

## The Oak Ridge Story

### Secrets 1942-1949

Oak Ridge, a city framed by the foothills of the Appalachian Mountains, was built under a cloak of great secrecy during World War II. When the Japanese attacked Pearl Harbor on December 7, 1941, the city of Oak Ridge did not even exist. Instead, century-old family farms and small Appalachian communities occupied the area. But after the attack on Pearl Harbor, the U.S. was forced to enter the war.

In an effort to bring an end to the war, three cities were chosen to be part of the top-secret "Manhattan Project" which would produce the world's first atomic weapons. Those cities were Los Alamos, New Mexico; Hanford, Washington; and Oak Ridge, Tennessee, which was built specifically for the war effort.

In 1942, the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers bought 59,000 acres of rural farm land. A city and three manufacturing plants of unprecedented scope were constructed to develop a technology that ended the war. The land on which the town and plants were built met military requirements for isolation, electric power from the Tennessee Valley Authority's Norris Dam, water, labor and accessibility to nearby highways and railroads.

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, which at the time was called the Clinton Engineering Works (C.E.W.) 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 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 two and a half years.

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 close to 28,000 with federal offices, industrial facilities, a major medical center and approximately 800 private firms. 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, including Melton Hill Lake and numerous parks.

