

# Los Alamos & the Manhattan Project – 1.5 Million Years of History in One Hour

(As published in The Oak Ridger's Historically Speaking column on May 9, 2016)

On Tuesday, May 3, 2016, Heather McClenahan, the Executive Director of the Los Alamos Historical Society, presented a program on the history of Los Alamos, NM, to a large audience at the Wildcat Den of the Midtown Community Center. She was the invited guest of the Oak Ridge Heritage & Preservation Association and provided the monthly program for May that was open to the public. I believe her audience may well have been the largest we have had for a monthly presentation.

Heather is a good friend of mine and we have worked together on the Manhattan Project National Historical Park efforts over the past several years. She was chosen to testify at the US House of Representatives from Los Alamos at the same hearing where I was chosen to testify from Oak Ridge. We were both selected to serve on the Manhattan Project National Historical Park Scholars Forum when the park was formally established on November 10, 2016, and, together along with some 15 other scholars, attended the formal signing ceremony in Washington, DC.

She also arranged for me to speak in Los Alamos at the historic Fuller lodge on the history of Oak Ridge. She was able to fill the lodge meeting room that evening and I had a ball telling our history to the folks there at Los Alamos! I was pleased to be able to reciprocate by arranging for her to speak in Oak Ridge about the history of Los Alamos. And she did an excellent job of it, too!

Heather has degrees in journalism and political science from Drake University in Iowa and a master's in U.S. history from the University of South Florida. She is passionate about sharing stories of Los Alamos, from the Ancestral Pueblo people to the homestead era, the Los Alamos Ranch School, and, of course, the Manhattan Project.

Several in the audience expressed their appreciation for her presentation. As is often the case with Oak Ridge and Los Alamos, we know of each other, but not usually the details of our relative history. I believe it is good to exchange such presentations and am glad to be a part in making it happen.

Next I want to work on getting someone from Hanford, WA, here to present the history of the tri-cities of Richland, Pasco and Kennewick and of course the Hanford Site. Fanny and I have enjoyed visits there and also I have made a presentation to a large audience of the history of Oak Ridge. We also toured the huge historic "B" Reactor.

But before we look at Heather's excellent history of Los Alamos, let me say that Gordon Fee commented that Heather had made the best history presentation he had seen in a while. He noted that she focused on the significant people who contributed to the Manhattan Project at Los Alamos and wondered why can't we do that here in Oak Ridge? Gordon has asked people in Oak Ridge to identify the important people and all he gets is Colonel Kenneth Nichols and Alvin Weinberg. Most people don't even realize that Clark Center Park is named for a MAN! One of the most influential leaders in the early years after the war years.

Now, let me share some of the history that Heather presented in her "1.5 Million Years of History in One Hour!"

First, Los Alamos is located on the Pajarito Plateau. It is made of volcanic deposits that extend from a huge volcano caldera, the Valles Caldera, like the fingers on a hand. This ancient volcano created what is now known as the Jemez mountains region in northern New Mexico. With time, erosion sculpted narrow mesas and canyons.

The city of Los Alamos and the main portion of the Los Alamos National Laboratory are both located on the plateau. The site was named Los Alamos which is Spanish for "the cottonwoods" by Ashley Pond, who founded the Los Alamos Ranch School for Boys (1918–43).



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However, the first residents known to have lived on these plateaus were Native Americans. One of their many pueblos was called "Tsirege," or the "bird place." The name Pajarito originates from this "bird place" and means "little bird" in Spanish.

The next residents of the area were the homesteaders who arrived in the 1880s. However, the area remained sparsely settled until 1917. A member of Teddy Roosevelt's Rough Riders, Ashley Pond started the exclusive Los Alamos Ranch School in the isolated setting.

Heather told us that, "Pond went into business with Pajarito Plateau homesteader Harold H. Brook, owner of the Los Alamos Ranch, to start a school for boys. Brook quickly bows out of the arrangement and sells out to Pond."

Heather said that Ashley Pond was a dreamer but had not the first clue about how to actually manage his ideas into reality. She went on to say that "Forest Ranger and Boy Scout leader, A. J. Connell, who had strong ideas about how boys should be education ran the school from 1917 to 1943." This came about because Ashley Pond realizing he could not manage the school sought someone who could and hired him.

Ashley's daughter was Peggy Pond Church, who became a noted author and poet. She wrote the following poem in 1946 as she thought back on the time on the Pajarito Plateau before the Manhattan Project,

"When I was a child I climbed here  
at sunrise, barefooted among the grasses.  
I searched for arrowheads among the ruins  
and stood wondering on the rims of the broken kivas.  
I had no language to say what it was that moved me,  
a wisdom of rocks and old trees, of buried rivers,  
of the great arcs and tangents of sky and mountain . . .

Sharon Snyder, author of *At Home on the Slopes of Mountains* (2011), a biography of Peggy Pond Church said, "she wrote these words in 1946 in 'Morning on Tserege,' a work destined to become her signature poem. They immortalize her sensitivity to the beauty, the spirituality, the mystique that is New Mexico.

In 1942 the US government took over the beloved Los Alamos Boys Ranch School. The school was abruptly closed and Los Alamos became a secret Manhattan Project site. J. Robert Oppenheimer was aware of the isolated plateau that held the school because for years he had spent time near there and regularly road horseback over the still largely unpopulated area.

When he and General Leslie Groves sought a secluded location for a scientific laboratory to design and build the atomic bomb, this remote plateau seemed the logical choice. Besides, as Heather told us, "Oppenheimer loved physics and New Mexico and longed for a way to combine the two." She also said that "He wanted landscapes that would inspire the scientists to think grandly and the Los Alamos Ranch School had the needed infrastructure."

The Fuller lodge and the Ashley Pond (literally a pond of water that uses the name of the founder of the boys school as a play on words recalling both the man and identifying the pond of water) remain today as historical reminders of those days before the Manhattan Project. And beautiful examples they are. The pond serves as the centerpiece of the town and is now a park enjoyed by many. A self-guided history walking trail surrounds the pond.



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A few homes along “Bathtub Row,” so named because the homes there before the project were the only ones with bathtubs, remain and may be destined to become a part of the Manhattan Project National Historical Park. They are now the property of the Los Alamos Historical Society who is working with the National Park Service to determine the best arrangement for interpreting the history of Los Alamos.

Heather showed us a picture of a portrait of General Leslie Groves that his grandson had donated to the Los Alamos Historical Society. She also mentioned that Los Alamos had erected two bronze statues near the Fuller Lodge, one of General Groves and another of Robert Oppenheimer.

She also introduced us to Dorothy McKibbin, the “gatekeeper” to Los Alamos who operated from 109 East Palace in Santa Fe. Dorothy served many roles for those scientists coming to Los Alamos from badge provider to furniture and equipment mover to baby sitter to a shoulder to cry on.

But she did it all without compromising the security of Los Alamos. To get there, one must first go through Dorothy, a graceful and attractive widow who found Robert Oppenheimer intriguing and immediately wanted to work for him when she first met him.

Heather told us that some of the key players at Los Alamos during the Manhattan Project were, Robert Oppenheimer, of course, but she also recognized Enrico Fermi, Hans Bethe, George Kistiakowski, Edward Teller (who is disliked immensely by people of Los Alamos because he was the person who indicated he did not trust Robert Oppenheimer and ultimately is credited with doing the most to get Oppenheimer's security clearance taken away and many say the ruin of Oppenheimer), Sir James Chadwick, William “Deak” Parsons and Niels Bohr.

She focused us on Deak Parsons, the person who armed Little Boy after it was placed on the Enola Gay. She indicated he was a strong supporter of Oppenheimer and worked closely with him. When Edward Teller was seen as a primary reason Oppenheimer lost his clearance, Deak took it hard. He despised Teller and some say he became so bitter toward Teller that it might have been a leading cause of Parsons' death.

Heather also told us of the Special Engineer Detachment and I could not help but think of Bill Tewes, who recently passed away. The reason is that Bill, being an SED himself, would have been overjoyed to see Heather include them in her history of Los Alamos.

She told us what daily activities were like during the Manhattan Project in Los Alamos. From the scientific experiments being conducted at the laboratory to the daily life in the city. She also noted the relationship that existed between Oak Ridge, Los Alamos and Hanford that led to Little Boy and Fat Man being dropped on Japan and helping end World War II.

She then noted that Norris Bradbury, who worked closely with Oppenheimer was chosen to lead the laboratory when Oppenheimer left in October, 1945. He agreed to do the job for six months, but remained there for 25 years. The Bradbury Museum in the center of the city of Los Alamos is named for him.

Heather concluded by telling us of modern day Los Alamos with a focus on the laboratory and the Manhattan Project National Historical Park. Like Oak Ridge and Hanford, Los Alamos is known as one of the cities created to build the atomic bomb. But it has evolved into so much more.

Los Alamos contributes to our nation's nuclear weapons program, has super computers, helps assure a strong national security, works on environmental cleanup, supports the space program and focuses on areas of health research. The laboratory is one of the leading laboratories in our nation and the city of Los Alamos takes great pride in the laboratory's accomplishments as well as the advancements of technology and the pleasant life of another “Secret City” that has grown into a stable comfortable city whose citizens are obviously proud of their heritage. .



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Heather McClenahan and Gordon Fee exchange thoughts after her excellent presentation on the history of Los Alamos



Mick Wiest presents Heather with a reprint copy of "The Oak Ridge Story"



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Heather McClenahan makes a point to the audience regarding Los Alamos