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Family Secrets: The Growth of Community at Los Alamos

JON HUNNER

Secrets abound in our world. History teems with veiled information that is revealed years, decades, even centuries later. Indeed, one of the reasons that history constantly changes, that each generation writes its history anew, is that revelations of previously hidden information rewrite history for us. Secrets are kept for many reasons. Personal secrets are hidden from even the closest friends or relatives. Familial secrets wrap ancestral history in mists of mystery. National secrets obscure industrial, military, even executive actions from the view of the nation's enemies as well as its citizens. Of course, secrets hide more than merely embarrassing truths about or wrongdoings by a country. They protect information about a nation's vital interests from falling into the wrong hands. So, secrets are kept for many reasons, from protecting oneself against painful or unpleasant truths, to keeping community confidences concealed in the attics of historical societies, to guarding the national interest from antagonistic opponents.

The story of why Los Alamos was secret is familiar. The United States and the United Kingdom feared that Nazi Germany was creating an atomic weapon. Thus, General Leslie R. Groves and the United States Army located Los Alamos in an out-of-the-way corner of the country to prevent infiltration by enemy agents. But Groves also wanted to isolate the scientists to prevent them from disclosing to their colleagues classified information about the atomic bomb project. A final reason for hiding Los Alamos was concern over explosions. If an atomic explosion did accidentally obliterate the laboratory, better it happen on a mountain top in New Mexico than near a populated Midwest or East Coast city.¹

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Once in northern New Mexico, the project brought two new languages to the plateau, both inaccessible to ordinary citizens. The first was a language of nuclear physics, of atoms, electrons, and neutrons, which few in the world understood at the time. The second was a language of secrecy. To augment security, the military created code names for places, things, and people. The official name for the laboratory in New Mexico was Site Y; unofficially, it was known as "The Hill." The entire atomic bomb project was called the Manhattan Engineering District or just the Manhattan Project. People with easily recognizable names (at least in nuclear physics) like Niels Bohr and Enrico Fermi became Nicholas Baker and Eugene Farmer. Laboratory director J. Robert Oppenheimer became James Oberhelm, and physicist Edward Teller was Ed Tilden. "Physicist" and "chemist" were changed to "fizzler" and "stinker." And the atomic bomb itself was renamed "the Gadget."²

Residents at Los Alamos reacted to the codes and secrecy in numerous ways. Historian Peter Bacon Hales observes that the Manhattan Project subjected both public and private speech to governmental authority. The end result was "the generation of a new language common to all, but controlled by the authorities."³ For Hales, the participants of the Manhattan Project, faced with secrecy and authoritarian power, retreated to silence as the only option available. Again from Hales: "And so silence became both the final act of resistance and the ultimate act of compliance in the topographies of power that formed the cultural geography of the Manhattan Project."⁴ Silence was indeed an act of resistance, but only one of the many ways residents responded to the secrecy. To be sure, silence did permeate the landscape of Site Y. At home after work, Eric Jette, who was purifying plutonium, quietly counted the nail holes in the living room ceiling instead of talking with his wife about his day at the office. Despite the secrecy, many wives knew of the project's purpose, sometimes from reading passages in physics books conveniently left open by their husbands to chapters on nuclear matters, and sometimes by talking to other women. It depended on each couple.⁵

Some women learned of the true purpose of Los Alamos quite by accident. Phyllis Fisher stumbled onto the secret through her unborn child. Searching for baby names, one night she jokingly suggested the name "Uranium Fisher" to her husband Leon. He roared at her never to mention that word again and clapped his hand on her mouth when she protested, "I only said Ur-." That night, Phyllis pored over some physics textbooks and discovered that "uranium fission" could theoretically produce an enormous explosion.⁶

Strict security did indeed demand silence, but not all residents meekly succumbed to the demand. In rebellion, they reacted with humor, anger, and frenzied off-duty social activities in resisting the imposed secrecy. Some, as in the instance of Richard Feynman's private war with the cen-

sors, took it as a personal challenge. Arline, his wife, confined to an Albuquerque hospital for tuberculosis, sent him coded letters as brain teasers. Censorship regulations forbade letters in code or any language besides English, French, or German. Feynman replied to her in code, and, to accommodate the regulations, he enclosed the key to the code for the censors. Feynman made many trips to the censor's office to argue about the arrangement, and his battle with the hapless censors provided comic relief for the community. In time, Feynman became an expert on what could get past the censors and won bets with fellow workers by phrasing forbidden subjects in such a way that the censors had to allow the offending letter to pass.⁷

Caught between two fences and quieted by the secrecy, residents turned to social activities at a feverish pitch. Numerous clubs offered release from the intense pressures at Site Y as groups organized for square dancing, hiking, skiing, and theater. Weekend parties also rocked the houses and dormitories of the site. Couples responded on a more intimate level, which resulted in a critical mass at the maternity ward of the post hospital. Equipped more for radiology or industrial accidents than pregnancy and pediatrics, the hospital staff sought help. In a June 1944 letter to General Groves asking for more maternity assistance, medical director Dr. Stafford Warren noted: "approximately one-fifth of the married women are now in some stage of pregnancy (the birth rate over the nation elsewhere is decreasing)."⁸ Eighty babies were born that first year, and ten newborns arrived every month thereafter.⁹ In Groves' account of the Manhattan Project, he remembered "one of the doctors told me later that the number and spacing of babies born to scientific personnel surpassed all existing medical records."¹⁰ One of the rumors about Site Y that circulated in Santa Fe might be explained by the number of expectant women from The Hill—including the rumor that it was a camp for pregnant WACs.

At one point, Groves protested to Oppenheimer about the rising birthrate. Oppenheimer declined to intervene in the private affairs of his charges, but a limerick swept the town:

The General's in a stew
He trusted you and you
He thought you'd be scientific
Instead you're just prolific
And what is he to do?¹¹

The secrecy affected children even more, since they had fewer prior experiences to judge behavior. For example, Claire Ulam Weiner attended parties as a young girl where men huddled in corners talking secret matters. Weiner thought that this was normal behavior for all fathers.¹² Nonetheless, even the least powerful residents on The Hill, the children,

responded to secrecy in ways other than silence. When five-year-old Ellen Wilder Reid arrived on the plateau in 1945, her family lived in a tent at the nearby Bandelier National Park since housing was scarce. One day while throwing rocks at the stream, Ellen's brother smashed her thumb. Her father, Edward Wilder, tried to rush her to the post hospital by way of the West Gate. Military Policemen stopped them because Ellen did not have a security pass. An argument ensued between Wilder and the guards until an officer granted permission by phone to permit Ellen and her father to proceed to the hospital. During the wait for clearance, Ellen learned that she could not enter because something very secret was at the post. Once inside the gate, she looked for that secret but only saw ugly buildings; however, at the hospital she saw ducks swimming on nearby Ashley Pond. Ellen counted the ducks and later recalled: "There were eleven ducks, that was a lot for me to count, but I figured that was it. I knew the secret! There was nothing else that anyone would care about there, obviously."¹³ That same summer, Ellen heard they were making a new secret weapon, a bomb at Site Y. To a five-year-old who had known war all her young life, she was unimpressed. She had also heard that if a lizard ran through a fire, it would turn into a dragon. Now that would be an impressive secret weapon. Ellen herded lizards toward their campfire and finally had one run across the coals. She became so terrified she ran and told the park ranger to bring his gun to shoot the dragon she feared would appear.¹⁴ Children and silence, like secrecy and families, are antithetical. Silence is hard, if not impossible, to enforce on humans, who speak even before we walk. Even when the mind is willing, the spirit creates mythical dragons, top secret ducks, names like Uranium Fisher, and jokes on censors to subvert the enforced security. Despite the army's desire for silence, residents of Los Alamos reacted with humor and guile to circumvent the secrecy, not by passing on atomic secrets, but by living and laughing. Like nature, humans abhor a vacuum.

Los Alamos accomplished its mission. It built not one, but several atomic bombs and ended the war. At a cost of two billion dollars, participants in the Manhattan Project developed, manufactured, assembled, and detonated an awesome doomsday weapon. Centuries of scientific progress culminated in the manipulation of invisible radioactive particles that released an enormous amount of energy. During the project, physicist Emilio Segre predicted: "What we do here, if we do it, will make a revolution, like electricity did."¹⁵ The revolution became public knowledge on 6 August 1945, when many people at Los Alamos learned of the true nature of the site along with the rest of the country and world. Newspapers from around the world reported the atomic bombing of Hiroshima and told of the secret community of Los Alamos for the first time. For some people at the site, the transition was jarring. Scientist Raemer Schreiber recalled: "It kind of felt like you were caught out in the

street without any clothes on. I mean, we were so accustomed to having this all so hush-hush, to have it out in the public took a little getting used to."¹⁶

A revolution swept the world after Hiroshima and Nagasaki. The release of atomic energy unlocked a Pandora's Box of nuclear possibilities. Fear mixed with hope as people around the world faced the atomic age. Nuclear energy was deplored for being able to destroy the world or heralded as an unlimited source of cheap power. Whatever direction the postwar world took, most residents of Site Y knew they had done their jobs and helped to shorten the war. They were ready to go home and resurrect their prewar lives.

After 6 August 1945, atomic energy was no longer a secret. To be sure, discoveries in the world of nuclear physics before the war directed scientists to the eventual release of the binding energy of the atom. During the war, scientists in Germany, Denmark, the Soviet Union, Japan, and other countries had nuclear programs, and for some, the success of the Manhattan Project only intensified their research. Even before the first successful test of the atomic bomb at Trinity Site, Russia obtained the details through espionage. After the war, atomic weapons were no longer a secret of nature, but merely of humans. The world knew it could be done. Soon after VJ Day, the Smyth Report released the story of the military applications of atomic energy at Los Alamos and told many of these details. As a result of the Smyth Report and espionage, the Soviet Union constructed and then detonated its own atomic bomb on 29 August 1949.¹⁷ Thus, in the long run, the secrecy at Los Alamos did not prevent other nations from creating their own nuclear devices. Even if more stringent security measures had been instituted, after 6 August 1945 there was no secret left, only the details on how to reproduce a nuclear weapon.

In Los Alamos after the war, the community floundered at first as its future resided in the hands of policy makers in Washington, D.C. Once Los Alamos became a permanent fixture of the atomic industry, it gradually transformed itself into a model suburban town. Ranch-style houses, a modern shopping center, and an excellent school system all contributed to a community that appeared to be on the forefront of a new age. With journalists forbidden to report on the work at the laboratories, stories appeared in national publications highlighting the atomic utopia created in the residential areas of Los Alamos.¹⁸ Wartime clapboard buildings gave way to more sturdy structures, but the fences remained around the residential community until 1957. At Oak Ridge and Hanford, the fences came down in the late 1940s and early 1950s, but residents at Los Alamos demanded that Los Alamos be enclosed longer. Many people on The Hill liked the safety that the fences promoted and enjoyed the protection from a hostile world provided by the gates and guards.¹⁹ But as with the assumed secrecy of creating an atomic weapon, the notion of

safety within the fences is questionable. For example, from 1944 to 1952, the laboratory released untreated radioactive liquid waste into a side canyon below the residential areas. Children romped through those canyons on their way to school or played among the sands and boulders. Secrecy about these releases was circumvented as the place was nicknamed "Acid Canyon." Perhaps that was enough warning to keep curious children away, but one teenager admitted: "We'd go all over the plateau until we'd run into a fence, and then we'd jump over that fence until a[n] MP would run us off."²⁰ Just as nature abhors a vacuum, children abhor fences. The residents of Los Alamos lived in a treacherous beauty, surrounded by ponderosa pines and breathtaking vistas, but also living near a laboratory where some of the most toxic materials known to man were processed and disposed. Yes, the community had some of the best security in the country protecting its secrets for the national interest, but at the same time, people at Los Alamos were vulnerable to elements used at the laboratory.

Ironically, the secrecy surrounding the country's nuclear weapons was welcomed by the citizens of the United States in the late 1940s and 1950s. Los Alamos and other nuclear outposts of the cold war like Oak Ridge, Tennessee, and Hanford, Washington, became part of a vast bureaucratic and industrial complex, and the American people accepted the veiled status of the atomic installations. Indeed, the American public embraced secrecy just as Los Alamos residents demanded that the fences remain—it provided them with a feeling of safety in an unsafe world. Most of the public accepted the assurances from the government and the experts about the safety of nuclear energy and did not demand full disclosure or debate about the course the country was taking.

Thus, the marriage of the atom and the bomb, consummated at Los Alamos, enjoyed a lengthy honeymoon with America. The issue from their union arrived quickly and for the next fifty years dominated much of the nation's affairs in economics, politics, and culture like a brash new kid on the block. The atomic communities that created the new weapon remained hidden behind fences and veiled because of national security. But the people of Los Alamos faced the challenges of the atomic age—like the need for secrecy at the dinner table and the concerns over toxic pollutants in the nearby canyons—with humor, with social activities, with resistance and, indeed, with rebellion against governmental regulations, and with raising families. As an outpost on the frontline of the cold war, Los Alamos has played an integral part in the nation's defense over the last fifty years. The outpost at Los Alamos also has established itself as a model community where families continue to grapple with the mysteries of the town while they live, love, and laugh.

NOTES

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