Two years before the attack on Pearl Harbor, President Roosevelt had realized the United States needed more powerful weapons than it had. The Germans were working on a deadly atomic bomb, and Roosevelt wanted the United States to develop one first. The U.S. Army Corps of Engineers began working on the new bomb right away. The top-secret project was called the Manhattan Project because early meetings took place in Manhattan, New York.

Choosing the Right Spot

Military leaders in charge of the Manhattan Project began looking for a location where they could research and build the new weapon. They finally selected 50,000 acres in Anderson and Roane Counties in East Tennessee. The piece of land seemed ideal because sharp ridges thickly covered with oak trees surrounded the valley. The site was very isolated and would be easy to hide. Officials called it Oak Ridge. Anderson and Roane Counties had fewer than 5,000 citizens, and there were only a few roads. Power was plentiful because the Tennessee Valley Authority generated massive amounts of electricity every day. The area seemed perfect for a secret project. Government agents gave landowners $50 per acre and two weeks to leave their homes. Many families were heartbroken. They did not want to leave the land their ancestors had owned for generations.

Shhh . . .

As construction began, no one in Anderson County knew what was going on. Workers built a large fence around the area. Everything about it was top secret. The government even hired a different company to build each section of the city so no one group knew too much. City

The site for the city of Oak Ridge was selected because the area was secluded. It was far enough inland to be safe from enemy attack. The plants were separated by ridges of mountains. If there was an accident at one plant, it wouldn’t set off a chain reaction.
planners laid out the city in a way that would confuse the enemy if Oak Ridge was ever discovered. Only five people knew what was really taking place at Oak Ridge, and the city did not appear on a map until 1949.

**Working at the Plants**

People traveled from Knoxville to Oak Ridge to work. They knew only enough to complete their assigned tasks. If a worker asked a question, he or she was told, “Don’t ask questions. Just do your job.” The government didn’t want workers to know they were creating an atomic bomb.

Within two years, 90,000 people worked at the plants at Oak Ridge. The city had schools, churches, stores, and swimming pools and soon became the fifth largest city in Tennessee. Roads were mostly dirt, and there were very few cars, so workers rode buses. So many people rode buses, in fact, that Oak Ridge had the sixth largest bus system in the nation. Most workers were less than 40 years old.

**Linking the Present to the Past**

After World War II ended, work at Oak Ridge changed from production to research. Today, workers do not make weapons. Scientists from all over the world travel to Tennessee to conduct tests and experiments instead. Oak Ridge is the largest hi-tech nuclear research and testing facility in the United States. The estimated cost of its latest project is $1.4 billion!