
Behind The Gates: An Interracial Perspective of Black and White Youth Memories of Oak Ridge, Tennessee, 1950s–1970s

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Originally built as a military secret, Oak Ridge, Tennessee, was a secure community for government employees working to separate uranium for the atomic bomb that was dropped on Hiroshima, Japan, on 6 August 1945.¹ The town was established as part of the war effort in an isolated area in East Tennessee, slightly west of Knoxville. The vast majority of residents during the war were from outside Tennessee, a trend that continued for several decades after World War II. This article explores the experiences of youth in Oak Ridge from the 1950s through the 1970s. As the first generation growing up in Cold War era Oak Ridge, the memories of these individuals speak to the larger reality of the negotiations of race during that period. Based on interviews with blacks and whites who lived in the town, this article discusses their recollections of racial inequalities and social change in the creation of Oak Ridge's municipal policies.

From the beginning of the town's formation, blacks lived in a separate community known first as Gamble Valley, and later as Scarboro.² Racial lines were drawn between Scarboro and the rest of Oak Ridge, as in most southern communities at the time: black citizens had separate stores for shopping, their own community center, and usually did not have equal access to facilities elsewhere in Oak Ridge. African American Archie Lee recalled that when his family moved to the town in 1953 from Mississippi, Oak Ridge was "very much segregated still."³ Paul Sylvester Early White, a black employee at the national laboratory in Oak Ridge, noted that "segregation of public facilities was much like any other southern town," despite being touted as a "model city" by white inhabitants.⁴ As a young African American woman in Oak Ridge in the early 1940s, R. L. Ayers recalled that public accommodations in Oak Ridge were segregated, including water fountains and restrooms. The only restaurants open to blacks were in Gamble Valley. Gamble Valley was "not a part of Oak Ridge . . . until we started trying to integrate."⁵ While Oak Ridge was a federal project, a fact that should have precluded legal discrimination on the basis of race, there were clear indications of *de facto* segregation throughout the community.

During World War II, the requirement for Oak Ridge to have equal opportunities for blacks and whites necessitated the allocation of equal funds for separate facilities (including housing and schools). The equality of funding, however, must be questioned when considering the early history of housing for African Americans and

the schools in Oak Ridge. Several individuals, black and white, described a system of vast racial discrepancies when discussing the available housing during the 1940s and 1950s. Depending on the number of family members, whites were given the choice of houses of varying sizes, or, if they were single, they lived in dormitories. The most common form of housing for African Americans was the hutment, a square building crudely built in sixteen feet by sixteen feet dimensions. Each housed four individuals and had a small coal stove in the center and no windows.⁶

Oak Ridge's founders apparently only had enough money for one school system and decided that an integrated school system in Tennessee in the 1940s would threaten the secrecy of the Manhattan Project. Only one school system was built – for whites. When recruiting whites, officials told them to bring their families. However, when hiring blacks (largely from Mississippi, Georgia, and Alabama) officials stipulated that they be single with no children.⁷ R. L. Ayers recalled that “there was no such thing as family life” in the town during this period.⁸ Without African American families, officials reasoned, Oak Ridge would not need another school system. While there may not have been enough money allocated for two separate school systems, the reasoning that only a white school system was affordable seems too convenient an explanation. Considering how much money was being spent on Oak Ridge, it seems illogical to assume that a request for additional funds for education would have been dismissed.

Ironically, despite efforts by officials to keep Oak Ridge a community of white families, its postwar years saw the growth of black families.⁹ As the Scarboro community grew, black children were first bused eleven miles outside Oak Ridge to Clinton city schools and then twenty-three miles to Knoxville through 1946. This temporary solution was at best a half-hearted effort on the part of town officials to force the problem away. In 1950, responding to the problem of educating black children, several white residents organized a group of certified teachers and volunteer instructors for a newly formed Scarboro High School within Oak Ridge.¹⁰ Many of these volunteers were scientists from the national laboratory and their wives. These individuals taught black students in Scarboro for five years until Oak Ridge High School began to desegregate.¹¹

The Atomic Energy Commission (AEC) oversaw the management of Oak Ridge from 1952 until 1959, when the town was incorporated into a Tennessee municipality. Waldo Cohn, a white member of Oak Ridge's Town Council (the advisory board to the AEC), proposed as chairman to integrate Oak Ridge's schools in 1953, following President Eisenhower's order to desegregate military bases.¹² His actions led to “angry citizens” demanding a recall election for his appointment. After they succeeded in forcing him to step down from his position as chairman, Cohn did not run again.¹³ Although some

residents were willing to accept token integration when it was implemented in 1955, a vocal minority clearly opposed racial change. When interviewed in 1959 regarding the AEC's upcoming turnover of the city's municipality to residents and the complete integration of the high school, Acting City Manager L.B. Shallcross defended the limited integration when he said, "The Army built it [the town] that way. The Negroes moved over there and the white people moved over here. That's the way it's been."¹⁴

Token integration in Oak Ridge began in the fall of 1955, following the *Brown v. Board of Education* decision. The process continued until the town's newly created Board of Education closed the Scarboro schools at the start of the 1967–68 school year, signaling the achievement of full integration.¹⁵ Oak Ridge's white schools, controlled by the AEC at the time, were not considered public and were actually desegregated a year before any of the state's public schools. Although Tennessee's response to the *Brown* decision was mild by regional standards, there was open resistance to racial integration during the 1957 legislative session, which mirrored the "Massive Resistance" espoused by many southern politicians at the time. Legislators passed a manifesto of protest at the *Brown* decision, in addition to laws impeding the work of the NAACP in the state.¹⁶ There was violent resistance to school integration in nearby Clinton, which witnessed riots, small bombings, and the beating of a Baptist minister who had escorted twelve new black students into Clinton High School; the most serious incident was the bombing of the high school on 5 October 1958. The FBI investigated the event, but never found enough material to build a criminal case.¹⁷

Larry Gipson, a member of the first integrated class to complete all four years in Oak Ridge High School when he graduated in 1959, recalled that he (and the other black students) were "lucky [if they had] another black student in [their] class." It was difficult to make friends in his classes because he was not able to spend time with his classmates outside school; the local hangout for youth, the Wildcat Den, was not open to blacks, nor were many restaurants in the city, and he was not able to play sports as a member of the school teams nor join clubs.¹⁸ Willie Golden and Archie Lee also experienced discrimination in school activities in the mid-1960s and late-1950s respectively. Golden was the first black student to play basketball at the high school and the first black basketball captain for the team. By the time he graduated in 1966, he had become the first black basketball player to play in the Tennessee state basketball tournament. Although he was recognized within Oak Ridge for his athletic achievements, he still faced animosity from other regional teams that Oak Ridge played.¹⁹

Archie Lee "found some difficulty in the beginning" adjusting to the high school, but the principal's position that overt racism would not be tolerated comforted him. However, what "overt" racism actually constituted must have been defined narrowly,

given that Lee endured having spitballs thrown in his direction, students wearing jackets embroidered with the Confederate flag taunting him, and students placing tacks in his seat. Despite all this, Lee described himself as “fairly popular” in high school. Although he did not believe whites and blacks became friends while he was there, he felt his experience was a positive one overall. He told of a school trip he took with his otherwise all-white physics class to Huntsville, Alabama, to visit the Redstone Arsenal. On the way back from the arsenal, the class stopped at a restaurant in Alabama, but upon being told by the proprietors that they would not serve them as long as Lee was in their group, the entire class walked out to find another place to eat.²⁰

Just as the schools were going through this racial transition, similar changes were occurring throughout the town in restaurants, churches, and businesses. While the white residents of Oak Ridge tend to remember less than black community members, it is clear that significant changes took place during the 1950s, 1960s, and 1970s. African American community leader Nelson Stephens recalled that “Oak Ridge had some resistance but it wasn’t the level of evil” as in other places.²¹ In an apparently positive step towards equality, the Oak Ridge Community Relations Council, comprising a bi-racial group of citizens interested in improving race relations in the town, was founded in the early 1950s.²² One of the council’s white participants recalled the following about the group’s intentions: “We decided we’d better educate ourselves [and others about racial inequality] . . . surely if people knew what was going on, they would be agreeable to changing it.”²³ The council was involved in the final stage of the desegregation of the Oak Ridge schools in 1967. It reviewed the situation and fielded questions and concerns from residents about the proposed bussing system that would incorporate the last group of black students from Scarboro into the school system.²⁴

An Oak Ridge laundromat was the site of frequent racial protests in the 1950s. Nelson Stephens, whose wife Kathleen was the president of the local chapter of the Congress of Racial Equality (CORE), recalled one of the many incidents that took place there. Kathleen and her friends were washing their laundry when some white men entered and threw the women’s clothes out onto the street. The following evening, Nelson and members of the local CORE chapter joined Kathleen and the other women at the laundromat. Not long after, they were met by a group of white youths with guns who sought to intimidate them, but no violence resulted. CORE also protested at the laundromat when a local group of the Ku Klux Klan (KKK) went there to wash their robes. Nelson, Kathleen, and their CORE friends stood outside the laundromat praying and singing while the KKK members remained inside.²⁵

Restaurants and other businesses were common sites for protests during this period, and establishments in Oak Ridge were no different. One white Nashville

reporter of the period postulated that eating establishments often witnessed interracial activism because “there is something sacramental about eating together.”²⁶ The management of the popular Davis Brothers Cafeteria in downtown Oak Ridge refused to let blacks eat inside, yet it employed blacks as waiters.²⁷ In reaction to this position, many wealthier white families like that of Kitty Wilcox Soldano refused to eat there. For other white families, the decision not to patronize the restaurant was an economic one; they simply ate at home for the majority of meals because it was cheaper.²⁸ R. L. Ayers recalled going to the cafeteria once to make a statement about the restaurant’s well-known refusal to serve blacks, despite its willingness to employ them.²⁹ “Me and Minnie Thompson sat there and every three minutes the waitress would pass by and say is everything alright. They did serve us, but I was afraid [for our safety].”³⁰ Dave Eissenberg worked at the national laboratory from 1952 to 1991, and he remembered demonstrations by whites in front of the restaurant urging its integration. “After integration, I don’t remember a lot of blacks eating in Davis Brothers, but the point was made that they could.”³¹ Other restaurants had similar service policies. Nelson Stephens remembered going inside the Snow White restaurant for a burger with a British friend; they were dragged outside and refused service.³² Ayers remembered going into the Snow White for service, but was served only after going to the back door at the proprietor’s insistence.³³

Archie Lee participated in some of the earliest sit-ins in Oak Ridge in the early 1950s by sitting at the counter of a local ice cream shop. It was a popular hangout for white youth in the town, but blacks were not allowed to eat there (they were served as long as they took the food outside). Lee recalled how he and friends would sit at the counter until the last possible minute, before running out when police arrived to arrest them.³⁴ Nancy Smith, a white graduate of the high school in 1968, described a similar incident from the mid-fifties. Entering a local ice cream shop, she saw a black girl about her age sitting at the counter alone, not being served. Smith, although quite young at this time, recognized the inequality of the situation, and sat down next to the girl and ordered them both ice cream floats.³⁵

Dave Eissenberg remembered an effort by a group of barbers in Oak Ridge to refuse service to blacks and how citizens defused this plan. The barbers claimed not to have the knowledge to cut the hair of blacks; a group of white citizens saw this as an attempt to hide their refusal to serve blacks under a flimsy pretense. To “call the barbers’ bluff,” the group found a barber from outside Oak Ridge and convinced him to move to the town and work near one of the major shopping centers downtown, Jackson Square. They proceeded to sell coupons throughout the community redeemable for one haircut at this man’s barbershop. This scheme convinced white barbers

to remember how to cut African American hair!³⁶ Demonstrating a strong opposition to racial exclusion by white community members, the barbershop initiative clearly improved race relations in the town.

The Skyway Drive-In Movie Theatre was a popular spot for white families to spend evenings. Like many businesses in Oak Ridge, it was segregated in the late 1950s. Nelson Stephens remembered how, as a member of CORE, he and others would often go to the theater and wait simultaneously in both ticket lines to hold up white patrons. Once when they decided to do this after a high school basketball game, the traffic from the theater and the nearby high school was so congested that the police were called in to help disperse the traffic jam.³⁷ Another African American, Kelly King, recounted that he and his friends would often watch the movies on the hill behind the Skyway Drive-In, because they were denied admission based on their race. Once, “a group of us were brave and walked in the back of the theater, got a box of popcorn and walked out. We had several people looking at us and we ran. We were pretty courageous that [day].”³⁸

Mozelle Bell, who arrived in Oak Ridge in 1948 as an adult, recalled an incident at the bowling alley in Grove Center, a shopping center in town. In the early 1950s, “a big dispute” occurred when a biracial team of women who worked together at the national laboratory attempted to enter the league. Bell was a white participant in one of the member teams. When the biracial team was denied the right to play, Bell refused to play in her team that year.³⁹ In the 1950s Nelson Stephens joined the bowling league in the Oak Ridge Institute of Nuclear Studies where he worked, and when he was told by some of his white colleagues that he would not be allowed to bowl, the AEC stepped in and cut the funding they normally provided for the institute’s league, thereby supporting Nelson’s right to participate in company events as an African American.⁴⁰

The differences perceived by residents often fell along not race but class lines. Some white interviewees described the subject of race as nonexistent. One stated that because students were “divided by academic achievement” in classes, “they [black students] were just sort of invisible to us.”⁴¹ Kitty Wilcox Soldano described her time growing up white in Oak Ridge as one in a community having “no ‘old money’, no ‘new wealth’.”⁴² Similarly, Dave Miller recalled his experience as a white youth as having “very little difference” between children in 1950s Oak Ridge. “Every adult in Oak Ridge that wanted a job had one. Every kid had lunch money, a bicycle, and clean clothes. Looking around the room at school, you couldn’t tell the Lab Director’s child from the soda jerk’s kid. *And it didn’t matter.*”⁴³ For Miller, differences in social class did not exist between whites, but he focused on equalities he saw in material possessions and jobs.

Blacks (and a few whites) had few illusions about the difference in job prospects according to race. Even though Elizabeth Peelle was white, she saw blacks working mostly as janitors and maids in the Oak Ridge Community Relations Council.⁴⁴ Archie Lee stated that in Oak Ridge during the early 1950s, blacks “either dug a ditch or swept a floor.”⁴⁵ R. L. Ayers came to Oak Ridge in 1943 after working as a soda jerk in Mississippi as a fourteen-year-old. When she heard about the opportunities for blacks in Oak Ridge, she and a cousin quickly left for the town because “you could make money here . . . ‘cause see, we wasn’t making any money where we was living.” She found employment at the laboratory washing dishes in the cafeteria and working in the infirmary.⁴⁶ Ayers’ experience of obtaining employment in Oak Ridge reveals better job prospects for blacks compared with other areas of the South, but employment opportunities were still far from equal.

While Oak Ridge was certainly distinct from other southern towns during the period, it had a difficult path to racial equality that, in many respects, mirrors the changes occurring in cities throughout the region. Although neighborhoods in Oak Ridge remained segregated, shopping districts and downtown areas were seen as opportune venues for racial protest to gain a foothold for change in the post Jim Crow era. The town *was* unusual for both the size of white establishment support for efforts for racial equality and the early instances of sit-ins in the community. Nevertheless, as was the case in countless other communities across the nation, efforts to change the racial status quo were met with resistance. Civil rights activity, although central to the memories of black youth in the town, was widely unrecognized and unacknowledged by white interviewees. These separate recollections indicate that the civil rights experience has yet to be fully reconciled in Oak Ridge, as it does in many communities in the United States.

NOTES

1. Charles W. Johnson and Charles O. Jackson, *City Behind A Fence: Oak Ridge, Tennessee, 1942–1946* (Knoxville, TN: University of Tennessee Press, 1981).
2. R. L. Ayers stated that the area acquired the name “Gamble Valley” because the Atomic Energy Commission purchased the land from a local man named Johnny Gamble. R. L. Ayers, interview by Keith McDaniel, Center for Oak Ridge Oral History, Oak Ridge Public Library, 13 March 2012.
3. Archie Lee, telephone interview with the author, 29 December 2011.
4. Paul Sylvester Early White, oral history with Rose Weaver, 5 January 2010. As these observations were made by African Americans relating to racial segregation, it should be noted that they were not reinforced in this case study with responses from white residents describing similar restrictions for black residents. That said, this only points to oral history methodology and does not imply that these recollections are incorrect. This work endeavors to use memories from participants to delve into the experiences of individuals in Oak Ridge, not to use the accounts to confirm observations or to certify assumptions.

5. Ayers, interviewed by Rose Weaver, winter 2006. In an earlier interview, Mrs. Ayers said that her name "R. L." came from her mother wanting a boy whom she would name "Robert Lee." When R. L. arrived as a girl, they simply shortened her name to initials. R. L. Ayers, interviewed by Mitch Jerald, National Educational Technology Solutions LLC (NETS), Center for Oak Ridge Oral History, Oak Ridge Public Library, 21 September 2005.
6. Elizabeth Peelle, interviewed by Keith McDaniel, Center for Oak Ridge Oral History, Oak Ridge Public Library, 23 February 2010.
7. Will Minter, telephone interview with the author, 30 December 2011. Peelle, interview. This was confirmed in McDaniel's interview of Mrs. Ayers and his interview of Elizabeth Peelle. An examination of the AEC archives relating to Oak Ridge in Atlanta, Georgia would very likely be able to corroborate this information.
8. Ayers, interview by McDaniel.
9. Minter, interview. The town transitioned from being run by the Army Corps of Engineers to leadership by the Atomic Energy Commission in 1952.
10. These residents were led by Robert and Ida Coveyou.
11. Michael Coveyou, email to the author, November 28, 2011.
12. *Carson v. Roane-Anderson Co.* 342 U.S. 232 (1952). Johnson and Jackson. *City Behind A Fence*. Ken Morrell, "The Equation at Oak Ridge," *Southern Education Report*, Vol. 3, No. 7, March 1968: 15. 1 September 1999, Nick Ravo, "Obituary of Dr. Waldo Cohn," *The New York Times*.
13. Dave Eissenberg, email to the author, 17 November 2011.
14. Tom Flake, "Federal Control To End At Oak Ridge," *Southern School News*, Vol. 6, No. 1, July 195: 1. For more information on the history of early Oak Ridge schools, see Ray D. Smith's "Historically Speaking" column in *The Oak Ridger*, particularly his articles published 4 and 21 November 2006 and 15 September 2009. The series in 2006 was entitled, "Education in Oak Ridge- Pre-Oak Ridge and Early-Oak Ridge Schools, Parts 1 and 2" and the article from 2009 was entitled, "Oak Ridge schools—a rich history, a promising future."
15. Morrell, "The Equation at Oak Ridge."
16. *Ibid.*, 143–44.
17. 4 October 1988, "School Bombing 30 Years Ago Helped Town Heal Wounds," *New York Times*.
18. Larry Gipson, telephone interview with the author, 28 December 2011.
19. Lee, interview. Willie Golden, telephone interview with the author, 28 December 2011.
20. Lee, interview. The Redstone Arsenal in Huntsville, Alabama made Huntsville a southern town with large amounts of federal funding and influence during this period, like Oak Ridge.
21. Nelson Stephens, oral history with the author, 29 December 2011.
22. Ayers, oral history by Weaver. Michael Coveyou, Facebook correspondence with the author, 11 January 2012.
23. Peelle, interview.
24. Morrell, "The Equation at Oak Ridge," 15

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25. Stephens, oral history.
 26. Reporter in Kelly Miller Smith, "Chapter 1: Shame and Glory," in "The Pursuit of a Dream," VUSC-KMS, Box 28, Folder 7, 18.
 27. Eleanor Hubbell Coffey, email to the author, 14 November 2011.
 28. Kitty Wilcox Soldano, email to the author, 29 April 2011. Nancy Craven Fears, email to the author, 28 November 2011.
 29. Kelly King, interview with Rose Weaver, summer 2009.
 30. Ayers, oral history by Weaver.
 31. Eissenberg, email.
 32. Stephens, oral history.
 33. Ayers, oral history by Weaver.
 34. Lee, interview. Other restaurants in Oak Ridge that did not serve blacks during this time were the Oak Terrace Dining Hall, run by Roscoe Stevens in Grove Center, and McCrory's, a national five and dime store chain. Peelle, interview.
 35. Nancy Smith, telephone interview with the author, October 2011. While Lee and Smith did not recall the name of the ice cream shops where these sit-ins occurred, it is possible that they took place at the same shop.
 36. Eissenberg, email.
 37. Stephens, oral history.
 38. King, interview.
 39. Mozelle Bell, email to the author, 12 December 2011.
 40. Stephens, oral history.
 41. Jane Ann Jett Wheeler (quoted), Gage Frye Woods, Anne Ergen DeLozier, Tollie Moore DeGraw, Ellen Gardiner Morgan, and Viola Ergen, interview with the author, 12 November 2011. For more on the invisibility of race, see Wei Sun, *Minority Invisibility: An Asian American Experience* (University Press of America, 2007) and Ralph Ellison, *Invisible Man* (multiple editions).
 42. Kitty Wilcox Soldano, email to the author, 5 April 2011.
 43. Dave Miller, email to the author, 16 March 2011.
 44. Peelle, interview.
 45. Lee, interview.
 46. Ayers, interview by McDaniel.