



Book Review

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Longing for the Bomb Oak Ridge and Atomic Nostalgia

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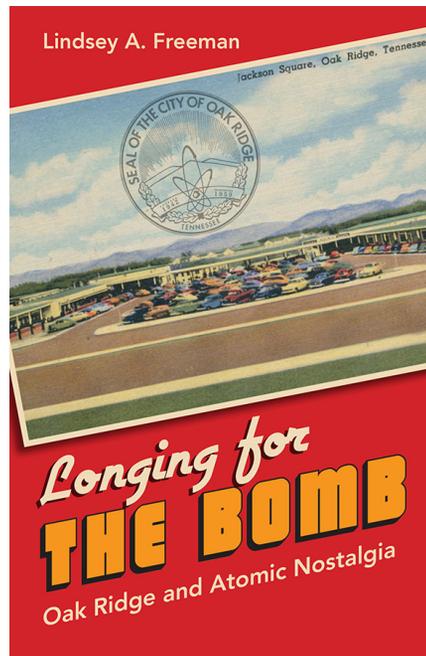
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The bomb making years of the '40s and '50s have left a legacy of literature, a legacy of historical personalities and a legacy of place. The latter are the facilities that were the birthplaces of the bombs and of the nuclear materials at the hearts of those weapons. This book, at once a personal experience and simultaneously a detached treatment of a purpose-built society, is a wonderfully written guide through the city of Oak Ridge, Tennessee, the secret, guarded, enclosed community whose residents created (unbeknownst to many of them) the enriched uranium for the Hiroshima bomb.

The author, whose family hails from Oak Ridge, was able to tap into family memories in order to balance and gauge her research findings. And, what she found has resulted in a deeply textured and nuanced narrative, easily accessible to any reader. This is in reality, a sociological treatment that reads like a homespun story: factual, meticulously researched but presented without pretense. It contains a very personal thread because of the author's ties to the community. Conversations with her grandmother float to the surface at opportune moments to



reinforce and personalize her research. Her work reveals both the highs and the lows of living in a pre-planned government community — very socialistic in certain ways — that fostered a paranoid culture of secrecy while attempting to keep its citizens both happy and engaged in a project whose outcome for security reasons, many knew very little of. Though the community succeeded in its ultimate goal, there were ethical and moral failures at other levels — the most egregious being reflections of American culture at that time.

Despite her allegiance to Oak Ridge, one senses after reading a few pages that the author is quite rightly allied to her research allowing her to maintain objectivity. She pulls no punches when it comes to negative criticism. For example, she begins her story with the

government's 1942 appropriation of private land that effectively wiped away five towns so that Oak Ridge could be built. Were the land owners properly compensated? Freeman answers no, especially when one considers that these properties had been held by families for generations. We are then treated to her study of the planning, building and running of one of the nation's first designed societies — the forerunner of the suburban Levittowns that would arise with the U.S. standard of living after the end of the war.

Freeman's view of life in a military-ruled community engineered not necessarily with democratic principles at the forefront, but with a secret national objective in mind, is wide ranging. She describes the influences the military had on the everyday life of the laborers, scientists, families, administrators and other support staff that made Oak Ridge their home. Freeman comments on the effects of gender differences in the labor force, the class stratification of families based on the professional credentials of the male breadwinners, the racial segregation that was designed into the town plan, the secrecy and surveillance that encouraged the reporting of potential spies, the many entertainments, services and privileges afforded most residents to keep them from visiting nearby towns and perhaps "talking too much," and their reactions to the horrific maiming, fatalities and physical destruction their mission goal (once revealed), had caused. It sounds



like a dystopian culture but in fact, its residents — its white residents at least — found it from their limited perspective, enjoyable, comfortable, patriotic and even exciting. It was unique and it allowed people to serve their country albeit in a very circumscribed and knowledge-fragmented manner. Its African-American citizens saw it as a chance for work at higher wages, a decent place to live, and a way to exhibit their patriotism but subject to the same atrocious, inhuman, segregationist tactics that befell the American society of the day.

Freeman frames the entire narrative in the context of nostalgia — specifically “technological or scientific nostalgia” — the current passion for what America built or discovered in the past and the tourism that has developed for these ventures. She indicates the manner in which the historical narrative fed to curious tourists can subvert the true nature of the past they seek. Tour guides — often an elderly former worker of the facility — espouse their own partisan viewpoint that has been cleansed of opposing perspectives. Many museums devoted to preserving the history of these legacy sites often sanitize the message or at least focus it such that the negative repercussions of the technology or the discovery are marginalized or not discussed at all.

The author contends that the current inhabitants of Oak Ridge do more or less the same. Take for example their view of segregation and African Americans. In the past, African-American Oak Ridgers were given the most dangerous and least desirable jobs. Their housing was substandard and separated from the neighborhoods of the white professional classes — Oak Ridge’s “other side of the railroad tracks.” It was planned

segregation. In the early days of the city, there was also no housing for married black couples. Sex became clandestine. Treated unfairly in accommodations, employment, and even in marriage, they also fell victim to Oak Ridge’s military secrecy in a most heinous manner. Medical experiments to determine the toxicity of plutonium were conducted at Oak Ridge on African Americans without their consent — a despicable crime perpetrated by the veil of concealment the hung over the community. Segregation, unfair practices, medical crimes — none are spoken of in detail today. The author contends they are acknowledged only fleetingly in the context of the “fevered wartime explanation” which simply stated was: There was a mission to accomplish: build the bomb — win the war. In short, the means justified the end.

Also pervading Freeman’s study is the concept of atomic utopianism. The ideal pre-planned community was not a new idea in the 1940s. But, the notion that a crucial mandate actually existed for such a community was an exciting idea. The very survival of the United States was thought to depend on it. The idea of contributing to a mission-driven community that combined massive industrial infrastructure with newly minted housing and supporting facilities placed into an idyllic setting in the Appalachian Mountains was appealing to planners, engineers and architects. Almost stealing a theme from science fiction (or is it the other way around?), Oak Ridge was where the new science of atomic physics could reach its apex and in the process, save the nation. In the literature of science fiction, dystopian communities often masquerade as paradises. The more sophisticated story

lines incorporate a legitimate mission for these communities that front an evil, all-controlling government. Often these fictitious places are refuges from humanity’s tragedies and mistakes. They can be hermetically separated from the environmental disasters that humanity visits on itself. *Longing for the Bomb* can be viewed as a real-life critique of the fictional dystopias depicted in novels like *Logan’s Run* or motion pictures like *Aeon Flux* — but without the extreme disasters that spawned these invented, closed societies. Like the domed and walled off cities of these fantasies, Oak Ridge was for a privileged many, a grand place to live — but not so for all because American cultural norms were not challenged — they were sustained; very telling for a federally built society. Another example: gender separation in the workplace — what we would term today as sex discrimination. The most famous example of this is the “Calutron girls” who operated their controls for the enrichment of U-235 without actually knowing what they were making. The reasoning for employing young women was simple. Girls were thought to be better suited than men to the repetitive work required.

Oak Ridge’s metaphorical dome was the controlled ingress and egress of its citizens. Background checks were performed on each before arrival. Information about the city’s mission was fractionated so that only a few knew the ultimate objective. The word “uranium” could not even be spoken. Loose lips were punished by unemployment and even imprisonment. Government informers listened and watched for violators. Entertainment such as bowling allies, ball fields, an Oak Ridge Symphony Orchestra, the largest

swimming pool in the South, and seven movie theaters kept the inhabitants inside the guarded perimeter of the community to not only curtail the flow of information to the outside but also to make it harder for the enemy to gauge the size and the specifics of the project. And all the while, housing, schools, free transportation, a greenbelt of parks and other amenities were provided by the government. All were inducements to come to Oak Ridge and to stay for the duration.

That all said, the author balances the idealism with the negative feelings Oak Ridgers felt about security, housing, and the caste system that developed around the most needed citizens (the physicists), and everyone else. This culminated in their conflicted feelings once they knew of their contribution to the atomic bomb. With the dropping of the Hiroshima bomb on August 6, 1945, the secret world of Oak Ridge ended. The media and the military revealed that the “terror bomb” had been unleashed. Those that had no knowledge of the city’s mission were at once perplexed about the outcome of their button-pushing and dial-turning, amazed that their contributions produced such a devastating weapon, and celebratory

over the achievement and the anticipated end of the war. But others, the scientists with the knowledge of what was being produced, were conflicted and in some cases disgusted by the outcome. They questioned the dual bombing of Japan. Why had we not given Japan more time to surrender? Others worried about the impact atomic warfare would have on the future of world society.

Oak Ridge was the first “scientific community.” It regards itself as the home of nuclear science to this day. The atom remains its symbol and the word “atomic” still adorns many a business in Oak Ridge. A two-day Secret City Festival honors its atomic heritage each year. But present day Oak Ridge reveals another layer of atomic nostalgia through the act of tourism. It seems to Freeman that today, science walks hand-in-hand with tourism in a less than empirical way. Tour guides repeatedly remind you of the past “miracle” accomplishments of Oak Ridge. The author, on one of the many bus tours now available, experienced an overenthusiastic guide trying to connect science and religion through (here it is again), science-fiction – via the 1960s TV show *Star Trek*. “Beam me up Scotty” (never spoken in the original *Star Trek* despite the author’s assurance

to the opposite) was used by the guide in a surreal attempt to invoke a divine connection with the city’s scientific accomplishment. Such is the layered, nuanced, slightly skewed nature of current atomic tourism and scientific nostalgia that Freeman eloquently discusses.

The book is a vivid, wide ranging journey into a very interesting corner of U.S. atomic history — a place that was itself a remarkable achievement; a place that helped produce a world-changing achievement, but also a place that was terribly flawed by the mid-twentieth century American culture that spawned it. Freeman’s discourse is brimming with accounts of individuals who lived the Oak Ridge experience. She deftly utilizes their written words taken from military speeches, newspaper stories and other sources. The town’s many cultural flavors are brought to the table in a manner easily consumed, understood and enjoyed. There is much to praise here including the author’s honest, factual, scientific investigation rooted in personal interest and personal connections but objectively discussed and explained. It is a book deserving of attention far beyond the borders (or fences) of its subject.