

# Further thoughts on Heritage Tourism and documentary films

*(As published in The Oak Ridger's Historically Speaking column on October 14, 2008)*

First let me comment on my recent *Historically Speaking* column featuring Liane Russell. I am pleased to see in The Oak Ridger on Monday, September 22, 2008 that she is to be recognized by the Tennessee Clean Water Network by awarding her the *Bill Russell River Hero Award* on October 2, 2008. Had I been aware of that, I would surely have included it in my recent attempt to bring her accomplishments to the attention of readers of that column.

I could not help but think of Liane Russell when I attended the world premiere viewing of *Appalachia: A History of Mountains and People* documentary film recently at the Frank H. McClung Museum. See the following link for more information: <http://www.appalachiafilm.org/>.

The series is going to be aired on the Public Broadcast System in February 2009 and the University of Tennessee is going to hold a conference in 2009 to discuss the film and other issues related to Appalachia. That should be a good dialog. I wonder if they even consider Oak Ridge as part of Appalachia? I think I will just ask that question at the conference. That should promote an interesting dialog, don't you think?

The reason I thought of Liane Russell is that the film, a series of four one-hour episodes, focuses on the Appalachia mountains and the rivers and streams as well as the evolution of the mountains and changes over time to people living near them. Emphasis on the damage done by strip mining, especially in West Virginia, would attract Liane Russell's attention. She would enjoy the beauty shown in that documentary series and would certainly identify with the destruction of the mountains over the past few years. She would want to do something to protect them.

The film begins with the origins of these most aged peaks and continues to depict the history of this region through the use of the mountains as the link to all that has happened in our region's history. I could not help but compare our own documentary films *Secret City: The Oak Ridge Story* (both the *War Years* and *1945 – 2006*) as well as the *Clinton 12* by our own documentary film maker, Keith McDaniel. Our films compare very favorably with this one.

The Clinton 12 is showing on PBS now and all three documentary films by Secret City Films have won numerous awards. We have a film maker who competes right up there with the best of them. He has several potential projects in the works, including *Fraterville*, a documentary on the coal mine disaster of 1902.

Keith is also considering how to film a couple of other documentaries with historic Oak Ridge themes. With continued support from the community, I can see even more great films that can be made featuring our unique heritage.

Katy Brown, President of the Oak Ridge Convention and Visitors Bureau and newly appointed East Tennessee representative on the Tennessee Association of Convention and Visitors Bureaus recently stated that visitors to Oak Ridge are seeking tangible items they can purchase that convey our history and heritage. What better "souvenirs" than video documentaries of our history?

For example, the tremendous story of the genesis of the Medical Isotope Program, the history of the Department of Energy in Oak Ridge, the Birth of a City project could possibly include a documentary, the birth of Commercial Nuclear Energy as well as the birth of the nuclear Navy and other projects to promote

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our heritage. Documentary films would be the most effective ways to tell these tremendous Oak Ridge stories!

Of course the oral history program being developed by the Oak Ridge Oral History Center will rely heavily on video interviews. These interviews can form the basis for numerous short films and documentaries about various aspects of Oak Ridge history. Such films can also contribute substantially to heritage tourism through promotion of our history in a creative and highly effective communication medium.

In fact, all the items mentioned above, including Liane Russell are assets we should use to promote heritage tourism. We could produce a documentary film on her life and it could be used to promote scientific discovery through biology as well as demonstrate, without a doubt, the single most effective citizen's advocacy effort ever.

The Citizens for Wilderness Planning is top of the line when it comes to addressing environmental concerns. We should take pride in the fact that one of our own has had such an instrumental involvement there. Somewhere in Oak Ridge, there should be a way to give the public a full appreciation for her and other scientists who have and are contributing to betterment of our world. We are missing the mark by not promoting the assets we have in our people.

We have award winning individuals and teams who are recognized elsewhere that are not even accorded any special attention at all in Oak Ridge. If for no other reason than to encourage tourism to come and see these people and learn about their accomplishments, we should proudly display their achievements.

Displays should be featured in the Oak Ridge Visitor Center, the Oak Ridge Chamber of Commerce, the Oak Ridge Public Library, the Oak Ridge Municipal Building, restaurants, American Museum of Science and Energy. The Ed Westcott permanent display there is an EXCELLENT example of what I am trying to say!

Again, the medium of documentary films may well be the best possible way to do the above. Think about it, creatively. I can see a rack full of documentary films at all locations where tourists visit in Oak Ridge and a selection of film trailers playing on plasma screen monitors nearby each location.

Another event in our community that has not been fully appreciated in our city is the annual *Secret City Film Festival*. This year 60 of the finest independent films from around the world are being shown according to Keith McDaniel, founder of the film festival.

In this fifth year of the annual event, educational workshops and technical panels, awards ceremonies and, of course, film screenings were included. While the film festival was started by Keith to encourage the local film production community here in East Tennessee, now films from around the country and throughout the world, are commonplace. Filmmakers attending this year hail from as far away as France.

On Thursday, October 9, 2008, at "free family night," I arrived at the festival late after presenting "Stories from the Secret City" to the Avery Trace Chapter of the Daughters of the American Revolution in Kingston. Recently I have told my "stories" in Oak Ridge, Knoxville, Chattanooga, Nashville, and now Kingston. On each occasion, I have found audiences that are eager to learn about Oak Ridge's "Secret City stories."

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When I arrived at the Oak Ridge Playhouse, the last film of the evening, *Being Lincoln – Men with Hats*, produced and directed by Elvis Wilson of Nashville, was almost over. I found the playhouse auditorium quite full and the audience completely absorbed in viewing the film.

Two of the over 160 men across the United States who are dedicated to bringing Abraham Lincoln to life were there dressed as Lincoln and watching the film. After the film finished, these two individuals took the stage with Elvis Wilson and Keith McDaniel to answer questions of the audience. A lively question and answer session followed.

I was struck by the intense dedication of both Gerald Bestrom of Hastings, MI and Whit McMahan of Nashville, TN who obviously took their portrayal of the 16<sup>th</sup> president very seriously. We have had a few individuals in the past who have portrayed John Hendrix. I have a video of Harry Carper that is an excellent creation of John Hendrix.

But, we don't routinely have anyone who portrays any of the main characters of our history. That may be an area where we need to give some thought. A living history demonstration of the Manhattan Project in Oak Ridge that told the history of early Oak Ridge might be a good idea. Or maybe the birth of a city with someone who portrays Gene Joyce might help visitors appreciate our heritage.

If we are to benefit economically from our heritage, we must creatively engage that history in all aspects of the promotion of our city. Heritage Tourism can be a source of strength in our community. A recent meeting I attended along with city councilman Charlie Hensley and members of the Oak Ridge Convention and Visitors Bureau gives additional insight. More on that meeting in an upcoming *Historically Speaking!*



Gerald Bestrom (portraying Abraham Lincoln) Elvis Wilson, Keith McDaniel and Whit McMahan (also portraying Abraham Lincoln) at the 2008 Secret City Film Festival at "Free Family Night"