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# Women of Los Alamos During World War II: Some of their Views

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KATHLEEN E. B. MANLEY

From 1943 to 1945, scientists in the newly-created town of Los Alamos, New Mexico, completed research that led to the explosion of the first atomic bomb over Hiroshima, Japan. Though many women were involved in this war effort, only a few materials detail their responses to the experience. Studies such as Ferenc Szasz's *The Day the Sun Rose Twice*,<sup>1</sup> Lansing Lamont's *Day of Trinity*,<sup>2</sup> James Kunetka's *City of Fire*,<sup>3</sup> Peter Goodchild's *J. Robert Oppenheimer: Shatterer of Worlds*,<sup>4</sup> and Richard Rhodes' Pulitzer Prize-winner *The Making of the Atomic Bomb*,<sup>5</sup> are concerned primarily with well-known people and events; the same is true

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1. Ferenc Morton Szasz, *The Day the Sun Rose Twice: The Story of the Trinity Site Nuclear Explosion, July 16, 1945* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1984).

2. Lansing Lamont, *Day of Trinity* (New York: Atheneum, 1965).

3. James Kunetka, *City of Fire: Los Alamos and the Birth of the Atomic Age, 1943-45* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1979).

4. Peter Goodchild, *J. Robert Oppenheimer: Shatterer of Worlds* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1980).

5. Richard Rhodes, *The Making of the Atomic Bomb* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1986).

of two books by women, Laura Fermi's *Atoms in the Family*<sup>6</sup> and Leona Marshall Libby's *Uranium People*.<sup>7</sup> Exceptions to this focus on major events and the men involved in the project are the autobiographical works of Eleanor Jette<sup>8</sup> and Phyllis Fisher;<sup>9</sup> several articles have also appeared, such as "The Ladies of the Hill,"<sup>10</sup> "A Love Story,"<sup>11</sup> and a 1960 series by Bernice Brode, which was published in the *Los Alamos Scientific Laboratory Community News*.<sup>12</sup> Recently the Los Alamos Historical Society published *Standing By and Making Do: Women of Wartime Los Alamos*,<sup>13</sup> a collection of reminiscences. The authors of the reminiscences, with one exception, lived in Los Alamos during the Manhattan Project; all wrote their essays shortly after the end of the war.

Many people today assume that those who worked on the Manhattan Project must feel guilty about having created the atomic bomb, and that surely if the men do not, then at least women, who are stereotypically nurturers, ought to. Often people think that many women, like Phyllis Fisher, had misgivings about the work the scientists were doing and feel the guilt Fisher expresses in *Los Alamos Experience*.<sup>14</sup> For a number of good reasons, however, women who lived in Los Alamos during World War II have very few reservations about their involvement in the Manhattan Project. The reasons vary considerably, but among them are age, degree of knowledge of the project, patriotism, the people in the community, the surrounding countryside, and the particular time of their lives. The women's own comments make some of these factors clear.

Though Los Alamos was only one of the sites involved in the Manhattan Project, it is often considered the center of work on the first atomic bomb because it became the headquarters for most of the scientists involved. It is also the site from which scientists and military personnel took the first atomic bomb to the Jornada del Muerto, near Alamogordo, for testing. For the most part, women who lived in this

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6. Laura Fermi, *Atoms in the Family: My Life with Enrico Fermi* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1954).

7. Leona Marshall Libby, *The Uranium People* (New York: Scribner, 1979).

8. Eleanor Jette, *Inside Box 1663* (Los Alamos: Los Alamos Historical Society, 1977).

9. Phyllis Fisher, *Los Alamos Experience* (Tokyo: Japan Publications, 1985).

10. Jacqueline Meketa, "The Ladies of the Hill," *New Mexico Magazine*, 53 (April 1975), 30-33.

11. Anne Poore, "A Love Story," *Los Alamos Monitor*, June 26, 1983, B1.

12. Bernice Brode, "Tales of Los Alamos," *Los Alamos Scientific Laboratory Community News* (June-September 1960).

13. Jane S. Wilson and Charlotte Serber, eds., *Standing By and Making Do: Women of Wartime Los Alamos* (Los Alamos: Los Alamos Historical Society, 1988).

14. Fisher, *Los Alamos Experience*, 15-16, 130.

center of work on the bomb filled the usual traditional support roles as wives, nurses, schoolteachers, secretaries; they also sometimes served as technicians. A few of them had graduate degrees in a scientific field and worked in the laboratory.

A significant influence in shaping the attitude of the women who lived in Los Alamos during World War II is the relative youth of the population as a whole. According to David Hawkins, official historian of the project, the average age for all civilians was 31.3; for scientific employees it was 29.4; and the most probable age for both was 27.<sup>15</sup> Fisher puts the average adult age at twenty-five.<sup>16</sup> Although there are no statistics on the average age for the women who lived in Los Alamos, most were in their twenties. One informant felt "old," in comparison to others, at thirty;<sup>17</sup> Inez Taschek,<sup>18</sup> who was twenty-six when she arrived in Los Alamos, said she wasn't worried about the Trinity test—she was young and carefree.<sup>19</sup> Phyllis Fisher was in her middle twenties when she arrived in Los Alamos in 1944 and comments on her immaturity and her idealism; she says she was a young wife content with her ignorance. Like others, too, she compares life in Los Alamos during the war to that on a college campus.<sup>20</sup> The relative youth of the women in the community may have meant, for some of them at least, that they were less involved in politics and world affairs than they might have been at a more mature age.

Another factor in the women's attitude toward the scientific work taking place in Los Alamos was that most of them were extremely busy. Those women who worked in the laboratory full time worked six days a week, with one shopping day off every month.<sup>21</sup> In letters written to her family in 1944 and 1945, Beckie Bradford Diven commented on the long hours.<sup>22</sup> Rose Pingel Watts pointed out that the general attitude

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15. David Hawkins, "Project Y: The Los Alamos Story, Part I: Toward Trinity," *The History of Modern Physics, 1800–1950* (Los Angeles: Tomash Publishers, 1983), 2: Appendix.

16. Fisher, *Los Alamos Experience*, 49

17. Interview with Jane Howes, July 15, 1982. Telephone interview with Jane Howes, March 1988.

18. The names used in this study reflect, as nearly as possible, the name a woman used in Los Alamos during World War II. If the woman married during the war or after, the name she used in Los Alamos is given as her middle name.

19. Interview with Inez Taschek, July 23, 1982.

20. Fisher, *Los Alamos Experience*, 17, 50, 51, 242; Elsie McMillan, "Outside the Inner Fence," in Lawrence Badash, et al., eds., *Reminiscences of Los Alamos, 1943–1945* (Dordrecht: D. Reidel, 1980), 43; interview with Peggy Hemmendinger, July 16, 1982.

21. Beckie Bradford Diven to her mother, May 30, 1944.

22. Beckie Bradford Diven to her parents, 25, 30.

was to keep working if someone needed something.<sup>23</sup> The women who came to Los Alamos as part of the Women's Army Corps (WACs) worked six days a week, like the rest of the laboratory workers.<sup>24</sup> Elsie Pierce, however, who was a motor transport driver, said the army was on duty twenty-four hours a day. She recalled that people didn't worry about days off; everyone was there for a purpose and worked as long as he or she was needed.<sup>25</sup>

Other groups besides the laboratory and army workers were extremely busy. Because there were only two of them, the nurses had to work two twelve-hour shifts if anyone was in the hospital early in the war.<sup>26</sup> Even later, when there were more nurses, they continued to be responsible for taking care of supplies; no disposable syringes existed, so the nurses cleaned them and sharpened the needles; they also patched the gloves used for minor surgery and cleaned and autoclaved intravenous equipment.<sup>27</sup> The well-known Los Alamos baby boom meant that much of the nurses' work involved obstetrics and pediatrics; Amy Komadina Gibson, who arrived in February of 1944, said she was kept very busy.<sup>28</sup>

Many of the women who came to Los Alamos during the war had the responsibility of caring for young children or became pregnant and had a child during the war—sometimes a second or third child. Phyllis Fisher, who arrived in 1944, had a young son at the time and a second child born shortly after the end of the war.<sup>29</sup> Inez Taschek's arrival was delayed by the birth of their daughter, who was six weeks old when they joined her husband in Los Alamos;<sup>30</sup> Lois Bradbury was pregnant and had two boys aged nine and seven and said she was busy,<sup>31</sup> as did others.<sup>32</sup> Official census records were not kept at Los Alamos until 1946,<sup>33</sup> but the school population increased from 140 enrolled, when the buildings were first completed in the fall of 1943, to over 350 at the

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23. Interview with Rose Pingel Watts, July 20, 1982.

24. Interview with Iris Bell and Katherine "Pat" Patterson Krikorian, July 14, 1983.

25. Interview with Elsie Pierce, July 14, 1982.

26. Interview with Sara Dowson Prestwood, July 17, 1982.

27. Interview with Edith Tenney, July 26, 1982.

28. Interview with Amy Gibson, July 15, 1983.

29. Fisher, *Los Alamos Experience*, 161.

30. Interview with Inez Taschek, July 23, 1982.

31. Interview with Lois Bradbury, July 28, 1982.

32. Interview with Jane Howes, July 16, 1982. Interview with Inez Taschek, July 23, 1982.

33. Edith Truslow, *Manhattan District History: Nonscientific Aspects of Los Alamos Project Y, 1942 through 1946* (n.p., n.d.), 101.

end of the 1946 school year.<sup>34</sup> In addition, a memorandum to General Groves from Stafford L. Warren, Colonel, Medical Corps, dated June 22, 1944, discussed the hospital situation and gave some indication of the Los Alamos baby boom:

Item 3.d. Approximately one-fifth of the married women are now in some stage of pregnancy. (The birth rate over the nation elsewhere is decreasing.) Item 3.e. Approximately one-sixth of the population are children, one-third of whom are under two years of age.<sup>35</sup>

Although most of the women who were so busy raising young children were able to take advantage of maid service, especially if they worked part or full time, many had to cope with lines at a community laundry<sup>36</sup> and at the commissary when they did their shopping.<sup>37</sup> Inez Taschek said she wore out her wedding ring squeezing out diapers.<sup>38</sup> Those women with small children who worked in the laboratory usually worked three-eighths time and received some (not always satisfactory) household help.<sup>39</sup> Fisher commented on an inward-looking attitude and concentration on family during the war years, indicating that it was a result of being "cut off from 'normal' society."<sup>40</sup> Part of the abnormality was undoubtedly due to the age of most members of the community and the conditions under which they lived.

Among the living conditions community members coped with were dust caused by constant construction and dry weather<sup>41</sup>—there were no paved streets or sidewalks<sup>42</sup>—mud when the weather was wet,<sup>43</sup> electrical power shortages,<sup>44</sup> sporadic difficulties with the water supply,<sup>45</sup> and soot resulting from the soft coal burned in the furnaces of

34. *Ibid.*, 85.

35. *Ibid.*, 90.

36. Interview with Ferne Theis and Mary Rosen, July 13, 1982.

37. Jette, *Inside Box 1663*, 55.

38. Interview with Inez Taschek, July 23, 1982.

39. Brode, "Tales," June 16, 1960, p. 8; and *ibid.*, June 30, 1960, p. 8.

40. Fisher, *Los Alamos Experience*, 242.

41. Interviews with Josephine Elliott Powers, July 29, 1982; Florence Koontz, July 15, 1982; Jane Howes, July 15, 1982; Charlotte Johnson, July 20, 1982; and Rose Bethe, July 28, 1982.

42. Brode, "Tales," June 2, 1960, p. 8.

43. Brode, "Tales," June 30, 1960, p. 5; Fisher, *Los Alamos Experience*, 59; Jette, *Inside Box 1663*, p. 38.

44. Jette, *Inside Box 1663*, p. 76.

45. Fisher, *Los Alamos Experience*, 107; Brode, "Tales," September 22, 1960, pp. 5-7; Jette, *Inside Box 1663*, pp. 86, 97, 109.

the earliest-built houses. Eleanor Jette bought a nail brush for scrubbing the soot off her walls because scrub brushes were out of stock at the PX.<sup>46</sup> Coping with these problems meant extra work (less time) for housewives; two of the women pointed out the difficulties the water problems presented for mothers of young children.<sup>47</sup>

The teachers, all of whom were women, were also busy. The first school term, which began in the fall of 1943, was late because the school buildings were just being completed; Central School opened at the end of September.<sup>48</sup> There was much discussion of the curriculum, including suggestions from European members of the community,<sup>49</sup> and since teachers were "quite unfettered by directives or syllabi,"<sup>50</sup> a considerable amount of their time must have gone into planning new activities and devising curricula. During the first year, the faculty were women who were members of the community because of their husbands' work; since the idea at the beginning was to keep the community as small as possible (in order to prevent leaks of information and reduce the amount of necessary housing construction), having the wives work was the most desirable situation. Later, teachers were hired from outside. Alice Smith provides an example of the difficulties faced by a scientist's wife and mother of two who taught school; she taught full time the first year but would agree to teach only two-thirds time the second year because of inconsistent household help.<sup>51</sup> Another group of mothers started the nursery school and took the responsibility of providing staffing for it.<sup>52</sup> In addition, many of the women on "the Hill" (as local and area residents still call Los Alamos) helped provide recreational opportunities for the young people. Eleanor Jette served as a den mother for a boy scout troop;<sup>53</sup> Dorothy Hillhouse, in addition to teaching second grade, had a Brownie Scout troop and was asked by the post commander to organize a square dance club (still in existence after over forty years) in order to furnish some recreation; Gracia Hane was in charge of a group called Buds, for boys under ten;<sup>54</sup> Jean

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46. Jette, *Inside Box 1663*, pp. 20–22.

47. Interviews with Rose Bethe and Lois Bradbury, July 28, 1982.

48. Interview with Dorothy Hillhouse, July 16, 1982.

49. Interview with Jean Parks Nereson, July 20, 1982.

50. Alice Kimball Smith, "Teaching at Los Alamos, 1943–45," *Los Alamos Historical Society Newsletter*, 6 (March 1986), 6.

51. *Ibid.*, 5.

52. Interviews with Frances Mueller, July 14, 1982, and Kay Manley, August 15, 1982.

53. Jette, *Inside Box 1663*, p. 47.

54. Interview with Florence Koontz, July 15, 1982; Brode, "Tales," July 14, 1960, p. 10; Dorothy Hillhouse to author, February 22, 1988.

Parks Nereson, a teacher, spent the summer of 1945 as a recreational worker and commented on how many of the women volunteered their time.<sup>55</sup> Florence Koontz directed recreational activities in the summer of 1944 in order to keep the children busy so their mothers could work.<sup>56</sup> Some women also substituted in the schools,<sup>57</sup> and women were involved in the operation of the small community library.<sup>58</sup>

Besides being busy with more than full-time work or caring for small children, women in Los Alamos were involved in the schools, the library, and organized recreation. A number of the wives and mothers also helped reduce the total population of the community by working in the laboratory or as teachers or nurses.

Another important factor, at least in the married women's attitudes toward being in Los Alamos and toward the work that was taking place there, was being with their husbands at a time when the war separated many families. Dorothy Hillhouse, hired as a schoolteacher when her husband was hired as head of the meat market in the commissary, was happy that her husband, whose draft classification was 1-A, would not be drafted;<sup>59</sup> and in spite of some uncertainty during part of their sojourn in Los Alamos, Phyllis Fisher had the same reason to feel elated.<sup>60</sup> Edith Tenney's husband, a member of the Army's Special Engineering Detachment, came out to New Mexico by himself; she had had nurses' training and was only allowed to come because of the shortage of nurses. When she arrived, she lived in a dormitory where her husband was the only man allowed to visit. She was happy that they could be together now and then and that he would not be going overseas.<sup>61</sup> Eleanor Jette's reply to one of the army's representatives on the Town Council sums up the attitude of many of the women; he asked her, during a discussion of living conditions on the "Hill," what she was doing there. She answered, "My man is doing a job over there in the Tech Area and I'm here to take care of him."<sup>62</sup>

The calibre of the people who were members of the community of Los Alamos during World War II appears to have been one of the

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55. Interview with Jean Parks Nereson, July 20, 1982.

56. Interview with Florence Koontz, July 15, 1982.

57. Interviews with Ferne Theis and Mary Rosen, July 13, 1982; Florence Koontz, July 15, 1982; and Jean Bacher, July 23, 1982.

58. Interviews with Ferne Theis and Mary Rosen, July 13, 1982; Florence Koontz, July 15, 1982; and Lois Bradbury, July 28, 1982; Brode, "Tales," August 11, 1960, p. 8.

59. Interview with Dorothy Hillhouse, July 16, 1982.

60. Fisher, *Los Alamos Experience*, 29, 73.

61. Interview with Edith Tenney, July 26, 1982.

62. Jette, *Inside Box 1663*, p. 69.

most significant factors in the women's attitude. Of twenty-nine women interviewed, seventeen, either gratuitously or when asked about the best part of the war-time years on the Hill, mentioned the people they knew or the camaraderie they experienced. Many of the scientists' wives and the laboratory workers already knew members of the community when they arrived, and they were delighted to see them again;<sup>63</sup> the people in the community were extremely interesting to be around. Peggy Hemmendinger, for example, mentioned the brilliance of the people involved;<sup>64</sup> Sara Dowson Prestwood thought she was privileged to have known such special people;<sup>65</sup> Jean Parks Nereson commented on people's knowledge and how intensively they studied everything—the Indians, for instance;<sup>66</sup> Beckie Bradford Diven still has friends from that period;<sup>67</sup> Josephine Elliott Powers appreciated the chance to work with many famous people on a worthwhile project.<sup>68</sup> At least two compared their experience to being in a family.<sup>69</sup> Elsie McMillan, looking back in 1975, said, ". . . I don't think I shall ever live in a community that had such deep roots of cooperation and friendship."<sup>70</sup>

In addition to enjoying the people who made up the community, the women in Los Alamos during the war also very much enjoyed the surrounding country. For many of them, recreation centered around hiking, horseback riding, picnicking, or skiing; and even those with small children spent a lot of time outdoors. At least nine women mentioned hiking as a major recreation; Brode and Jette and at least four others mentioned horseback riding.<sup>71</sup> Inez Taschek and her husband went on hikes and picnics, taking their baby in a baby buggy; they also became rock hounds,<sup>72</sup> as did Jean Bacher and her husband.<sup>73</sup> Beckie Bradford Diven loved the mountains and having skiing at her door,<sup>74</sup> and Iris Bell, during one of several return visits to Los Alamos, said,

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63. Interviews with Ferne Theis, July 13, 1982; Peggy Hemmendinger, July 16, 1982; Charlotte Johnson, July 20, 1982; Inez Taschek, July 23, 1982; Kay Manley, July 29, 1982; Beckie Bradford Diven to her parents, April 3, 1944; Brode, "Tales," June 2, 1960, 7.

64. Interview with Peggy Hemmendinger, July 16, 1982.

65. Interview with Sara Dowson Prestwood, July 19, 1982.

66. Interview with Jean Parks Nereson, July 20, 1982.

67. Interview with Beckie Bradford Diven, July 20, 1982.

68. Interview with Josephine Powers, July 29, 1982.

69. Interviews with Mary Rosen, July 13, 1982, and Frances Mueller, July 14, 1982.

70. McMillan, "Outside the Inner Fence," 43.

71. Brode, "Tales," July 28, 1960, p. 8; Jette, *Inside Box 1663*, p. 46.

72. Interview with Inez Taschek, July 23, 1982.

73. Interview with Jean Bacher, July 22, 1982.

74. Interview with Beckie Bradford Diven, July 20, 1982.

"I loved the outdoors and I've never gotten over being here."<sup>75</sup> Jane Howes: "Anybody who likes scenery could not be bored at Los Alamos."<sup>76</sup> Bernice Brode writes that on her first trip to Los Alamos she was

bewitched by the scenery—the stretches of red earth and pink rocks with dark shrubbery scattered along the ochre cliffs; lavender vistas in the distant Sangre de Cristo mountain range. Color was everywhere. Occasionally adobe houses arose from the earth with strings of scarlet chili peppers hung outside to dry. The flat roofs were strung with ears of yellow, blue, white and dark red corn, also drying in the sun for tortillas.<sup>77</sup>

Two women mentioned the scenery as factors in their frequent or permanent return to the area: Rose Bethe, who returns often in the summers, said that the best thing during the war years was the sky; when she went back to Ithaca, New York, after the war, it came down on her head.<sup>78</sup> Amy Komadina Gibson, who returned to St. Louis after the war in order to continue her schooling, found she missed the mountains and blue sky and had to go back.<sup>79</sup> Even the author of a relatively recent and mostly negative article on Los Alamos, Vivian Gornick, comments on the "incomparable" views: "the drama of open mesa, deep canyon, big sky."<sup>80</sup>

Not only were many of the women captivated by the country surrounding Los Alamos, but a number commented on the sense of freedom they felt in Los Alamos—a somewhat paradoxical feeling, because by most standards they were extremely restricted. Mail was censored, for example; travel without permission was confined to a radius of about one hundred miles; the site was fenced and guarded and residents had to show a pass to enter or leave it; any extended conversation with people in Santa Fe, even if they were old friends, was prohibited. The fence and the army patrols, however, allowed the freedom of not locking one's doors<sup>81</sup> and provided a certain sense of

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75. Interview with Iris Bell and Katherine "Pat" Patterson Krikorian, July 14, 1983.

76. Interview with Jane Howes, July 16, 1982.

77. Brode, "Tales," June 2, 1960, p. 6.

78. Interview with Rose Bethe and Kay Manley, July 28, 1982.

79. Interview with Amy Komadina Gibson, July 15, 1983; Amy Komadina Gibson to author, February 27, 1988.

80. Vivian Gornick, "Town Without Pity," *Mother Jones* (August–September 1985), 17.

81. Interviews with Ferne Theis and Mary Rosen, July 13, 1982, and Jane Howes, July 16, 1982.

security; Edith Tenney, for instance, didn't worry about accepting a ride from someone in a jeep when she went to her graveyard shift at the hospital—even though blackout regulations made the night "black as your hat. . . . you knew it was perfectly safe."<sup>82</sup> Many of the women also delighted in the informality of dress in Los Alamos, and in particular in wearing jeans everywhere, from PTA meetings to work. Rose Pingel Watts commented on jeans' practicality: "You can do more things."<sup>83</sup>

Another factor in the women's state of mind about the work taking place at the laboratory was the amount of knowledge they actually had about the project. Most of them obviously knew that the project was secret and that it had to do with the war effort. Beyond that knowledge, however, comprehension of the precise nature of the project varied considerably. For example, Inez Taschek, who has a master's degree in physics, indicated that because of her degree her husband probably told her more than some other husbands told their wives.<sup>84</sup> Peggy Hemmendinger had worked on weapons development in Washington, D.C. before she was married and knew that the work at Los Alamos was weapons-related and that the weapon was an atomic bomb. She has an undergraduate degree in physics; and she also heard enough, during evening social talk (probably because those who had known her in Washington forgot that she was not working in Los Alamos) to understand the nature of the project.<sup>85</sup> Katherine "Pat" Patterson Krikorian, a WAC who worked preparing vouchers for payment for goods coming to Los Alamos or received at the warehouse in Santa Fe, said she knew nothing about the project when she was in the fiscal section; but later, when she was transferred to the Army Contracting Officers office, which was "over above C Shop," she and others used to speculate about what was being built in the shop: "Common sense would tell you that it was some sort of weapon by the shape of it."<sup>86</sup> Jean Parks Nereson, however, one of the schoolteachers, merely noticed the absence of the men at a picnic near the time of the Trinity test but

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82. Interview with Florence Koontz, July 15, 1982; Brode, "Tales," June 2, 1960, p. 8; interview with Edith Tenney, July 26, 1982.

83. Interview with Lois Bradbury, July 28, 1982; Brode, "Tales," June 16, 1960, p. 8; interviews with Peggy Hemmendinger, July 16, 1982; Beckie Bradford Diven, July 20, 1982; and Rose Pingel Watts, July 20, 1982.

84. Interview with Inez Taschek, July 23, 1982.

85. Interview with Peggy Hemmendinger, July 16, 1982; telephone interview with Peggy Hemmendinger, March 6, 1988.

86. Interview with Katherine "Pat" Patterson Krikorian and Iris Bell, July 14, 1983; Katherine "Pat" Patterson Krikorian to author, February 23, 1988.

otherwise knew nothing about the impending event.<sup>87</sup> Dorothy Hillhouse, another schoolteacher, knew nothing,<sup>88</sup> though she found a suspicious-looking notebook in her schoolroom one day. She felt she should take care of her own business, not snoop. Ferne Theis, who was at home with two small children and whose husband worked in the laboratory, knew nothing and said her husband maintained his silence even after she mentioned news of the Trinity explosion.<sup>89</sup>

The amount of knowledge these women had, then, obviously varied considerably. Some of the scientists' wives, particularly those who had a technical background, knew about the significance of the work and what it was leading to, although they did not know details; some of the laboratory workers knew; others pieced together a vague knowledge and some were completely ignorant.

Some of the women who lived in Los Alamos during World War II had relatives or friends who were in the armed forces; this fact certainly affected their attitude toward the work in Los Alamos, since they naturally wanted the war to come to a speedy conclusion. Others had relatives or friends who had already died. Josephine Elliott Powers had two brothers, both with families, who were called to active service; one of them was in the South Pacific at the end of the war. She said, ". . . so I was so glad that we had a weapon that might end this war. So I did not then, I do not now, have any qualms about using that horrible weapon. I just, just can't work up any shame about it."<sup>90</sup> Elsie Pierce joined the WACs because of a brother killed on the Bataan march and a fiancé killed in the New Guinea area.<sup>91</sup> Kitty White's younger brother was also killed;<sup>92</sup> and Jean Tucker, Rose Pingel Watts, Katherine "Pat" Patterson Krikorian, Eleanor Jette, and Adrienne Kennedy (now Lowry) each had a brother who was in the service.<sup>93</sup> Also, a large number of European and British personnel were involved in the project and therefore living in or visiting Los Alamos; their presence created considerable awareness of the agony the war in Europe was causing. For the Peierls, for example, who were part of the British Mission (a

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87. Interview with Jean Parks Nereson, July 20, 1982.

88. Interview with Dorothy Hillhouse, July 16, 1982.

89. Interview with Ferne Theis and Mary Rosen, July 13, 1982.

90. Interview with Josephine Powers, July 29, 1982.

91. Interview with Elsie Pierce, July 14, 1982.

92. Interview with Kitty White, July 26, 1982.

93. Interviews with Jean Tucker, July 15, 1982; Rose Pingel Watts, July 22, 1982; Iris Bell and Katherine "Pat" Patterson Krikorian, July 14, 1983; Jette, *Inside Box 1663*, 7, 85; Dorothea Wolfgarm, "Box 1663, Santa Fe," *Washington University Magazine* 52 (Spring 1982), 39.

group sent from Britain to help with the project), living in Los Alamos meant a reunion with their two children, whom they had not seen for four years; they had sent the children to Canada when it appeared Britain might be invaded.<sup>94</sup>

Patriotism is another factor in the women's attitudes; it was important to be doing something for the war effort. For example, Kitty White found her parents' ignorance of her and her husband's efforts to hasten the end of the war very difficult, and she was relieved, when the war was over, that her parents could then know.<sup>95</sup> Rose Pingel Watts, who almost joined the Navy before she was hired to go to Los Alamos, said, "I was doing my bit"; and "You know we were all so patriotic then."<sup>96</sup> Edith Tenney, one of the nurses, commented, "I sort of felt part of things, that maybe I was doing something for the effort, the war effort. . . ."<sup>97</sup> Jane Keller Rasmussen, a WAC, said that her main purpose for joining the army was "to work and to help."<sup>98</sup>

Many factors—involvement with small children, their own youth, the fact that they were able to be with their husbands, concern for relatives and friends in the armed forces, great enjoyment of the country and people that surrounded them, a certain amount of freedom, sometimes ignorance of the precise goal of the project, and their patriotism—all contributed to the women's lack of reservations about the work that was taking place in the laboratory at Los Alamos. Looking back, most still have few qualms about the development of the atomic bomb. They believe that it saved lives and ended the war. Josephine Elliott Powers: "We were in a war that we did not start. . . . I don't at all recommend using it now. I hope they don't."<sup>99</sup> Beckie Bradford Diven: "We honestly, and I still feel, that we did a part to shorten the war. . . . And if it didn't come then, it was going to come as a possibility sometime. So I don't have any guilt feelings, whatsoever, about what was done at that time. One makes a decision and we did it. And I still feel like we saved lives."<sup>100</sup> In contrast to their feelings about the development of the bomb, some of the women were not altogether happy about the way it was used; for example, Peggy Hemmendinger felt elated when the war was over, but "there was nobody really felt altogether good about it, I thought; there was no relief except that the

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94. Jette, *Inside Box 1663*, 61.

95. Interview with Kitty White, July 26, 1982.

96. Interview with Rose Pingel Watts, July 22, 1982.

97. Interview with Edith Tenney, July 26, 1982.

98. Interview with Jane Keller Rasmussen, July 22, 1982.

99. Interview with Josephine Powers, July 29, 1982.

100. Interview with Beckie Bradford Diven, July 20, 1982.

war, the end of the war was in sight . . . I've never felt very comfortable about the whole thing."<sup>101</sup> Charlotte Johnson didn't like the Hiroshima drop; at that point she thought ". . . we might not be right. . . ."<sup>102</sup> Jean Tucker, who grew up in New Mexico and graduated from Santa Fe High School, had many friends who had been in the Bataan Death March and a brother who was in the service in the South Pacific. She worried about whether using the bomb was the right thing but thought "the most important thing in the world right then was to get our boys home. . . . And I still feel that way."<sup>103</sup> Because she could remember the end of the First World War and thinking then that surely there would be no more war, Kay Manley's reactions were mixed; she found herself thinking "no more war" after the bombings of Japan but also that she might be mistaken once again. If the United States had had to invade Japan, she said,

it was going to be a long, slow, difficult, and very costly operation, both as to money and to lives and they [the scientists] just felt that it was something that if they could get it done in time to stop the war—then that was something that they were willing to put an enormous amount of time and energy on, which they did. And as to whether it should have been used the way it was used or not, that wasn't their decision. But they knew that if they could get it ready it could be used to end the war in some fashion and that's what they wanted.<sup>104</sup>

She went on to say that after VJ Day, "A lot of people were upset about the way the bomb had been used. They felt that it shouldn't have been, that it should have been demonstrated, or something like that instead of being actually dropped. But of course, there was the argument on the other side that they didn't know whether it was going to be a dud or not."<sup>105</sup> Phyllis Fisher was tremendously upset by the bombing of Nagasaki,<sup>106</sup> and Lois Bradbury expressed similar sentiments.

Well, of course I was grateful and thankful that the war was ended. I had misgivings about the Hiroshima drop. I always did and particularly the second one at Nagasaki. I felt that that probably

101. Interview with with Peggy Hemmendinger, July 16, 1982.

102. Interview with Charlotte Johnson, July 29, 1982.

103. Interview with Jean Tucker, July 15, 1982; Jean Tucker to author, March 22, 1988.

104. Interview with Kay Manley, August 15, 1982.

105. Interview with Kay Manley, August 15, 1982.

106. Fisher, *Los Alamos Experience*, 117–21.

shouldn't have been done. But I must say I didn't go into a complete breakdown over it. . . . And I still think that there was a point to the whole thing. And I think whether we had done it or somebody else they would have eventually. And it was a triumph of scientific experiment and, you know, I didn't have guilt feelings, in other words, but I did feel it was too bad that they had to really use the bomb. I always felt that way.<sup>107</sup>

Jane Wilson, co-editor of the recently-published book *Standing By and Making Do*,<sup>108</sup> commented in a newspaper account of the book's publication, "We had no shame for the bomb then, which a lot of us had afterwards. At the time, we thought we were saving civilization."<sup>109</sup>

In spite of their misgivings about the way the first atomic bomb was used, most of the women who lived in Los Alamos during World War II look back on the war-time experience in Los Alamos as one of the best parts of their lives. The people they met, the country surrounding them, and a feeling of adventure and excitement all contribute to a sense of community that still exists for many of them. Many of the women met their future husbands during those years; others were having first or second children. All of these factors contribute, not surprisingly, to most of the women's having few of the guilt feelings many people today expect them to have. Jean Tucker, for instance, felt that it was a great period—a time when she could stay home with her son. She had "worked eleven years as a secretary and wanted more than anything to be able to be with him."<sup>110</sup> Mary Rosen:

We were all here on a temporary basis and were pretty much on a par with everyone else as far as the type of housing we occupied; we all had small children and were of the same age group, YOUNG. We had to provide our own entertainment and keep it simple—might even be described as crude—due to lack of facilities. We had G.I. furniture, a Black Beauty stove and government housing; dirt roads and boardwalks substituted for sidewalks.<sup>111</sup>

Jane Howes:

It [life] will never be that simple again. Never! I think that to me

107. Interview with Lois Bradbury, July 29, 1982.

108. Wilson and Serber, *Standing By and Making Do*.

109. (Santa Fe) *Journal North* (December 6, 1988), 6.

110. Interview with Jean Tucker, July 15, 1982; Jean Tucker to author, March 22, 1988.

111. Mary Rosen to author, February 20, 1988.

was the best part of the time. I liked it. I liked it then and I liked it after the war, but not as much as I did during the war. But you felt a part of it, even if you weren't working for it. You felt a part of whatever it was was going on. And you hated the war, with a passion, but you felt whatever you were doing was going to help end it. And I think that was the main thing. Now, today, people look on those days at Los Alamos and they think how awful they were and how awful of you to even work on an atomic bomb and all that sort of stuff. But I don't think they realize just what was going on. There's so many things that young people and middle-aged people don't realize today.<sup>112</sup>

Sara Dowson Prestwood: ". . . I just wouldn't change it for the world. I wouldn't change the memories . . . raising our children here and living here."<sup>113</sup> Rose Pingel Watts: "It was something that happens only once in a lifetime, I think. . . ." "And I'd do it again; if there were another project I would go again."<sup>114</sup> Ruth Marshak:

In a broader sense, for most of us elders, the Los Alamos experience was one of the most educational of our lives. Sequestered, regimented, we had to make the most of the little we had. Perhaps it was a good thing, three years ago when I left home and started westward, that I knew so little of what awaited me. There was so much amiss in the ugly town where the bomb was born. Yet I have only to think of the neighborliness and warmth and esprit de corps of Los Alamos to be heartily glad for the chance that took me there. Nor is it surprising that most people really enjoyed their years on the mesa. Los Alamos was our town, our own creation. To no other community will we ever give so much of ourselves.<sup>115</sup>

Jean Davis: "'It was just a wonderful time. The best years of my life. Things were so different from what they ever were before or could ever be again. I'm glad I was able to live through it.'"<sup>116</sup>

Though quite a few of the women who lived in Los Alamos during World War II—and who, for the most part, still live there or in the surrounding area—expressed reservations about the way the atomic bombs were used, generally they did not express feelings of guilt. During the two war-time years that most of them spent in Los Alamos,

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112. Interview with Jane Howes, July 16, 1982.

113. Interview with Sara Dowson Prestwood, July 19, 1982.

114. Interview with Rose Pingel Watts, July 22, 1982.

115. Jane Wilson, "Secret City," *The Atom and Eve* (manuscript, Los Alamos Historical Society archives, on deposit as of May 1983).

116. Meketa, "The Ladies of the Hill," 33.

they were young and were occupied with work, family, or both; many did not know, in any detailed fashion, what the outcome of the project would be; they were building a community they thought was temporary; they enjoyed immensely the people in the community, the country which surrounded them, and certain freedoms that they had; they were concerned about relatives and friends in the service, saw the effects of the war in Europe, and were very patriotic. Their own words indicate not only these factors in their attitude but also their feeling that living in Los Alamos during the war was an extremely special time. It is not surprising that these women view their participation in the Manhattan Project quite differently from the many outsiders who think that these women and their men were "awful" to have worked on the atomic bomb.