

AMSE returns Flattop house to Oak Ridge

(As published in The Oak Ridger's Historically Speaking column on November 11, 2008)

On October 16, 2008, in the grassy area just west of the American Museum of Science and Energy, a familiar looking structure that might look unusual anywhere else, seems right at home in Oak Ridge. A well preserved, nearly original Flattop house made the return trip to its place of origin.

This Flattop was one of several thousand prefabricated houses quickly erected to provide living quarters for families arriving in large numbers to support the emerging Manhattan Project. Beginning in late 1942 and growing by leaps and bounds in 1943 through 1945 when the war ended, young families put down roots and began raising children in the young city quickly named Oak Ridge because it was located on a ridge named Black Oak Ridge.

Such houses as this Flattop became homes to these young families who had left family and friends to work on a special secret project. Many of them did not fully realize what they were actually doing in this pioneer boom town named Oak Ridge, yet a town often referred to by such names as "Dogpatch." However, these quickly built houses soon became the center of family life and where new friendships were made.

Coming back from Tazwell, Tennessee, where this particular Flattop was moved in 1948 after being purchased at auction by Thaddeus Fitzpatrick, makes this house even more special. Fitzpatrick's daughter, Isabelle Smith and her husband, Dr. Kenneth W. Smith, of Middlesboro, KY, have donated the well-preserved Flattop in honor of Isabelle's parents and her sister, Frances Fitzpatrick. Frances had worked at Y-12 and K-25 as an engineer, a draftsman and a technical editor until retiring in 1982.

A recent visit to the American Museum of Science and Energy by Mrs. Smith caused her to consider the donation after seeing photographs of the Flattop's exterior and interior in the museum's new premiere exhibition, "Oak Ridge: World War II Secret City." She realized that the Flattop her parents had obtained in Oak Ridge and moved to Tazwell was exactly what was being shown in the photographs. She also realized it had changed little when compared to the photographs. She wondered if it might be of interest to the museum staff and proceeded to contact them to make them aware of the house.

When the staff at AMSE was first informed of the desire to donate the Flattop, they immediately recognized the potential, if the structure was as authentic as described. A visit to the site proved that the house was even more authentic than what they had been told and surprisingly the light fixtures, bathroom and kitchen remained very much original. What a find. Similar Flattops in Oak Ridge had long since been modified or at least had such fixtures replaced. This one was immediately recognized as unique.

The historic Flattop design was known as "B-1" and consisted of two bedrooms, a combination living and dining room and one bath. The total size was only 576 square feet. The name comes from the fact that the roof was flat and consisted of tar spread over canvas. The roof of the donated house will be of a more substantial nature, to assure proper protection from the weather.

One of the reasons this particular Flattop has remained in such excellent condition is that it was used from 1948 as a summer house. When it was moved both times, it was separated into its three parts and then reassembled upon arrival at the desired destination. The roof has been protected by a supplemental pitched roof that was installed to provide added weather protection when used as a summer house. That portion has been removed and the roof will be returned to the original configuration.

AMSE staff's intent is to create an original World War II living history project by refurbishing this Flattop in authentic fashion. The location is just west of the main museum and is accessible from the museum and by special handicapped access. There will be no additional cost for touring the living history exhibit, rather it will be included in the standard museum entrance fee.

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Plans are to have the exhibit ready for visitors by the anniversary of the city's opening of the gates on March 19, 2009, the 60th anniversary of that historic event. It was on that same day that the original American Museum of Atomic Energy was first opened.

The museum first opened on March 19, 1949 in an old wartime cafeteria located at 15 Jefferson Avenue.

On that very first day, guided tours took visitors through the peaceful uses of atomic energy thus promoting the vast potential of this new energy source. The present facility, known as the American Museum of Science and Energy, opened in 1975. The museum today continues to provide the general public with a large array of energy information and experiences to help adults and children learn more about science and energy. The name of the museum was formally changed to the American Museum of Science and Energy in 1978.

This latest addition to the museum will be the first of hopefully several living history exhibits to be added in the future. It will be an outdoor exhibit enclosed by an authentic "security fence." There will be an authentic wooden boardwalk leading to the front door of the Flattop. A photographic history of the house will be included as part of the exhibit.

The goal of these living history exhibits is to tell the Manhattan Project story in as much authentic detail as can be created. Oak Ridge's unique heritage deserves our most dedicated efforts to provide authentic heritage tourism experiences both for our citizens and for visiting tourists. The mission of the museum to "make history and science come alive" is realized in this Flattop's return to its home of Oak Ridge to become a living visual experience for all visitors who see it. It will be a showplace of the REAL thing!

Not only have Ken and Isabelle Smith donated this fine exhibit structure, they have also made a monetary contribution of \$13,000 to establish funding for the unique living history exhibit being planned by AMSE staff. The estimated cost for the entire project is \$50,000.

The AMSE Foundation is actively encouraging community residents and businesses to pledge funds toward the completion of this first outdoor permanent living history exhibit. A plaque listing contributors to the project is planned to be permanently located near the entrance to the exhibit. Contributors' names will also be placed on individual boards in the boardwalk access to the Flattop.

Period furniture and other donations of items that would have been seen inside a Flattop in the 1940's are sought as well. To support this effort with your contribution, call AMSE at 865-576-3200 or e-mail flattop@amse.org. Additionally, a web site www.amse.org/flattop has just been created where you may learn more about this unique and new living history exhibit.

When the project is completed a special event for AMSE members will be scheduled for the grand opening of the new tour, including areas that will not be open to the public.

Please consider if you can help by contributing to this project. Of course you are always encouraged to also join AMSE, if you are not already a member, when you contribute to this project. You may learn more about specific membership options by going online at: <http://www.amse.org/membership.html> or by calling AMSE staff at: 865-576-3229.

This special project is an excellent example of expanded efforts to enhance Heritage Tourism in our city. The experience of seeing an authentic World War II era structure as it existed during the Manhattan Project is the type of visual experience that heritage tourists expect to find when they visit historic locations. We can provide that experience.

Our historic heritage is unique and cannot be found elsewhere. We MUST capitalize on our unusual heritage tourism assets. Please join AMSE in making this authentic experience meaningful for all.

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An original Flattop that retains much of its earlier character is being restored at AMSE for a living history exhibit that will provide heritage tourists an authentic and realistic experience of early Oak Ridge housing