

A 1950's letter and the integration of area schools

(As published in *The Oak Ridger's Historically Speaking* column on January 21, 2011)

Charles A. Washington, Jr. called me with an idea for a story. It is not unusual for me to get such calls and the suggestions for stories often run the gamut from simple historic facts that have been overlooked to personal stories that are known only to the individuals contacting me. Charles' request was different.

He recalled a letter to the editor written in The Oak Ridge somewhere around 1950 that was quite short and written by a 14 year old youngster who sincerely did not understand why some people were treated so differently than others. His brief letter to the editor set off a response from churches and individuals that within a matter of weeks made a huge difference in the lives of the young black students in Oak Ridge. The young writer was white, but his letter pertained to the education of black students.

You see, for several years prior to 1950 in Anderson County including Oak Ridge there was no place for black high school students to attend school within the county or the city. They were bused to Knoxville. Not something they liked, but the only choice they and their families had if the youngsters were to complete their high school education.

This busing situation was not unique to Oak Ridge and Anderson County. It was the common practice and touted as "separate but equal" even though it was obviously, in hindsight, not equal. After four black students attempted to enroll in Clinton High School and were rejected, a lawsuit was filed in December, 1950, on behalf of Joheather McSwain by her mother, Wynona McSwain.

I am proud that Fanny and I have been fortunate enough to meet Joheather and develop a friendship. She is the person who sat in front of us at the premiere showing of the award winning documentary film *The Clinton 12* created by Keith McDaniel.

At the end of the movie, Joheather turned around and said to me, "that didn't tell it all, there is more to the story!" Well, I had to know the rest of the story and before the evening was over, Fanny and I had invited Joheather and her family to lunch the next day to learn "the rest of the story."

Resulting from that lunch has been a series of articles in *Historically Speaking* telling the fuller story of the Clinton integration and most important of all to Fanny and me, a lasting friendship that extends to this day. Joheather called the other day from California, just to wish us happy holidays.

The McSwain versus County Board of Education in Anderson County, Tennessee, lawsuit was not heard by Judge Robert L. Taylor until February 13, 1952. At which time he upheld the practice of separate but equal as he claimed to not be able to see any terrible inconvenience caused by busing black high school students to Knoxville.

After Brown versus the Board of Education was ruled upon by the U. S. Supreme court in 1954, the U. S. Court of Appeals, Sixth Circuit, overturned Judge Taylor's 1952 ruling. McSwain versus County Board of Education in Anderson County, Tennessee, was returned to Judge Taylor's district court for a new decision. That decision would ultimately result in the Clinton High School's integration.

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After delaying over a year while improvements were made to segregated schools, Judge Taylor ruled in January, 1956, that Clinton High School would be integrated by the fall term of the 1956 school year. This action produced the first integrated state supported school in Tennessee and in any Southern state.

Meanwhile, Oak Ridge had already taken action to integrate all Oak Ridge schools effective September 1955, a full year earlier than Clinton High School. However, Oak Ridge was not a state supported school, as it was fully funded by the federal government.

As all the black students lived in Scarboro Village, only Oak Ridge High School and Robertsville Junior High School actually had black students to enroll. This was because of the proximity of the schools to the black community and the fact that the Scarboro School was to remain open.

The Scarboro School with grades one through six continued to operate as a community school until 1967. Arizona Officer was the well respected principal.

Having been closed in 1942 along with all other schools in the area required by the Manhattan Project, Scarboro School was opened again in March 1944 and was used for white students. It was later used from September 1946 to June 1949 as a black elementary school.

According to Blankenship in "An Adventure in Democratic Administration," Scarboro School was selected as the location for the black school in September 1946 when it became obvious that the black population, required by state law to be educated in separate schools, was in need of a school.

During the Manhattan Project years, 1943 – 1946, no black children were allowed to live in Oak Ridge. See the rapid changes taking place. By 1946, black families were being allowed to move into Oak Ridge, obviously.

In June 1949, the black students were moved to the school in Gamble Valley that had been a white school but with the creation of the all black neighborhood there the school was located closer to the black community. It retained the original name of Scarboro School and thus the reason for the name of the community becoming Scarboro Village.

While the integration of Oak Ridge schools in 1955 was implemented without the kind of protest brought about in Clinton by the outside negative influence of John Kasper and Asa Carter that happened in 1956 in Clinton, integration in Oak Ridge was not without some negative resistance. The person who was most profoundly impacted by this small but vocal resistance may well have been Waldo Cohn.

Cohn was a scientist who personally worked to create and ship the first medical isotopes generated by the Oak Ridge National Laboratory's Graphite Reactor and who is credited with starting the Oak Ridge Symphony Orchestra as its founder, organizer and first conductor. He was also the Chairman of the Oak Ridge Town Council during the most tumultuous time of the early to mid 1950's.

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His resolution of December, 1953, to desegregate Oak Ridge schools, created a firestorm of controversy. Passed by a vote of four to two, the town council soon found itself under attack, but the primary target of the segregationists was the chairman, Waldo Cohn.

Letters to the editor, phone calls containing threats and general displeasure with the resolution led the council members to back down from their position of support for integration, but not Cohn. He stood firm.

An insight into the turmoil can be seen in the handwritten letter Cohn sent to Howard Baker, Sr. Sent on February 1, 1954, it begins, "Dear Mr. Baker, Perhaps you have heard about our tempest-in-a-teapot here in Oak Ridge, stirred up by the Council's school integration resolution of December 21, 1953..."

Cohn went on to say, "As matters stand now, there is to be a recall election on me next Monday. The petition was started by anti-integrationists and others who don't like me in any shape or form. Subsequently some of these banded together in a little group (less than 100 for sure) calling themselves the Citizens Action Committee."

The upshot of the recall election was that while there was a majority of votes for recall (rumored to have been helped by people outside Oak Ridge coming in to vote) it failed to achieve the necessary two thirds majority. Cohn kept his seat on Town Council.

According to an article in *The Oak Ridger* of Jan. 21, 1974, regarding activities in 1954, Kit Kuperstock states, "Though 3,356 voted in favor of recall, with only 2,061 supporting Cohn, this was still short of the two-thirds majority necessary and Cohn kept his seat. He chose to resign as Council chairman, however, and Cliff Brill was elected to replace him. Jerry George was elected vice-chairman." The number voting was far larger than the number who voted to elect the town council.

The council had passed another resolution negating the first integration resolution and calling on Oak Ridge to wait for the state of Tennessee to create guidelines for integration before integrating its schools. The pressure of the Citizens Action Committee was obviously being felt by the town council.

Yet, when Brown versus the Board of Education was ruled upon in 1954, the Atomic Energy Commission issued a directive in January 1955 to integrate Oak Ridge schools. While only the Oak Ridge High School and Robertsville Junior High School had black students enroll, the ruling applied to all schools.

Because of the continued segregation of the neighborhoods, it was in 1967 before black students enrolled in any other Oak Ridge schools. The Scarboro School was closed at that time.

In 1950, a group of volunteer teachers offered to teach high school grades at Scarboro and in June 1951 Oak Ridge had its first three black high school graduates. Scarboro School (in the Gamble Valley location) then graduated the first black high school students in an Anderson County school when it held the first "Negro high school commencement" in May 1951. Graduating were Nancy Cooper, Ben Phipps and Willie Ann Southall.

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Permanent teachers then replaced the volunteers, enrollment grew and by 1955 Scarboro High School, located in the same building with the elementary grades, graduated 15 seniors. The school's enrollment was growing and the need for integration of Oak Ridge schools was apparent to many who lived in Oak Ridge, but surely not all.

Charles Washington, Jr., is convinced that this early community support for Scarboro School that resulted in the first black high school in Anderson County resulted from the Letter to the Editor written by a 14 year old white boy. Both Charles and I are looking for that letter to the editor. Charles recalls seeing it in the past.

Charles is also convinced that the area churches contacted churches in Scarboro Village and between the several churches involved, the volunteers were found and the high school teachers engaged to form the high school. If he is correct, this is a good example of collaborative efforts of churches in Oak Ridge.

We would like to know more about this early effort that established the first black high school in Anderson County and Oak Ridge. If you have information, please contact me at 865-482-4224 or draysmith@comcast.net.



Charles A. Washington, Jr. and his son Austin Tyler Washington at the site where the Scarboro School was located