

Our International Friendship Bell – a unique Oak Ridge symbol, part 8

The Pavilion - part 2 – “Bish” makes a difference

(As published in *The Oak Ridger’s Historically Speaking* column on July 29, 2008)

Last week we featured Jon Coddington’s thoughts as he designed the Oak Ridge International Friendship Bell Pavilion. I hope you gained new insight into the thought and effort he placed in the project and that you felt his pride at being privileged to design the bell house.

Now let’s look into some of the actual day to day decisions regarding the final construction as seen by Hugh “Bish” Bishop who managed the overall construction project. Known as “Bish” to his friends, Shigeko Uppuluri suggested I talk to him regarding the construction of the pavilion.

He is quick to give credit to others and is extremely reluctant to accept any praise for what he did. However, I am convinced his involvement was a key element in the successful completion of the bell project.

Think about the people who were involved and ask yourself if any of them had the experience and skill to manage such a unique construction project, read the drawings and make changes on the fly as needed. Alvin Weinberg’s neighbor did and Alvin knew it well. He had called on his neighbor, Hugh “Bish” Bishop, for many details of home repair and improvement projects over the years, so he knew Bish’s skills.

Alvin also must have known that if he and Herman Postma could get his good friend Bish to take on the project, he would stick to it like glue and that each and every detail would be done precisely. Bish readily agreed to help. I could tell when I talked to him that Alvin Weinberg and he had enjoyed a special relationship.

I am sure Herman, who by this time was not only leading the fundraising but had assumed the overall project leadership role at Alvin’s request, was extremely pleased to have his help on the project. They made an excellent leadership team. Many others helped as well, but the actual construction oversight was crucial.

Hugh “Bish” Bishop was 72 years old at the time the construction began in June 1995. He was 73 when it was finished and his wife had died during the construction. Bish still recalls that time in his life as significant with both the high points of the bell house construction and the low sadness of the death of his wife. He said he was thankful that he had the project to keep him occupied when he lost Martha, his wife of some 52 years.

Their life together had begun in 1944 and she was the one who found the ad in the paper for work in Oak Ridge. They were living near her parents in Huntington, West Virginia, where he worked installing automatic sprinkler systems.

His work included all aspects of the job from measuring the structure to creating the drawings and the installation plans and then to the actual installation with necessary modifications to assure a suitable final product. All this was good training for his later career in Oak Ridge.

But his training had begun even earlier. He was working with a Civil Engineering firm in Junior High school! Then he spent three years in the Army Air Corp (before there was an Air Force) and there he learned drafting as well as other technical skills.

When Hugh Bishop family came to Oak Ridge in 1952, after Martha encouraged him to check out the ad she found in the newspaper, he was hired to “do piping” in the Union Carbide Nuclear Division’s Engineering organization. However, when he actually reported to work he found there was a need for someone to work in the Reactor Controls portion of the Instrument and Controls division. He took that opportunity.

The first job he had was on the Aircraft Reactor Experiment. A project he now says was not something that ever had a chance of working, but sure did get a lot of attention and a good bit of funding back in the early 1950’s.

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Next he worked on the Geneva Conference Reactor in 1955. He described it as a small demonstration reactor that was taken to Geneva and “left there.”

The Tower Shielding Reactor was also a project he worked on before taking on the High Flux Isotope Reactor. He worked this job from “start to finish” and recalled working what he described as “six days and two nights” a week for five or six years. His primary area of expertise was the design and installation of the Safety Systems for the reactor.

Finally he also worked on the Clinch River Breeder Reactor project reviewing drawings. He retired in October 1985 after 32 ½ years. So, Bish was well suited to such a project as overseeing the construction of a most unusual structure - the bell house for the Oak Ridge International Friendship Bell.

When I went to Bish’s house to meet him and learn more about the construction of the bell pavilion, the first thing he told me was that he could never have done the job if it were not for the people who did the actual work. His first and last words to me were to be sure that credit was given to the people doing the work.

He still has his clipboard with the list of contacts and phone numbers for all the people with whom he needed to maintain contact during the daily interactions of building the pavilion. The specific people Bish wanted me to be sure and mention were:

Ben Adams of Adams Craft Herz Walker, Inc. for site planning and surveying;

Randy Keziah and Marshall Kessell of Oak Ridge Hardwoods, Inc. who selected, cut, sawed and delivered the white oak timbers;

Keith Cole and Dan Gaskey of Pathway Bellows, Inc., who provided the many steel connectors to tie the massive beams together. (Bish had to design these on the fly and he specifically noted the task as a job where Pathway Bellows went well beyond the call of duty to help assure accurate placement of the beams);

Len M. Hart of Len Hart Construction Company, Inc., and his many craftsmen for the actual construction of the foundation, timber erection, frame construction, stonework, carpentry, and electrical work (Bish was most complimentary of the workmanship that went into the effort by these workers. Len told me that he took the job at cost because he felt the project was something of tremendous value to the city. He knew it was not popular with some in Oak Ridge, but thought the task important to the community as a whole.);

Rick Brogdon and Mike Monroe of Brogdon Roofing, Inc., who installed the copper roof;

David Wilson, Cindy Reno and Ben Yarber of David Wilson Nursery, who designed and installed the landscaping;

Lee Martin and Dan Kuban of Omniview, Inc., who contributed and installed the security monitor;

Daniel Childs of Tennessee Cablevision, Inc., who installed the cable to the police department;

Jim Duff of Oak Ridge Memorial Park for the brass plaque;

Marilyn and Allan Howard of Mid-Tennessee Turf, who laid the sod; and

Bruce Hale of Oak Ridge Lighting for the illumination of the pavilion.

Of all the people Bish talked about, he continually came back to the craftsmen of Len Hart Construction Company and said over and over, “I never could have done it without their help.” He just could not say

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enough about the manner in which they, with pride, took each task seriously and assured everything was done exactly as Bish wanted it and according to the instructions he gave them.

To give you some idea of the enormous task Bish undertook, the difficulties began with the excavating. They struck rock and Bish said the foundation started out one foot higher than intended. This made a substantial difference in many of the specifics of the layout of the pavilion, something Bish had to wrestle with throughout the construction. That “one foot” difference continued to cause changes right up to the very last bit of construction.

He also talked about the weather and all the mud that hampered construction activities. Remember, construction was going on all through the 1995/96 winter. The snow fell, the rains came, the mud lingered for weeks and still Bish and the crews pushed on through the elements.

In Alvin Weinberg’s letter to Bish, he said, “I can only tell you once again how grateful I am for all you did so well and painstakingly over many months to ensure that the Friendship bell project was completed in a timely and convincing manner. But then after having known you all these years I expected no less, even under the most trying personal circumstances. You were a real pro all the way, and I quite agree with Herman’s designation of you as an Angel to the entire Bell project. Thank you so much!”

In Herman Postma’s handwritten note to Bish, he said, “It was great to work with you on the pavilion. As they say ‘we could not have done it without you!’ And that is so true. Whether 20 degrees or 100 degrees, you were there to make it happen. Oak Ridgers should be eternally as grateful as I am”

But, I believe the most appropriate recognition of Bish’s contribution came in a letter from Jon Coddington to Alvin Weinberg where he said, “Thank you so much for your kind letter regarding the Bell House, or as I prefer to call it, the Peace Pavilion. In both the philosophical and literal meaning of the word, it was (is) a project that one could not not work on. For me it was a very satisfying experience, for I saw it as a truly collaborative effort that affirmed a set of profound and fundamental beliefs which represent the best impulses of our community. To be part of giving those beliefs palpable form is an opportunity that is all too rare today.

“Because of people like you, Bish, Herman and others, the project was not something that was merely acquired but was achieved in the truest sense of the word. When something is built as much from the heart as it is with the hand, an authenticity is created that is difficult to define, but easily experienced.

“While it is probably claiming too much, I also see the project as a gentle critique of an increasingly banal and privatized world of the built environment that speaks only of today and is indifferent to tomorrow. The bell and to a lesser extent the pavilion have a presence to them that is at once dignified and calm while still maintaining a vitality and promise about them. I think these qualities will increase in time, especially if the landscaping is installed as designed.

“Alvin, I also want to thank you very much for the dedication symposium. I am constantly coming back to the points and issues that were made and raised. The symposium has made a difference in the way I think and consequently act and I am sure it will find its way into my teaching and creative work. I am very much looking forward to getting the proceedings from Jack. Again, thanks for everything.

See what I mean? Jon mentioned three people in his letter regarding the construction of the pavilion. Being the architect, the construction manager was seen as critical to the successful implementation of his design. He felt success was achieved because of the dedicated efforts of those people working on it.

Bish will think this article is way too much about him, but I think he is an unsung hero with regard to the bell pavilion. So, while I have attempted to follow his instructions regarding recognizing the people who did the actual work, I have ignored his pleas that I not focus the article on him. It is very much an attempt to recognize the kind of expertise that makes the difference and to honor the abilities of a true leader who accomplished much through skillful personal effort and encouraging others by his strong leadership.

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Bish, you made a difference!



At my recent visit to his home, Bish points out on a drawing where he had to make changes as the bell house was being constructed

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The snow was just one of the weather related setbacks about which Bish told me



Lining up the striker just so...

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Bish works on drawings during construction