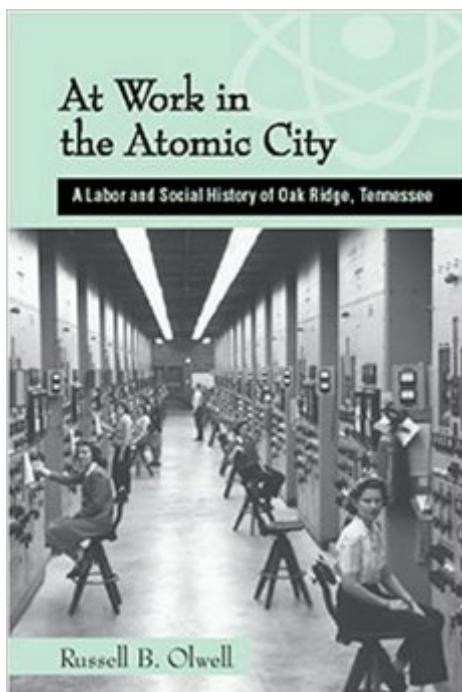


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# At Work In The Atomic City: A Labor And Social History Of Oak Ridge, Tennessee



## Synopsis

Founded during World War II, Oak Ridge, Tennessee, was a vital link in the U.S. military's atomic bomb assembly line—the site where scientists worked at a breakneck pace to turn tons of uranium into a few grams of the artificial element plutonium. To construct and operate the plants needed for this effort, thousands of workers, both skilled and unskilled, converged on the city behind a fence—tucked between two ridges of sparsely populated farmland in the Tennessee hills. *At Work in the Atomic City* explores the world of those workers and their efforts to form unions, create a community, and gain political rights over their city. It follows them from their arrival at Oak Ridge, to the places where they lived, and to their experiences in a dangerous and secretive workplace. Lured by promises of housing, plentiful work, and schooling for their children, they were often exposed to dangerous levels of radioactivity, harmful chemicals, and other hazards. Although scientists and doctors intended to protect workers, the pressure to produce materials for the bomb often overrode safety considerations. After the war, as the military sought to reduce services and jobs in Oak Ridge, workers organized unions at two plants to demand higher wages and job security. However, the new Taft-Hartley Act limited defense workers' ability to strike and thus curbed union influence. The book examines the ongoing debates over workers' rights at Oak Ridge—notably the controversy surrounding the new federal program intended to compensate workers and their families for injuries sustained on the job. Because of faulty record keeping at the facilities and confusion over exposure levels, many have been denied payment to this day. Drawing on extensive research into oral history collections, transcripts of government proceedings, and other primary sources, *At Work in the Atomic City* is the first detailed account of the workers who built and labored in the facilities that helped ensure the success of the Manhattan Project—a story known, heretofore, only in broad outline. Russell Olwell, an assistant professor of history at Eastern Michigan University, has published articles in *ISIS*, *Tennessee Historical Quarterly*, and *Technology and Culture*.

## Book Information

Hardcover: 192 pages

Publisher: Univ Tennessee Press; 1 edition (December 3, 2004)

Language: English

ISBN-10: 1572333243

ISBN-13: 978-1572333246

Product Dimensions: 9.4 x 6.3 x 0.8 inches

Shipping Weight: 12.8 ounces

Average Customer Review: 4.0 out of 5 stars See all reviews (3 customer reviews)

Best Sellers Rank: #449,076 in Books (See Top 100 in Books) #13 in Books > Business & Money > Job Hunting & Careers > Job Markets & Advice #8082 in Books > History > Americas > United States > State & Local #111568 in Books > Reference

## Customer Reviews

In September, 1952, 'The Antioch Review, published an article called 'Acorns to Atoms' written by Clifford Seeber. It was later released in booklet form; he was a native Oak Ridger who took up for the reputation of his birthplace, saying it wasn't "inhabited by ignorant hill-billies" just because it was full with Oak trees (acorns). The fertile valleys produced "better families," the ridges were full of scrubby oak and "poor whites." The Oak Ridge lab (part of the Manhattan Project to develop an atomic bomb) was mainly an assembly line. The workers had no idea what they were doing. Many thought they were producing ice cream sticks and for lollipop novelties. They were exposed to dangerous levels of radioactivity and harmful chemicals which caused many deaths among the government workers. They were pressured to produce materials for the bomb, often overriding safety considerations. Most of the workers were brought in to this "secret, hidden" city (really a very small concentration camp in extremely primitive living conditions) from other places; very few natives were used in this experimental phase which needed discreet and competent people to do dangerous occupations without inquiring the nature of their work. When workers or their families became ill, there was no extended family nosing around. Leaks of the radioactivity uranium and plutonium came all the way over on the wind to Knoxville, causing all kinds of cancer. At my neighborhood school, we had to wear dog tags like soldiers in battle wore in case of chemical extermination or serious leaks. We had drills on crawling under our school desks in case we were bombed like London.

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