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Los Alamos: In Search of an Identity

ROBERT J. TORREZ

When Carlos Vásquez, Director of the University of New Mexico Oral History Program, asked me if I would take part in the Impact Los Alamos project and speak about the history of Los Alamos, I hesitated. Los Alamos? Los Alamos has a history?

I work at the New Mexico State Records Center and Archives in Santa Fe, a repository that contains the Southwest's richest and most extensive collection of manuscript materials dating from the Spanish Colonial period. Yet, all I could think was that Los Alamos did not possess a history; it seemed a relative newcomer that had, by virtue of the work done there, made an extraordinary impact on the events of world history, but had no historical identity. It seemed a historical void (at the risk of using a potentially scientifically inaccurate metaphor), a black hole into which programs and people associated with those programs went and disappeared.

As one attempts to place Los Alamos into the context of greater New Mexico, one cannot help but compare it to the surrounding places which are indeed historical. Nearby Chimayó has its Santuario and holy dirt; Santa Fe has its Palace of the Governors and "Santa Fe Style." Even Española, one of the few places in New Mexico that demolishes its last remaining historic buildings in order to build a "historic park," has its low riders. Each has an identity that Los Alamos lacks.

Los Alamos is at the center of a place of great antiquity, one measured in geologic time. A volcanic eruption, which would have dwarfed the historic explosion at Trinity Site, created the Jemez Mountains and

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laid the basis for the Valle Grande. Within this broad context we can wonder about Los Alamos' apparent lack of a historical identity, even though the region abounds with history.

The area includes prehistoric sites such as Guaje, a Coalition Period settlement (c. AD 1200–1350) that illustrates when indigenous people of New Mexico, including those from the Anasazi region, moved to higher elevations for relief from drought. There is Pajarito Springs, inhabited between 1350 and 1550, which contains many agricultural features. There is also Puye and the several contemporary Tewa villages, or pueblos, which line the banks of the Rio Grande. Clearly, the region has long been attractive to people seeking a place to settle and make their own.

Then came the Europeans. Not far from Los Alamos is located the ancient Tewa village of Okhe, where the Spanish colonizer Juan de Oñate brought his expedition to a halt on 11 July 1598 and established the Spanish settlement of San Juan de Los Caballeros, St. John of the Gentlemen, so named because the Tewas welcomed these newcomers in the manner of gentlemen.¹

Along with their colonies, the Spanish brought a system of land distribution that included land grants. At least four Spanish grants—the boundaries of which lie partially within, or contiguous to contemporary Los Alamos County—were given. The earliest was the 1724 Juan Tafoya grant, followed by Cañada de Cochiti in 1728, the Rito de Los Frijoles in 1742, and the Ramon Vigil the same year.

The most important of these, as it relates to Los Alamos, is the Ramon Vigil grant. It began when Pedro Sanchez, a resident of the nearby Villa Nueva de Santa Cruz de La Cañada, petitioned Spanish colonial Governor Gaspar Domingo Mendoza (1739–43) for a land grant in 1742. Sanchez noted in his petition that he had a wife, twelve children, three orphaned nephews, and three female servants to support. His land in Santa Cruz, he maintained, was no longer adequate to provide for this large group of dependents. Mendoza granted the land on which Los Alamos is now located to Sanchez on 20 March 1742.²

As was standard Spanish practice, Governor Mendoza ordered the *alcalde* of this jurisdiction to place the grantee in possession of the land. The *alcalde* then determined if the Indians of nearby San Ildefonso Pueblo had any adverse claims to the land. Once he determined no adverse claim, the *alcalde* placed Sanchez and his family in possession through a marvelous process by which the grantees would pluck grass and scoop up handfuls of earth which they would toss into the wind. Possibly, they would throw rocks as they shouted “long live the king.” In the Spanish land grant system, you could not buy Florida swamp land or Arizona beachfront property. To acquire land, you had to see it, walk on it, and make a physical demonstration of your intent to settle, cultivate, and if necessary, defend the land with your life.

The grant became the property of Sanchez once he met a preestablished residency requirement. As a private grant, he could sell it, which he or his heirs apparently did. After a series of transactions, Ramon Vigil eventually acquired the land and applied to the United States Surveyor General for the grant's confirmation following the American occupation of New Mexico and the signing of the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo (1848). In 1860, the United States Congress confirmed the grant to Vigil.³ Contemporary Los Alamos had its beginnings with the attempts to develop the Ramon Vigil land grant during the latter part of the nineteenth century.

By the late 1880s, the Santa Fe Southern Narrow Gauge Rail Line, affectionately known as the "Chili Line," had made the vast stands of pine in the surrounding mountains accessible to lumbering. By the early twentieth century, the lumber had been thinned out, and Ashley Pond and his partners purchased a portion of the grant to create the Pajarito Club, "a recreational club for the wealthy."⁴ The Los Alamos Ranch School and the Frank Bond period followed. Bond acquired the Vigil grant and used it for grazing before selling it to the federal government in 1934. Various government agencies such as the United States Soil Conservation Service and United States Forest Service managed the grant until the War Department purchased it in 1943.

Until this time, the value of the grant and the value of the land itself was minimal. According to Frank Bond, the grazing leases he sold fell short of what he needed to pay the property taxes. A scholar of Los Alamos, Marjorie Bell Chambers, maintains that the value of the land on which Los Alamos is located was due not to its commercial value but its intrinsic value—its spectacular setting and its isolation. These attractions have inspired men to scheme, plan, and dream of ways to put the land to "perfect use."⁵

And so it was when World War II intervened and provided the opportunity to utilize that isolation which attained for Los Alamos, its ultimate value. For several years, that value, or at least public knowledge of that value, was confined to post office box 1662 in Santa Fe. During the cold war Los Alamos struggled to break the confines of that post office box and establish its own identity. That identity does not evade or deny its image as "The Atomic City." Rather, it is separate from the Los Alamos National Laboratories. It is an identity as its own community, however new or different, with a role within the broader scope of New Mexico history.

When I began learning about Los Alamos' history, I proceeded as I would with any inquiry regarding a place about which I knew next to nothing. First, I read the earliest compilation of local history material at the archives—the Works Progress Administration files on New Mexico counties. Since these materials were collected in the late 1930s, the futil-

ity of this search came as no surprise because there was no Los Alamos County at the time. The only references I found were to the Los Alamos Ranch School, which in the 1930s was located in Sandoval County.

Next I went to another standard source of information for New Mexico history—the *New Mexico Historical Review*. A search through the *Review*'s indexes from 1926 through 1985, yielded only occasional references, and once again most of those were to people or subjects related to the Ranch School. Staying with sources that are generally available to the public, I went to one of the oldest and most popular New Mexico publications—*New Mexico Magazine*. This was an eye opener.

Within a month of the detonation of the first nuclear bombs over Japan, the September 1945 issue of *New Mexico Magazine* carried an article by George Fitzpatrick exposing "The Secret of Los Alamos." The article, however, spoke little of the community of Los Alamos and concentrated on the prehistoric and scenic resources of the region. In an attempt to associate this secret city with something local, the author managed to find and describe with great pride, the role of "native New Mexican" Captain William S. Parsons of Fort Sumner. Fitzpatrick had little, if any access to Los Alamos itself.⁶

Two years later, *New Mexico Magazine* published an article based on an "eyewitness" visit to a community that was still generally closed off to the rest of New Mexico. A mining boom town analogy ran through the entire article. Despite having made a visit, the author still was unable to decide how to describe the community. Among the most notable conclusions drawn was that Los Alamos was "a normal American community that [was not] at all normal . . . a community of boomtown [sic] openness and necessary war-time secrecy."⁷ It is no surprise that both of these early articles used the word "secret" in their title.

In 1949 when Fitzpatrick wrote a second article on Los Alamos for *New Mexico Magazine*, it was clear things were changing. He found Los Alamos a very different place than the one he had visited four years earlier. Even then, he noted, scientists were already thinking of the peacetime contributions they could make to medicine, agriculture, and industry. Much of what had changed is reflected in the manner Fitzpatrick quipped that, according to residents, Los Alamos was now famous for three things: "Kids, dogs and the Atomic Bomb."⁸ It was a very young community in every sense of the word.

In 1949, New Mexico recognized Los Alamos as its thirty-second county, but it was still clearly different. Another article on Los Alamos, published in 1952, noted the town's civic improvements and modern amenities. Yet the author of the article, apparently a resident, waxed nostalgic about the rocky beaches of New England's coast, the red maples in the fall, and rolling Pennsylvania farmlands. The author noted how Los Alamos residents missed the big cities from which they had come

and “their” cultural events. Los Alamos “almost over-organized” as a consequence, with 130 clubs of all types attempting to compensate for what residents felt they were missing.⁹

It seems Los Alamos’ early civic leaders wanted the community to be different, and they wanted it modern. These early articles lavishly describe the modern conveniences and utilities Los Alamos had in its infancy—a time when many New Mexico communities did not have them. The articles also noted that along with progress came the disappearance of many of the original log buildings of the Ranch School and the construction of a modern community center. These actions destroyed some of Los Alamos’ most visible links with its past.

Los Alamos was, and still may be, a company town. Despite that connection, civic leaders have periodically attempted to assert an identity separate from “The Labs.” A dispute between The Labs and several Los Alamos community groups in the early 1970s may illustrate this attempt to establish an identity. At that time, there were nine Navajo rugs hanging in Fuller Lodge that the owners of the Ranch School had apparently purchased decades earlier “to complement the rustic log and stone structures of their campus.” The Labs apparently considered the rugs, like the buildings in which they were located, to be little more than “government-appropriated property.”¹⁰ Hence, the Atomic Energy Commission decided to remove them from Fuller Lodge and place them in offices of the University of California.

The Los Alamos Arts Council and other local organizations objected. They protested that while the move would certainly “offer scientists and other Laboratory visitors” the opportunity to view the rugs, The Labs’ actions severely limited the general public’s access to, and enjoyment of what one report called “part of the heritage of Los Alamos.”¹¹

On 18 March 1975 the *Los Alamos Monitor* may have reflected local feeling when it sarcastically noted that The Labs’ action would mean the rugs would be forever “consigned to the sterile reaches of E[nergy] R[esearch and] D[evelopment] A[gency]-land . . . not to be returned to their natural habitat, Fuller Lodge.” Chuck Ogren’s editorial strongly endorsed returning the rugs to Fuller Lodge because they belonged in the “social and cultural center of the community—rather than the probably pillbox structure to be inhabited by out-of-towners.” These were strong words for a community that had been in existence little more than a generation, and that consisted mostly of what the rest of New Mexico would have considered “out-of-towners.”¹²

While one wonders whatever became of those rugs, and whether they, like so many of New Mexico’s other cultural treasures, may be adorning some office or museum in California or New York, a more recent development further illustrates Los Alamos’ search for a historical identity. In September 1994, Mesa Public Library was nominated for inclusion in the New Mexico State Register of Cultural Properties. The

nomination precipitated an extraordinary public response. During the Cultural Properties Review Committee's (CPRC) nomination, the meeting room was packed. It was evident the supporters of the nomination were concerned that the library, which was representative of the development that displaced the old log buildings of the Ranch School, would itself fall victim to "the development plans of the present."¹³

Those opposed to the nomination, however, made it clear they felt the building was obviously not one of great antiquity, had little historical significance, and that listing it on the State Register would hinder both civic and commercial progress. The CPRC voted to place the building on the Register in November 1994, giving it a modicum of protection and recognizing as historically significant one small piece of contemporary Los Alamos history.¹⁴

It became evident that Los Alamos is not so much a place without a history, but one searching for an identity within the context of the vast panorama of New Mexico's past. For nearly fifty years, the community of Los Alamos gave up its identity, first in the name of national security, then in the name of progress. During that time it witnessed the razing of much of what materially tied it to the past.

It has been a tough, if comfortable, struggle for "this new kid on the block," especially for a kid who has not played much with the other kids in the neighborhood. It has been a place where the best minds of the world have gathered to contemplate the mysteries of life and their meaning. Yet, it is a place where many have forgotten that others had been there for centuries and had pondered the same mysteries, except they did it in places not called laboratories, but kivas and moradas.

There is some hope that Los Alamos is taking positive steps to find and develop its identity. That the Los Alamos Historical Society has the largest membership of any such organization in New Mexico, far exceeding that of the Historical Society of New Mexico, offers hope. Clearly, a large number of Los Alamos' citizens are interested in their history, however limited it may be.

A recent article in the *Rio Grande Sun* also gives hope. It tells how children from Los Alamos and the Española Valley schools have programs of personal and cultural exchanges through which they may learn more about each other and look at each other with less puzzlement and suspicion.¹⁵

It may not be insignificant that it is in Española that these cultural exchanges are being attempted. Los Alamos' neighbor is also struggling with the development of a historical identity. A relatively new community by New Mexico standards, Española also has razed much of its historic fabric in the name of progress. One wonders if this has anything to do with its proximity to Los Alamos.

Because of exchanges such as those begun through the schools, however, and possibly as a result of open forums such as Impact Los Alamos, the day may come when those in the Valley will look up to "The Hill" at night and admit that the flickering lights really are street lights, and not glow-in-the-dark people and buildings.

NOTES

1. George P. Hammond and Agapito Rey, *Don Juan de Oñate, Colonizer of New Mexico 1595-1628*, 2 Vols. (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1953), 1:320.
2. Spanish Archives of New Mexico, Series I, Surveyor General Records, and the Records of the Court of Private Land Claims, Surveyor General file 38, Ramon Vigil Grant, microfilm roll 16. Santa Fe, New Mexico State Records Center and Archives (NMSRCA).
3. J. J. Bowden, "Private Land Claims in the Southwest" (LL.D. thesis, Southern Methodist University, 1969), 1217-20.
4. Marjorie Bell Chambers quoted in New Mexico State Register of Cultural Properties Application for Registration (Form A), Pond Cabin, Los Alamos County, State Register 1502, p. 4.
5. *Ibid.*, p. 5.
6. George Fitzpatrick, "The Secret of Los Alamos," *New Mexico Magazine* 23 (September 1945), 10-11, 43.
7. Sanky Trimble, "The Secret City of the Scientists," *New Mexico Magazine* 25 (August 1947), 52.
8. George Fitzpatrick, "Los Alamos . . . The World's Most Important Small Town," *New Mexico Magazine* 27 (August 1949), 19.
9. Marion Black Williams, "Life on the 'Hill,'" *New Mexico Magazine* 30 (December 1952), 45.
10. Los Alamos Arts Council to David E. Reilly, New Mexico Division of Recreation and Historic Preservation, 31 March 1975. Los Alamos Ranch School, Cultural Properties Review Committee (CPRC) files, NMSRCA.
11. *Ibid.*
12. *Los Alamos Monitor*, 18 March 1975.
13. Mesa Public Library nomination to New Mexico State Register of Cultural Properties, CPRC meeting, 18 November 1994. CPRC files, NMSRCA.
14. *Ibid.*
15. *Rio Grande Sun* (Española, New Mexico), 8 February 1996, p. A8.

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