

Security in Early Oak Ridge

"Behind the Fence." That's how Oak Ridge came to be known in its early years. Born in late 1942 with most of its construction taking place in 1943, Oak Ridge didn't open its gates to the public until 1949, the same year it was officially placed on the state and national maps.

During the War, the word "uranium" was classified for obvious reasons. In fact, the few people who knew that uranium was even being enriched in Oak Ridge were told to call it by a fake name, "Tubaloy," whenever they had the need to use it.



The atomic number for uranium is "92." A majority of the buildings at the Y-12 Plant are named numerically beginning with those first two numbers, i.e. 9201-2, 9214, etc. When General Groves arrived in Oak Ridge, he was very displeased that this number was being used so openly.

He was also upset that the K-25 Plant had a tell-tell name. The 25 was taken from the Uranium 235 that was being produced in the plant, and the K stood for Kellogg, the subsidiary of M.W. Kellogg Corporation that was engineering and constructing the building. However, to take any action would have called more attention to the numbers and letters than desired and would have caused more harm just letting the practice continue.

Stories abound in Oak Ridge about the amount of energy involved in keeping such a huge secret. One of them revolves around the word uranium. It seems that when the atomic bomb was dropped on Hiroshima, one man working in a laboratory at Y-12 was seen running up and down the hallway outside his office yelling, "Uranium, uranium!" because he could then say the word opening, as his wife had just called him to say the newspapers had reported that the uranium for Little Boy came from Oak Ridge.

A Post-War Security Story: "Katy's Kitchen"

The name of the project was originally "Installation Dog." It began in 1947, and its purpose was to construct Building 9214, a structure specially designed and camouflaged to look like a farm barn with a silo. The motivation for the unique design was to create a better, more hidden location for the storage of the Uranium 235, the fuel for the atomic bomb which was being enriched in Oak Ridge. Initially, the Uranium 235 was stored in Building 9213 where it was not hidden in any fashion. The importance of this material required all precautions be taken, so an alternative plan was set into motion.

The "silo" on Building 9214 was actually a guard tower. An underground vault safely concealed the Uranium 235, and the barn-like structure was added to the building to make it look like any other barn set within the rural landscape. The enriched uranium was stored in Building 9214 from May 1948 to May 1949.

In 1957, a woman named Kathryn Odom, a division secretary, often had lunch in Building 9214, and the facility was nicknamed "Katy's Kitchen."

Today:

In some small ways, Oak Ridge is still behind the fence. The Department of Energy Reservation, which includes the BWXT Y-12 National Security Complex and the Oak Ridge National Laboratory, was once again placed under heightened security following the terror attacks on September 11, 2001.

However, Oak Ridge as a whole is open to the public and very welcoming and eager to share its incredible story by means of its intriguing heritage sites, fascinating Manhattan Project veterans (many of whom can be found volunteering at the Oak Ridge Welcome Center), and wonderful attractions.

Year-round, an audio driving tour is available at the American Museum of Science & Energy's Discovery Shop. This tour takes visitors on a journey through the Secret City from yesterday to today, giving insight into the historic sites of the Manhattan Project up to today's venues like the city's Melton Hill Lake rowing course, site of the 2007 NCAA Women's Rowing Championship Regatta and the 2007 Master's Rowing Regatta. Maps and brochures are also available at the Oak Ridge Welcome Center.

During the summer months, a special guided bus tour provided by the Department of Energy takes visitors back behind the fence so they can visit some of the original Manhattan Project Sites that are now closed to the general public. Please contact the Oak Ridge Welcome Center for dates and times.

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