

Making history the second time

ORHS Class of '59 —



Rena Jo Hall Johnson

By Rena Jo Hall Johnson

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OAK RIDGE, Tenn. —

After August 1945, most of the world knew that Oak Ridge, had made history. We moved from being "The Secret City" to being "The Atomic City."

The 10 tumultuous years that followed included our memories of attending elementary schools all over the city, swimming in a great pool, having the advantage of summer playground activities all over town, Girl Scout and Boy Scout meetings, going to variety of churches, synagogues, and other places of worship, attending Jefferson Junior High School together as seventh graders, and then dividing ourselves between JJHS and the new Robertsville Junior High School.

Outside and inside our city gates, a major social issue was bringing great changes to the American South. The Civil Rights Movement picked up momentum after Brown vs. the Board of Education in 1954. The racial integration of our schools was necessary to provide equal opportunity for all children. The next fall we made history again in Oak Ridge.

When we walked through the doors of Oak Ridge High School in September 1955, we were the first high school class in the South to begin our four years as an integrated class. Most of us were not thinking, "Oh, today I'm making history; we now have both black and white students." No doubt, our African-American classmates were keenly aware of what their steps through those doors meant. The maturing process of the next four years made all of us more aware of what we were doing, but probably not yet aware of the history we were living.

By the time this class crowded onto the ORHS Auditorium stage in June 1959, we had accomplished much. Who can forget? We were the Tennessee "State Football Champions." We sent many students all over the United States to great colleges and universities; many of those students had substantial academic or athletic scholarships. A higher than average number of seniors went to colleges, technical schools, or the military. Some already had jobs lined up at the local plants.

Memorable events? Yes. More history making than a number of other institutions in various corners of the United States? Probably not. Then what? The ORHS Class of 1959 was the first graduating class in the southeastern United States to complete four years as an integrated class. And, we did it peacefully. Very few people in the United States knew that any school system in the South integrated peacefully. This writer dare not say we did it without incidents. Our young, black classmates who came through those doors did so with bravery and dignity and most likely suffered indignities unknown to most of the rest of us.

As we lived the history of the next four years, those Atomic City kids began to learn racial tolerance, respect for the intellect, gifts and talents of each other, and, hopefully, the brotherhood and sisterhood of all human beings. Could it be that our legacy of June 1959 is a redemptive seed for those who cannot forgive the legacy of August 1945? In the tumult of today's world, that is most likely a far too heavy question. Yet, we lived a significant, important bit of history -- peacefully, in spite of Little Rock, in spite of Clinton.

In a February issue of the Greensboro (N.C.) News and Record celebrating "Black History Month," columnist Glen Chavis noted "before there was Little Rock, there was Clinton." The bombing of Clinton High School in October 1958 was a sad learning experience for both our Clinton neighbors and us. We watched their buses transport them to the old Linden Elementary School in Oak Ridge to complete that school year. Watching those buses every morning opened these eyes to the futility of violence and the necessity of tolerance. During this weekend of memories, let us take time to contemplate our history. Yes, "before there was Little Rock, there was Clinton." Before there was Clinton, there was the ORHS Class of 1959. We lived it; we made history -- peacefully.

A special "Thank You" to our African-American classmates who bravely helped teach us the value of diversity. Hopefully, regardless of where we have traveled or what history we have made over the last 50 years, that lesson has made all of us better men and women -- better people.

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