

## **A closer look at Los Alamos and how they interpret their history** (As published in *The Oak Ridger's Historically Speaking* column on September 13, 2011)

As I have mentioned in an earlier *Historically Speaking* article, on April 19, 2011, I was fortunate enough to have been invited to speak at Fuller Lodge in Los Alamos, NM, on the history of Oak Ridge. It was an honor to see the lodge meeting hall filled with over 200 people. The Los Alamos Historical Society had invited me over a year earlier.

The trip was also filled with tours of historic sites in Los Alamos, The Los Alamos County Historical Museum, The Bradbury Science Museum, The National Museum of Nuclear Science and History and The Trinity Site. It was a great week of intense visual stimulation and getting to see many new historic artifacts. It made me wish for more such exhibits in Oak Ridge.

When I returned to Oak Ridge, I could hardly wait to write of my experiences and to tell readers what I had seen in Los Alamos. I wanted to chide us about our lack of attention to the same details they were exceptional at featuring, in my very biased opinion.

I tried in a *Historically Speaking* article and in presentations to civic groups around town, but was never satisfied that I had succeeded in adequately conveying my frustration. So, the thought just seethed in my mind that I still had missed the mark in my attempt to convey what I saw. Eventually I came to realize that what I felt was not conveyed was the important single element of statues.

So, I have decided to try again in retrospect. The statues I intend to discuss are the two statues of Robert Oppenheimer and General Leslie Groves placed outside Fuller Lodge in Los Alamos. I want to contrast that installation with our utter lack of statues recognizing the people who have contributed to our history.

It began well before the May 19, 2011, dedication of the statues. As early as March 10, 2010, the Albuquerque Journal printed an article written by Kate McGraw, titled, *Trail of statues*. In this article, McGraw stated, "A life-size bronze statue of J. Robert Oppenheimer stands in the lobby of Fuller Lodge, waiting for a companion – a sculpture of Major Gen. Leslie R. Groves." I saw and photographed this statue of Oppenheimer.

She continues to recognize the nationally known artist, Susanne Vertel, who created the sculptures. She notes that, "the two figures are part of a 10-year, two-phase memorial sculpture project that, when finished, will give Los Alamos a 'trail' of 13 sculptures representing the different phases of The Hill's history. "

One of the 13 sculptures, that of Dorothy McKibbin, may be destined to be placed in Santa Fe. I purchased the book, *Dorothy Scarritt McKibbin, Gatekeeper to Los Alamos*, by Nancy Cook Steeper. It is among seven books I purchased while on this trip. I already had the book, *109 East Palace, Robert Oppenheimer and the Secret City of Los Alamos*, by Jennet Conant, granddaughter of James B. Conant, who along with Oppenheimer opposed the development of the hydrogen bomb.

These books tell of the devotion of Dorothy to Oppy. She served as the front for the secret Los Alamos as all who were destined to work there entered that parallel world through her office at 109 East Palace Avenue just off the already historic square in downtown Santa Fe. What a great story and well documented by Jennet Conant.

The cover of her book states, "In March 1943, Dorothy Scarritt McKibbin took a position that catapulted her into the center of the Manhattan Project. Her office at 109 East Palace Avenue in Santa Fe was the

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entry point for all the scientist, technicians, and their families who came to Los Alamos, an isolated mesa in northcentral New Mexico, to build a 'gadget' that would change the course of World War II. "

The cover continues, "They also built a community where people attempted to lead ordinary lives under extraordinary circumstances. Dorothy, a rare combination of gentility and fire, was a powerful civilizing influence for those individuals. She was their one contact with the world beyond 'the Hill,' a world that did not know of their existence."

The statues will be funded by one percent for art monies from public projects and private donations, according to Stephani Johnson, Los Alamos County community services director as reported by McGraw. Each sculpture cost between \$50,000 and \$80,000.

Johnson is quoted by McGraw as saying, "The idea is to represent Los Alamos from Pueblo times, through the homesteaders around the Pajarito plateau who were displaced by the Manhattan Project, the ranch school era, the Manhattan Project and the Cold War. " I would suggest we in Oak Ridge should do much the same...that is represent the Cherokee, the white settlers, the early plantations and later farmers who were displaced, the Manhattan Project and the Cold War.

Linda Deck, director of the Los Alamos National Laboratory's Bradbury Science Museum, is quoted by McGraw as saying, "We have a unique history. We came up with criteria on placement that put safety first..." Oak Ridge also has a history that could be commemorated by statues of key individuals in our history.

One of the questions being pursued by the newly formed Facebook group, "I remember when in Oak Ridge..." has a thread generated by Tim Gawne that asks the question, "Can anyone name some of the heroes of Oak Ridge past and present?" Who would you guess was among the first listed and mentioned the most frequently? Mayor Al Bissell and Waldo Cohn! We need statues of both!

So, just where in Oak Ridge should such a group or "trail" of statues be placed? Gordon Fee had an interesting concept he shared with some of us who are thinking about the pressing need to preserve the Guest House/Alexander Inn. He suggested we create a group of bronze statues such as Oppenheimer and Groves rocking on the porch of the historic Guest House with Alvin Weinberg, Alden Blankenship, Al Bissell, Eugene Joyce and I would add Waldo Cohn walking around in the garden or yard.

You can think of others who should be honored, I am sure. How about Dr. John Googin outside Y-12 New Hope Center? How about Oak Ridge National Laboratory's Clifford Schull, 1994 Nobel Prize winner? There are others, many of them!

I must add here, don't you know that Los Alamos would give its eye teeth to have a "Guest House/Alexander Inn!" I dare say, they would not allow it to deteriorate to the dismal point we have allowed. Don't give up on it yet. There is a lot of life left in that ole structure! It is way more sound than first appearances might suggest.

Might I go so far as to suggest that some funding be set aside to create and install the statues mentioned above? We might benefit more from this initiative than we have historically seen return on our investment in some other things we have spent significant sums on with little to no actual return on our investment. Surely you agree, we tend to study things to death!

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On the Los Alamos County web site is found the following: "The statues are the culmination of many years of research, planning and design work by members of the Fuller Lodge/Historic District Advisory Board. The statues are the first of many planned for installation under the adopted Historic Sculptures Master Plan. "

The web site continues, "The statues honor those who have had a significant impact and contribution to Los Alamos throughout its history. The goal is to use the statues to create a vibrant and interesting walking tour in the downtown area, where tourists and visitors will be able to learn more about the rich history of the Los Alamos community."

Where is our "master plan for sculptures?" We have a master Heritage Tourism Plan...do you know about that? Have you seen it? Ask for it at the Oak Ridge Public Library or the Oak Ridge Convention and Visitor's Bureau. See how you think we are doing on it.

In Los Alamos, the initial two statues were dedicated in conjunction with Rosenfest 2011, a two-day Los Alamos National Laboratory -sponsored event honoring the life and work of Dr. Louis Rosen, the Father of the Los Alamos Neutron Science Center, the signature science facility at Los Alamos National Laboratory.

Rosenfest 2011 was held at the lodge on May 19 and 20 and was expected to draw many visitors to the local area. They intend to use the statues as draws to get visitors to come see the history of the site.

Who is our "Rosen?" Alvin Weinberg? Where is our ORNL sponsored festival honoring him? I know, you say, we have our award winning Secret City Festival and I grant you that. However, we should NOT settle for that festival or even for the Lavender Festival. We should look for several festivals that feature different aspects of our uniquely wonderful , yet still too secret, city. We can do better.



Bust of Norris E. Bradbury, LANL director, located at the entrance door of the Bradbury Science Museum of the Los Alamos National Laboratory

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Statue of Robert Oppenheimer waiting on the General Groves statue to complete the first two sculptures to be installed in Los Alamos outside the Fuller Lodge



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Oppenheimer and Groves families at the dedication of the statues on May 21, 2011