FROM OUR ARCHIVES

SED Commander Recalls LA Days

By Nelson C. Baker

Despite the fading of my memory after forty-seven years from the time I left Los Alamos, New Mexico, I will try to pass on what little I do recall about my experiences “on the hill.”

After spending two years in the European Theater of Operations during WW II and returning from Italy in May 1944, I was a training officer at the Engineer Training Center, Fort Belvoir, Va. In August, I received orders to report to General Groves’ office in Washington, DC. Upon reporting on Aug. 12, I was given travel orders with instructions to fly to Albuquerque for assignment to the Manhattan District with station at Santa Fe. Although unexpected, I had a suspicion that my old company commander in Africa, T.O. Palmer, had made a request for me to serve with him. He had been injured in Africa and upon my return, I renewed my friendship with him at Walter Reed Hospital in Washington, (CONTINUED ON PAGE 5)

SPECIAL FOR LOS ALAMOS RESIDENTS

LA Day at the New Mexico History Museum

On Saturday afternoon, June 16, the New Mexico History Museum and its Los Compadres del Palacio will host a visit to the Museum for all Los Alamos County residents. The event will begin with an informal reception at the Museum starting at 1:30. At 2:15, Los Alamos visitors are invited to participate in a tour of the St. Johns Bible exhibition led by Tom Leech, head of the Palace Press. They can also visit other exhibits in the Museum, including those in the Palace of the Governors. Museum admission will be free from 1 to 5 p.m. for Los Alamos visitors.

During the afternoon there will also be an opportunity to visit the Shop of the Rainbow Man across the street from the History Museum, where the original 109 E. Palace offices of the Manhattan Project were, including Dorothy McKibbin’s office. This visit will include some discussions with Los (CONTINUED ON PAGE 10)
Los Alamos National Bank “Science and History” Lecture Series, 2012-2013
7:30 p.m. in Fuller Lodge

Sept. 11, Chautauqua speaker Susan Frontczak as Marie Curie

Oct. 9, Paul Bauer, “Rio Grande Geology”

Nov. 13, James Petersen, “A Brief History of Wendover Airfield”


Feb. 12, Cary Skidmore, “The Seven Explosive Fatalities at LANL”

March 12, John Anderson, “Hiroshima & Nagasaki 2010”

April 9, Dale Coker, “Bandelier Trails: Before and After”

May 14, Annual Meeting & Ice Cream Social, Robert Kuckuck, “On Being a LANL Director”

Atomic Film Festival:
7:30 in Fuller Lodge

June 27, Day One

July 25, Atomic Cafe

Aug. 23, Dr. Strangelove

Museum Exhibits:

June-July, Los Alamos Opera Guild

Aug., History Adventures Showcase

Sept.-Oct., Photography of Jack Aeby

Nov.-Dec., Hal Olsen Nose Cone Art

Brown Bags with the Collection:
12:30 p.m. in Fuller Lodge

Aug. 7, Petroglyph Photographs

Nov. 6, New Items in the Collection

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Mission

The Los Alamos Historical Society preserves, promotes, and communicates the remarkable history and inspiring stories of Los Alamos and its people for our community, for the global audience, and for future generations.

Vision

Los Alamos Historical Society is respected worldwide as the source and repository for the compelling history of Los Alamos and its people from prehistory to contemporary times.
In 1964, with the Cuban Missile Crisis fresh in viewers’ minds, the Cold War at its frostiest, and the hydrogen bomb relatively new and frightening, Kubrick dared to make a film about what could happen if the wrong person pushed the wrong button – and played the situation for laughs.

This Emmy winning, historically accurate drama tells the complex, moving story of the Manhattan Project. Racing against the Nazi war machine and enduring intense military/political pressure, scientists wrestle with the challenge of creating the ultimate weapon. Before the bomb can be perfected, Hitler’s death and Germany’s surrender remove one enemy from the equation. But Japan remains. Day One builds quietly to a shattering climax, as the scientists who developed the bomb out of patriotic fervor witness its grisly consequences.

A disturbing collection of 1940-50s U.S. government propaganda films designed to reassure the public that the Atomic Bomb was not a threat to safety. A black comedy about the harrowing misinformation surrounding government acquisition, development, and testing of both the atomic and hydrogen bombs.

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By Chris Kovacevich, Communications Chair, 2012 National Preservation Conference, Spokane Preservation Advocates

“Beyond Boundaries” is the theme for the National Trust for Historic Preservation’s 2012 National Conference, hosted this year in eastern Washington, October 30 through November 3. This conference attracts nearly 2,000 nationally recognized experts and practitioners for a weeklong series of educational workshops and peer-to-peer networking. The conference will explore preservation’s boundaries using Spokane and the Inland Northwest as a living laboratory to showcase preservation successes and as a classroom for discussing preservation challenges.

The conference provides an opportunity for the attendees to interact with the local preservation community, bringing their depth of knowledge and expertise to bear on local issues. It also provides local community leaders with affordable and accessible high-caliber professional development opportunities. Participants learn from leading experts and practitioners, share tactics and achievements, and explore challenges and successes in our region. Attendees will include board members and staff of nonprofit preservation organizations, downtown revitalization professionals, real estate developers, architects, planners, and students, all of whom will bring fresh eyes to Spokane and return to their own communities with newly acquired knowledge and inspiration.

The conference will include interactive education sessions, field sessions with hands-on exploration of preservation sites, affinity sessions for partnership building and networking, and on-your-own activities that inform, teach, and connect. The conference will challenge the preservation community to work with traditional and new partners to increase preservation’s relevance in modern communities and become better advocates for the movement in our hometowns.

Conference focus areas include:

**Sustainability** Reuse of historic and older buildings, greening the existing building stock, and reinvestment in older and historic communities to combat climate change.

**Diversity** Protecting, enhancing, and enjoying the places that matter to people to ensure these places and their stories remain part of the American narrative, ensuring a diversity of people and places to reflect the full range of the American experience.

**Public Lands** Enhancing stewardship of cultural resources on public lands through education on their importance and increased funding for their protection.

**Re-imagining Historic Sites** Creating new and innovative models for historic site interpretation and stewardship.

Attendees will enjoy Spokane’s vibrant, walkable downtown dominated by historic buildings. Events are scheduled for a variety of memorable venues, including the magnificent Davenport Hotel, the art deco Fox Theatre, and the Steam Plant. With over $3.4 billion invested in this urban core in the last decade, downtown Spokane has established itself as a compelling destination with incredible shopping, world-class entertainment, and the region’s best dining.

Heather McClenahan, executive director of the Los Alamos Historical Society, is slated to speak on a panel about the development of the Manhattan Project National Historical Park.

Watch for more details coming to: www.PreservationNation.org/conference
where he was recovering from his injuries and undergoing therapy. As I recall, General Groves’ office did not elaborate on precisely where I was going or what my assignment would be when I arrived at my final destination.

Upon landing in Albuquerque, I was met by a WAC driver and a jeep that transported me to the area engineer office in Santa Fe, as with so many others before and after me. Although my recollections are rather dim, I do not recall receiving any specific information about my assignment. From there, I was driven up that torturous mountain road to Los Alamos… [M]y ears “popped” as we climbed to the higher elevations.

After I arrived, I reported to the base commander and received instructions to report to Captain Palmer at the Special Engineer Detachment. I was delighted to find that I was to be his executive officer with one of [my] primary duties to be personnel officer and to handle what training was required for the military personnel. I soon found that a Lt. Joseph Carroll had been the detachment commander until Captain Palmer had arrived, and I was to be the only officer in the unit for the time being. At that time, the unit was approximately three hundred strong with the majority of troops involved in scientific duties, none of which was explained or elaborated except for the need for secrecy. That left me with the task of supervising and working directly with an office staff—the detachment of First Sgt. Winston Dabney and his group of personnel people. We were responsible for the general welfare of all the troops—to see that they received proper housing and clothing, got paid on time, promotions were timely and deserved, required training was completed, and the barracks and mess hall were well kept and provided the best we could with what was available.

Since the majority of the men worked in the tech area, the officer contact with them was at the usual military reveille each week day and at some drilling/marching, and primarily on Saturdays when we held minimal training classes, brushed up on drills and marching, and had the typical Saturday morning inspections of living quarters, equipment, and uniforms. It was also my job to pick up the monthly payroll and pay the troops. This was the most direct contact with the men as individuals. Perhaps the most knowledge I acquired of each of the men was through the reading of their mail, as I had the onerous job of being the unit censorship officer. Many a chuckle was had at the attempts of some to bypass the censorship rules in their writings, though there were no serious violations of security. It was interesting to note that when we did put the troops on parade, there were always a few, just a few, obnoxious civilians who liked to “jeer” the troops and make unnecessary remarks, which nettled the troops who were doing the same highly complex work and received much less pay as soldiers. The “quick drafting” of the most obnoxious ones and their shipment off for induction, training, and return to Los Alamos

(continued on next page)
as privates in the army soon made the problem non-existent and provided a morale booster to the long-suffering troops.

During the period from August 1944 to when I left in October 1945, the Special Engineer Detachment grew from approximately three hundred to over seventeen hundred, and my administrative staff grew with the addition of one warrant officer and three officers. It is noteworthy that this warrant officer had been a sergeant on my staff and was able to receive his warrant. Several others received direct commission as officers. The Los Alamos Historical Museum has a photograph of the officers and enlisted staff taken in late 1945.

While discussing the troops, I think it is appropriate to point out that the SEC, along with the Military Police, the WAC detachment, and the Post Engineer Detachment were the recipients of the Meritorious Service Unit plaques for the period Oct. 7, 1944 through Nov. 30, 1944 and a star (in lieu of another plaque) for the period of Dec. 1, 1944 through May 31, 1945. There is no question in my mind or others who served during those periods that the military personnel, both scientific and support, had a distinct and important part in the development of the atomic bomb, and the awards were well deserved.

As an officer with the SED and at Los Alamos, I became acquainted primarily with other military officers—army and navy, both technical and non-technical. Even though I was granted access to the work areas in the technical area to inspect the conditions for the working troops, with the requirement for secrecy and the compartmentalization of the work, I did not become “privy” to the true nature of the work until the announcement of the dropping of the bomb on Hiroshima on Aug. 6, 1945. This came to us from the big headline, “Los Alamos Secret Disclosed by Truman, Atomic Bombs Dropped on Japan.” Some inkling of the importance of the work at Los Alamos filtered back to us, as the excitement was very evident when the test at Alamogordo was completed, but even then, I was not aware of the true nature of the work.

It is difficult to recall my thoughts at the time. Like most soldiers who had served or were serving overseas, I had no doubts about the necessity for shortening the war and avoiding what we considered would have been a difficult invasion of Japan and the loss of innumerable lives. My experiences in Africa and Italy and the loss of friends and fellow soldiers were such that I felt no regret in dropping of the bombs at that time and, in retrospect, I believe I would have endorsed the dropping of the bombs despite what many critics have had to say about the destruction of Hiroshima and Nagasaki in later years.

No doubt information on the Los Alamos community is well documented, but at the expense of duplication, I might throw in a few statistics. In 1945, in addition to the original buildings of the Los Alamos Ranch [School], there had been constructed thirty-seven buildings in the tech area with some two hundred other project buildings. There were about three hundred buildings containing around six hundred families, plus military barracks, hospital, administration building, etc. There were three specific buildings that I recall—one for bachelor men, one for bachelor women, and one for married couples without
children—two story, typical military construction with small rooms. I might add that on weekends and with time to enjoy life after the need for secrecy was over, it was sometimes difficult to tell which building was which. There were also three-room prefabricated houses, three-room apartments—eight to a building, and four- to five-room apartments—four to a building. As for myself, I initially lived in a dormitory, later in a bachelor apartment, and then, after marrying my wife, in one of the three-room prefabs. How well my wife and I remember the sand blowing through the cracks in the pre-fab, trying to cook on a small gas stove with a tin box placed over a burner for an oven. Despite this, it was wonderful to be young, in love, and together, and the memories are all happy ones. Perhaps as a young officer not too long from the battlefields of Africa and Italy and newly wed, the scientific activities were not of primary interest and, thus, not the most important things in my life at the time.

Among the memories I have are the occasional military parades, the Saturday “broomstick polo” played by the mounted military police, the afternoons at the pistol and rifle range when officers were required to maintain their proficiency, a few court-martials as they became necessary, the small local radio station that I briefly supervised before the responsibility was turned over to the chaplain, inventorying our post exchange, rationing, water shortages, the two local theaters which were always packed, little theatre groups, and, of course, those hair-raising trips to Santa Fe for fun and recreation. Ah, those were the days.

In closing, my memories are fond ones, and I think often of the old friends who served with me, those that have passed away, and others seldom seen these days. The experiences are those that will stay with me despite the passing of time and the fading of little details.

Biographical Sketch of Nelson C. Baker:

- Married to WAC recruiting officer, Ucil. Four children: Suzanne, Jeffery, Nelson Jr., and Jill

Military Service:
- Michigan National Guard, 1937-1941
- Called to Active Service, October 1940

Overseas duty, WW II:
- May 1942-May 1944, 1st Armored Division, Tunisian campaign
- Nov. 1943-May 1944, 6617th Engineer Mine Clearance Co., Italian campaign

Manhattan Project duty:
- After brief training, assigned to the Manhattan Engineering District as follows:
  - August 12, 1944, reported to General Groves’ office in Washington, DC, for duty and received travel orders to Albuquerque, NM, with reporting date of August 14, 1944, with permanent station at Santa Fe, NM, as assistant to the area engineer.
August 1944, assigned as Executive Officer, Second Provisional Special Engineer Detachment (SED).

January 1945, appointed Executive Officer, SED, Personnel Officer SED, Supply Officer SED, and Post Recreation Officer.

October 12, 1945, reported to Bruns General Hospital, Santa Fe, for separation from the service.

Post WW II Service:

September 1946, returned to active duty and served in command, staff, and advisory positions as follows:

- Fort Lewis, WA, Engr. Battalion Personnel Officer (Sept. –Dec. 1946)
- Japan, Assistant Division Engineer. (through June 1949)

- Boston, MA, Engineer Instructor for Army Engineer Reserve Units and Operations Officers (through July 1952)
- Germany, Engineer. Unit Testing Officer (through 1955)
- Fort Benning, GA, Intelligence, Operations, and Executive Officers, 151st Engineer Group (through July 1957)
- Taiwan, Advisor to 2nd Army Engineer Chinese Nationalist Army (through July 1959)
- Fort Carson, CO, Executive Officer, 32nd Engineer Battalion, 2nd U.S. Army Missile Command (through May 1961)

Retired May 31, 1961 as a Lt. Colonel

Employed by the U.S. Civil Service Commission and the Office of Personnel Management as a personnel and security investigator, San Francisco region, until July 1982.

Retirement activities included traveling, genealogy research, and archaeology.


Capt. Nelson Baker, second from right, celebrates with other officers at a farewell party in October 1945. (Photo from the Los Alamos Historical Museum Archives)

How Do You Like Your Newsletter?

Help us go green and save some green at the same time. How? Get your newsletter and your event postcards by e-mail as a .pdf instead of by U.S. mail. Just e-mail heather@losalamoshistory.org with your request, and we’ll get you into the e-mail system. If you prefer hard copies of the newsletter and postcards, that’s fine, too. We are happy to mail them to you.
Looking for Ranch School Pics

Do you have pictures of any Los Alamos Ranch School graduations, such as the one below, prior to the building of Fuller Lodge? We are looking for photographs to document the historic view-scape of Graduation Canyon so that it can be preserved for the future. Please e-mail electronic copies to heather@losalamoshistory.org. If you would rather send a hard copy, which we will keep in the archives, please send it to our office, Attn: Rebecca Collinsworth, P.O. Box 43, Los Alamos, NM 87544.

Correction: A Caption in our March newsletter said that the atomic test pictured above was Ivy-Mike, the first test of the hydrogen bomb. The top picture is actually the Baker test that was part of Operation Crossroads. The picture below is the Ivy-Mike test.

Report from the Annual Meeting; Dues Date Changing

The Los Alamos Historical Society held its annual business meeting on Tuesday, May 8. Six members of the board of directors were elected, officers of the board were chosen, and two changes were made to the bylaws.

One change to the bylaws clarified the administration of the endowment fund, which was established by a generous gift from the late Dr. Beth Plassmann. The other change set the membership due date for everyone as July 1 to assist the administration of memberships.

Re-elected to the board of directors for two year terms are Dennis Erickson, J. Arthur Freed, Arthur Montoya, John Ruminer, Sharon Snyder, and Ron Wilkins.

Elected as officers of the board are: Ron Wilkins, president, (2nd term); Mike Wheeler, vice president; Wendy Hoffman, secretary; and Carole Steward, treasurer, (2nd term).

Incumbent directors are Wendy Hoffman, Shay Burns Kendricks, Kate O’Donnell, Carole Steward, Todd Urbatsch, and Mike Wheeler.

In other business, the treasurer reported that the Society ended last fiscal year with a slight surplus (approximately $5,000) but expected to end this fiscal year with a slight deficit.

President Ron Wilkins reported that the Society is moving forward under the guidance of the new strategic plan with construction of the new archives facility, plans for uses of the Oppenheimer House, work on the Manhattan Project National Historical Park, fully staffing the Society’s activities and programs, and continuing excellence in publications.
Historic Homestead Tour Now Available

The Los Alamos Historical Society participated in a wonderful community event on Friday, May 18, when seventeen historic markers at seven sites were dedicated, commemorating the homesteads in the Los Alamos townsite. More than seventy-five people, many of whom were descendants of the original homestead families, attended the event. County Council Chair Sharon Stover, who had relatives that homesteaded on the Pajarito Plateau, presided over a ribbon cutting. Four of the markers are located in the Los Alamos Historic District near the Romero Cabin. Others can be found near Sullivan Field, Urban Park, the golf course, Guaje Pines Cemetery, North Mesa tennis courts, and Deer Trap Trailhead on Barranca Mesa. Tour maps and brochures are available at the Los Alamos Historical Museum.

Thank you from National History Day Students

Dear members of the Los Alamos Historical Society,

Thank you for helping us raise money for our trip to Washington, DC, to compete in the National History Day competition. We enjoyed eating ice cream with you and participating in the Experience Auction at the Annual Meeting.

When you passed the hat to support our trip, you gave us more than $350! Wow. That will go a long way toward helping us get there.

We’ve really enjoyed competing in National History Day this year, at the local, regional, and state contests. We have learned a great deal about doing historical research, made some new friends, and had tons of fun!

Thank you again for your support. Love, Kathryn McClenahan and Ruby Selvage

Los Alamos Day at the NM History Museum

(Continued from Page 1)

Alamos Historical Society members and others who have been researching the occupancy of these historic structures. There will also be a separate "Atomic Walking Tour of Santa Fe" on the morning of June 16 for members of the Palace Guard, a membership group of the History Museum. This tour will be led by historian Jon Hunner, author of books on the development of Los Alamos and on J. Robert Oppenheimer. Membership in the Palace Guard is open to Museum of New Mexico Foundation members, with an annual fee of $100 for individuals or $150 for couples/families. For more information on the Palace Guard programs, please call 982-6366, ext. 100, or go to www.museumfoundation.org
Summer History Adventures Promises Hands-On Fun

Children from pre-school through third grade are invited to learn about the history of Los Alamos and life on and around the Pajarito Plateau, from prehistoric times to the present, at the Historical Society’s summer History Adventures program.

Each week, a partner organization will lead a new theme related to the history of Los Alamos and the region.

The programs will include a brief children’s reading followed by an engaging hands-on activity for both fun and learning. Programs will be held at 10 and 11 each Monday listed below on the portal of Fuller Lodge (east side).

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Address Change? Please Let us Know!

We recently went through our membership database and discovered that a number of you had moved but forgotten to tell us. If your address is different from the one on the mailing label on page 12 please call our office at 505-662-6272 or e-mail us at historicalsociety@losalamoshistory.org to let us know about the change.

If you have received this newsletter because you live at a house where one of our members used to live, but you are not a member of the Historical Society, please let us know that, as well.

Finally, if you move, please let us know through a U.S. Post Office “Change of Address” card.

Thank you for your assistance in keeping membership information up to date and mailing costs down.
Los Alamos Historical Society and Museum

Open free of charge every day except New Year’s Day, Thanksgiving, and Christmas.

November to March, Monday to Friday 10-4, Saturday 11-4, Sunday 1-4

April to October, Monday to Friday 9:30-4:30, Saturday 11-4, Sunday 1-4

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Website: www.losalamoshistory.org
Online shop: shop.losalamoshistory.org
Facebook: Los Alamos Historical Museum
Twitter: twitter.com/losalamosmuseum

Los Alamos Historical Society 2012 Membership

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