The Atomic Prophecy: The Myth of John Hendrix and the Historic-Future Atomic City

The myth of the atomic prophet states that at the turn of the twentieth century in a rural section of East Tennessee, John Hendrix, a local logger with no formal education, began hearing voices and having visions that the valley where he lived would be transformed into a bustling city that would provide the key to winning a horrible war in the future. Just prior to his experience of these visions, Hendrix had suffered extreme loss. Ethel, his youngest child, died of diphtheria, and following her death, Hendrix's wife left him and set off for Arkansas with their three remaining children in tow. In a state of unbearable grief over the loss of his family, Hendrix began hearing voices telling him to head into the woods for forty days and forty nights to pray for guidance. Hendrix did as the voices requested, persevering through near starvation and extreme cold; it is said that one morning he woke to find his hair had frozen to the ground. When the forty days were up and he emerged from his Mosean journey, the voices and the visions continued. Hendrix believed he could see the future and felt that it was his duty to tell everyone who would listen (or at least everyone within earshot) what would transpire along the Black Oak Ridge. Around the year 1900 he is thought to have said:

> Bear Creek Valley some day will be filled with great buildings and factories, and they will help toward winning the greatest war that will ever be. There will be a city on Black Oak Ridge, and the center of authority will be on a point midway between Sevier Tadlock's farm and Joe Pyatt's Place. A railroad spur will branch off the main L&N line, run down toward Robertsville and then branch off and turn toward Scarboro. Big engines will dig big ditches and thousands of people will be running to and fro. They will

> be building things, there will be great noise and confusion, and the earth will shake. I've seen it. It's coming.[1]

Hendrix would repeat his proclamations to locals and those passing through while holding court at a crossroads market called Key's store.[2] At the time of Hendrix's prophecies most people in his community thought he was mad. He was even institutionalized for a time.[3]

Yet, in the early 1940s Hendrix's visions seemed to come to fruition. During World War II, the area surrounding the Bear Creek Valley was chosen by the federal government as a top-secret site for the Manhattan Project. Five small communities were evacuated and several gigantic atomic factories and the city of Oak Ridge were constructed in their place. The chief administrative building or "center of authority" for the site was placed at the point described in Hendrix's proclamation, as was the railroad spur. By 1943, Oak Ridge became an atomic beehive, employing thousands of workers for the enormous factories turning out fissionable uranium-235. This material eventually powered *Little Boy,* the atomic bomb that demolished Hiroshima.[4] The sudden appearance of the instant city of Oak Ridge with its massive factories and new railroad spurs closely resembled the 'great city' of Hendrix's

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[1] Oakes, Joe. 1944. "John Hendrix, Prophet of Oak Ridge, Predicted Project and Railroad More than 40 Years Ago!" *Oak Ridge Journal* (2 November), 3; George O. Robinson, *The Oak Ridge Story,* (Kingsport, TN: Southern Publishers, 1950), 17 – 19.

[2] Clifford Seeber, "From Acorns to Atoms," *The Antioch Review* 12.3, (Autumn, 1952), 365.

[3] He soon escaped and prophesized that the county farm where he was held would be destroyed by God. Months later a lightning storm burned the institution to the ground. See: D. Ray Smith, *John Hendrix Story,* (2009), 10.

[4] A similar effort was established on the western side of the United States at Hanford, Washington, which was the production site for the plutonium that propelled the bomb, *Fat Man* that decimated Nagasaki. The third city in the secret network of the Manhattan Project was Los Alamos, New Mexico, the brain center where J. Robert Oppenheimer directed the Theory Division.

visions.[5] Of course this is no coincidence, but the reason the John Hendrix myth is ever-present in the narratives of the city. For Oak Ridge, the relaying of the John Hendrix myth has become a "mnemonic tradition," a scripted and practiced way of remembering the past as a group. As sociologist Eviatar Zerubavel has shown "mnemonic traditions" include "not only what we come to remember as members of a particular community but also *how* we remember it."[6] The Hendrix myth is in this sense a "social mythology" that is characterized by a repetitive narrative and performance that is of a cultural origin.[7]

It is curious that Oak Ridge, the "Atomic City," a place that sees itself as a bastion of high-culture would trace its origin to a notorious hillbilly; it is perhaps even more curious that a city devoted to science would rely so much on a mythic prophecy to tell the story of

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[5] Intriguingly, the Dene, the first nation tribe that worked in the uranium mines in Canada that provided the United States with uranium ore for the Manhattan Project also had a prophet, Louis Ayah, sometimes called "grandfather," who predicted the hazards of the mine years before it existed. Peter C. van Wyck paraphrases the prophecy in *The Highway of the Atom*: "The Dene had always known it was bad medicine to travel in front of the area now known as Port Radium; it was said that loud noises came from within it. For some reason a group of Dene hunters had camped there, and in the morning the medicine man told them his dream, in which he saw white people going into a large hole in the ground with machines. He saw boats on the lake and huge flying birds loaded with things. They were making something…that they dropped on people, burning everyone." (Montreal & Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2010: 41). See also: George Blondin, *When the World Was New: Stories of the Sahtú Dene,* (Yellowknife: Outcrop, 1990: 78 – 79).

[6] Eviatar Zerubavel, *Social Mindscapes: An Invitation to Cognitive Sociology.* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1999), 87.

[7] Bringhurst, Robert, "The Meaning of Mythology," In *Everywhere Being is Dancing: Twenty Pieces of Thinking.* (Berkeley, CA: Gaspereau Press, 2007): 68; Peter C. van Wyck, *The Highway of the Atom,* (Montreal & Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2010): 8.

its beginning. In histories of Oak Ridge, a stark contrast is drawn between the earlier residents who are presented as believing in mystics and visions and the Oak Ridgers, who by contrast are supposedly steeped in a modern rational tradition of science. Yet, it is the Oak Ridgers and not the pre-atomic citizens who were removed from the area who utilize the myth of John Hendrix to justify their place in the landscape. As Georges Bataille (1994) wrote of contemporary society, perhaps the grandest myth is that there is an "absence of myth" in modern times.

After World War II, the Hendrix myth becomes a key component in the collective memory of Oak Ridge. The repetition of the Hendrix myth creates a prophetic spectacle of the past by circumventing and screening out other more complicated histories of the area including the forced removal of pre-atomic residents from their land, as well as the grisly details of the atomic bombings of Japan. The story of John Hendrix makes what transpired in Oak Ridge and the cities of Japan seem inevitable: an atomic manifest destiny. What is at stake here is not the accuracy or inaccuracy of the script of Hendrix's visionary rantings and ravings, which could certainly be debated. What is far more important is how this myth has been passed down through time by members of the Oak Ridge community and what use it has for those who choose to repeat it. What follows will be an explanation of how a city without a past creates one, not out of thin air, but rather by plucking a story from an earlier time period and bending it to reflect a desired origin story. While, an expansive history of the pre-atomic communities is out of the scope of this article, a gesture towards providing a richer history of those who were removed to make room for Oak Ridge will also be included.

Declaration of Taking

In 1942 - 1943, approximately forty years after Hendrix's proclamations, the federal government of the United States evacuated five small farming communities: Elza, New Hope, Scarboro, Wheat, and Robertsville, the town where Hendrix had lived. The land acquisition process was set in motion on 6 October 1942, when an attorney from the Real Estate Branch of the Ohio River Division of the Corps of Engineers filed a "declaration of taking" at the Federal Court in Knoxville.[8] The result of this declaration was that nearly 4,000 residents of the area were ordered to leave their homes and were removed by force if necessary.[9] Through the power of eminent domain[10] the land was seized, if the owners were not home when the government officers visited their property, evacuation notices typed on onionskin paper would be nailed to fence posts or front doors.[11] Typically, residents were

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[8] Fine and Remington, *The Corps of Engineers,* 655; "United States versus 52,600 Acres of Land in Roane and Anderson Counties, Tennessee and Ed Browder, et al.," Oct. 6, 1942 Civil Action No. 429, District Court of the United States, Eastern District of Tennessee, Northern Division, Knoxville; Charles W. Jackson & Charles O. Johnson, *City Behind a Fence,* (Knoxville, TN: University of Knoxville Press, 1981), 41.

[9] Robinson, *Oak Ridge Story,* 37 – 38.

[10] The power of eminent domain is outlined in the Fifth Amendment to the United States Constitution. The practice is an action taken by the state to seize private property for "public use." Under the "Takings Clause" "just compensation" must be paid to the owners, although their consent is not required.

[11] John Rice Irwin, "New Places Strange People" *These Are Our Voices,* (Oak Ridge, TN: Children's Museum of Oak Ridge, 1987): 20; Jackson & Johnson, *City Behind a Fence,* 41; Davis, "Evacuation of Area Residents All Ready to Leave it "Will Help Win the War", 10.

allowed less than three weeks to relocate.[12] For many in the area, this would be their third forced removal for federal projects, after the clearing of homesteads for the Great Smoky Mountains National Park in the 1920s and for the creation of Norris Dam by the Tennessee Valley Authority (TVA) in 1933.

Unlike the TVA evacuations, the Manhattan Project provided little assistance to the evacuees either with their belongings or with finding new homes in other areas. Some were paid for their land prior to their relocation, but many were not. This left many of the pre-atomic citizens with no money, no land, and often no job prospects. Most of the evictees left without challenging the government, although a few brought legal action to dispute the sums paid for their land. In 1943, the House of Military Affairs Committee launched an investigation into the land acquisition practices of the War Department. Leading the charge was Representative John Jennings Jr. of Knoxville who argued provocatively, "The Secretary of War has assumed the guise of an invader."[13] In the end, the Manhattan Project was deemed of too great importance to be more than mildly affected by these claims.[14] As if to sum up the ease with which the pre-atomic citizens were excised from their land, James Marshall, an official for the Corps of Engineers described the land acquisition process as "child's play".[15]

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[12] The most important areas to the Manhattan Project were designated 'hot spots' residents of these areas were given only fourteen days to vacate their property. See: Irwin, "New Places Strange People," 20, and War Department Letter to Parlee Raby 11 November 1942 located in the Oak Ridge Archives at the Oak Ridge Public Library.

[13] Robinson, *The Oak Ridge Story,* 29.

[14] In some cases the land was reappraised and landowners received second offers. In the final settlements the average cost of an acre of land was forty-five dollars. Robinson, *The Oak Ridge Story,* 28.

[15] Fine & Remington, *Corps of Engineers,* 663; Jackson & Johnson, *City Behind a Fence,* 43.

After the land grab the federal government had procured 59,000 acres, measuring seventeen miles long and approximately seven miles wide. The area was protracted through the geometry of military and political power in accordance with the natural landscape. Chosen in part for its seclusion, the site was hemmed in by the Clinch River and a series of ridges. The topographic layout ensured that the various atomic plants could be separated, with each tucked in its own valley, so that in case of an accident at one site the damage could theoretically be contained, avoiding a dangerous game of radioactive dominoes.[16] The proximity to the TVA power center of Norris Dam and the Louisville & Nashville Railroad line were also key deciding factors. The government needed easy access to water, electricity, and transportation outlets; the chosen section of East Tennessee proved more than adequate for Project needs.[17]

Once residents of the pre-atomic communities were scattered into neighboring towns, states, and beyond, the Manhattan Project was free to usher in a new aesthetics of power based on spatial, social, and visual control. [18] Arguably, one of the most devastating effects of the forced removal is that some farmers, who were forced off their land, then went to work on the Manhattan Project, becoming tenants on the very land they once owned! In a matter of months Oak Ridge began to take shape, most of the town was newly built, but portions of the new space contained scraps of the old. Transportation shortages and the

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[16] Leslie Groves, *Now It Can Be Told: The Story of the Manhattan Project,* New York: Da Capo, 1962: 94.

[17] Richard G. Hewlett & Oscar E. Anderson, *The New World 1939-1946: A History of the United States Atomic Energy Commission,* (University Park, PA: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1962), 76-77.

[18] Since no official records were kept it is difficult to say where people moved once evacuated from the area. There is disagreement on the topic, D. Ray Smith argues: "very few moved farther than a fifty-mile radius". Whereas Peter Bacon Hales suggests: "most farmers were forced far away, off the land to cities like Chicago." See: Smith, *The Hendrix Story*, 49 and Hales, "Topographies of Power," 263.

speed with which the previous residents were forced to evacuate led to the abandonment of many possessions not deemed absolutely essential. In light of wartime shortages, the Army Corps of Engineers sometimes incorporated abandoned buildings and the flotsam and jetsam of objects left behind into the construction of the Oak Ridge site. The effect was a rustic military aesthetic, a bricolage of Appalachian elements combined with government drab. For example, the abandoned New Bethel Baptist Church was taken over by the X-10 site[19] and was converted into a storage building,[20] abandoned log cabins were used as recreation and picnic centers,[21] and the fence around the perimeter of the city was laced with barbed wire scavenged from the abandoned farms. To add insult to injury the menacing material, which once helped to protect the pre-atomic citizens' property from would-be thieves or wild animals, was then used to keep them out.

What is simply amazing is that the land was commandeered, residents removed, and construction of facilities began without so much as a phone call to Tennessee Governor Prentiss Cooper. General Groves, the military director of the Manhattan Project had received permission from President Roosevelt to set up Oak Ridge, as a federal military reservation, giving the military freedom from both federal and state laws. When high-ranking officers were finally dispatched to inform the governor, he was livid and reportedly tore the memo to shreds. He felt that the land and roads had been seized and stolen for an

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[19] X-10 was the code name given to the graphite reactor used to separate elements of uranium to produce weapons grade fissile materials for the Manhattan Project. X-10 also produced small amounts of plutonium. The former X-10 site is now home to the Oak Ridge National Laboratory.

[20] Leland Johnson and Daniel Schaffer, *Oak Ridge National Laboratory: The First Fifty Years,* (Knoxville, TN: The University of Knoxville Press, 1994), 17.

[21] Lois M. Kaufman, "A House Stronger than Time," *These Are Our Voices,* Ed. James Overholt (Oak Ridge, TN: Oak Ridge Children's Museum, 1987), 38.

"experiment in socialism." The governor believed the seizure of land was a trick by the "New Dealers cloaked under the guise of a war project."[22][23] When Governor Cooper finally visited the Oak Ridge site he was shown only the factories' façades. According to military accounts, the governor was reportedly "placated by whiskey" and the importance of secrecy, his patriotic duty, and security was impressed upon him until he softened.[24] In actuality, any smooth talking or pressuring on the part of the military was superfluous, the President had already written the order, the factories were constructed, and Governor Cooper really had no choice in the matter. General Groves, known for his aggressive and brusque demeanor, later admitted that this situation should have been handled with more finesse.[25]

It was not only the Tennessean governor who was perturbed by the seizure of this particular plot of land; David Lilienthal,[26] chairman of TVA, was also resistant to the Project's site choice. Lilienthal objected because portions of the land chosen had already been set-aside as part of a TVA agricultural improvement program. He tried to steer the Manhattan Project into western Kentucky close to Paducah to no avail. The physicist Arthur Compton working for the Manhattan Project site selection team refused Lilienthal's pleas and authorized the court seizure of the land. Lilienthal argued: "It was a bad precedent. That particular site was not essential; another involving far less disruption in people's lives would have served as well, but arbitrary bureaucracy, made doubly powerful by military secrecy, had

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[22] Hales, *Atomic Spaces*, 121 – 122; Jackson & Johnson, *City Behind a Fence,* 49; Groves, *Now It Can Be Told,* 26 – 27.

[23] Governor Cooper may have been on to something. During the war years, Oak Ridge had universal healthcare, zero unemployment, and state owned housing.

[24] Hales, *Atomic Spaces,* 122.

[25] Groves, *Now It Can Be Told,* 26 – 27.

[26] David Lillenthal would go on to lead the Atomic Energy Commission from 1947 – 1950.

its way."[27] The way in which Governor Cooper was dealt with as well as the forced removal of residents from their land shows the focus of the Manhattan Project to be directed away from the local and towards a more national and international view. The strategy could be summed up as "the more imbedded in the local, the more difficult to persuade."[28] This logic persisted until after the war.

After 1945, a curious process occurred where those who remained in Oak Ridge began to tie their histories to those who had inhabited the geographical space in which they were now situated. This terrain, both imagined and lived, helped to shape the way Oak Ridgers remember and retell their past. Accounts of area history do not simply herald the glories of scientific prowess, they also suture Appalachian heritage to the Atomic Age. In the late 1940s, the situation in Oak Ridge began to change as the city was slowly weaned from federal control. In 1949 the gates of the city opened with great fanfare[29] and by 1959, the city was a fully incorporated entity in the state of Tennessee. Once Oak Ridge was no longer a secret city, Oak Ridgers began to think of their city as something more than a temporary war project. When it was clear that Cold War security needs would keep the labs open, many chose to remain in Oak Ridge and make it their permanent home. In order to think about the future, the community began to turn inwards and backwards, looking for a way to tell its story to explain and justify its place in the world, both geographically and historically. From this point forward the myth of John Hendrix, the atomic prophet, took on

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[27] Quoted in Johnson and Schaffer, *Oak Ridge National Laboratory,* 16.

[28] Hales, *Atomic Spaces* 125.

[29] See: Lindsey Freeman, "Happy Memories Under the Mushroom Cloud: Utopia and Memory in Oak Ridge, Tennessee," *Memory And the Future,* Eds. Gutman, Brown & Sodaro, (New York: Palgrave MacMillian, 2010), 158.

greater significance, often as the lead story in the town's history. The Hendrix myth became a kind of shorthand for telling the history of the region both to outsiders and to Oak Ridgers themselves.

John Hendrix as Synecdoche

"…I am collecting the ashes of the other possible cities that vanish to make room for it, cities that can never be rebuilt or remembered." – Italo Calvino[30]

Even though the genres are sometimes used interchangeably by Oak Ridgers, the story of John Hendrix should be considered as a myth as opposed to a legend. The anthropologist and folklorist William Bascom (1965) has defined myths as "prose narratives which in the society in which they are told, are considered to be truthful accounts of what happened in the remote past."[31] He goes on to define legends as "prose narratives which like myths are regarded as true by the narrator and his audience, but they are set in a period less remote when the world was much as it is today."[32] While these definitions seem to point the Hendrix story towards legend rather than myth, I argue the opposite. Even though the time period between Hendrix's visions and the realization of Oak Ridge is only a few decades, the narrative is told in a way that stretches time, making it seem as if there is actually a much deeper temporal chasm between the two forms of social organization – in other words the world of Hendrix is *not very much as it is today* in Oak Ridge. Another argument for the

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[30] Italo Calvino, *Invisible Cities,* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1974), 60.

[31] William Bascom, "The Forms of Folklore: Prose Narrative" (*Journal of American Folklore* 78, 1965), 4.

[32] Ibid.

Hendrix story as myth is that myths are typically more sacred in nature, drawing on religious imagery and tropes, whereas legends lean towards the more secular.[33]

Myths both gigantisize and miniaturize the people and pasts with which they come into contact. Through the myth of John Hendrix the history of Oak Ridge grows large; it unfolds with a message from God, disseminated through a local prophet. Oak Ridge emerges from the tale as a heroic city built of speed with a robust and intelligent citizenry destined for greatness. Meanwhile, the history of the communities, which were removed to make room for Oak Ridge are reduced and distorted. Through the telling of the myth, John Hendrix functions as synecdoche, where the entire population of the pre-atomic communities is compressed into a caricature, a man who had predilections of what was to come. The earlier inhabitants of the valley are then dismissed as willing participants in their own exodus, making the story altogether too neat. The pre-atomic citizens of the hills and valleys are mentioned, but they are "half-amputated, they are deprived of memory" as Barthes writes of the figures portrayed in myth.[34]

Not only are the histories of the earlier communities flattened, but they are also victim to a temporal gap. By focusing on Hendrix, the narratives fix the pre-atomic residents at a time before 1915 when he passed away, thus canceling out nearly thirty years of area history. Like a thief who manipulates a security system to show a fixed, constant time, while he is pilfering in a dynamic flow of time, the narratives of Oak Ridge halt the prior communities' history and take the parts they desire for their own. By portraying the people of Wheat, Elza, Scarrboro, New Hope, and Robertsville as from another era, the historical narratives are able to move Oak Ridgers beyond these locales, as if the two forms of social

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[33] Ibid.

[34] Roland Barthes, *Mythologies,* (New York: Hill & Wang, 1972), 122.

organization did not exist simultaneously, but instead as nodes on a linear timeline, the pre-atomic followed by the atomic, thus implying progress. When in fact, "piling their goods on trucks or wagons, or in some cases leaving them behind, outgoing residents crossed paths with the thousands of construction workers pouring in."[35] In Oak Ridge in the 1940s it was possible to look for ruins of a lost civilization – one that had just been eradicated – and one that was oddly cotemporaneous with the secret atomic city that had taken its place.

Along with the bulldozing of the physical structures, the barns and homes, the Manhattan Project nearly obliterated the memory and culture of the pre-atomic communities. A historian of the Wheat community, which became the area surrounding the K-25 gaseous diffusion plant,[36] Dorathy Moneymaker writes, "when a new place is to be built, the first thing that must be done is to be rid of the old place. Even though all buildings are removed, the impression of the people who lived in the old place cannot be erased."[37] While Moneymaker expresses a nice sentiment, the truth is that the impression of those who came before is often in the hands of those who came afterwards. The effect can be thought of much like a toy-drawing pad wrestled away from a younger sibling. Here the impression or memory, of the pre-atomic communities can be compared less to impressions left upon Sigmund Freud's *Wunderblock*,[38] where past markings are recorded in wax to be rediscover at

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[35] Jackson & Johnson, *City Behind a Fence,* 41.

[36] Gaseous diffusion is a method used to enrich uranium by separating uranium-235 from uranium-238 based on the principle that lighter isotopes will cross a porous barrier more readily than heavier ones.

[37] Dorathy Moneymaker, *We'll Call it Wheat,* (Oak Ridge, TN: Adroit, 1979), iv.

[38] The *Wunderblock* was a toy made of a thin sheet of clear plastic which covers a thick board made of wax. The user draws or writes on the surface with a pointed stylus, which makes an impression on the wax below the surface. When the sheet is lifted the image disappears from the surface and a new design can be made. However, traces of the previous design still remain in the wax. Freud uses the *Wunderblock* as a metaphor for

will, and more akin to designs created on an *Etch a Sketch*,[39] which can be erased forever by a simple shake of the wrist.[40]

Before the erasure of the pre-atomic communities, the city of Wheat was the educational seat of the region, home to a well-respected high school, which in modern parlance would be called a 'magnet school'; it drew students from the surrounding areas. The community could also boast Roane College, one of the earliest accredited four-year colleges in the region. Yet in local history, the images and narratives that dominate are of rustic cabins and moonshine stills peopled by "old-timers," "wondering hill folk," and "pioneers of another era" who *voluntarily* gave up their land and homes to a "new type of pioneer" who could "bring about a New Age."[41] Through mythic story telling the history of Wheat and the other pre-atomic communities lose their dynamism; they are arrested. Former Wheat resident, Grace Raby Crawford, the step-granddaughter of John Hendrix, balks at this representation in her memoir, *Back of Oak Ridge*:

> It has been said of the Oak Ridge area, '…from a wilderness to an atomic city,' but many people do not realize that a growing and thriving community

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how memories are stored in the unconscious. Sigmund Freud, "Mystic Writing Pad" *der Wunderblock* [1924]," in *General Psychological Theory: Papers on Metapsychology,* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1963).

[39] The *Etch a Sketch* is a mechanical drawing toy manufactured by the Ohio Art Company, first released in 1960. The toy is square and made of molded plastic with a glass screen placed over aluminum powder. Two knobs are situated at the bottom right and left. By manipulating these knobs a dark line is created on the light gray screen. To erase the image the toy can be either turned upside down or shaken from side-to-side.

[40] Here I do not mean to suggest all is completely lost. The previous design can of course be redrawn from memory if the person who has control of the screen so chooses.

[41] See: Ed Westcott, *Oak Ridge,* (Charleston, SC: Arcadia, 2005), 8; Francis Sill Wickware, "The Manhattan Project," *Time & Life,* (Reprinted for the Employees of Union Carbide and Carbon Corporation, 1945), 94; Robinson, *The Oak Ridge Story,* 8 – 9.

> existed there. There were many acres of cultivated fertile fields, beautiful farm homes, churches, schools, post offices, lumber mills, grain mills and at one time an ammunition (powder) mill. Various other small businesses were also in the community…None of these are found in a 'wilderness.'[42]

Not only do some former residents of the pre-atomic communities take issue with the way they are represented as caricatures, they also wish the evacuation story to be told with more nuance. John Rice Irwin, historian and founder of the Museum of Appalachia was twelve years old when his family received notice that they would have to vacate their land, which was located in the Robertsville area. He sheds light on the psychological effects of the move: "the economic and technical problems inherent in such hurried-up moving, monumental as they were did not compare to the mental trauma. One has to understand the cultural and ancestral roots to which rural folk become attached to the land after a few generations in order to understand the shock which results from such uprooting."[43] Another, more colorful narrative on the forced evacuation comes from Hendrix's own son, Curtis, who laid his resentment down in a poem titled, "The Planned and Organized Society (Sponsored by Elinoir)," referring to Eleanor Roosevelt. Here is a short excerpt:

I had a home in Robertsville.
They call it Oak Ridge now.
T'was home for all my younguns
and their chickens and the cow.

One day a bunch of men rode in
With papers in their hands
And great big shining badges.
They came and took our land.[44]

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[42] Quoted in Smith, *John Hendrix Story,* 31.

[43] Irwin, "New Places, Strange People," 21.

[44] Curtis Allen Hendrix's poem appears in Smith's *John Hendrix Story,* 55 – 56. Smith procured the poem from Evorie Loe, a descendent of John Hendrix.

As these examples have hopefully shown, this process was much more complicated and not as widely accepted as many of the dominant narratives of the city suggest. These counter-mythic accounts or "back talk" are important in that they trouble the simplified story of the area by "open[ing] a gap in the order of myth itself" (Stewart, 1996: 3). Myth, of course is not benign; it has a "type of social usage.".[45] When myth is put into action a great deal of violence is caused to the richer histories it upends. For example, if one were to consult newspapers from wartime, one might find something like this report from 18 October 1942 from the *Knoxville News-Sentinel*:

> Prospects of short-notice wholesale exodus have naturally loosened their tongues. Their stories pathetic, humorous or tragic go to make up the picture. The humor may have been studied but not the pathos. These valley and ridgeside families speak their piece in straight-forward matter-of-fact fashion. AND EACH AND EVRY EVACUEE, WITHOUT EXCEPTION, DECLARED A WILLINGNESS TO LEAVE 'IF IT WILL HELP WIN THIS WAR'.[46]

And if one were to turn on the radio one might hear something like this report from William Gallaher from the nationwide radio show "We the People," which aired on 9 February 1947:

> All the folks in these parts were farmers. They worked the ground and minded their own business, peaceful folks living a simple life. Of course, when the Civil War came along, we sent a few of our boys out to fight. And then in World War I we did our share. But other than that, we didn't pay much attention to the outside world and they didn't bother with us. That was up to 1942, anyway, when one day a man came to our house and said he was from the Government. 'We're going to buy up your land,' he said to me. 'All of it?' I asked. 'Yes, sir,' he said, we're going to buy all the land in this

[45] Barthes, *Mythologies,* 109.

[46] Davis, "Evacuation of Area Residents All Ready to Leave it "Will Help Win the War", 10.

> section. Everyone has to go.' I went outside the house with the visitor and looked around me…up at the green hills my grandfather had come across 100 years earlier, and I looked at the farm I'd worked for half a century. I asked the visitor what the Government was going to do and he said he didn't rightfully know, but it was for winning the war. I had three sons in the Service – two oversees – and I figured if giving up my home and my land would help bring them home sooner, I'd be happy to do it…[47]

At the time, the newspapers and radio waves were patriotic boosters and nothing critical regarding the war effort in general or the Manhattan Project, more specifically, would be given ink or airtime. In fact, any article pertaining to Oak Ridge in the *Knoxville News Sentinel* carried the tag: 'In accordance with censorship regulations, the accompanying article has been referred to a proper military authority in this region – EDITOR.' The danger is that these are the reports that have mostly been taken up by historians and memoirists and incorporated in their work. When no dissenting voices are represented, these accounts are the only ones repeated until they appear as natural history, as common sense.

The Ubiquity of the Hendrix Myth

Myths of the Atomic Age pile up. Mythic stories featuring Oppenheimer and other star 'atom-splitters,' myths of traitorous spies, and myths of gruesome radioactive experiments and disasters are among the myths that have captured the most attention on a national level. Yet, at a local level, no such myth can surpass the popularity of John Hendrix, which has lodged itself in the collective memory of Oak Ridgers. The Hendrix myth is a

[47] Quoted in Robinson, *The Oak Ridge Story,* 35 – 36.

powerful tool of "mnemonic socialization;"[48] it alerts Oak Ridgers, as well as outsiders, looking to understand the city's past to what is important to remember. The story of the 'atomic prophet' is ubiquitous, it is repeated in local histories, memoirs, poems, films, and museum displays.

On 2 November 1944, the Hendrix myth made its first print appearance in the local newspaper the *Oak Ridge Journal*.[49] Initially, the military resisted publishing the article for fear that the dynamism of the story and its depiction of frenzied construction would draw too much attention to the Oak Ridge site.[50] Security was a priority during wartime, so much so that the newspaper was not even supposed to leave the city. The *Journal* carried a staunch warning just below its masthead: "KEEP THIS COPY HERE PLEASE. NOT TO BE TAKEN OR MAILED FROM THIS AREA."[51] Eventually, the story proved too alluring

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[48] Eviatar Zerubavel, *Time Maps: Collective Memory and the Social Shape of the Past.* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003), 5.

[49] The *Oak Ridge Journal,* a weekly newspaper, first appeared 4 September 1943 on mimeographed sheets of typed copy. The *Journal* was originally civilian run and published by the Recreation and Welfare Association, however, citing security concerns the military took over control of the paper in 1944. After World War II, the *Journal* was run by the AEC until 1948 when it was dissolved and commercial newspapers took its place. See: Jackson & Johnson, " "The Urbane Frontier: The Army and the Community of Oak Ridge, Tennessee, 1942 – 1947," (*Military Affairs* 41.4), 10; June N. Adamson, *From Bulletin to Broadside: A History of Early Journalism in Oak Ridge, Tennessee* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee, 1969).

[50] Ed Westcott, who photographed the remains of the Hendrix homestead and his rough hewn gravestone for the article explained: "The lid was placed on Dick's [the reporter] story and my photographs because intelligence wanted to prevent any attention to be attracted to the concentration of industry in Oak Ridge." Quoted in Smith, *John Hendrix Story,* 13.

[51] Censorship of the newspapers was a common practice during wartime with most commercial press following the *Code of Wartime Practices for the American Press* (issued 15 January 1942). General Leslie Groves did allow for

and was published under the pseudonym, 'Joe Oakes, Journal Prophecy Expert;' the reporter was actually Richard 'Dick' Gehman, an assistant editor of the paper.[52]

Gehman began the article with an air of suspicion: "There is no written proof that John Hendrix actually made these predictions, no Hagiographa, no Doomesday book, no local Book of Morman. He never bothered to write them down, but simply told them to everyone he knew and met."[53] The reporter first heard of the story from Guard Force Lt. James Braden, who grew up in the area, he told Gehman: "I got the last whipping I ever got from my mother for belivin' John Hendrix prophesyin'".[54] In the article, Braden gave the script of the Hendrix prophecy, a script that is repeated verbatim in every account of Oak Ridge history. As Barthes has argued, this is "the major power of myth: its recurrence."[55]

The next mention of the Hendrix myth in print can be found in former Project worker George O. Robinson's (1950) *The Oak Ridge Story: The Saga of a People who Share in History,* a hybrid and at times grandiose text of local history and memoir; it is subtitled a 'saga' after all. Robinson's account suggests that Hendrix "found his most ready audiences at

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some mention of the goings on in Oak Ridge. He writes: "The Knoxville papers were permitted to carry items – mostly in the nature of social notes – about employees and events at Oak Ridge, though nothing, of course that would help the average reader determine the purpose of the project or its importance." *Now it Can be Told: The Story of the Manhattan Project,* (New York: Harper Press, 162), 147 – 148.

[52] Richard Gehman was drafted by the U.S. Army in 1942 and sent to Oak Ridge, where he was assigned the wartime duty of newspaper editor of the *Oak Ridge Journal.* After the war, Gehman had a vibrant carrier as a writer and journalist, working for *Playboy, Cosmopolitan, Good Housekeeping, Time, Life,* and *Esquire,* among other publications.

[53] Oakes, "John Hendrix, Prophet of Oak Ridge, Predicted Project and Railroad More than 40 Years Ago!" 3.

[54] Ibid.

[55] Barthes, *Mythologies,* 135.

the crossroads' store near his home and to them he solemnly voiced his prophecies."[56] Robinson eludes that it is from these folks and their kin who listened to Hendrix at the trading post and then passed on the story that gives the myth its authority. This is the only link to Hendrix, the author stresses, as "there was no historian to put his stories to paper" but still "fragments of information remain which give accounts of John's speculations of the future."[57]

Accompanying Robinson's text are photographs by the official Manhattan Project photographer Ed Westcott. Black and white images of Hendrix's gravestone and ramshackle home complete with an empty rocking chair make for a scene straight out of James Agee's and Walker Evans' Great Depression era *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men*. These are the same photographs that appeared in the original Hendrix newspaper article. This is not surprising in that Westcott was the only Oak Ridger authorized to photograph the secret military site during wartime. These photographs are a bit of a trick because they tend to suggest that this broken down condition of Hendrix's home was how it looked when he lived there, when in fact what Wescott has captured on film is a ruin. The images show what was left after the Project procured the land and kicked everyone out, which if you will remember was twenty-eight years after Hendrix died. Also, even though there are existing photographs of the Wheat school and other flourishing examples of pre-atomic community life; the images utilized in area histories are typically of 'old-timers' dressed in overalls and wrinkled by a life lived working in the fields. The fact that these are the only images that consistently appear in the early histories of Oak Ridge makes Westcott's photographs that much more powerful, like the Hendrix myth itself, they repeat.

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[56] Robinson, *The Oak Ridge Story,* 20.

[57] Ibid.

The John Hendrix Myth in the Museum

In the early days of the American Museum of Atomic Energy,[58] which later became the American Museum of Science & Energy (AMSE),[59] a mannequin of John Hendrix sat in a rocking chair at the entrance to the "Oak Ridge Story" section of the museum. The display of the dummy Hendrix might have seemed out of place next to the mostly technical and scientific displays devoted to the uses of medical isotopes, the process of nuclear fusion, and the machinations of the calutrons,[60] which made up the majority of the museum. The poet Marilou Awiakta, whose childhood was spent in Oak Ridge, captured the odd juxtaposition in these lines from a poem about the prophet: "John would feel proud…He's in the Museum. By a giant atom with electrons whirling round it like tiny azure stars, there he sits – leaning on his cane. His prophecy came true. They've hung pictures to show it's so. And I can go out the museum door and see the great city strung along Black Oak Ridge, waiting…"[61] The Hendrix mannequin is no longer a permanent feature of the museum;

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[58] The U.S. Atomic Energy Commission and the Oak Ridge Institute of Nuclear Studies operated the American Museum of Atomic Energy, the first museum to be devoted to atomic energy.

[59] The museum, which changed its name in 1978 is now owned by the Department of Energy and managed under the Oak Ridge National Laboratory by UT-Battelle, LLC. A major portion of the AMSE funding is provided by UT-Battelle, LLC in partnership with B&W Y-12 and Bechtel Jacobs Company, LLC.

[60] Calutrons are mass spectrometers used for the separation of isotopes of uranium. Developed by Ernest O. Lawrence at the University of California, these instruments were used during the Manhattan Project at Oak Ridge's Y-12 plant.

[61] Marilou Awiakta, "Pine Ridge: Pilgrimage to the Prophet," *Abiding Appalachia: Where Mountain and Atom Meet.* (Blacksburg, VA: Pocahontas Press, 1996),43.

instead a wax statue of Einstein greets visitors.[62] AMSE Deputy Director Ken Mayes credits the Department of Energy with the mandate to remove Hendrix from the museum because of the dearth of proof of his predictions. Meanwhile, a local historian reports that the Hendrix "display was removed when a Washington, D.C. bureaucrat felt the folklore had no place in a 'prestigious museum of science,' and the museum staff was coerced into removing the display."[63] Clouding the issue further Mayes suggests, "The reasoning for having to pull the exhibit has become as much folklore within the museum as John's story has to the history of Oak Ridge."[64] The switch from Hendrix to Einstein illustrates the tension in the museum between local history and the broader national and international story of physics and nuclear science.

In 2010, the museum's affinity seemed to swing back to local history as the city of Oak Ridge was afflicted with John Hendrix mania. The atomic prophet returned to the AMSE with a new exhibit, "Prophet of Oak Ridge,"[65] as well a new book, *The John Hendrix Story,* and two short films. The John Hendrix exhibit at the AMSE was a collaborative effort of the museum staff, along with local Hendrix enthusiasts Jack and Myra Mansfield, and newspaper columnist and Y-12 historian D. Ray Smith. The exhibit was composed of text from Hendrix family records, transcriptions of oral history, a short film, and nineteenth century artifacts. The artifacts were examples of objects that Hendrix may have used and

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[62] For further discussion of Einstein's role in the AMSE see: Lindsey Freeman, "Happy Memories Under the Mushroom Cloud: Utopia and Memory in Oak Ridge, Tennessee," *Memory And the Future,* (New York: Palgrave MacMillian, 2010), 158 – 178.

[63] Smith, *John Hendrix Story,* 10.

[64] Email Correspondence. 10 June 2011.

[65] The exhibit ran from 9 November 2010 to 30 January 2011.

been surrounded by rather than authentic relics of the man himself. Some of the objects on display ensconced in plastic cubes were found on the grounds of Hendrix's abandoned homestead, these included: a rusty saw, canning jar, and weathered washboard. Aromatic bales of hay and a rough-hewn fence enclosed the exhibit, making it seem more like a display from the Museum of Appalachia located in nearby Norris, Tennessee than a national museum dedicated to science and energy.[66] Despite the fact that the AMSE is a Smithsonian Affiliate, there was no opposition from Washington, D.C. and no local controversy over the Hendrix exhibit of 2010.[67] The museum reflects the sensibility of the town, one that has always vacillated between playing up its futuristic scientific mission and its southern Appalachian frontier tradition. The Hendrix myth works so well for Oak Ridgers because it is a synthesis and an explanation of the relationship of the two.

The centerpiece of the Hendrix exhibit was the short video "John Hendrix as Portrayed by Jack Mansfield" made by the documentary filmmaker, Keith McDaniel.[68] The video presents the standard script of the Hendrix myth as referred to in this article, but also adds some theatrical flourishes. He begins, "Howdy, my name is John Hendrix. I was born in 1865 over in Bear Creek Valley, of what is now Oak Ridge just at the end of the 'War of Northern Aggression' which as you know was a war between the Yankees and the Americans." Dressed in a period costume, a simple cotton shirt, suspenders and a farmer's hat, the actor portrays Hendrix by peppering his soliloquy with folksy phrases, southern pride, and religious vernacular. The video shows how Oak Ridgers use the story of Hendrix,

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[66] Observations are from field notes dated 6 January 2011.

[67] Personal email exchange with D. Ray. Smith 25 March 2011.

[68] Keith McDaniel is the foremost documentary filmmaker of Oak Ridge, see also: *Secret City: The Oak Ridge Story* and *Operation Open Sesame: Opening the Gates of the Secret City*.

not only as a period piece or means to justify their nuclear past, but also as a vehicle to express their views about the present. Mansfield as Hendrix veers from the mythic script as he ends the six-minute monologue with this pronouncement:

> It was God's plan to build a weapon to stop that war and there hasn't been another big one since. What took place here was an awesome miracle. Only a desperate situation would warrant dropping another bomb like that one and I pray it doesn't happen. Since then God has allowed this nation to prosper and to help keep the rest of the world in order. So keep praying for this nation. Especially, for us to return to our Christian heritage on which we were founded.[69]

In this telling of the myth, not only is Oak Ridge a product of manifest destiny, but atomic bombs as well! This is dangerous territory indeed.

While the Mansfields focus primarily on the religious meaning of the Hendrix Story, another short film produced in 2010, *Prophet of Oak Ridge*, links the myth more closely to institutional power. The film, narrated by the official Y-12 historian D. Ray Smith, includes dramatic reenactment and voice-overs combined with black and white images to tell the story of Hendrix. Even though the Y-12 film was not the one on display in the AMSE, the text on the wall of the exhibit was provided by Smith and geared more towards the institutional justification version of the myth:

> The story of John Hendrix must be appreciated for the wonder it brings. Y-12 is more than just a place and more than mere historical fact. Y-12, in the truest sense, is a vision brought to reality. Over 40 years before it was conceived in the minds of government officials, it was seen in a true-to-life vision by John Hendrix. In the 1940s, Y-12 was a monumental national triumph over seemingly insurmountable obstacles, it succeeded in producing

[69] Jack Mansfield. *John Hendrix*. Secret City Studies. Prod. Keith McDaniel, 2010.

> a new material so powerful that it changed the world forever and it represented the epitome of an idea transformed into spectacular and tremendous action.

D. Ray Smith describes the Hendrix myth as a "memory hook,"[70] which helps visitors to tie the atomic past to the town of Oak Ridge. The Hendrix story also functions as a "usable past" for Y-12 that helps paint a desirable picture of national history.[71] The Y-12 National Security Complex's "Our Hidden Past" film series, of which the *Prophet of Oak Ridge* is a part, is an outreach program designed by the institution to foster a stronger relationship with the community. These videos can be seen at the Complex's New Hope Center, which also includes a few artifacts from Y-12's past and explanatory display boards. The videos are handed out to visitors for free along with promotional and educational brochures. Y-12 is self-conscious about its image and works hard to present itself as virtuous and reliable. As the anthropologist Mary Douglas has written in *How Institutions Think,* "An institution causes its members 'to forget' experiences incompatible with its righteous image and brings to their minds events which sustain the view…that is complementary to itself."[72] What could be more righteous than the myth of John Hendrix with its direct proclamation from God, which seemed to unfold so true to form?

Oak Ridge remains a community with strong ties to the federal government, which is still its largest employer. The city is also still a scientific center with a large corporate science presence. Therefore it is not surprising that the Department of Energy and the large-scale scientific corporations anchored in Oak Ridge are among the most powerful entities shaping

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[70] Personal Interview. 8 January 2011.

[71] Anthony Smith, *The Ethnic Origins of Nations,* (Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 1991): 212 – 213.

[72] Mary Douglas, *How Institutions Think,* (Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press, 1986), 112.

the collective memory of the town today. As philosopher Avishai Margalit writes, "shared memory is built on a division of mnemonic labor,"[73] however, it should be noted that these labors are not equal; the very same powerful institutions that shaped the town now shape the collective memory. Of course there are dissenting voices and alternative histories, but these are quieted behind other stories, such as the myth of John Hendrix, that obscure and distort the richer histories that rest behind.

Conclusion: Atomic Prophecy Fulfilled

"I continue to be fascinated by our fundamental need to create meaningful narratives, ignore inconsistencies, silence some stories, and elaborate others; by our enormous capacity to forget and live on, and remember and live on, and take this dual process for granted; by our inexhaustible efforts to continuously reconstruct our memory of the past between words and silences, images and void."
– Yael Zerubavel[74]

The Hendrix myth is a powerful component of the town's "mnemonic tradition" and "mnemonic socialization"[75]; it teaches Oak Riders to be nostalgic for the future they have already fulfilled, through a process I call *nostalgic bridging.*[76] Through this process the residents of the city of Oak Ridge can be nostalgic because they can see themselves as the product of a deeper past, a past that they have created by linking themselves to the past of those who lived in the geographical space before them. *Nostalgic bridging* is a historical robbery, which causes longing for a golden age not entirely deserved, but seen by those

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[73] Avishai Margalit, *The Ethics of Memory,* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2002), 52.

[74] Yael Zerubavel, *Recovered Roots: Collective Memory and the Making of Israeli National Tradition,* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1995), xvi.

[75] See: Zerubavel, *Social Mindscapes,* 87, and *Time Maps,* 5.

[76] My development of the concept 'nostalgic bridging' is influenced by the work of Eviatar Zerubavel and his concept of 'mnemonic bridging.' See *Time Maps,* 7 – 8; 10; 40-55.

pining as justified, a culmination of an inevitable chain of events. The Hendrix myth is a narrative with much plasticity – it can be bent to illustrate how the city without a past became a continuation of the American pioneering story or it can be bent to explain how the city without history is actually the fulfillment of its pre-ordained destiny.

In 1947, Georges Bataille writes: "Perhaps the absence of myth is the ground that seems so stable beneath my feet, yet gives way without warning."[77] In the aftermath of World War II, Bataille understood that society had not fully realized Weber's great fears of being completely rationalized and disenchanted. Devastated yes, disenchanted, not yet. As he wrote his essays on Surrealism in the late 1940s and early 1950s, Bataille argued that there was still a deep social desire for myth; and there was still a social function for myth to play. He only wished myth didn't always serve the powerful, or provide justification for war as it so often does, and as it did in the case of Oak Ridge.

While the myth of the atomic prophet is alive and well, John Hendrix lies buried in the city of Oak Ridge in an area that is now called Hendrix Creek Subdivision. The rude gravestone captured in the official Manhattan Project photographer Ed Westcott's snapshot is long gone, replaced by a new headstone, a gift of Dorothy Bruce's 1966 – 1967 Jefferson Junior High School students. Currently, a "mnemonic battle"[78] is in process over the lot adjacent to Hendrix's gravestone, which falls on land owned by a man named Bobby Ledford. Ledford aims to build a house on the land, but some historical preservationists and city leaders worry about construction on what they consider at most a sacred site, and at least an important civic historical marker. The Oak Ridge Heritage and Preservation Association is fighting for a fifteen-foot monument to be erected onsite. They worry that without a site

[77] Bataille, *The Absence of Myth,* 48.

[78] Zerubavel, *TimeMaps,* 70 – 72.

indicator the Hendrix grave will be dwarfed by the new home construction and come to resemble "nothing more than a yard ornament."[79] And so the battle over the memory of the pre-atomic citizens and John Hendrix, the man chosen as their representative continues, as does the struggle over land rights and the historical weight of the past.

[79] Susan Crane quoted in John Huotari, "Oak Ridge Council OKs Home Near Grave of 'Prophet' *Oak Ridger* 14 April 2011, http://www.oakridger.com/highlight/x1798429125/Oak-Ridge-Council-OKs-home-near-grave-of-prophet, Accessed 6 June 2011.

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