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Recollections of Nevada's Nuclear Past

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▶▶ Recollections of Nevada's Nuclear Past



The Nevada Test Site Oral History Project is documenting, preserving, and disseminating the stories of those involved in one of the most technologically sophisticated yet controversial endeavors in Nevada's history

by Mary Palevsky, Robert Futrell, and Andrew Kirk

Photographs by Geri Kodey

If you drive 65 miles north of Las Vegas along Highway 95, past the Paiute Reservation, the town of Indian Springs, and the vast alluvial plain abutting the nearby mountains, you will come to a sign that reads, "Mercury."

Like many exits between Las Vegas and Reno, the road appears to lead deep into the empty desert. A closer look reveals a small airstrip and control tower, a complex of buildings, and a guarded entry gate. Behind this entrance is one of the most important and controversial landmarks of American techno-scientific ingenuity and Cold War politics: the Nevada Test Site, the United States' 1,375-square-mile nuclear weapons proving ground.

Today, there are few travelers on the road to Mercury. The Nevada Test Site (NTS) operations have been drastically reduced since the height of the Cold War, when thousands migrated to the state for jobs with the nuclear testing program. During the 1950s and 1960s, every morning before dawn, a continuous stream of headlights stretched from Las Vegas to Mercury. Commuting test site workers dubbed the treacherous two-lane highway "The Widowmaker." In Las Vegas, residents and tourists gathered to watch the spectacle of atmospheric tests light

up the sky. The mushroom cloud became an icon of the nuclear age.

COMMUNITIES OF VOICES

The Nevada Test Site Oral History Project is a multiyear, multidisciplinary program in UNLV's College of Liberal Arts dedicated to documenting, preserving, and disseminating the stories of those affiliated with and impacted by the NTS during more than 40 years of nuclear testing.

The goal of the project is to contribute to the understanding of the multifaceted social, cultural, organizational, scientific, and environmental history of nuclear testing. The research team is led by the authors of this article (project director Mary Palevsky and principal investigators Robert Futrell, a UNLV sociology professor, and Andrew Kirk, a UNLV history professor). The team is collecting stories from the diverse communities of voices, offering valuable insights into the many complex test site cultures.

The project will enable scholars from many fields to use these rich archives to research the history and sociology of nuclear testing in order to more fully understand the



impact it has had on our country's past, as well as what it means to the future of society in general.

Project participants range from national laboratory weapons designers to electricians, miners, welders, carpenters, and other trade workers who built the test site infrastructure; also included are public officials, military officers, corporate executives, and support personnel who made this highly complex organization run. Also integral to the project are the individuals and organizations that fervently opposed the test site's mission, with concern for its impact on Nevada, surrounding states, and world affairs. Radiation survivors, American-Indian tribal organizations, anti-nuclear peace groups, local ranchers, families and communities living downwind of the site, and arms control and disarmament advocates comprise this important group.

PUBLIC RELEVANCE OF UNLV RESEARCH

Major research projects are often highly specialized efforts aimed at academic audiences. In contrast, the NTS Oral History Project demonstrates the relevance of UNLV research to the larger community. As researchers contribute to the historical record, they are also forging links with a broad cross-section of Southern Nevadans dedicated to preserving the test site's historical and cultural legacy. In

UNLV's Nevada Test Site Oral History Project has recorded the different perspectives of (from left) Troy Wade, former assistant secretary of energy for defense programs and longtime Nevada Test Site official; Franciscan Sister Rosemary Lynch, a test site protestor; and atomic veteran George Maynard. The photographs they hold reflect their roles at the test site.

addition to the archive in UNLV Lied Library's department of special collections, the NTS oral history collection — along with related documents and photographs — will be accessible to the public through museum exhibits, presentations, and print and Web-based media.

The development and testing of nuclear weapons played a critical role in 20th century history. In the summer of 1945 in the New Mexico desert, American scientists conducted "Trinity," humankind's first atomic test, marking the dawn of the nuclear age. The atomic bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki and the end of World War II quickly followed. The world's nuclear arsenal grew from a handful of warheads at the end of 1945 to tens of thousands during the height of the Cold War. The NTS Oral History project is bringing to light the early days of humankind's nuclear history by gathering firsthand accounts of the ways in which weapons development and testing, fueled by the U.S./Soviet arms race, fundamentally altered Nevada's demographics, economy, ecology, and culture.

Recently, controversies have dominated regional politics regarding the federal government's plan to develop a nuclear waste repository at Yucca Mountain, which sits on the test site's western edge. The NTS Oral History Project's research provides a meaningful context for these debates by documenting the memories of the many individuals affiliated with the test site who still call Nevada home.

CONTESTED MEMORY

Even before the Trinity test, national leaders debated nuclear weapons' impact on domestic policy and international relations. The NTS Oral History Project explores myriad views on the fundamental problems that

From left, UNLV history professor Andrew Kirk, project director Mary Palevsky, and sociology professor Robert Futrell are leading the Nevada Test Site Oral History Project.



remain relevant today. Many retired NTS workers see the site's landscape, pockmarked with craters from 100 atmospheric and 804 underground tests, as a primary battlefield of the Cold War. They conceive of themselves as unsung combatants who, faced with the threat of all-out nuclear war with the Soviets, achieved peace. Many are eager to tell their stories. (Some information remains classified; secrecy shrouds memory, and tension often exists between what participants know and what they say.)

Troy Wade, former assistant secretary of energy for defense programs and a longtime Nevada Test Site official,

explains this perspective in his interview.

"I believe that the use of nuclear weapons ended World War II. The nuclear deterrent, designed at Livermore and Los Alamos and Sandia [National Laboratories], perfected in nuclear tests at the Nevada Test Site, kept us out of another major world conflagration like a World War III. The fact that we had nuclear weapons, sometimes massive numbers, caused the Soviet Union to realize that we could wipe them out if we chose to do so. That simple fact kept them from doing anything crazy. That's called deterrence."

Other policymakers insist that the pace of U.S.

nuclear weapons development fueled the arms race and contributed to worldwide stockpiles and proliferation, thus weakening national security. Critics passionately question the safety and ethics of experimental nuclear weapons testing, as well as its social, environmental, and geopolitical implications.

In 1977, inspired by the nonviolent teachings of St. Francis of Assisi, Franciscan Sister Rosemary Lynch began holding vigils near the NTS. In 1982, to honor the 800th anniversary of St. Francis' birth, she and like-minded people decided to promote the peace he taught not through a church celebration but by spending the Lenten season in the desert near the test site.

"We cannot defeat evil with more evil or power with more power," Lynch observes in her interview. "People don't need bombs; they need bread, they need food, they need medicine, they need care, they need help. We tried in the very beginning [of the protests] to make friends with the guards, with the police.... They're victims of the bomb just as much as we are. Any bomb that falls is going to hurt indiscriminately. It's not going to say, 'Well, I'm not going to hurt a test site worker.' We have to understand that. Martin Luther King used the beautiful expression, 'The building up of the beloved community.' We have to do it together."

The range of experiences and opinions are valuable pieces of the larger historical and sociological puzzle. Atomic veteran George Maynard, a retired master sergeant from the U.S. Air Force, was exposed to high levels of radiation while serving in the U.S. Army at the NTS during the 1950s. He is convinced of the site's importance to the American nuclear deterrent. He also believes the nation has yet to recognize the risks troops faced during their atomic missions. "Well, you know, a guy in a Purple Heart situation is either a rifleman or a machine gunner ... and knows that he's going to take that chance on getting shot," Maynard says in his interview. "And when you go out and get involved in the weapons testing program, you're not made aware of all of the hazards.... And I think that if the government creates the Atomic Veterans Medal and awards it to the remaining survivors, it will serve

justice like the World War II memorial that was recently dedicated."

Contrasts among participants' testimonies reveal profound tensions, even contradictions. The purpose of the research is not to reconcile them, but to contribute to our understanding of the complex and contested memories of the nuclear age.

A STUDENT-CENTERED ENDEAVOR

The NTS Oral History Project provides firsthand research opportunities to graduate students in history and sociology. To date, 30 students have been involved in the project. During the pre-interview phase, students conduct research for the project's bibliographic database of primary and secondary sources. They work on research design and learn to use state-of-the-art digital audiovisual equipment.

During the interview phase, students receive training in qualitative, narrative, and oral history theory and methods. They study the counterarguments that arise from the interviews and work to ground their research in larger historical and social contexts. Students are also involved in the Southern Nevada community, attending NTS retiree gatherings, as well as meetings with faith-based, tribal, and other activist organizations.

During the post-interview phase, students learn about managing the large quantities of data generated by oral historical research. They edit, index, analyze, and interpret research findings and then develop strategies to present them in a variety of forums. They present papers at academic conferences, submit articles to scholarly journals, and create digital and Web-based audiovisual materials for dissemination of the research.

The NTS Oral History Project has been funded by grants directed to UNLV by Congress from the U.S. Department of Energy (\$582,000) and the U.S. Department of Education (\$248,525). The project demonstrates that federal research support can be utilized to make significant contributions to the historical record, provide remarkable opportunities to graduate students, and build meaningful bridges between institutions of higher learning and the larger community.

A BRIEF HISTORY OF NUCLEAR TESTING **JULY 1945:** U.S. conducts Trinity, humankind's first nuclear explosion. **AUGUST 1945:** U.S. atomic bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki. **1946:** U.S. Atomic Energy Commission established. **1946 & 1948:** U.S. conducts atomic tests in Pacific. **1949:** First Soviet atomic test. **1951:** Continental test site established at NTS. **1951:** First atomic tests at NTS/Frenchman Flat. **1951:** First U.S. thermonuclear test (Pacific). **1953:** First Soviet thermonuclear test. **1958:** Nuclear testing moratorium. **1961:** U.S.S.R. breaks testing moratorium. **1963:** Limited Test Ban Treaty. **1967:** U.S. Nuclear stockpile at maximum (33,000 warheads). **1970:** Nuclear Nonproliferation Treaty. **1986:** U.S.S.R. stockpile at maximum (45,000 warheads). **1988:** Largest demonstration at NTS draws 8,000 protestors. **1988:** Joint U.S./U.S.S.R. test verification series. **1990:** Threshold Test Ban and Peaceful Nuclear Explosions Treaties. **1992:** Testing moratorium begins. **1996:** U.S. signs Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty (to date not ratified).



CLIMAX, part of Operation Upshot/Knothole, was a 61-kiloton device fired June 4, 1953, at the Nevada Test Site. U.S. Department of Energy photograph.