

Visionary foretold of Oak Ridge

John Hendrix wandered the woods for a good many days around the turn of the 20th century, and when he finally emerged, he said he had seen a light, a vision. That brought a few hoots, some laughter and just a whole lot of finger pointing at the old man.

Some 40-odd years later, the laughing stopped. Others had seen the light as well. It was called the atomic bomb and it had exploded over two cities in Japan.

Visionaries are seldom taken seriously in their own time. That was true of Hendrix. Most wrote him off as a coot whose hay loft was a half empty. But that didn't stop Hendrix. In truth, Hendrix cared little about being taken seriously. He went right on making his predictions until he died in 1903.

And when it came to his vision about Bear Creek Valley, he'd finally latched on to a good one. For the entire story you must go back before there was a Bear Creek Valley, back before there was an Anderson County.

When Collins Roberts arrived in the late 18th century in what is now Anderson County, he was with a group of long hunters, probably from Virginia and North Carolina, who were with Elisha Walden. They had been sent into the region looking for land.

Roberts stayed and was granted a big chunk of property for his efforts. He became a prominent merchant and prospered on his several thousand acres, which eventually became part of what is now Oak Ridge.

In a way this created a kind of norm for this part of East Tennessee. In the mid-to-late 18th and the opening of the 19th centuries, land companies arrived. Speculation was a way of life.

So in the 1940s, it seemed rather natural when the federal government moved into Bear Creek Valley and said it was taking over some 60,000 acres.

Now, back to Hendrix. In early 1900,

We drive right by them and never notice. The great, gray Tennessee Historical Commission markers tell us about our past, who we were, who was important, who stopped here long ago. On The School Page we will highlight a slice of history by focusing on some of the state historical markers in our area. Some will surprise you. All of them will enlighten you about the area's rich history and the people who walked this ground before us.

— Compiled by Fred Brown

Hendrix routinely ambled off into nearby forests. He would take lengthy trips to meditate and study.

One day, he said, he heard a great voice, "sharp as thunder." The voice told him that he was to go off for 40 days and 40 nights. He was to lay his head on the ground and sleep. It sounds biblical and probably was to Hendrix because he followed to the letter the vision's requirements.

He strayed off into the wilderness where he later reported that he had slept for 40 days and nights, a feat within itself. Upon waking, he revealed another vision. This spectacular scene, he said, was one of a great city on a hill, specifically on Black Oak Ridge.

Hendrix saw big engines gouging out large ditches. He saw chaos and noise. He said "the earth will shake." He said Bear Creek Valley would be filled with large buildings and factories that would help to win one of the greatest wars ever fought.

He said a railroad would run through Robertsville and then head off toward Scarboro and Wheat and would serve the great city.

Area farmers laughed and told the old man they would just keep on farming until his big city showed up. He completed all of this by saying, "I've seen it. It's coming." In 1942, the city arrived, and the farming stopped.

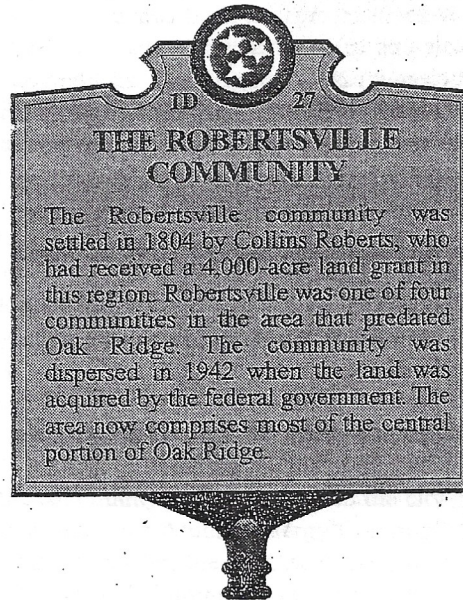
And on July 16, 1945, after observing the first test explosion of the atomic bomb in Alamogordo, N. Mex., Gen. Thomas Farrell wrote that the detonation lit "the whole country by a searing light. ... It was that beauty the great poets dream about but describe most poorly and inadequately."

With the exception of one poet and wanderer, perhaps, who had seen the chaos and noise and the shaking earth some four decades before.

The historical marker is on Robertsville Road at the Robertsville Middle School entrance.

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MARKING TIME



THE OAK RIDGE STORY

Oak Ridge was built under a cloak of great secrecy during World War II. A city and three manufacturing plants of unprecedented scope were constructed to develop a technology that ended the war.

Oak Ridge was created in 1942 as a major site of the "Manhattan Project," a massive wartime effort which produced the world's first atomic weapons. The 60,000-acre tract on which the town and its plants were built met military requirements for isolation, electric power, water, labor and accessibility to nearby highways and railroads. At that time, the area was populated by 3,000 persons residing in approximately 1,000 homes scattered throughout the communities of Scarboro, Wheat and Robertsville.

Scientists had learned by 1939 that uranium atoms could be split with the release of large amounts of energy. This process was called fission. Its use for military purposes was seriously discussed since development of an atomic weapon was considered vital to national security. Albert Einstein sent a letter to President Franklin D. Roosevelt expressing the views of several leading scientists and explaining the potential of such a weapon.

Early in 1942, it was determined that two methods could be used to produce necessary fissionable material--either plutonium 239 or the highly purified isotope uranium 235. Ultimately, three methods were brought to large-scale production. Oak Ridge played a major role in each of these processes. Three facilities, each identified by a code name, were built in the Oak Ridge complex, then called the Clinton Engineering Works after the nearby town of Clinton. This work was performed under the direction of the Manhattan District of the Corps of Engineers which had been formed in June 1942 to oversee the entire atomic weapons program.

The Y-12 Plant was built to separate the uranium 235 isotope from natural uranium in sufficient quantity and quality to produce the fissionable material for atomic weapons. It was the first to accomplish this goal. This plant utilized an electromagnetic process developed at the University of California at Berkeley and had the unusual distinction of using \$300 million worth of silver borrowed from the U.S. Treasury. The silver was used as a substitute for copper in the fabrication of equipment for the plant. Uranium separation by the electromagnetic process ended in 1947 at the Y-12 Plant. However, research & development and specialized production continue today at this facility which is still identified by its wartime code name.

Another enormous facility, the K-25 Plant, was built to separate uranium 235 by a more economical method. This plant was one of the largest scale-ups of laboratory equipment in history and involved process systems of unprecedented vacuum tightness and cleanliness. The original K-25 Plant covered more than 1,500 acres and was the forerunner of similar facilities in Paducah, Kentucky and Portsmouth, Ohio. Today, these plants are a source of enriched uranium which is used to fuel both military and civilian nuclear power reactors.

A third facility, X-10, was the site where a graphite-moderated nuclear reactor was constructed as a pilot facility for the larger plutonium production complex in Hanford, Washington. This reactor, later used to produce radioisotopes, was closed in 1963. It has been designated a National Historic Landmark and is open to the public. The X-10 area became the Oak Ridge National Laboratory (ORNL) in 1948. ORNL has gained worldwide recognition for its research in the basic sciences, energy systems, environmental technology and safety.

The city, which is approximately 10 miles in length and two miles wide, is located in a valley known as Black Oak Ridge. Reaching a peak World War II population of 75,000, it became the fifth largest city in Tennessee in 2-1/2 years. Original housing included trailers, dormitories, hutments and single family dwellings called cestos. The single family homes were constructed in a variety of floor plans and sizes designated by letters of the alphabet. These houses were located in the city's hills and valleys and most are still used today. Shopping centers, businesses and schools were located throughout the community and decentralized the city into separate neighborhoods.

The Manhattan District was transferred to the Atomic Energy Commission (AEC) on June 1, 1947. In 1949, Oak Ridge was opened to the public. Six years later, the AEC sold the government-owned houses and land to city residents. Since that time, additional homes and churches have been built. Oak Ridge was incorporated under a City Council-City Manager charter in May 1959. It currently has a population of 28,000 with federal offices, industrial facilities, a major medical center and approximately 800 private firms located here. The Oak Ridge school system has maintained a high ranking both within the state and the southeastern United States. There are many cultural activities including a symphony orchestra, civic ballet and community playhouse. A variety of recreational facilities are also available and they include Melton Hill Lake and numerous parks.
