

A FAVORITE AFTER-HOURS ACTIVITY DURING WAR TIME OAK RIDGE: DANCING

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✚ All through WWII, 1939-1945, the United Service Organization (USO), a non profit group entertaining and supporting soldiers traveling about the country or about to leave for foreign duty, sponsored dancing at USO clubs in many cities. The movies of the war years frequently depicted them as fun places to go and place where a guy met The Gal. These dances involved hostesses (classy girls) from the local community who were volunteering their time to help boost our troops' morale, raise their spirits, provide a safe alternative to bars and roaming the streets in some strange city. Dancing was seen as pleasant and socially acceptable. Its expression was not much more than decent hand-holding - lead and follow; touch, don't feel.

✚ The Manhattan Project's biggest mission, in terms of people, was uranium enriching – producing the U-235 needed to help win the war, which brought a peak of 75,000 people to Oak Ridge in 1945. Amazingly, the average age was 27. The Army knew its four code-named plants (Y-12, K-25, X-10, S-50) were going to require many thousands of people to come to Oak Ridge to work in a brand new, temporary, wartime town – a Secret City. They could easily see that the mix of 13,000 single young people – of course lots more gals than guys – could be a serious powder keg of problems - keeping them reasonably contented with staying here and not running to Knoxville for their off-hour entertainment. They created right at the start an Oak Ridge Recreation & Welfare Association. (Not that any Welfare would be needed in the closed community, but it would sound more like a “normal” city if the name leaked out.)

✚ In addition to picture shows at about six “theatres”, and that many bowling alleys, the Army sponsored (paid for) and provided fields and equipment for 17 different sporting teams under their **Physical Recreation** programs. Under their **Social Recreation** programs, they provided and equipped four recreation halls plus two Community Centers “which the FYI Booklet on the town said “provides dancing, music listening, parlor games (mostly bridge, pinochle, etc.), and parties.” The Ridge Rec Hall had as part of their building a wing for the nicely equipped public library.

Ridge Rec Hall was at Broadway/Kentucky Ave., near Jackson Square.
Grove Rec Hall was in Grove Center
Jefferson Rec Hall was in West Village
Happy Valley's Rec Hall was near K-25
Midtown Community Center was at the Turnpike and Robertsville Rd

Gamble Valley Community Center was in that neighborhood.



I went regularly and often to the Ridge Rec Hall, which was the hang-out for all the many dorm residents in the original center of Oak Ridge, home to over a thousand singles. Looking back I see something that never occurred to me then. The way the town developed, the different rec halls were each in different kinds of populations that came in as the town got bigger and bigger. The first to arrive were the key professional guys and gals, served by the Ridge Rec Hall. The Midtown Center served the 5,000 trailers all over Midtown, and the Jefferson and Grove served the huge Flattop area of mid and West Village where they were centered. The Happy Valley Center served the construction camps at K-25. The way the town grew this was a natural development, the only way it could happen, not planned, but it provided for more compatible groups at each, the trailer people had theirs (lots of married people), the construction folks at K-25 had theirs, the blacks had theirs.



Why go there? It was something to do. For guys it was a place to meet gals and be with other guys you worked with. We were mostly 20-23 year olds. Some singles worked on rotating shifts (day, swing and midnight), but many worked days till 5 and then ate at the Central Cafeteria, and then found themselves in this strange, brand new city with few or no friends at all. Lots then went to the Center Theatre and watched whatever movie was on. They changed the movie four, sometimes five days a week. Some nights you went bowling, but almost every night we went to the rec hall to dance and meet others who soon became friends and then after a couple of months you went just to hang out with your friends – and dance.



Because no one could get into the Secret City without a pass, which meant having a job, and getting a job here required a police record check at the very least and a FBI check for professionals or clericals handling secret reports, the feeling by gals and guys was one of safety, and some trust for both sexes. The rec hall crowd aura was more like a college freshman class “Meet and Greet.” Tight security required you couldn’t talk about work, so the lead first question was, “Well, where are you from?” Most of the guys were not in the Army because they were scientists or engineers – chemists, physicists, etc. and mechanical and electrical engineers – hired and sent here by the companies the Army brought in to run the big plants. Professionals came from all over the country – cities in California, from Chicago, New York, Rochester, Kingsport and many other states. Professional women were likewise sent here from all over, but most of the large number of clerical, record clerks, and operators of the complex equipment were from Tennessee. Oak Ridge was a forerunner of the geographic diversity we now have everywhere, but that was a first, and strange to all of us. The mingling of accents was a delightful conversation starter and source of laughter and gentle ribbing for both parties.



But we all danced and told stories and joked and it was good fun. The tight security actually worked for relaxing folks. It felt safe there. Gals went to the rec hall dances in small groups from dorms, my then-single spouse, Jeanie, told me “in twos and threes.” Same with us guys. Jeanie’s roommate went with her sometimes. Margot was married and her guy was in uniform fighting overseas. It was a relaxed, uncharged, social activity, guys and gals, not E-Harmony. The music was records played by an early master of

the D.J. art, Oak Ridger Bill Pollock, and, as today, the music was a subject everyone could discuss. That 1943 period was the high point in the Big Bands Era – Glenn Miller, Tommy Dorsey, Benny Goodman, Artie Shaw, Harry James, and on and on. They played music that made you want to get up and dance. The craze then was jitterbugging. The fast numbers like One O’Clock Jump, Opus One, Let’s Dance, had to be followed by Moonlight Sonata, My Ideal, or other slow number to let us all catch our breaths. A flaming red-head named Jeanie was a real pro at jitterbugging. I was not, but was sure I had to learn. When guys watched her skill, they’d not “break”, but asked her between numbers (we had no dance cards) and she danced away the nights.

✚ What happened was that over the first month or two of going to the same rec hall several nights a week, we made friends and got to know lots of our “classmates” and then started developing deeper relationships. For most of us it was a good time becoming friends, and as for the boy-girl part of it, the objective was what we called “romance” over a longer term, not the bed.

✚ Food and drinks? No, no food. Franchises hadn’t been invited. There was a snack bar that had Coke, Grapette, Orange Crush and such for sale plus candy bars and cracker sandwiches. Candy was popular then as now, but the soldiers needed it overseas, too, so selection was usually very limited and ran out almost every night. Hershey Bars, plain or with almonds, were a rare treat.

✚ Booze? No. Beer? No. Anderson and Roane and Knox Counties had laws that prevented the sale or possession of any alcoholic beverages. But the Army, as they did at all their many bases and airfields, sold something that tasted like beer but had a very low alcohol content. The content was the maximum that some legal definition said was not intoxicating – namely 3.2% alcohol. The brand name on the bottles was “Barbarossa Beer.” We called it “near beer” and other not so nice names. Real beer has twice that, 6% or a little more alcohol. We griped, it was something we could all agreed on. But it came in the right shape bottles with nice labels and was cold and slacked your thirst. You never got even a little “buzz”; the impact of drinking many bottles was just to wear you out going to the rest rooms.

✚ Looking back at this major gripe of those of us who came from more “civilized” parts of the country, there’s no question that this kept the rec hall evenings from getting rowdy. I don’t remember any fights, bouncers, or chaperones. There were police or security there I’m sure, but they were unobtrusive. I don’t recall any posted rules other than security posters reminding us about loose talk. Many of us were away from our homes and colleges for the first time and well aware of our being here in the midst of an awful war, never far from everyone’s thoughts. The war stories of the day were frequent subjects of conversation. My Jeanie’s older brother was a bombardier flying missions over Germany, and her younger brother was an officer in the Navy. We were all growing up fast.

✚ The Army had provided these rec halls for our entertainment, and the behavior was more like that at college than in Anytown, USA. Rec hall dances were free of cost except for your near-beer and soft drinks. After I dated Jeanie the red head a while, we got in the habit after the rec hall of going back over a block or two to the Central Cafeteria for a

sandwich and coffee or milk. The big main Cafeteria kept opened for snacks from 8PM till 2AM. I have a clear memory of my midnight cheese sandwich - not grilled, no. Imagine just two pieces of dry, plain white bread with a slice of Velveeta in between. I put mustard on it and **liked** it. Wartime Oak Ridge.

✚ There is a difference between Dances and Dancing. In wartime Oak Ridge rec halls we had dancing, not dances. At the rec hall there was never any organized program, no leader making announcements, starting things off, calling Paul Joneses and breaks, wanting folks to do this thing or that. The music started and some guys and gals got up to dance. Tables, I think were rounds with lots of chairs around the walls of the nice big rectangular-shaped hall.

✚ Each of the Plants, however, was operated by a selected Corporation, Y-12 by Tennessee Eastman Co., K-25 by Carbide & Carbon Chemicals Corp., X-10 by DuPont, S-50 by Fercleve Corp. After the companies got things settled down and running smoothly in their plants, their personnel departments often organized their own sporting leagues and parties and dances, usually held in the Grove Center dining hall, the largest gathering hall in town. These parties were often dances of the more formal kind, often semi-formal so the gals could dress, and these were often very nice affairs – the purpose of course to develop teamwork, pride, etc. Photos of such parties abound in the photo books, looking very much like echoes of life back home.

✚ Why did people dance? I asked Jeanie, age 87, to think back, “It was something to do,” she finally said. She enjoyed it and was good at it. Of course there was the social interaction that is natural for the boys and girls of that age that was a factor, but in the culture then it played a very different role than it does today. Today the kids start thinking and talking about having sex before high school. In WWII the unwritten drive for a budding relationship, driven by wonderful movies of the times, was romance – falling in love, and that possibly in the distance getting married. In those years guys put their gals on pedestals, and the gals looked for guys who were gentlemen, dependable, funny, and orthodox in their values.

✚ The kind of dancing and the dress evoked those romantic dreams. Jitterbugging was very playful, but did not, as we did it, involve physical contact. It was ideal for a casual, first meeting. The slow dancing then was patterned on the ballroom Box Step we were taught by our sisters, a formal, no-pressure contact like the gracious waltz, cheek to cheek only when you got to be really good “friends.”

✚ The summer heat made the rec hall very “close” despite all the electric fans – no air conditioning of course – and some bright couple suggested having dancing out on the Tennis courts right next to the rec hall. These are still in place today. Again it was Big Band music, free, and well attended, though neither Jeanie nor I ever attended one – neither can recall why – most likely because after a year of the rec hall we now had found other places to go and do. The jitterbuggers had no problem with the surface of the tennis courts, but the slow dancing was not as easy as indoors on the smoother floors.



Dancing at the rec halls all over Oak Ridge helped pass the time, relieve pressure of the work place by getting our minds thinking other things, and their legacy was dozens of marriages between Yankees and Tennesseans that populated Oak Ridge through the Boomer years. In our eighties now, we don't dance much anymore, but we love to listen to those great hits of sixty years ago – and can't keep our feet still.

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1945 -The Ridge Rec Hall, in Left Wing (an ell that ran down Kentucky) were the Music Rooms & Library





AEC Girls Club Dance 1947 3313-2



AEC Girls Club Dance 1947 3313-3

FILE COPY



Miss Oak Ridge Contest 3143-1 1946



Teen Club "Wild Cats Den" 1946 3146-3

The Wildcat Den was the Dance Hall in the Midtown Community Center, now turned over to the High School kids.