

Planning the original Gates Opening Ceremony

(As published in *The Oak Ridger's Historically Speaking* column on March 10, 2009)

In June 1948, Oak Ridge Operations Manager, John C. Franklin, announced that opening the gates of Oak Ridge would be a good step in normalization of the city. He felt the security of the government installations could be maintained by building new fences near each facility and constructing guard houses on the roads to the plants from the city, rather than keep the entire city enclosed as it had been since inception.

Interestingly enough, a poll in the local newspaper, *The Oak Ridge Times*, indicated the majority of city residents liked things just the way they were. In a city council meeting four days after Franklin's announcement where some 200 citizens showed up and voted ten to one AGAINST opening the city. Nevertheless, the Atomic Energy Commission continued with plans to open the city.

New gatehouses were constructed on the roads leading to the three sites and these buildings are still standing today. Two of these historic structures have been nicely preserved by the Department of Energy and the third has been painted, but the interior remains in need of restoration.

The two restored buildings, one on the Oak Ridge Turnpike on the way to East Tennessee Technology Park (original K-25 site) and one on Scarboro Road on the way to the Y-12 National Security Complex, are both put to excellent use for meetings and training sessions. They each have excellent selections of Ed Westcott black and white historic images of the Manhattan Project era in Oak Ridge.

What John C. Franklin also realized was that the cost to the government to maintain the support to the citizens living in Oak Ridge at the same level as during the Manhattan Project was not practical. Yet, the citizens had come to feel all those amenities were part of their compensation package for living and working here. This was never stated as such, it was just something that became a common perception.

During the Manhattan Project, the government had purposefully held rents low and provided coal for heating, water, electricity and home maintenance at no cost to the residents. Schools were as good as any in the country and the curriculum was better than most other schools. Medical care was excellent and cost a family only \$4 per month.

Chickens were grown on an area chicken farm, so the meat was fresh and plentiful for wartime. Movie theaters, four of them, changed movies four times per week. Bowling lanes were plentiful and leagues from all the plants were constant players.

No wonder the citizens of Oak Ridge did not look forward to the "opening of the gates" or "Operation Open Sesame" the code name for the project. They realized when they had it good and were not anxious for change, voting against it – to no avail.

The first thing the Atomic Energy Commission did to begin their "normalization" was to appoint an advisory city council and a city manager. These changes were met with resistance at every turn.

Yet, proceed the AEC did. By the end of 1948, things were in order and the process of opening the gates was moving ahead. Realizing the high level of resistance to change they faced, the AEC management wisely decided to engage a huge number of individuals on various committees to plan the actual gate opening ceremony. I am convinced they did this out of self-defense as the citizens were so strongly opposed to the change in status of their closed Secret City.

Many changes occurred in 1949. One of the most visible was the change in the newspaper. *The Oak Ridger* became the name of the newspaper in January of 1949. The newspaper played a key role in the promotion of the opening of the city by printing large pictures of the individuals who were leading the various gate opening planning committees and by constant reminders that the event-filled day was approaching.

There were at least 170 people on 15 committees plus an executive committee chaired by Carl M. Harmon, President Oak Ridge Better Business Association, and co-chaired by W. A. Swanson, Chairman,

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Oak Ridge Town Council. This huge level of participation in the planning of the gate opening ceremony achieved the desired result of drastically lowering the resistance to the change.

Although some disgruntled citizens remained, they became less effective in their pleas for status quo as more and more people became engaged in the planning process. The wisdom of the process is evident in hindsight and obviously led to the success of the effort.

Fredrick (Fred) W. Ford, who was referred to as Director of Community Affairs and also as City Manager, took the lead as the AEC's person "in charge" of the town. Len Z. Dolan, had been selected in 1947 as the first City Manager picked by the newly formed AEC, but Ford was the one in the position when the gates opened in 1949. He performed admirably in this most challenging role.

The first announcement, that set the date of the "gate opening" as March 19, 1949, was made on January 28, 1949. A huge headline accompanying the announcement indicated that President Truman had been invited to come "turn the key" along with Tennessee's US Senators Kenneth McKellar and Estes Kefauver. Remember McKellar was the one who according to Dick Smyser told President Roosevelt, "Yes, Mr. President, I can help you hide the cost of the Manhattan Project, just where in Tennessee are you going to put that 'thang?'"

The Oak Ridger continued to provide constant promotion of the event by highlighting the various committees and their assigned tasks. The newspaper gave encouragement by naming the members along with photos of the leaders in various planning roles.

The Program Committee went to work immediately lining up prestigious potential speakers. They ultimately succeeded in securing the Honorable Alben W. Barkley, Vice President of the United States.

The first major political official to accept the Special Guest Committee's invitation was US Senator Brian McMahon of Connecticut. He had chaired both the US Senate Special Committee on Atomic Energy and the US Congress Joint Committee on Atomic Energy. He was the author the Atomic Energy Act forming the Atomic Energy Commission. He accepted on February 24, 1949.

Others followed and Senators McKellar and Kefauver soon joined McMahon on the list. Tennessee Governor Gordon R. Browning accepted and attended. Representatives Jennings and Gore also accepted the invitation and attended the event.

However, President Truman declined as did his daughter, Margaret Truman, who had been asked to accept the honor of "wielding the scissors to cut the ribbon." She had a concert tour conflict. Senator Estes Kefauver helped get Vice President Barkley confirmed as the principal speaker and also assisted in getting Governor Browning committed to attend.

The Program Committee structured the day-long gate opening event around four main venues. First was the actual opening of the gates at 8:30 AM, the parade at 11:00 AM, the speeches on the high school football field at 2:30 PM and the evening reception and banquet at 7:00 PM and 8:00 PM the Oak Terrace in Grove Center. A number of other informal events developed as did numerous parties at various homes.

Finally, as time drew near and March arrived, the Hollywood stars finally began to accept invitations. Dancer Donald O'Connor was first to accept the invitation to be Master of Ceremonies for the evening dance and Alexis Smith agreed to come and be crowned "Miss Atomic Blonde." However, both of these celebrities cancelled a week later!

Good news came in the form of an announcement in the newspaper that cowboy movie star Rod Cameron was coming to ride a horse in the parade. Also announced as accepting were Virginia Mayo, Marie "The Body" McDonald, Adolph Menjou and Jack Bailey. Now we were getting somewhere!

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State and Federal elected officials were lining up and even the Chairman of the AEC, David Lilienthal, indicated his intention to attend. TIME, LIFE and NEWSWEEK were all going to cover the event.

In spite of all the participation by leading officials, prominent business and civic leaders as well as a large number of just plain folks who wanted to do all they could to help the gate opening be a success, the Letters to the Editor in *The Oak Ridger* was filled with complaints.

There were people writing about such issues as “we are going to have to start locking our doors” and what would we do about increased traffic that would surely lead to increased numbers of accidents, door to door salesmen would now come our way and other such nuisance issues.

I must observe that little has changed in 60 years as we continue even today to see the same thing.

Whenever there is a major initiative by our leaders, there are a few vocal naysayers who oppose whatever it is. They don't have a solution, just complaints and negative reactions. Oh well, such is Oak Ridge, but in spite of it all, I am convinced we are a major contributor to the betterment of the world and will eventually find the right mix of ideas to even get the Oak Ridge Mall to be a shining example of energy-independence and advanced demonstration of applied energy technology.

Next week's Historically Speaking column will feature the details of the actual gate opening ceremony and the full text of Fred Ford's speech. This speech was saved from being forever lost by B. B. Blevins, who grew up on Olney Lane in Oak Ridge and when the Fred Ford home at 104 Olney Lane was being closed up years ago, B. B. spotted and rescued Ford's original 3" x 5" note cards of his remarks made on this historic occasion (as noted by Bill Wilcox in *The Opening of the Gates to the Secret City*).

This Wilcox document was also the source for much of this article and may be purchased online at www.secretcitystore.com.

As you may know, the 60th anniversary of “Operation Open Sesame” the code name for the original gate opening ceremony is March 19, 2009. It is being re-enacted on March 21, 2009. There will be many events that will replicate the original. Gerald Boyd will replay the role of John Franklin by welcoming the crowd, Jim O'Connor will represent Fred Ford and will re-enact his speech (see next week's column for the full text of this momentous welcome to visitors to Oak Ridge).

Make your plans now to take part in the historic re-enactment of the Gate Opening Ceremony events. At 8:30 AM, be at Elza Gate on the east end of Oak Ridge Turnpike.

At 10:30 AM be at the American Museum of Science and Energy Auditorium for the premier showing of the new Keith McDaniel DVD Gate Opening Documentary Film and much more.

At 12:30 PM be at the Wildcat Den or Midtown Community Center at the corner of Robertsville Road and the Oak Ridge Turnpike for a lunch hosted by Heartland TV Series' Bill Landry.

The lunch is the only event with a cost. \$20 will get you lunch and more. Contact Margaret Allard at 607-1122 for tickets. In addition to the DVD Historic Documentary Film, *Operation Open Sesame*, a 227 page photographic history book documenting the events of the gate opening will be available for purchase.

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The famous gate opening “explosive” ribbon cutting ignited by an electrical signal generated from the Graphite Reactor at the Oak Ridge National Laboratory