

ORAL HISTORY INTERVIEW
WITH
HILARY PARKER

12 SEPTEMBER 1995
MURFREESBORO, TENNESSEE

INTERVIEWED BY REGINA FORSYTHE
FOR THE Q. M. SMITH ORAL HISTORY PROJECT
INTERVIEW #QMS.094

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Albert Gore". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style.

ALBERT GORE RESEARCH CENTER

MIDDLE TENNESSEE STATE UNIVERSITY

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ABSTRACT



**ORAL HISTORY INTERVIEW WITH
HILLARY PARKER**

Q. M. SMITH ORAL HISTORY PROJECT

INTERVIEW #QMS.094

FORSYTHE: This tape is part of the QM Smith collection designated as QMS.1995.94. This is Regina Forsythe I am interviewing Mr. Hillary Parker, today is Tuesday September 12th 1995. The interview is being conducted in the home of his sister at 1417 East Castle Street, Murfreesboro, Tennessee. The tape of this interview along with a transcription of the interview will become part of the Quinton Miller Smith collection and will be available to the public. Future researchers may include portions of this interview in their publications. Is that all right with you Mr. Parker?

PARKER: Yes

FORSYTHE: Ok can you talk about Oak Ridge?

PARKER: In the early 1940's, we were in the second World War and were involved pretty deeply with the European nations, and Japan in the Pacific. Dr. Albert Einstein called President Franklin D. Roosevelt and told him that with the proper application and enough money from Congress that an atom bomb could be developed with the right perseverance on the project. It is said that FDR got busy right away and called all his scientist and talk to them about is and it was agreed that they would make an effort, especially after this experiment under the stadium in Chicago. The first proof of atom smashing was done under the stadium steps at the University of Chicago. There was proof that nuclear fission was possible. I am not a scientist enough to know what all takes place but that is the term used when they were talking about it. A place to be selected was the next big job and a number of places were thought about, it would probably have been out West in some of those sparsely inhabited places. But is had to be near a place where there was plenty of electrical supply and they thought of TVA and its electrical potential. Tennessee was finally selected because of the source of electric power. I remember a man came walking across my farm where I was sewing a crop of cain and he said "You maybe able to sew this but you may not be able to reap it." Then he began to tell me the plans of looking for a place, but fortunately my area was not selected. This was out in the Warren and Cannon county area Tennessee. The one that was selected was Anderson county in what they called Black Oak Ridge, well later they left off Black and just called it Oak Ridge. They gave it the name of the Manhattan engineering development project. An Army general by the name of Leslie Grose was selected to be the kingpen of the project. He decided that one of the best ways to get speed going on this project was to get three companies working on the same project at the same time. The three companies selected was the Union Carbide company, the DuPont company, one

called the Tennessee Eastman at that time, it had a different name now. Those three companies were given an area in the sixty six thousand acres that we were put upon in the Oakridge area. DuPont used the electro-magnetic process, Union Carbide was to use the diffusion process. Those three companies set to work at the task. The gaseous diffusion process used by Union Carbide company was the one that went out and was successful in producing Uranium 235. Much of the ore was brought from Canada, as well as other places where you find uranium in its natural state. Why was I connected with it, I am not a scientist. I was in the education business, at the time I was working with Austin Peay University in Clarksville. One day when I was down at the Peabody placement office, the director of the office said that there was a man that wanted to see me at such and such of time and I made an appointment but I said "I don't need to speak to him I am happy where I am now." But a Dr. AH Blakenship who had gone to Columbia University in New York but whose home was in the state of Washington, was the man who came to interview me and he had been appointed superintendent by General Gose. He had gone to Columbia University so he could be the godfather of the educational system. He had kind of a Pide Pimper personality, and there was something about him so we agreed to follow him to look into it. Upon arriving I learned that we were to select teachers from all over the country as to not take too many from one area. That was a time when teachers were scarce and hard to employ. We had teachers from Homestead Florida to Bootbay Maine, and from Empire Valley California to Minnesota. Our principals were selected from a wide area to. For two reasons, one was that the population would be from all over and we thought it would be better if we had people who understood the culture and background then we were all read the riot act if we spoke out of turn, no talking about what you do no discussion, as far as I know we didn't have any trouble in the school system except on one occasion after we had set up the school system, which is a long story about setting it up. We were preparing for about eight thousand children that first year and had set up a number of schools and they were in the process of being built along with the other installations homes and offices stores and so on, for the population but on one occasion after we had started school at this super secretive place, one biology professor said to his students one day, "I can tell you what they are doing here, they are going to split the atom." In the that class was the son of the FBI man given in charge to maintain the secrecy of the place. He immediately told his father and his father came down, DelGenio was his name, Captain DelGenio came to us and said "you have to get rid of this man, he has got to go, and you can't tell him why." Well he was a very independent East Tennessean man, unmarried, and he asked us why and we said "we can't tell you, we can give you a higher paying job." Hell no he wouldn't be insulted that way, we wouldn't tell him what we were doing, so he resigned right off and went to Louisiana to teach.

FORSYTHE: What was his name?

PARKER: I don't remember his name at the moment. I have information on the Oakridge teachers who were with us but I don't have it where I could reach it.

FORSYTHE: Captain DelGenio, How do you spell that?

PARKER: D-e-l-G-i-n-o. That was the toughest job I ever had was to take part in dismissing a man. I was in administration and had the task of having to do it. The assistant always get the job to do for the boss. Now one of the most unusual and delightful experiences of education I have had in my forty six years being in the school business before retiring, I actually resigned from there after spending twelve years in Oak Ridge, before I came to teach at the College level here in Murfreesboro the last fifteen years of my experience.

FORSYTHE: When Mr. Blakenship came and talked to you what did he say your duties would be.

PARKER: He wanted me to be on the administration staff, he wanted me to be principal or superintendent or something like that.

FORSYTHE: There were no schools in existence when he came to talk to you?

PARKER: No

FORSYTHE: So you were there from the beginning?

PARKER: Yes

FORSYTHE: When did he come talk to you, do you remember the date?

PARKER: IT was about the first of September, 1943.

FORSYTHE: That is when you immediately started working for him?

PARKER: I started to work the 1st of October, of '43.

FORSYTHE: You and your family moved out there?

PARKER: Yes

FORSYTHE: What did your wife think about this?

PARKER: She didn't have much to say about it only that she was willing to go along. We had two children, one a kindergardener and the other a second grader. They were in the schools up there, the bot in the first grade was put in the elm grove school because it was the first to open and all children had to go there for the opening and then next school near us was the Cedar Hill School and finally another school opened ever nearer our place, the pine valley school and we changed to that and I remember Bob saying "Daddy if I have to change anymore I just want to drop out

of school." He was having to get acquainted with a new teacher all the time. One of his teachers was from Oklahoma and the next was from some place up East, and you can see how it was hard for teachers and children both to adjust to a smooth way of life again. One teacher who had come for the adventure of it as well as we were able to pay with the supplement that the Federal government gave, doubled the salary of nearly every other school system, otherwise we could not have been able to recruit that many teachers so fast. One of them was a professional teacher, she had taught in the city schools of New York City all her life, I don't suppose her feet had ever touched real soil, there was always a sidewalk or pavement under them. But she had the spirit of sportsmanship to come down, she was one of the best teachers we had ever had in an elementary school because she would not go through a school year without visiting every home, not only visit with the mothers but with the fathers would be home to so she made a point be there at supper time when the father would be home. She was an unusual person but she had a lot of sportsmanship and a spirit of adventure to which carried her along, otherwise she could not have withstood all the inconveniences we had at Oak Ridge. No sidewalks and mostly gravel roads, at first. That is pretty hard if you are walking with ladies heels.

FORSYTHE: What did your wife think about that?

PARKER: She didn't have to walk around much, she didn't teach any up there, she had taught a few years but not up there. In a little while we had board sidewalks, so you didn't have to go to Atlantic city to see a boardwalk you could go to Oak Ridge.

FORSYTHE: What were the name of the schools that were there?

PARKER: That was an interesting little item there. The Army officers there wanted us to name the schools for their wives, the Florence Johnson school and so on. But our superintendent said that in lew of naming the schools after people he thought it would be better to name the schools after the local geography like Oakridge, they were names Elmgrove, Pine Valley, Cedar Hill, Lyndon, the name of a tree and that is how we named the schools. Of course the high school just got Oakridge High School, and Oakridge junior high school. We had once a month a special day for teachers to get together and exchange their experiences with each other about their methods of handling difficult situations and t hat became one of the strength to our schools, was that there was so much communication between the teachers and staff about the job at had about what we do and how to solve this problem or that problem. One incident I recall as being a satisfactory one was about when the war was over we had visitors coming from Japan and Germany here from their minister of education who had sent them, German and Japanese teachers it seemed a little far fetched to think we could teach them democracy but this time we had about three our four German teachers and I was taking them personally thorough this Lyndon school, with about one thousand elementary children and we were in second grade and the German teacher heard something about democracy and she said "they are putting on a show for us, these children

don't know anything about democracy." I said "well let's ask this little girl." and she said "could you tell me about what democracy means to you?" and the little girl in her flat southern droll said "well when have a project we vote on it to see whether we do it or not and then after the vote we have to help do it whether we want to or not." I don't think anyone could have presented an example that you could have shot a hole through any more than that one. You have to help do it whether you want to or not.

FORSYTHE: What did the German teacher say after that?

PARKER: I don't think she said anything, she seemed satisfied anyway.

FORSYTHE: This is a continuation of the interview of Mr. Hilary Parker on Tuesday September 12, 1995. What did Oakridge look like when you and your family arrive.

PARKER: IT was a sea of muddy streets, they all hadn't been paved yet and all the wooden boardwalks hadn't been built yet, so it was mud, mud, mud, that was the word, mud. Houses were going up fast, there were two types of houses some were prefabricated and the others were built out of what they called cemesto board which was a substitute for lumber and if you can imagine an if you can imagine an ice cream sandwich, with either side of the sandwich being cemesto board, a kind of stiffend cement, and the inside part of the sandwhich, made out of sugar cain waste, ground up pulverized pulp fiber and it made very good insulation for heat and cold and those boards were used to make the sides to our houses and they were made in such a way that the inside finish and the outside finish were the same, it is a wonder that more of us didn't get cancer from the asbestos that they put into it so it would be fire proof, we didn't know about asbestos being dangerous. I don't know about it but some people think that Oakridge has a higher incident of cancer than other regions, thank goodness I made it 89 years with out it.

FORSYTHE: What kind of house did you live in?

PARKER: In Oakridge, of the cemesto houses there were three types depending on the size of the family, they were called the "A, B, C, and D" houses, D being the largest. We lived in a C house and it was furnished with a coal burning furnace and refrigerator, electric stove and running water. We paid a flat rent for these houses depending on the sizes I believe our rent was \$80 a month and that included electricity and water, that would be nice now to get a one room apartment for that. The houses were built along the hillsides of Black Oak Ridge, naturally as you can imagine the streets had to be in a terrace formation to keep them fairly level and the street at the lower part of the valley was called the Oakridge turnpike, that ran from east to wet of the whole 66,000 acres and the top part was called outer drive, the highest one, then the streets running along the hillside from Oakridge turnpike to Outer drive were called starting from the East, Alabama street, and

they ran alphabetically, the next was Florida and then Georgia, Michigan, I left out Kentucky, Pennsylvania and so on, then the little streets that ran off of Georgia would begin with "G's", it might be Gage lane and you knew how to get to Gage lane because it was off of Georgia, you knew how to get to Moyland lane because it was off Michigan, I have a niece still living on Moylon lane in Oakridge although it doesn't look like the same Oakridge now all the houses have been remodeled on the outside and made to look differently but they left as many trees as possible but the odd thing about is was that when they were building the houses they would put the foundation down and then the crew would come and up the sides and the next crew would come and but up the screen doors and it would be odd to see a house with screen doors swinging and no roof on it yet, the roofers were a little behind and hadn't got the roof on the houses on that block and they were built in blocks, the first thousand, the second thousand, the third thousand and so on of houses, we obtained our house in the second thousand.

FORSYTHE: Was it easy to get in and out of Oakridge to go other places?

PARKER: Well some people thought it was a hinderance but we never thought of it to much we had to have a wear badge wherever we went with our picture on it and a number and so we couldn't get in or out of the place without checking with the guard at the gate, there were two or three main gates that we called the Ellis gate, and the Gallahard gate and the Oliver Springs gate, the Edgemoor gate and so on, according to the names of the local areas there. You certainly could ration your guests or your company by this system here they couldn't come to see you unless you first sent them a pass to get in we didn't have to much trouble and we were some distance and not too many relatives were willing to make the trip gas was rationed so it was hard to get gasoline they gave us stickers to put on the inside of out automobile that said "is this trip really necessary?" that made us conscious, and we also had rationing stamps for a number of other articles like shoes, leather shoes.

FORSYTHE: Looks like you would wear out shoes with all that mud.

PARKER: Yes we had to be careful. Sugar, meats and a few other foods were rationed.

FORSYTHE: Did the stores in Oakridge supply what you needed or did you have to go elsewhere.

PARKER: Yes there were three or four well stocked groceries there as far as clothing you had to go to Knoxville to get clothing or furniture or anything like that at first, later those could be bought in Oakridge in limited number of stores like furniture and furnishings for the home.

FORSYTHE: How did the locals treat you when you went out?

PARKER: Well they wanted to know how we were doing and if we had anything they could catch like contamination and radiation. There were a lot of jokes. There were two or three rumors that were spread around I suppose purposely to keep people from wondering what was going on there. One was that we were making white skins, because Mrs. Eleanor Roosevelt wanted to give all the Afro-Americans white skins she was such a crusader for the rights of Afro-Americans. There were some other jokes I don't remember one right off hand. A few people had disastrous experiences coming there, there were two teachers from Texas who came to apply and they were stopped at the gate because they had no passes, no one had sent them a pass, so the guard called up to the school administration offices and I was sent down to meet them. They had been detained and harassed pretty well and asked some pretty stupid questions and they phoned their congressman about it and as an administrator in the school system, I had a congressman or two to call me about what had happened to one of his voting constituents one was Senator Dirks from Illinois, he is Howard Baker's father-in-law, Howard Baker was a congressman from Tennessee, and when I told him this story he said "OK" [imitates]. What had happened was that some person was pretty obnoxious in that particular school and the rest of the faculty says "if this faculty member stays then we all go." so we had to move that faculty member to another job that payed the same money or maybe even more.

FORSYTHE: What was this faculty member doing that was so aggravating?

PARKER: I don't remember they just detested her. I don't think it had anything to do with her ABC's it was just personality quirks.

FORSYTHE: Did you have any idea what was going on when it was still a secret?

PARKER: No I had no idea, just that it had to do with winning the war it was a war effort, that was all we knew.

FORSYTHE: Did it bother you being fenced off away from everybody else?

PARKER: No not particularly I understood the reason for it. It was the best kept secret the United States ever had, I don't think they will ever have one kept like that.

FORSYTHE: After the bomb was dropped in Japan, how soon did you know that it was through your efforts?

PARKER: Immediately

FORSYTHE: What was the reactions going on

PARKER: Celebration, hip-hip -hooray, everyone was in the streets dancing and they didn't care who they were dancing with. Time magazine had a picture of a sailor hugging a girl and kissing her when the war was over. We were doing the same

thing in Oakridge. I happened to be coming to Nashville the next day and they were celebrating in the streets there. It was such a relief to know that the war was over because it was getting real dirty, every once in awhile there would be a letter that said "the government regrets to inform you of the death of your husband or your son" I had to hand out a few of those. The post office was flooded with mail half addressed and so on and they would try to pick up help and on Saturday's and during the Christmas holidays teachers would help at the post office trying to take out barrels of unsorted mail, that is when I had the unpleasant job of handing out some of those yellow telegram things.

FORSYTHE: Were they given priority since they were yellow and you could tell what they were?

PARKER: Yes I think they were.

FORSYTHE: Was there a curfew?

PARKER: I don't remember a curfew, but maybe there was. I guess since a curfew would effect our family so little that I didn't pay much attention.

FORSYTHE: Was the town well lit at night?

PARKER: No not to well, the streets ran through the woods and that would cut down any light that you might otherwise have had.

FORSYTHE: Was there a lot of crime?

PARKER: No. there was very little crime, there were police men all around and besides the population was screened that got in there anyway and a lot of those kind of people who would do crime would be screened out before they could do it.

FORSYTHE: So before you got a job there you were investigated

PARKER: Oh yes the FBI was investigating everybody all the time, they investigates my family about the Jones's that lived next to us and then they would go the Jones's about us, what were we doing, activities that seemed questionable.

FORSYTHE: That didn't bother you?

PARKER: No, we knew the purpose of it. We were spied on all right.

FORSYTHE: Did you think Oak Ridge was going to be a permanent city when you moved there?

PARKER: We had no idea what might happen, the department of energy was doing all the work and some of the factories were to continue production they were making

radio isotopes, and we knew that there would be people there. When I left Oak Ridge I didn't leave because the job had lessened any we had as many people as we had ever had, it was the fact that I wanted to get back to a normal situation, back here in middle Tennessee and at the college at MTSU.

FORSYTHE: What was the culture like in Oak Ridge?

PARKER: Well we had a great deal of activities to satisfy people, for example we had a better symphony orchestra than the city of Knoxville had, one reason was that a lot of those well trained scientists were also well trained musicians and they could play in an orchestra, and act, we had a little theatre there that was second to none, in Tennessee at the time. We had a lot of productions, some of Thornton Wilder's plays and I had a lot of fun going to the theatre, the live theatre not just the movies, we did have two or three movie houses which children spent a lot of time in the movie houses probably more so than other times because there was not much else to do around their place at the time I don't ever remember seeing a drunk man there wobbling on the streets. They had a public library there that was pretty good, it was well used. There were a lot of plays put on by the high school, I remember we put on Carousel way back when Rogers and Hammerstein first put it out, we had to get permission to do it and the director, I can't think of his name but he was a music man a vocal man, didn't like the way some of it was going and he complained to me and I investigated it the best I could. He called Mr. Rodgers in New York and I talked to Mr. Rodgers and he said we could continue our license because we were about to lose it. It just so happens that there was a tragedy that happened. The girl who had the lead in the scene "you will never walk alone" you know "hold your head up high", just a day or two before that was to be put on at our local high school a crazy lover came in a shot and killed her mother and father because they wouldn't let him go with her sister, he had just come in from some state further south of Tennessee and we were afraid that she couldn't go on with it but she said she could and we wondered if in the middle of the song she might just crack up, singing "you'll never walk alone" but she didn't she carried it out excellently and it seemed that she would have had more emotion in it than she would have, that is just an incidental thing that happened.

FORSYTHE: How was it when the fence came down was it a big deal or did it just come down?

PARKER: No it was a big deal, they advertised the day when they were going to take down the gates and some movie star, was there a man named Rod somebody? Rod Starling, he was there from Hollywood and was in the parade, in the car that led the parade.

FORSYTHE: Did you all get a flood of visitors curious about what it looked like.

PARKER: Not to many. We had two or three national people who came who were just curious about Oak Ridge, one was Norman Vincent Peale the preacher of a New York church, he came down and had the eleven o'clock at two different times in

our chapel in the hill, it was a what do you call it, come one come all, inter-denominational, two services one for catholic services and one for protestant services, this chapel was built using the architecture of an Army chapel and that is where we worshipped, and Dr, Norman Vincent Peale officiated there. One of the most unusual services was there.....