. While there had been several more small schools in earlier years, during 1920 – 1927 many of them closed as busing became feasible and consolidation resulted in fewer schools.

Of the three pre-existing schools, only two have continued to be used and the same two were initially used as schools – Scarboro and Robertsville. Only one continues to function as a school – Robertsville. The Wheat school, located near the K-25 site, was demolished in 1950. Although the Wheat High School building was not used as a school, rather it was used as construction company offices, there was a school that seems to have been referred to as the "Wheat School" located in Happy Valley.

I found evidence in Alden H. Blankenship and R. Mildred Kidd's *An Adventure in Democratic Administration* that there may well have been a school of 30 teachers and 900 students consisting of "Northerners, Southerners, Easterners, Westerners, Mexicans, Indians, Republicans and Democrats" as well as children from "nine religious groups" that existed in a location called the "Wheat School" while K-25 was being built (If anyone knows more facts about a Manhattan Project school in the Wheat/Happy Valley area, please contact me with details).

The teacher quoted in the above document stated, "The school was the only common bond among these thousands of people" (speaking of the 15,000 people who lived at Happy Valley). That teacher went on to say, "Our school became a 'melting pot of America'". The teacher went on to describe a "Before School Club" at Wheat where children who arrived early were taught the art of rug making by a teacher who also arrived early because of bus schedules.

An Oak Ridger article written by Holly Hemphill on October 3, 1962 states that the "old Wheat School" opened in February 1944 and closed for the last time in June 1947. This must have been the same school as the "Happy Valley" school – I do not know the exact name of this school. In the same article is stated that, "classes opened October 1, 1943 in Elm Grove, Robertsville and Oak Ridge High School." The article further stated that Pine Valley opened in December of 1943, Glenwood and Highland View opened in September 1944 and Linden and Gamble Valley opened in September 1945.

Let's look at the Robertsville School history. The original Robertsville school building was constructed in 1914 – 1915. The Robertsville Middle School still uses what was the old school's brick gymnasium as part of the present school's auditorium. At first, from 1915 until 1939, Robertsville School had grades one through twelve, but when Scarboro School was constructed in 1939 Robertsville was converted to a grade nine through twelve high school and Scarboro served elementary grades one through eight.

In 1945, Jefferson Junior High School (named so by the students because of the proximity to Jefferson Avenue) was opened in the building that was the pre-Manhattan Project Robertsville School. This school building was opened in October 1943 to serve as one of the three first schools in Oak Ridge after closing during the 1942

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Christmas holidays when the community of Robertsville had to relocate because of the Manhattan Project taking their land for the war effort.

Now this is an interesting detail – The Jefferson Junior High School was located in the Robertsville School building - a third change for that building in as many years. Yet, those changes would not be the last for Robertsville School. Many more variations would follow, yet the single pre-Manhattan Project school building to remain in service as a school would continue to serve children all the way to the present day!

Changes to the names of some schools happened in 1951 when the new Oak Ridge High School was completed. Jefferson Junior High School moved to the old Oak Ridge High School location north of Jackson Square above where Blankenship Field is now. Jefferson Junior High School/Jefferson Middle School would move one more time to the present location of Jefferson Middle School (first named Jefferson Junior High School) when the present building was completed in 1968.

The old Robertsville School that was named Jefferson Junior High School was vacated and remained empty until 1954 when it became apparent that a second junior high school was needed to serve the west end of Oak Ridge. The old pre-Manhattan Project Robertsville High School building was reopened in September 1954 as Robertsville Junior High School and the remaining parts of the building were incorporated into the new school with simply a new shell added around the old walls.

Grades six, seven and eight comprised the school population of about 1,000 students. In 1957, the ninth grade again became part of the junior high school and the sixth grade returned to the elementary schools. Robertsville Junior High School was designed using the plans for the Oak Ridge High School main classroom building. The original Robertsville School Gym built in the early 1930's was renovated and made into an auditorium. The cafeteria, music rooms and industrial arts rooms were built around the auditorium. The large gym, built by the government in 1945, was renovated as well.

Over the years the Robertsville School building has continued to serve the Oak Ridge education system as the single pre-Manhattan Project school building that has been given consistent use as a school. It remains a key element of the Oak Ridge education system. Tom Hayes serves as principal and the location is now the home of Robertsville Middle School.

I was most pleased to see the "Oak Ridge Café" (Community Advocates for Excellence) publish on Friday, November 10, 2006, in The Oak Ridger, a summary of the achievements of Oak Ridge Schools. It was my intent to include in a future *Historically Speaking* column a condensed version of the enormous list of Oak Ridge school achievements over the years. Well, that will not be needed now, we can just reference the Friday article as it covers the subject of achievements quite well and I will just move on to other historic details.

Next week we will continue our look at the early schools before moving on to more recent history of Oak Ridge Schools. As always, your help is requested to make sure we capture the details of the history of education in Oak Ridge. Contact me at 482-4224 or draysmith@comcast.net.

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Robertsville High School closed during the 1942 Christmas holiday and reopened in October 1943 as one of three initial Manhattan Project schools

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The portion of the original Robertsville High School Gym, now the auditorium for Robertsville Middle School



Sign along roadways at the main city entrances proclaims "Excellence in Education Since 1943"