

The final chapter... Bill Wilcox, my friend

(As published in *The Oak Ridger's Historically Speaking* column on September 16, 2013)

A giant passed from our midst on Monday, September 2, 2013, in the early evening. Quietly, with dignity and class, Bill Wilcox breathed his last. Lying close beside him was a three-ring notebook with tabs for each of several articles he was completing on some features of Oak Ridge history.

He was working on these articles while putting off completing the final chapter of his favorite project, a book titled, "A Brief History of K-25." He was writing the authoritative history based on and expanded from a number of newspaper articles he produced at my request that were published in *The Oak Ridge Observer* during the first six months of 2006. More on this "final chapter" in a bit, but now let's stay with the creation of the articles on Oak Ridge history.

These stories were being created at the request of a new webmaster, who has taken on the responsibility to update and maintain the Oak Ridge Heritage & Preservation Association's web page, www.oakridgeheritage.com. Bill was anxious to help, as was his usual reaction when he saw an opportunity for a new initiative to promote better understanding of the history of Oak Ridge.

Here is where we take a turn to share a very private and personal aspect of the last days of Bill's life. Mention has been made in both the news media and social media of Bill spending his last days doing what he loved to do, working on documenting Oak Ridge history, right up to the end.

One of his daughters, Martha, has graciously shared with me some more intimate details of what actually took place on his last Sunday and Monday as she helped her dad complete this last and final task. It shows insight into Bill's thoughts near the end, as I think nothing else might.

Martha said she found that one of the articles, "How 75,000 people kept a secret" was not actually a completed article to be edited but was only a rough outline. She showed that to Bill and he said, "I will dictate it to you." But when he tried, Martha said it was just too hard for him to talk that much.

So, Martha took the outline and using what she knew of Bill's often told stories of Oak Ridge history, she began to write the article paragraph by paragraph. She would read the article to him as she created it one paragraph at a time. Bill would make verbal changes sentence by sentence and Martha would correct the document on her laptop computer using his instructions.

I am sure this was a slow process as Bill was growing very weak and even talking at all took a toll on his strength. Yet, he insisted they proceed. I know about Bill's weakened condition personally as my last visit with Bill saw him insist that he remove the breathing treatment mask and talk to me. His son, also named Bill, told me that he saw his dad revived and more alert during my visit than had been the case all day.

However, I cut my visit short for just that reason. Talking to me was taxing his meager strength.

Can't you see this picture? Martha types on a laptop, pauses to read what she has just typed and Bill says, "No, No, No, let's say it this way..." and he would verbalize a replacement word or phrase. I fondly recall his tendency to say "No, No, No" as he rarely just said the word once, it was almost always in threes.

Martha also told me that her dad often repeated George Washington's reported final words, as recorded by Tobias Lear, in his journal (14 December 1799). "'Tis well' said he." While Bill did not utter those exact words on the day of his death, Martha, felt they fit the situation. Bill was an authority on the portraits of George Washington and held a life-long attraction to the precise details he could learn of our nation's first president. He used quotes from his favorite historical figure and this "Tis well" was one that she remembered being used most often.

As has been noted in much of the material written about Bill since his death, he was a man of many interests, ranging from butterflies to motorcycles, from scientist to historian and from a "man of deep faith," as noted by Martha in Darrell Richardson's *A portrait of Bill Wilcox* in *The Oak Ridger* on Friday,

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9/6/13, to a person with a great sense of humor. He lived life to the fullest and enjoyed everything he undertook.

Gordon Fee said at the memorial community reception that "Bill always put his all into everything he did and the history of Oak Ridge, especially K-25, was no exception." Both Gordon and Gerald Boyd challenged the group at the reception to stay the course and be sure that what Bill worked so hard to set in motion came to fruition.

Cindy Kelly, speaking from a national perspective as President of the Atomic Heritage Foundation, sought to remind the group of Bill's dedication to preserving the history of K-25 and his tireless efforts to see the Manhattan Project National Historical Park become a reality.

Lynn Jones Perkins, an Episcopal Priest who credited Bill with the initial efforts that brought her back to the church and set in motion what resulted in the priesthood, spoke of him as her mentor. Mayor Tom Beehan cited the team of Jeanie Holder Wilcox and Bill as worthy of recognition. They worked together for 67 years of a wonderful marriage.

Finally, his son, William H. "Bill" Wilcox, thanked a number of people for support of his dad's endeavors and recognized the city of Oak Ridge and its people for giving his dad such a wonderful place to call home. Especially the substantial recognition provided in recent years was something the entire family truly appreciated.

Now, let's move back to that "final chapter." Bill's other daughter, Kitty, said to me, while we were discussing how much Bill wanted to publish his book that, I believe, will ultimately become the definitive history of the K-25 Gaseous Diffusion Plant, "I think he put that final chapter off because it was just that – the 'final' chapter."

I had to agree with her because I had encouraged Bill on a number of occasions to just publish the book without trying to capture all the latest nuances and changes that kept happening. I wondered to Kitty if it might have been that he was hoping to include the passage of the Manhattan Project National Historical Park bill in the final chapter.

Kitty again said, "No, I think it was just that final chapter in something he had worked on so very hard for so many years. It was just too final." She may be correct. I know that Bill loved K-25 in a way that caused him to devote untold hours and expend energy I did not think he had to make numerous revisions and changes to the various "options" that the group who met with him sometimes weekly, the Partnership for K-25 Preservation, presented for consideration.

Gerald Boyd, at the memorial community reception, said he spent the last 12 years knowing Bill and for the first 10 of those years, as the Department of Energy's Oak Ridge Operations Manager, he talked to him (listened actually, I'll bet) about K-25 almost exclusively. Yet, Gerald valued Bill's dedication and insights so much so that he actively sought Bill out to get his input. I was privileged to be included in breakfast meetings where I observed this interaction first hand. It was a delight.

Much of what Bill accomplished, he did so with subtle interactions and by taking on a lion's share of the work personally. You may recall that our beloved International Friendship Bell which we most all take for granted today was once steeped in controversy. Bill worked the issues quietly and drafted the words on the plaque by the bell that essentially laid that controversy to rest.

He was good at bringing about consensus and striking a compromise, while also being able to hold fast to critical elements of things he felt important to the future of the city. As Oak Ridge City Historian, Bill often discussed the future of the city so grounded in its history. He understood the importance of not forgetting our past yet moving briskly into our future without hamstringing the next generations with things of the past that have little to no lasting value.

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His passion for historic preservation in balance with progressive development is something we should retain as we move to the future, a future without Bill here to guide our thoughts. Yet, he left many memorials that serve to remind us of his resolve and dedication. I can see his imprint on our city at almost every detail of our history that is commemorated.

Yes, I will miss him greatly and yes, he was a giant in our community, but he will not soon be forgotten. He has left us far too many practical and lasting contributions. As with Ed Westcott's photographs, without Bill Wilcox's writings, memorial plaques, video interviews and personal impressions he made on many of us, our ability to communicate Oak Ridge's history would severely limited. Thank you, Bill!



Gordon Fee speaks to the group at the community reception in memory of Bill Wilcox

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Oak Ridge Mayor Tom Beehan



Gerald Boyd, former DOE ORO Manager

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Cindy Kelly, President Atomic Heritage Foundation



William H. "Bill" Wilcox

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Lynn Jones Perkins, Episcopal Priest