

The Last Robertsville Reunion, part 2

(As published in *The Oak Ridger's Historically Speaking* column on February 10, 2014)

Continuing Myra Mansfield's research and documentation of the most recent and officially the last Robertsville reunion, she shares insights into several more of the attendees.

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Lawrence Tunnell had only been to one movie in his life when he joined the military at age 18 during WWII. He remembers taking a horse and wagon up what we call Key Springs Road to reach Copeland's Store in Robertsville. The Tunnells owned a large home in Marlow where his forefathers were the first settlers here around 1787. There is much more to tell about Mr. Tunnell. He earned several awards and distinctions as he served the military during WWII and the Marlow community has given him the honorary title of "Mayor of Marlow". At age 93 he continues to go to work at his law firm every day, serves as a substitute judge in the Oak Ridge City Court and holds the distinction of being the oldest practicing attorney in Tennessee.

Ray Kear told me about life out near Melton Hill Dam, before there was a dam. Bessie Fox Smith told me about her family's large farm where Oak Ridge Memorial Garden is now. Faith Tunnell Andrews shared with me how she was protected from racial prejudice while growing up in Robertsville. An African American family lived up the hill and would frequently come for dinner with their family. During the war she got a job at a local bank. When a situation came up at the bank she found herself in trouble with the boss for NOT showing discrimination! Thank goodness some things have changed.

The old Robertsville School is still standing buried beneath the newer additions to Robertsville Middle School. The last teaching staff included Dena Stooksbury teaching Science, Naomi Jones teaching Home Economics, Verona Amerine teaching Math, Louise Roberts teaching English, Eugene Arnold teaching Future Farmers of America, and Owen Davis as principle teaching Civics and History. These folks remember when the school had a wood burning stove to which the boys were tasked with keeping firewood handy. There was also no running water in the school so the girls took turns walking down to the spring to carry water back up. Oak Ridge Turnpike was a simple gravel road. When the school closed the students left their homes to finish their education in other areas around East Tennessee.

The Robertsville Reunion first began in 1971 when Mr. Arnold invited the young men from his class to meet with him at Marlow Park. After hours of reminiscing they decided to meet again the following year. As time went by they continued their new tradition, expanding their participation to include their wives, and then other students from the old school. Now that the reunions are over these precious people are left to keep in touch by telephone or letters.

Our memories are a valuable treasure, especially as the world continues to change at such a rapid rate. These folks remember life in a way that is foreign to young people today. They remember the day when listening to a radio was the only media outlet they had except for an occasional newspaper or magazine. They remember the pleasures of roaming the hills looking for squirrels, or maple syrup, or herbs. They remember the fascination of a sun ray beaming through a piece of glass to start a fire in a man's tobacco pipe. They remember the worry of trying to save a calf's life in the cold winter snow and the joy of making taffy over a large iron pot. By the time the war interrupted their lives each of these

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communities shared one telephone usually located in a country store or phone house. Most importantly these folks remember the days when those who didn't attend church were the rarity, and simplicity and innocence remained protected by their faith, family, and friendships.

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Thanks again Myra for an excellent look into the past with the folks who grew up attending Robertsville High School before there was an Oak Ridge or the Manhattan Project. They have certainly seen things change, huh.

I promised more insight into one of our citizens who has led his life as an adventure and still looks at each day expecting exciting things to happen. Lawrence Tunnell had a most unusual experience in that he was drafted into the military before completing high school. Seems unusual, huh. Well, it is a bit unusual, you see Lawrence was sick a lot when growing up and was held out of school for some time.

Even while being held at home because of his sickness, he did not let that stop him from exercising his mind and engaging in political debate even at a very young age. He wrote articles for the Knoxville newspaper about political issues. Now that will not surprise you if you know Lawrence Tunnell. He is still a very active Republican and does not hesitate to tell you why.

He is an avid admirer of Abraham Lincoln and has been since childhood. He has photographs of President Lincoln on the walls of his office in the Tunnell Building and there are several busts of Lincoln on display there as well.

Lawrence was presented with the Republican Senatorial Medal of Freedom award in 2004. He has this award displayed on his wall full of other awards and recognition certificates. But I get the feeling this one is the most special to him.

Back to Lawrence and his three year tour in the Army spent almost entirely in the Persian Gulf. When he received notice that he was to be drafted and he was still in high school, he went to Clinton and attempted to explain that he had been unable to finish high school because of sickness. He really wanted to finish school, so he asked to be given time to do that.

However, Sam Carson, who was the person responsible for filling the draft quota told him, "The only thing I will give you is a gun." Lawrence was disappointed by this turn of events, but he went on to the Army. Some years later after Lawrence had returned to East Tennessee and had become a lawyer, he had occasion to practice law with Sam Carson on opposing sides of issues.

Sam asked Lawrence why he was so hard on him and Lawrence reminded him of the "gun" remark. Yet, the two of them became friends and Lawrence actually said that it was a good thing to be drafted as he then got to go to college on the G. I. Bill...receiving \$100 per month to attend the University of Tennessee where he earned two degrees and became a lawyer. His life's work in the law resulted from that turn of events.

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Later in life he decided to attend a seminar at Harvard University to see that school and the Boston area. He enjoys explaining that he has studied at Harvard. Pretty good for the “Mayor of Marlow” and an East Tennessee lawyer, huh.

The sparkle in his eye when he talks about his life is something amazing to see. I have encourage him to participate in our Center for Oak Ridge Oral History so his story about his young years in the military in the Persian Gulf and in Robertsville as well as his many political and legal events in his life can be captured for future generations. I would encourage you to all consider that your story is important as well and contact the Oak Ridge Public Library to participate in the program.

Lawrence is proud of the sign he has placed on the west end of the Tunnell Building, “In God We Trust.” Finally, the story he tells of his return to Robertsville High School after his three years in the military is that he was called to the principal’s office and when he got there all his teachers were there as well.

He did not know what to think, but the principal said, “Lawrence, you have succeeding in doing something that has never been done at Robertsville High School before.” Lawrence was even more confused. The principal continued, “You have scored 100 on four of five courses and 99 on the other.”

Can’t you see the sparkle in his eye and the wry smile on his face when he recounts fondly the early years of his long 93 years. What a joy it is to listen to Lawrence Tunnell tell his stories.



Lawrence Tunnell proudly holding his Republican Senatorial Medal of Freedom award and standing beside a portrait of Abraham Lincoln