

What was Los Alamos like in 1945?

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A top secret location. A sequestered community. Primitive roads. Barbed wire fence. Makeshift dormitories and labs. Working seven days a week. Dancing to the music of the big bands.

The people of Los Alamos worked hard and played hard during the final months and days of World War II. Two books published in 2005 coincided with the 60th anniversary of the end of the War and focus on life in Los Alamos.

CONTACTS:

Los Alamos Historical Society
505-662-6272
historicalsociety@losalamoshistory.org

Los Alamos Meeting & Visitor Bureau
505-662-8105, 1-800-444-0707
mvb@losalamos.org
visit.losalamos.com

Jennet Conant, author of *109 East Palace* chronicles the chaotic beginnings of Oppenheimer's by-the-seat-of-his-pants operation, where freshly minted secretaries and worldly scientists had to contend with living conditions straight out of pioneer days.

Conant reveals the character and charisma of the brilliant Robert Oppenheimer. With his leadership, top scientists from all over the world came to the high desert of New Mexico to dedicate their efforts to ending the war.

The homogeneous and supposedly temporary community was fenced with barbed wire and closed to the outside world. Workers were directed to 109 East Palace street in Santa



Fe, where they met Dorothy McKibbin, a young widow who served as a front for the clandestine operation. She would hook them up with a long truck ride over primitive dirt and mud roads to get to the mystery town of Los Alamos.

“They stepped across her threshold into a parallel universe--the desert hideaway where Robert Oppenheimer and a team of world-famous scientists raced to build the first atomic

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bomb before Germany and bring World War II to an end,” reads the jacket cover.

“Despite all the obstacles, Oppie managed to forge a vibrant community at Los Alamos through the sheer force of his personality.”

“I think by the end of World War II Oppenheimer had succeeded in creating a vibrant and utterly unique scientific community atop that sun baked mesa,” says Conant.

“Oppenheimer was such an inspiring leader that he left a lasting impact on Los Alamos, from his love of the mountains which led him to situate the laboratory there in the first place, and to fight to preserve as much of the mesa's natural beauty as possible even as the town mushroomed in size, to his understanding of the importance of community and the vital role it plays in supporting and sustaining the creative process.”

Also recently published is *Silent Voices of World War II* by Los Alamos author Nancy Bartit and co-author Everett M. Rogers. Their book shows the connections between the various New Mexico groups that contributed to the war and includes interviews that recount some of the stories that have become lore in Los Alamos.

For example, among the world famous personalities that came to Los Alamos was Richard Feynman, then a young scientist fresh from Princeton University. He took it upon himself to demonstrate the inadequacy of security systems and regularly broke into the offices of his colleagues and then left a note reading, “Feynman was here.”

Likewise, when he found holes in the fence, he made it a practice to sneak out, then walk back in through the gate until the guards realized he was only going one direction.

Since Feynman’s wife was hospitalized in Albuquerque and, like most of the other scientists, he did not have a vehicle in Los Alamos, he frequently borrowed a car from Klaus Fuchs, one of the few residents who had one. That is, when Fuchs wasn’t using it to sneaking secrets of the plutonium bomb to the Russians.

Fuchs, who was a German communist turned British citizen, would rendezvous with Russian spies at a meeting place in Santa Fe regularly from 1942 to 1945.

The scientists of the wartime era are also well known to have removed trees and cleared new ski runs for the local ski area with the help of the explosives they were developing. The Pajarito Ski Club lodge still displays the original logbooks signed by Fuchs and other famous scientists..

As Bartlit and Rogers explain in their book, several groups of New Mexicans impacted many aspects of the War. The New Mexico National Guard was the first U.S. military

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unit to fight the Japanese, holding on for four months on Bataan, and then suffering through years in POW camps. The Navajo code talkers helped capture bases from which B-29s bombed enemy cities, and several thousand Japanese Americans were interned in a camp near Santa Fe. And of course, the atomic bombs were developed in Los Alamos and one was tested at a site near Alamogordo.

Around the water cooler, people were talking about their relatives overseas. The Allied forces were retaking European lands and surrounding the Nazi troops while the Russians were marching toward Berlin. America was racing to develop the bomb before the Germans. Some of Oppenheimer's relatives were sent to concentration camps. A number of famous atomic scientists at Los Alamos were Jewish emigres, protected by their American and British scientific peers, who had escaped from Nazi oppression.

Then Hitler committed suicide in May of 1945, and Germany surrendered before the atomic bomb was completed and the Allies began to mobilize for the invasion of Japan.



The Los Alamos scientists and enlisted men and women continued to work night and day

making preparations for the test of “Fat Man,” as the bomb was named, near the Trinity Mountains in White Sands, New Mexico, on July 16.

“Persons I interviewed about the Manhattan Project state that Dr. Oppenheimer did not want time taken away from the necessary research to develop the bomb for use in the Pacific in order to discuss the morality of the use of the atomic bomb,” says Bartlit.

“Since the research at the University of Chicago was winding down the summer of 1945, researchers there signed a petition not to use the bomb which never reached President Truman before the order to use the bombs was given.”

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After the bomb's successes, Los Alamos scientists organized themselves into a group to promote an international sharing of the atomic power, which was thwarted by a Russian veto in the United Nation's Security Council, according to Bartlit.

Rogers and Bartlit's interviews with the people of Los Alamos in 1945 supplement the historical record and reveal the patriotism, humor, suffering and courage of a new community.