

WHY OAK RIDGE SHOULD CELEBRATE SEPTEMBER 19th AND WHY CELEBRATE THE MANHATTAN PROJECT?

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[During the Manhattan Project (from May 25, 1943) a Jr. Chemist, Tennessee Eastman Corp., Y-12 Plant]

Remarks for the 70th Birthday of the Secret City of Oak Ridge, Wednesday, September 19, 2012
In Front of the WWII Center Theatre, Jackson Square.

Distinguished Guests and My Fellow Citizens,

On this historic occasion I'd like to briefly address two questions that I suspect many of you might have as we come together to celebrate the 70th birthday of the Manhattan Project in Oak Ridge.¹

That Saturday Sept. 19th, 1942 was just two days after Colonel Leslie R. Groves was given command of the Project and he wasted no time in ordering the acquisition of these 56,000 acres of East Tennessee to house the entire Manhattan Project.² Your first question might be why celebrate our birthday today, didn't Ridgers just a couple of years ago celebrate the City's birthday as June 1, 1960?

We sure did, and that's just as it should be. This city really does have two different birthdays because we have in fact been two very different cities located in just the same place. Each is distinctive and deserves its own birthday; both share the same unique, rich heritage.

Today we celebrate the birth of the first Oak Ridge, the WWII Secret City: It was a government built, paid for, and generously subsidized city, built to last only until the end of the war. A town made as livable as wartime conditions would permit so as to keep the scientists, engineers, managers (and their spouses) reasonably contented. For instance, homes had extras like working fireplaces and screened-in porches, and the town had 163 miles of boardwalks to keep everyone out of the muddy mess the thinly graveled streets turned into with the briefest of showers.³

Little is left today of that bustling wartime temporary city of 75,000. The so attractively laid out roads and streets are still here, but the town we so fondly remember is now just "gone with the wind." Gone is the Army Engineers 7 wing, two-story "castle." Gone are the ninety, two story dormitories where 13,000 singles lived. Gone are the three big recreation halls where we danced and dated to the Big Band records. Gone, too, are most of the so convenient, nine neighborhood shopping centers and ten elementary schools, and all three of the biggest, chicken and fish serving cafeterias you ever saw. And happily, gone are all of our 5,000 trailers and 4,000 hutments for construction workers. All 3,000 Cemestros home are still here but I do not know of

any that looks like it did in 1944 – they have all been “improved” as have all the remaining “flattops” that now have gable roofs.

So you civic leaders of today can better understand why we historic preservationists treasure this precious Townsite (in 1945 renamed Jackson Square) with its nearby Chapel on the Hill, Guest House, and Jackson Square Apartments. This is the best place to bring visitors to give them a little feel for what the center of the historic Secret City looked like.

Now let’s move on to address what might be your second question -- Why does anyone want to celebrate our role as a major part of the Manhattan Project? To many of the modern generations who have even heard of the Manhattan Project, the term brings to mind only Hiroshima and Nagasaki. Are we commemorating or celebrating their bombing? Most certainly not -- not any more than the other awful killings of that terrible war, like Tokyo, Dresden, Bataan, and hundreds of others in the East and in Europe. No; I’d like to suggest four reasons for us today to celebrate Oak Ridge’s role in that remarkable Manhattan Project.

First, we can celebrate 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 that saw an unimaginable 54 million people killed by their fellowmen.⁴ Oak Ridge helped to stop it.

Second, we can celebrate the fact that stopping the war cancelled the plans the Allies had already made for an all-out invasion of Japan to begin November 1, 1945. The forecasts of casualties made by our military experts were appalling – 250,000 of our men (a quarter of a million!) and millions of Japanese soldiers and women and children.⁵ What a blessing to them and us that the Manhattan Project obviated that horror! Oak Ridge helped stop it.

Third, we can celebrate the fact that the Manhattan Project opened doors to the nuclear age. For the first time in history, scientists learned how to release and control the tremendous energy of the atomic nucleus. Nuclear energy is not something man invented; it is the energy of the universe, of nature and nature’s God. Nuclear energy is what makes this planet livable by heating up our sun. Each source of energy we have, like fire and electricity, even solar and hydro can be both a blessing and a curse; nuclear as well. But mankind has learned how to use them safely and not let fear paralyze us into not reaping their very real benefits.

Fourth, we need to celebrate the many legacies that have come from putting that wartime nuclear science and technology to work in the 65 years since the project. That know-how has given birth to highly beneficial applications: 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.

Celebrate Oak Ridge? Yea, verily. Our Secret City of 75,000 young patriots from all over the country were joined together here by one purpose – to do whatever their government asked them

to do to help win the war. Accomplishing things never before done anywhere in an unbelievably short time.

The renowned author Herman Wouk, back in the 1980s wrote two very entertaining and historically well researched books on WWII, *The Winds of War* that leads up to Pearl Harbor, and *War & Remembrance*, the story from then to the end of the war. His overarching theme for them both I feel is good to for us all to reflect on. It was this:

The beginning of the end of war – lies in remembrance

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 motivate each of us to do something more to bring the world lasting peace.

Happy birthday, Secret City!

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Notes:

¹ Throughout the WWII years, the name Oak Ridge was used only to refer to the town. The town, plus the area beyond it, where the plants were, was called Clinton Engineer Works. Just after the war, the CEW was dropped and the entire 90 square mile area was called Oak Ridge.

² Rhodes, Making the Atomic Bomb page 427; Robinson, The Oak Ridge Story, page 22.

³ Reports and Statistics Branch, Manhattan Project –Facts, Figures, and Statistics.

⁴ Gil Eliot, The Twentieth Century Book of the Dead. (Compilation of the author).

⁵ Ibid. Compared to the US total of 400,000 deaths during the war,