

Revolution, Reaction and Reform: Transformation of the Community of Wheat, by Sarah Littleton, part 3

(As published in *The Oak Ridger's Historically Speaking* column on August 26, 2013)

After two articles of introduction to this series, here is the first half of the heart of the story, the document created by Sarah Littleton. She is an eighth grade student, obviously wise beyond her years and capable of telling a story that will intrigue you as it did the judges of the National History Day competition. Enjoy!

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A small, secluded community became a hidden key to United States' victory in World War II. One thousand ordinary farming families made a significant sacrifice for an even greater cause. This place, these people, once defined a small community called Wheat, Tennessee. The people of Wheat remember a safe, quiet society. What we should remember about them is their reaction to change and the sacrifices they made for our nation.

Wheat was part of what is now Oak Ridge, Tennessee, but most people do not know of the once rural community there. To the east were the beautiful Smoky Mountains, and to the west the Cumberland's. Wheat had classic one-room school houses. Churches were a common site, along with small stores.

Streams and good farm land made soil a natural resource. Forests, animal life, and coal were other natural resources. For recreation, people enjoyed square dancing, all day singings, worshipping, quilting parties, and homecomings at local churches. Of course, that was when they were not working.

Life was full of hard work. The residents were mostly farmers, but some people worked in the peach orchards. Boyd Littleton remembers picking peaches for less than a dollar per day. When he was fifteen, his oldest brother Martin asked him to help deliver a truck load of peaches to Cincinnati, Ohio.

Unfortunately, when they arrived, the peaches were all rotten! The store would not accept them, so they scrambled to sell them on the street. There are many stories like these about life in Wheat.

The residents of Wheat had ties to the community for decades. Some had century old farms and houses. Many people like the Magills, the Littletons, and the Watsons had extended families living there. These families sometimes lived on the same street and visited often. What made Wheat so close-knit was that most of its residents had never left the area. They did not want, need, or intend to leave. This was their home and heritage.

The United States Government had revolutionary plans for Wheat. The Japanese bombing of Pearl Harbor on December 7, 1941, brought unbelievable devastation to the United States. Three of the largest warships in the U.S. Navy sank, and on just one of those ships over one thousand men were killed. The attack came in two waves, making it difficult to respond.

Reg Grant, author of *World War II* says, "The Pearl Harbor mission was a huge success for the Japanese, but the 'sneak' attack made Americans determined to have revenge." The United States declared war after the attack. They needed a new weapon, one that would reform warfare and be new to the world with a huge impact. This weapon became the first atomic bomb.

In July, 1942, a group of scientists visited East Tennessee and gave their approval to the Wheat-Scarborough-Robertsville-Elza section of Roane and Anderson counties. General Leslie R. Groves, in charge of the atomic bomb project, personally made the decision on September 19, 1942, to create Oak Ridge as a bomb research city.

The location was ideal because it was far enough inland to prevent possible attacks. Only one thousand families lived there, making relocation easier. "The U.S. Army decided that this would be the site of massive plants which were to be constructed," according to Katherine Hoskins in *Anderson County*.

The area taken was seven miles wide and seventeen miles long. The Clinch River provided eastern, southern, and western borders. Johnson, Charles W., and Charles O. Jackson in *City Behind a Fence*, said, "The thermal, the electromagnetic, and the gaseous diffusion processes required large amounts of electricity and the Tennessee Valley Authority hydroelectric plants at Norris Dam, just north of the area,

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and Watts Bar to the south could provide much of that need.” These TVA electrical resources helped make the area a logical choice.

While General Groves and others were deciding how to relocate one thousand families, the rest of the world continued to fight in World War II. America was determined to win but was fighting on both the Pacific and European fronts. Japan was a formidable threat because it had the most powerful navy in the Pacific, had formed an alliance with Germany, and wanted to conquer all of Asia.

Autumn of 1942 would prove to be one of the most difficult for many Wheat families. The Army Corp of Engineers was sent to evacuate everyone. They wanted to move everyone out quickly and quietly. The Corps probably did not realize how much the little society would be revolutionized because of relocation.

George O. Robinson wrote in his book, *The Oak Ridge Story*, that some people were informed face-to-face: “We’re going to buy up your land,” he said to me. “All of it?” I asked. “Yes, sir” he said, “we’re going to buy up all the land in this section. Everyone has to go.”

“I went outside the house with the visitor and looked around me...up at the green hills my grandfather had come across 100 years earlier, and I looked at the farm I’d worked for half a century.”

Other people just found a piece of paper stuck to their door telling them how many weeks, usually between two and six, that they had to relocate. Many people did not believe they were given enough money for their property.

One resident recalled, “The government’s offer was a total of \$10,500 for the property in its entirety. For this amount we soon found that we would be able to acquire half as many acres in the surrounding area,” as recorded by James Overholt who edited *These Are Our Voices: The Story of Oak Ridge 1942-1970*.

This shows that some people did not receive the money that their property was worth. Some went to court over the issue but only received limited compensation.

There were political controversies during relocation. “On October 6, an attorney for the Real Estate Branch of the Ohio River Division, Corps of Engineers filed in the Federal court at Knoxville a ‘declaration of taking’ to obtain immediate possession of fifty-six-thousand acres in Roane and Anderson counties.”

However, Tennessee governor Prentice Cooper was extremely frustrated to hear about this because he was not given prior notice. General Groves said in *Now it can be told*, “No one of sufficient rank was sent to inform the governor of the Army’s plans to close off a sizeable portion of land in his state.” Many mistakes were made, but these mistakes were not what really broke the hearts of the people of Wheat.

Most families worried about having enough money to find a new home. Schools for the children and work for the men were their problems, not the government’s problem. Some people felt cheated, because they had no help with the relocation. Residents were supposed to have six weeks to relocate, but some had only two.

To move a family, find a place to live, and have enough money to do it with was almost unthinkable.

However, many had a humble reaction toward relocation. People like the Magills, just did what they were asked to do. “We did what we were told. They told us we had to move, so that is the only thing we had to do.” This shows a positive and cooperative attitude considering the Magills had a one hundred-fifty acre farm with two houses and three barns.

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Next we will complete Sarah’s excellent story of the transformation of the Wheat Community.

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A gathering of Wheat residents during a recent Wheat homecoming held the first Sunday in October each year



Sarah Littleton shown among the artifacts of nuclear weapons at the Y-12 History Center, the reason the people of Wheat had to leave their community

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Historical marker at Wheat