

Putting the Manhattan Project into proper perspective

(As published in The Oak Ridger's Historically Speaking column on October 8, 2012)

Two of my good friends have in their own way recently taken action to help the Manhattan Project National Historical Park to be better understood. They are Bill Wilcox and Martin Skinner.

First, Bill Wilcox, the Oak Ridge City Historian, wrote a short speech for the 70th Birthday of the selection of this area of East Tennessee for the Manhattan Project.

In that speech, Bill included the following four points reported by Darrell Richardson in his coverage of the 70th Birthday Party in The Oak Ridger on September 21, 2012. I have summarized the enlightening points Bill made regarding why we should celebrate our role in the Manhattan Project.

Bill's first point was to clarify that we are NOT celebrating the bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki. Rather we are celebrating "Oak Ridge's three-year wartime effort that very directly helped bring peace to a world torn and aching from six exhausting years of war..." This war that brought 54 million deaths was stopped with help from Oak Ridgers.

His second point was that stopping the war "cancelled the plans both Japan and the Allies had already made for an all-out invasion of Japan..." This invasion was anticipated to bring an appalling 250,000 deaths of our men and millions of deaths of Japanese. Again, Oak Ridge helped stop the war.

His third point was the ushering in of the Nuclear Age through the Manhattan Project. The tremendous energy of the atom was, for the first time, released and controlled. Oak Ridge helped with that transition.

Bill's fourth and final point was the "many legacies that have come from putting that wartime nuclear science and technology to work..." Examples Bill gave of highly beneficial applications included, "nuclear medicine, commercial nuclear power, and everyday applications in industry, and agriculture that have brought an improved quality of life to mankind all over the world."

Bill ended his speech with a quote from Herman Wouk, "The beginning of the end of war --- is remembrance."

Finally, Bill concluded, "No, we do not remember our wartime roles in order to glorify that or any war, but to remember how terrible war really is and hopefully do something more to bring the world lasting peace."

I have predicted that this speech Bill gave at our 70th Birthday will become a classic in the historic preservation literature detailing the true results of the Manhattan Project. It is concise and targets the key elements that the Manhattan Project National Historical Park will focus on.

Secondly, Martin Skinner, who worked for years at Y-12's Building 9731 and personally separated many of the stable isotopes that have had such a tremendous positive impact on all our lives decided to write a letter in support of the Manhattan Project National Historical Park. He chose to address his letter to the strongest opponent of the park, Congressman Dennis Kucinich of Ohio.

"Dear Representative Kucinich:

"I am sorry you voted against the formation of the Manhattan Project National Park. The paper quotes you as saying you saw no reason to "celebrate ingenuity that was used to put all humanity at risk".

"The initial goal of the Manhattan Project was to develop an atomic bomb to defeat Japan. In an amazingly short time – almost a miracle – the U. S. was successful and the war was over. While the death toll was large as expected, it was nowhere equal to the loss if we had invaded Japan. Just look at how the Japanese defended the islands to almost the last man. The combined losses of Japan and the U. S. would have been tremendous. The men on ships in the Pacific headed for the invasion were told they likely would not return. Ask any of those men – some are still alive - how they felt when peace was declared!

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"Apparently your staff has either given you incorrect or incomplete information about the proposed park. There is much more than the celebration of the bomb technology to be displayed. What is to be celebrated is the ingenuity of scientists and engineers who have developed technologies that continue to benefit hundreds and thousands of people all over the world every day of the year. Nuclear medicine is an outgrowth of the Manhattan Project, as is nuclear propulsion for space exploration. Specifically, separations in the Calutrons (the electromagnetic separators) of Oak Ridge provided enriched stable isotopes that, when irradiated in a nuclear reactor, produce radioisotopes useful for diagnosis and treatment of many maladies. Many materials testing techniques using separated isotopes have been developed to improve materials of all sorts. Surely, you must remember the "Atoms for Peace" endeavor. While defiled by some, we now have considerable amount of our electrical power coming from nuclear power plants – the result of the Manhattan Project.

"Why am I interested in the effort to establish a Manhattan Project National Park? Because I have lived through all of the outstanding accomplishments just in Oak Ridge. Initially I served as a GI in Oak Ridge in 1944-46 servicing the equipment that controls the Calutron. Later, after WW II was concluded, as a civilian I worked in the development of equipment – modifications of the Calutron – to separate many of the stable isotopes that have been used for research and solutions to problems. This equipment is important to tell future generations of the efforts of the people of the Manhattan Project. Right now most of the Oak Ridge equipment is almost like when last operated so can easily be preserved. Unless a method is developed to preserve the equipment and history, all will be lost forever – the National Park is a way to accomplish that preservation.

"I hope in the coming months you will become more acquainted with the "peaceful" efforts of thousands of people who have toiled to make our nation a greater place to live. I refer you to a publication of L. O. Love in "Science", Vol. 182, pp. 343-352 (Oct. 26, 1973) to learn more about the important separation of stable isotopes in Oak Ridge. There are many more sources of information on the peaceful utilization of many aspects of nuclear technology. I think that if you will study more, you will see the need to preserve these important sites for the people who follow us. Please, then vote to establish the Manhattan Project National Park when it is again considered. The matter of financing can be addressed at a later date when the park has been approved.

"Sincerely, Martin Skinner

The Manhattan Project National Historical Park received a majority of votes in the House, but because of the rules under which it was brought forth, a 2/3rds majority was required for passage. Congressman Doc Hastings, sponsor of the bill, indicates he will bring it to the house for a vote under normal rules, which requires only a majority to pass. A companion bill in the Senate must also pass for the park to become a reality.

Oak Ridge is one of three locations of the proposed park. Los Alamos, NM, and Hanford, WA, are the other two sites. The bills must pass first, but when that happens, then the National Park Service and the Department of Energy will have one year to determine the facilities that will make up the park in each of the three locations. Then the Park Service will conduct a management study. Only then will the reality of a national park be realized.

Another excellent source of information on the Manhattan Project history has just been made known to me. It is located online at http://www.osti.gov/accomplishments/manhattan_story.html and is the brainchild of Mary Schorn, an Oak Ridge resident and product manager for DOE Research and Development Accomplishments, an Office of Scientific and Technical Information web site.

This excellent web blog was highlighted on the DOE Office of Science web page, <http://science.energy.gov/>. This is a good example of the work done at OSTI to capture scientific and technical information online. Much of it has historical significance as well. Thanks to Linda Ponce, of OSTI's External Communication and Outreach, for making me aware of this resource.

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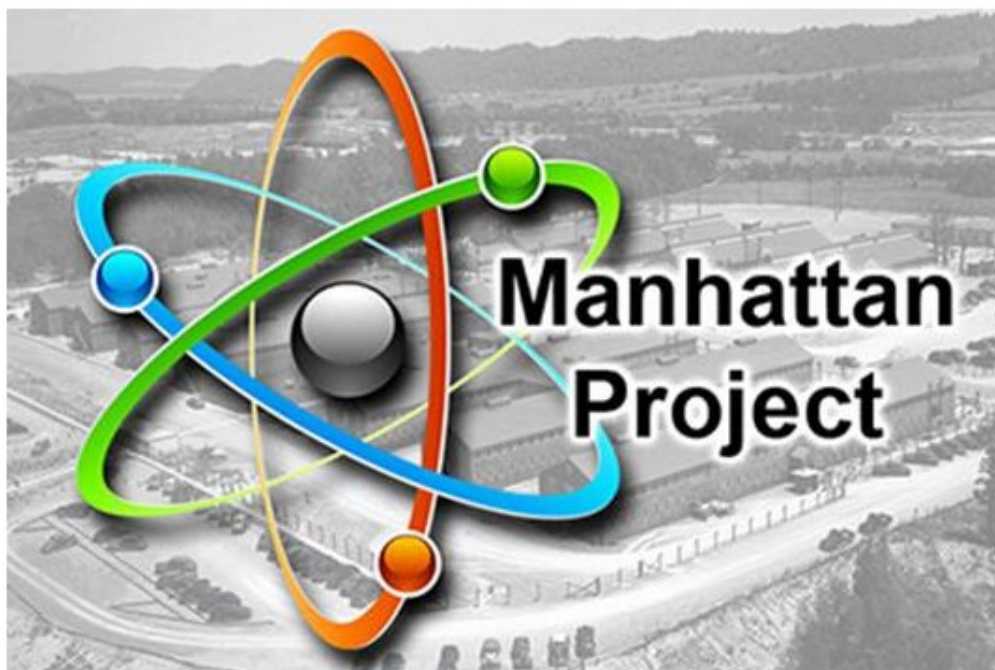
Bill Wilcox presents his perspective on the Manhattan Project to the crowd at Oak Ridge's 70th birthday event



Martin Skinner as he prepares to greet visitors to Y-12 on a recent Secret City Festival public tour

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The logo for the Manhattan Project blog created by Mary Schorn of the DOE Office of Scientific and Technical Information