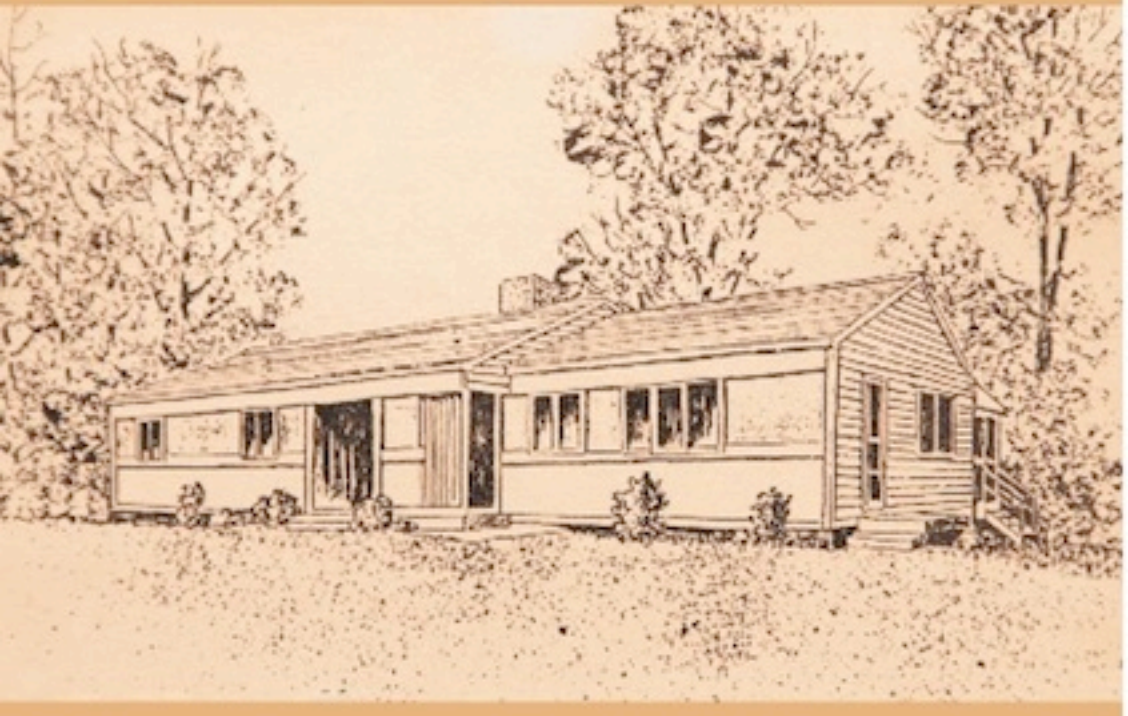
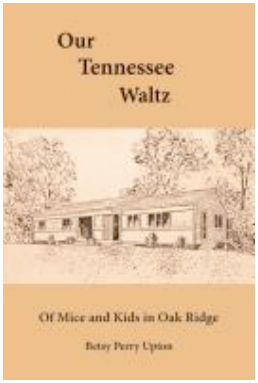
Our Tennessee Waltz



Of Mice and Kids in Oak Ridge

Betsy Perry Upton



OUR TENNESSEE WALTZ: Of Mice and Kids in Oak Ridge *is composed of stories derived from the writer's 20 years of living with her family during the 50's and 60's in Oak Ridge, Tennessee, often referred to as the "atomic city."*

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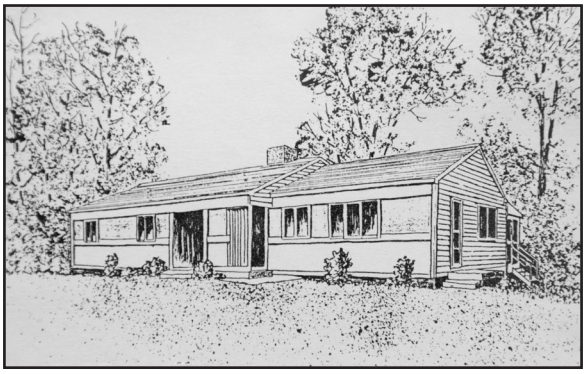

The cover photograph shows a prefabricated type "D" cemesto house exactly like the one the author and her family lived in. Cemesto was a sturdy lightweight composite building material made of sugar cane fiber, asbestos, and cement. At the time, the problems with asbestos were unknown. Three thousand houses were built. Each one took only two hours to put up! One house was completed every thirty minutes.

This book is dedicated to my husband, Art, and my three children, Rebecca, Melissa, and Brad, who danced this Tennessee waltz with me.

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Preface

Oak Ridge, Tennessee, the Atomic City, what kind of a town would that be to live in? I can still remember when my husband, Art, telephoned me long distance to say that he had accepted a job as a research associate in the Biology Division of the Oak Ridge National Laboratory. I could hear the excitement in his voice as he spoke about his interview, "I'll tell you all about it when I get home tomorrow." As we hung up the telephone, I knew that we would be moving to a part of the South I was not familiar with.

All I knew about Oak Ridge was that the town and the laboratory were secretly built in 1942 for the purpose of producing enriched uranium for the first atomic bombs to be used in war. The site ultimately comprised about 59,000 acres, and was built on land taken from the families living there, mostly on small farms. They were told that this was for the War Effort. The residents were paid for the land, but far less than its true value. Some 1,000 families were displaced, and many of them given only a few days to collect their belongings and move away.

Then, thousands of young men and women were recruited to come to work and live in a secret city without being told where it was, or what kind of work they would be doing. There was tremendous urgency about the project, since it was feared that the Germans might develop atomic weapons before we or our allies could. Secrecy was essential, and the new workers soon discovered that once they began working in Oak Ridge, their job security depended on never talking about their work, and never asking anyone else questions about what went on in the various laboratories behind the security fence.

Now it was 1951, nearly ten years, later and Oak Ridge had become a major center for peacetime research.

When we moved to Oak Ridge, we soon learned that there was an ongoing tradition of never asking anyone about his or her work. During the nearly 20 years that Art and I lived there, I had no idea what most of my friends' husbands did, nor which of the various laboratories they worked in. The careful security in the town was graphically demonstrated to me, several times a year, from my kitchen window, which looked out on the street. Two or three times each year, I used to see a pair of young men dressed in dark suits and fedoras walking down the sidewalk on our street. We all knew that they were either young Mormon missionaries or FBI agents, since nobody else dressed that way. If they stopped at every house, they were missionaries. However, if they skipped one house and went to all the others along the street, it was obvious that they were F.B.I. agents asking questions about the residents of the house they had just skipped. Once, when our house was skipped, I was somewhat concerned, because one of our neighbors seemed to be going through some sort of emotional breakdown. Even though she was formerly my friend, now she would not speak to me. I wondered what she might say to the investigating F.B.I. agents.

During the years Art and I lived in Oak Ridge, raising our two daughters, Rebecca and Melissa, and our son, Bradley, we realized that Art's new job had taken us to a good town to live in. It was a lovely, quiet and peaceful community, with good schools, fine music teachers, and creative dancing classes, plus wonderful lakes in the area for weekend picnics, as well as all of the cultural opportunities we wanted for our children. The residents in town were an interesting mixture of many different backgrounds. I used to say that we Oak Ridgers were like the "Brits in Inja," since we had created an enclave of culture unlike that of most of the surrounding

small towns in East Tennessee. By the time we moved away, we had our own symphony orchestra, a new community art center, a local theater group, several dance clubs, a kennel club, and many other organizations created or brought in by new residents of the town.

In 1969 we moved away from Oak Ridge to New York, and I focused on developing a teaching career. I had no plans to write about the variety of experiences I had during our nineteen years in East Tennessee.

In the past several years, with a mixture of nostalgia and amusement, I began to remember some of the idiosyncrasies of many of the scientists who lived there. I was always struck by what a contrast they were to the stolid country people whom I came to know, the native Tennesseans trying to scratch out livings in the "hollers" and the valleys near our summer cottage. I was enriched by the friendships in both places, in Oak Ridge and down on Watts Bar Lake, where I spent the summers with my family.

When I first considered writing my memoirs about living in Oak Ridge, I planned to write one continuous narrative. Then, as I began to recall many of the experiences I had, and the various people I met, they were so diverse that it became clear that writing them as a series of short stories would be better. The result is this collection of stories that give my own personal glimpse of Oak Ridge.

Oak Ridge, Tennessee

"Ohhhhh! It's just like an Army Post!" I burst out, thrilled, as Art stopped the car at a sentry post, at the east entrance to the town of Oak Ridge, in East Tennessee. The military sentry came over, examined Art's identification, and waved us in through the gates. It was a happy reminder of my Army childhood, stopping at the gate for a military sentry to check I.D.'s.

Art had received his high level clearance (Q clearance) so he drove down to Tennessee from Ann Arbor, Michigan two weeks before, while I stayed on to finish the packing and close on the sale of our house. It was a glorious spring day in Tennessee in May, 1951, when I flew down to Knoxville with three year old Becky and one year old Melissa. Art met us at the airport and we drove to Oak Ridge.

The drive from the Knoxville airport to Oak Ridge was pure joy to me. It was a sunny beautiful day and the perfume of the south came in through my open car window. The whole countryside was lush and green with the arrival of spring.

As we entered the Sentry gates, on the Oak Ridge Turnpike, the main road into town, I saw more similarities to Army Post life. There were rows of identical wooden apartment buildings on one side of the Turnpike. We passed a big shopping center, obviously the commercial center of town. The other side of the four-lane turnpike, appeared to be more residential, with one family houses. Like so many army posts, the houses were all the same kind of construction, obviously all built at the same time.

"Where are the Garden Apartments?" I asked Art, knowing that that's where we had been assigned to live.

"Look ahead, up on that hill against the trees," Art pointed out a cluster of contemporary looking white buildings. "I think you'll love our apartment." Art had been camping out there since his arrival two weeks earlier.

He turned left off the Turnpike up a winding street named Vanderbilt Drive and drove to the top, where he parked in front of the apartment at the end of the building. Our apartment was on the ground floor, and the moment I walked into it, I was thrilled. We had a spacious two-bedroom apartment, with an efficient modern kitchen, that looked out on the grounds in front. I noticed several mothers sitting together watching their young children play in the big, open grassy space between our building and the apartment building next to ours.

In 1950, the year before we arrived in Oak Ridge, Art decided to apply to the Public Health Service in exchange for his Military Medical training. He was accepted into the Medical School at the University of Michigan, just before World War II began, but very soon he found himself marching to medical classes as one of the Army Specialized Training Program buck privates.

Once the war ended, Art was able to continue his training as a civilian. However, it was expected that he would spend at least two years in some branch of military service in repayment for his medical school training. Now, at the end of his residency in Pathology, he knew that he was more interested in research than in clinical medicine, so the Public Health Service seemed to be a good choice for him.

He was waiting for word from the Public Health Service, when the phone rang one day. It was, Jacob Furth, a famous pathologist calling from a place called Oak Ridge in Tennessee. He was looking for a young pathologist to come to work with him, so he had gone to Washington to consult with a friend in the Public Health Service. His friend let him look

over the Public Health applications they had. When he read Art's application, he knew that Art was the young man he wanted.

Art spent a long time on the telephone, and when he came into the kitchen to tell me about it, he looked stunned, and said, "You won't believe this!" He had been invited to fly to Oak Ridge two days later for an interview with Dr. Furth.

Two days later, I was waiting, anxiously to know how his interview had gone, when the phone rang. Art was euphoric! It was a dream job with a renowned research pathologist, something he had never expected to find. Both of us were delighted. I also knew that it would be good for our family to live farther away from all the in-laws.

As the first daughter-in-law, with the first grandchildren, I was the one everyone practiced on, not an easy nor always a pleasant role, especially when different members of the family had opposing ideas about how I should be living, thinking, raising my kids and even voting.

In Oak Ridge, we were happy to have been assigned one of the lovely Garden Apartments, which was the newest and handsomest area of residential housing in town. Situated high on a hill overlooking the center of town, our building looked far into the distance at the Cumberland Plateau. Behind our buildings, there was a wooded area, with clotheslines for hanging laundry. For me, one of the joys was the fresh scent of honeysuckle blooming. During most of my childhood, the perfume of honeysuckle and wild roses had been a part of my life until we had moved to Michigan. Now, I was back in my beloved South again, and I felt complete once more. I smiled to myself thinking that I would not have to fight screaming babies trying to get them into the heavy snowsuits that were a part of life in Michigan.

During the next several days, Art drove us around the town, so both of us could become familiar with our new sur-

roundings. So much of the town reminded me of an Army post with the rows of nearly identical houses built on street after street, that for me it was almost like moving back to an army post. I was ecstatically happy. Later I was amused to discover that the reaction of the other women I met in the apartment complex was often one of dismay, even horror, at what they saw as a monotonous uniformity of the town and it's buildings.

It soon became clear how much care and attention had been paid to planning the town. Some 59,000 acres had been selected as the site for the new secret city and the even more secret wartime project that was a race against the enemy. It was a sad story, as the luckless families living in the area were summarily given six weeks to relocate, and some, even less. The land was cheap, and there were the advantages for the new research project to being near a plentiful supply of water and electricity, as well as highway and railroad accessibility.

As Art and I drove around the town, we were both impressed by the layout of the streets and the houses that had been built in such a hurry at the time of the war. The main streets ran from the Turnpike up the steep Northeastern slope of Blackoak Ridge to Outer Drive, the lovely winding street that ran along the ridge. Skidmore, Owings and Merrill had designed the layout of the city as well as the quickly built single-family houses. The streets curved around, following the contours of the land, and large areas of native greenbelt had been left behind most of the residences. Many of the houses had lots of space around them, and now, in May, gardens were bursting into bloom. Views from the houses along Outer Drive were spectacular, as one looked off into the distance at the Cumberland Mountains

"Who knows? Maybe we'll get a house up here someday." Art and I smiled. We had already decided we wanted to have a third baby, a decision we had made long before we learned

that it would qualify us for a spacious three bedroom house.

The geography of Oak Ridge was uniquely appropriate for the separation of areas of the city. In addition to Blackoak Ridge, where the majority of houses were situated, there were four other elongated ridges, that ran roughly parallel to one another in a Northeast to Southwest direction. The result was four valleys, where the city had been built.

The top-secret laboratories were located behind the natural barriers of these ridges. When I occasionally drove Art to work at the Biology Division, the entrance to the restricted area required us to stop at a second set of gates, manned by guards examining passes. There was no impression of anything else built in that area, besides the Biology Division, the other main areas of research, the plants known as Y-12, X-10, and K-25 were each hidden behind more hills and tucked into other valleys, separated from each other.

Art and I lived in the Garden Apartments for about a year. I loved the companionship of the other women who lived there. They were an interesting mixture of backgrounds and experiences. Kathleen Ryan became my closest friend. She was a New York City girl, and had been a detective before she married. But when she moved to Oak Ridge, she gave up her career and had a little boy our girls enjoyed. In nice weather, we sat outdoors, watching the children play. There were lots of small children for our two girls to enjoy.

Maria Zucker was completing a nursing degree at the nearby University of Tennessee in Knoxville despite having twin boys who were nearly four. Once in a while, a group of mothers would fix picnic food and we would all eat out in the shade. On hot afternoons, I used to turn on the sprinkler and let the girls play in the water, and often several of the mothers would join us and bring their children to cool off, too.

Once a week or so, I packed a picnic lunch, put Melissa and Becky into our big red wagon, then climbed behind

them, and we coasted down the long steep sidewalk that ran from our building to the bottom of the hill. There was a lovely grove of trees partway down the hill, and that was usually where we coasted to a stop. Wherever the wagon stopped, we got out, spread a blanket on the grass, and had our picnic.

As I recall that first year in Oak Ridge, I remember how happy I was. Moving to a new city, but immediately finding companionship for me and both our girls was the perfect way to avoid the loneliness one often feels after a move.

One evening, when I called Becky to come inside and get ready for bed, I suddenly knew that our little three-year old had adapted well to our new life. She began calling good night to her friends "Night, Jimmy, night, Tommy, night Susie, night Carol, BAAAAA Cahn-nee."

When she came in I asked her why she spoke that way to Connie, and looking at me very seriously, she said, "Oh, Mommie, didn't you know? Connie's from Alabama, and I have to talk that way so she will understand what I say."

Ain't No Woman …

As soon as Art and I moved into our government-owned house, we began stockpiling two essentials: cloth diapers and electrical fuses. With two preschoolers plus an infant, diapers were grabbed to wipe up anything wet: a sopping baby, a half-gallon of milk dropped by a toddler, the puppy's wet feet, or the laundry tub leak in the utility room. The daily diaper pile grew like trash in a municipal landfill, and meant a lot of laundry loads to keep our heads above the deluge. With the washer and dryer going, the refrigerator would kick on, or Art would turn on his electric drill, or I would plug in the iron, and suddenly the fuse would blow. In the ensuing silence, the call to arms was not "Quick, hand me a diaper!" but "Quick, hand me a fuse!" There was quite obviously a symbiotic relationship between the two necessary items.

One day after we had lived there a couple of years, we had a major stop-up caused by tree roots growing into the drain, so we called for help from Roane Anderson, the government's emergency service providers in Oak Ridge. The man arrived and began running the "roto-rooter" machine to ream out the drain outside the house. Just then, in a fit of forgetfulness, I dumped the just-washed portion of the daily diaper pile into the drier, reloaded the washer and turned them both on. Dead silence was the result. The washer quit, the dryer quit and the plumber's roto-rooter quit.

As I reached for a new fuse, the plumber called through the screen door, "I gotta go back to the shop and git me a new snake. This one has a bad connection and it done cut out on me."

"Just a minute," I said, "There's nothing wrong with your

machine, it's just a blown fuse. I'll get it fixed."

He blew up! "Ain't no woman gonna tell me nothin' about my business! I'm takin' this here busted machine back." With a look of outrage, he got into his truck and left.

As I began to fume, I decided not to change the fuse. "I'll show that stupid jerk who thinks women don't know nothin' about nothin'. "

When he returned, and tried to turn on the replacement machine, the plumber was dismayed to find that it didn't work either. So I opened the door and called him to come into the utility room. "I'll fix it for you," I said.

While he stood there, a sneer on his face, I reached up and replaced the blown fuse in the box, then told him to go turn his machine on. While I stood in the door, listening to the noise it made, I mused, "Ain't no woman can live in an Oak Ridge house and not know a blown fuse from a busted machine."

Art and I decided to remodel our house some years later, after the government sold them to the residents. Rewiring the house was at the top of our list. We analyzed our needs and decided what changes we wanted to make in the house. Then, because Art was out of town so often at scientific meetings, he left everything to me. I drew up detailed working drawings for the construction, including plumbing isometrics and diagrams for the electrical circuits so I could submit each one for bids.

The first electrical contractor to come by to give me a bid showed up after dinner one night, just as I had started cleaning up the kitchen. Art told me to go talk to him, adding, "I'll finish cleaning up the dinner dishes."

I invited the electrician into the living room and proceeded to spread out my working drawings for the proposed rewiring of the house, while I explained the changes we wanted. Then I glanced up, waiting for his comments and a suggested bid,

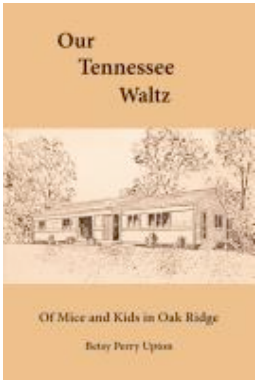
and saw a scornful look on his face. He burst out, "Ain't no woman knows squat about wirin' a house. I need to talk to the mister."

"Hey, Art," I called, "Mr. Hammond wants to talk to you about this job. Will you come in here?"

Art walked in, dressed in my ruffled apron, rubber gloves on his hands, drying a plate as he came into the living room, "I'm sorry, but I don't know anything about my wife's electrical diagrams. You'll have to ask her to explain anything you don't understand."

Poor Mr. Hammond sat there, mouth open while he looked from Art to me and back to Art again. Mumbling something, he got up and left.

Today, I can't remember the name of the electrical contractor who did take the job, but "ain't no woman" could ever forget Mr. Hammond or the look on his face.



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