



The Historical Roots of Tribal Involvement in the Development, Operation and Cleanup of DOE's Weapons Complex

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Abstract

In December of 1945, the Pueblo of San Ildefonso celebrated its annual deer dance. They were joined by members of a square-dance club from nearby Los Alamos. In the midst of the festivities, the governor of the Pueblo climbed on a bench and shouted, "This is the atomic age, this is the atomic age." And it was and it is. The American Indian involvement in the development and operation of the nuclear weapons complex is a little-known story. It is the story of the Wanapum Indians who left their fishing village along the Columbia River with the yet-unfulfilled promise that when "this" is all over they could come back and fish again. It is also the story of Navajo uranium miners whose lives were cut short by their labor in unventilated mines. It is the story of the Pueblo Indians who worked as cooks and maids for the physicists of Los Alamos and on construction crews. And it is these stories that, in large part, supports the involvement of Indian tribes in the cleanup of the DOE weapons complex.

To fill out the story of tribal involvement in the Manhattan Project and subsequent operations of the nuclear weapons complex, the Department of Energy is working with 11 Indian tribes and with the Council of Energy Resource Tribes to document these stories. This authors will describe the work the Department of Energy has done to help tribes document the oral histories and conduct archival research for this project.

INTRODUCTION

The Tribal Oral Histories Project was first developed a little over two years ago in response to tribal concerns that valuable information from tribal elders would be lost forever if they are not captured in an oral history collection. These concerns were brought to the Department of Energy, Office of Environmental Management's attention in light of a larger and more general concern that despite the volume of material written about the Manhattan Project and the Cold War, practically little, if nothing at all, has been recorded about the role of and impacts to tribes during this time. In fact, both the Department's own historical accounting of the Manhattan project and information documenting the specific developmental and technical processes involving the nuclear complex never reference Tribes. Additionally, beyond the general historical accounts of the nuclear complex and the documenting of the specific technical developments during the Cold War period, the Department has appropriately produced historical accountings of human interest involving the experiences of the workers from the Manhattan Project. Tribal people played their own role in an important aspect of not only American history, but world history. Tribal people not only served faithfully in the military and worked at these nuclear facilities, they also gave up

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their lands and crucial materials from their lands for the project; and in some cases, they paid a tremendous human and cultural price.

With this backdrop, the Department recognized a need to secure the history for the record and hopefully learn from this information, and therefore, initiated a project to gather oral histories from tribal members. Specifically, the oral histories would be from tribal members around DOE sites who may have had direct interaction with or been impacted by the initial construction and operation of those sites. This information would benefit both the DOE and the tribes by enabling them to learn more about past U.S. government/tribal interaction as well as understand the impacts on tribes and their cultures from the development of the nuclear weapons complex. This valuable information, gained from a tribal perspective, will help DOE document its own history and assist in making better cleanup decisions which can minimize damage to resources during restoration activities.

Specifically, the early stages of the project was developed through a series of meetings with the tribes in order to begin to shape the priorities or goals of the project, establish milestones and project deliverables, highlight concerns with such a project, and develop a strategy for success. The one element that came out loud and clear in those meetings was the need to timely record the histories of tribal elders before they passed away. DOE-EM clearly recognized the urgency in recording the stories of tribal members in short order and therefore immediately provided to the tribes the resources to achieve that result. The tribes recruited the staff and purchased the equipment to achieve that goal with the technical assistance of Xavier University. Currently, the tribes are in the process of securing some of those histories.

The Department and tribes also recognized that the oral histories would present only part of the story, that much, if not most, of the Indian story could only be told by teasing out of records maintained by tribal, federal, state, municipal and university archives and libraries, the information that could weave the individual stories into a coherent and compelling tapestry.

THE ANNOTATED BIBLIOGRAPHY

An annotated bibliography is a necessary first step in tracing the historical roots of Tribal involvement in relation to the nations atomic weapon complex. The annotated bibliography will document the written record of the historical relationship between the activities of the Manhattan Project and their relation to the Tribes in their region. This process is an on going effort.

The annotated bibliography's purpose is two fold. One is that it should present the written story that exists concerning the tribal involvement in the Manhattan Project. The objective of a written text is to give DOE employees an understanding of the role the involved tribes had concerning the weapons complex. With this understanding the identification and annotation of the written history can then be used as an aid in justifying tribal involvement in the clean up process of DOE's weapons complex. A potential benefit of this understanding is that it should foster better working relations between the Department and the Tribes.

The second purpose of the annotated bibliography is to act as a template or model for future history projects regarding tribes. A potential area of study may be looking at the role tribes had in the development of energy resources within the United States. The areas of oil and natural gas, and mineral development are just two examples where tribes have had a significant role in history that has yet to be fully studied.

INTRODUCTION

The Council of Energy Resource Tribes entered into a cooperative agreement with the U.S. Department of Energy Office for Environmental Management in 1995. The purpose of the cooperative agreement was originally to provide technical assistance to Tribes analyzing the potential impacts to tribal interests from the proposed Federal Facility Compliance Act agreements between states and the federal government. In accord with this agreement, a history project arose as a means of analyzing potential impacts to tribal interests. The history project came about in response to a document the Department published in 1995 titled *Closing the Circle on the Splitting of the Atom*. A second edition was released in January 1996. This report documents the development of the US's nuclear weapons complex and the ensuing legacy of radioactive contaminants. Upon review of this document it was noted that there was no discussion on the involvement of tribes in general, concerning the development, testing, deployment and cleanup efforts surrounding the nations nuclear weapons complex.

Soon after, nine Tribes with cooperative agreements began the process of implementing a plan to amend *The Closing the Circle on the Splitting of the Atom* document with a section telling the tribal story. These tribes are: Seneca Indian Nation, Pueblo of Cochiti, Pueblo of Jemez, Pueblo of San Ildefonso, Pueblo of Santa Clara, Shoshone-Bannock Tribes, Nez Perce Tribe, Umatilla Tribes, and the Yakama Indian Nation. The planning sessions began with a meeting on March 18, 1996 and have continued to the present. From the earliest meetings in 1996, it was proposed that the Council of Energy Resource Tribes (CERT) take on the responsibility of conducting the Archival Research to compile information from the Department of Energy and other sources into an annotated bibliography. This responsibility became a reality in August 1997 with the hiring of an historian.

FINDINGS

Research began the last week of August 1997, when the historian was hired. In the beginning, the CERT historian began his research from documents related to the project that were in the CERT offices. These first documents were the *Closing the Circle on the Splitting of the Atom* (DOE 1996), *Linking Legacies* (DOE 1997), and *Memories Come To Us In The Rain And The Wind: Oral Histories and Photographs of Navajo Uranium Miners & Their Families* (Red Sun Press 1997). As previously mentioned the *Closing the Circle on the Splitting of the Atom* document set in motion the Tribal Oral History Project. This document gave the CERT historian an understanding of the problem of how the exclusion of tribal involvement in the official history brought about this particular project. The second document, *Linking Legacies*, detailed the "link" between production activities of the nations nuclear industry and the resulting contaminants and wastes that were byproducts of production. This document gave the CERT historian an understanding of how the waste and contaminates, which are a major concern to the Tribes, were produced as a result of normal production activities. The third document, *Memories Come to Us in the Rain*, regarding the Navajo miners and their families, was an important document for two reasons. One was that it detailed how one tribe, the Navajo, was greatly affected by the nations production activities of atomic weaponry. And secondly, it was an excellent example of a written story on how one tribe was affected as a result of the nations nuclear weapons industry.

These documents were the beginning points for the CERT historian's research. Upon completing these documents the CERT historian made a request to the Environmental Management Information Center (1-800-736-3282) asking for cited material from both the *Closing the Circle* document and the *Linking Legacies* document. During the waiting period until the requested

documents were received, the historian began his research at the public library, which is located near the CERT office, downtown Denver, CO. At the Denver Public Library (DPL), the CERT historian began a general search using the library's search engine. He searched by topic under the following subjects: Manhattan Project, Atomic Weapons, U.S. Atomic History, U.S. Nuclear Weapons. The CERT historian looked up each of the nine tribes for background information regarding their relationships to their land areas and lifestyles as well. In addition to this, the CERT historian also looked up information regarding the histories of the land areas where nuclear production facilities were located during the Manhattan Project era. The two areas of major concern for the CERT historian were southeastern Washington, and the Pajarito Plateau in New Mexico.

Concerning tribes in particular, the CERT historian looked for any references made concerning a tribe, tribal lands, policies or lifestyles and in turn would search the source cited that made reference to a tribe in any way. The CERT historian would look up the sources that were cited as references or listed in the bibliographies of texts that were reviewed and in turn would research those sources for further leads. This created a system where one text led to several sources. And those sources led to further readings, etc.

Based on this initial research at the Denver Public library, a majority of the information found surrounding the Manhattan Project was secondary sources. The author of one secondary source, Peter Bacon Hales, in his work *ATOMIC SPACES* states that "[i]nformation on [the Indian] workers [at Los Alamos] is remarkably absent from the official records." Hales' observation applies to other sites as well. In general, the involvement, even peripherally, of Indian tribes and Indian people in the activities of the Manhattan Project is absent not only in the histories of Los Alamos, but those of Hanford and Oak Ridge as well. The full meaning of Hales' statement became more obvious as more and more secondary sources were reviewed. The fact became apparent that Indian tribes and Indian people were not included among the major players in the Manhattan Project and accordingly, accounts of their involvement are found primarily in the diaries, autobiographies, and reminiscences of some of the major players and supporting cast.

In order to look in to these primary source documents, the historian traveled to various locations across the country to conduct his research. Approximately a week was spent at each of the two most significant nuclear production facilities concerning relative proximity and impact to tribal interests. Those facilities are the Hanford Site located near Richland, Washington and the Los Alamos National Laboratory (LANL) in Los Alamos, New Mexico. At these two locations research time was spent in their public reading rooms identifying documents that are not available in local libraries. At both of the public reading rooms, the material found regarding the facilities relationship to the local tribes dealt mainly with issues regarding cultural and natural resource management. These documents were for the most part were written at time periods well after the Manhattan Project era.

However, all was not lost. There exists the diary of Col. Franklin T. Matthias at the public reading room of Hanford. Matthias was the general manager of the Hanford site during the Manhattan Project. It was Matthias who made agreements with the Wanapum people of the Hanford Site to relocate. His diary covers the years he was active as manager of the Hanford Site. In the span of time that the historian was researching at Hanford, he was only able to get through the first section of Matthias's diary. In that first section no reference was yet made concerning the Wanapum or any of the other tribes near the Hanford Site. Therefore, more travel and research time is necessary to completely analyze Matthias's diary.

At Los Alamos, similar historically significant material was discovered, not at the Los Alamos public reading room but at the Los Alamos Historical Society. There exists at the Historical Society a photo archive of Los Alamos. In their archives of Los Alamos during the Manhattan Project era there are a number of photographs from the infamous San Ildefonso Christmas party that is made reference to in a number of secondary sources. These black and white photographs are visual documentation of the types of cultural interaction that existed at the Los Alamos site. Again this is just one form of primary source of documentation that was uncovered in an area where relatively few primary sources exist. The lack of primary source material again makes Hales' statement all the more valid.

During the CERT historians stay at Los Alamos, time was spent at various locations. The CERT historian researched material at the J.R. Oppenheimer Research Library and the LANL Archives. Much like the public reading room at Hanford, both of these sites possessed material pertaining to the management of cultural and natural resources of the neighboring Pueblo at time periods after the Manhattan Project era.

In an effort to identify more primary sources the historian traveled to Washington D.C. on two separate occasions. While in D.C. the historian conducted research at all of the following locations: the National Archives II, the Smithsonian Archives, the Special Collections at Dibner located within the National Museum of American History's archival libraries, and the National Air and Space Museum.

From the material researched at the Smithsonian Archives was an excellent documentary video done on the Manhattan Project. However, the historian did not view the actual videos, but instead read the complete manuscripts of the material. A Stanley Goldberg conducted the documentary interviews in 1987. Goldberg interviewed a number of workers who held various positions in regards to the Manhattan Project. The first set I chose to read about was labeled the Hanford series. In this episode Goldberg interviewed workers at the Hanford Reservation inquiring about the Hanford experience. The second set of manuscripts read through were Goldberg's interviews of workers at the Los Alamos facilities of the Manhattan Project. These interviews were similar to those of the Hanford series, which consisted of inquiries of what went on at the facilities project wise and socially.

In the second set of manuscripts an interesting story was told that is worthy of further investigation. An interviewee from the manuscripts tells a story of witnessing a Pueblo ceremony where normally traditional foods are offered to a certain deity. The person interviewed remarks that she saw a Pueblo woman throwing in packets of store bought Kool Aid for offerings. When asked about the Kool Aid packets, the Pueblo woman replied that since she was working she didn't have time to prepare any traditional foods. This in itself is a reflection of the types of impacts the Manhattan Project had on traditional native lifestyles that needs further investigation.

At the National Archives II, research was conducted in their still print department in the hopes of finding photographs of the Manhattan Project decision-makers. Unfortunately, no such photos existed of the key players such as Gen. Leslie Groves, Col. Franklin T. Matthias, or any other decision making official from the Manhattan Project. However, some useful photos that are relevant to the project were discovered. There were three photos with important implications to this subject matter. The first one was a photo with a Pueblo couple posting a War Bonds ad upon a wall. The language used in the ad is in Pueblo, which has some definite cultural significance. The organization responsible for the ad created it to specifically target the Pueblo people. The next picture was a series of pictures where Col. Louis W. Proper presents the widow of Lt. Frank

Paisano Jr., a Pueblo prisoner of war with a medal. From these we can see the Pueblo dancers and U.S. Army soldiers lined up facing each other in the ceremony. Pictures like these show the interaction between two different cultures meeting for a military ceremony. The final photo has potentially more significance and relevance in that it shows an archaeologist digging up an Alaskan native burial site in an area where the U.S. did some testing. Though, it is not from the actual Manhattan Project era, it is a great area for further research concerning impacts of the weapons complex on Native Americans.

The other material looked at while at the National Archives II were recently declassified documents regarding the site selection criteria and processes regarding both the Hanford and Los Alamos sites. These documents were in a microfilm reel titled *The Official History of the Manhattan Project*. This document was looked at to identify any mention of the Wanapum or other Pueblos near either site. No reference was made regarding the Wanapum at the Hanford site. However, for the Los Alamos site there were some references to Pueblo peoples. In the site selection section for the Los Alamos site there is reference to the sensitivities of certain “sacred” Indian Burial grounds that caused for the irregular shape of the southeast boundary. And in a following section regarding the classification of the land types acquired at Los Alamos, it is stated that 19.5 acres of land was acquired from the Department of Interior, Indian Services. This is a starting point for further investigation.

CONCLUSION

From all the secondary material and references made based on primary sources, a number of themes can be identified. In the literature that has thus far been annotated, three major themes are apparent. The three themes that come up in relation to the Tribal involvement in the development, operations, and clean up of DOE’s weapons complex are: Indians as mythic characters, Indians as victims, and The Manhattan Project as an agent of cultural, economic, and political change.

The breakdown of these themes is as follows:

Indians as mythic characters. Colonel Matthias’ accounts of his interactions with the Wanapum Indians, the story of the Christmas party at the San Ildefonso Pueblo and the tales of the Indian maids and housekeepers present the Indians as somewhat mythic characters. For most of the narrators, these interactions were the first they had with any Indian people. Much of their observations and characterizations of the Indians are patronizing, but even the patronizing tone is tempered with a sense of awe. Indians are different. They may work in the homes and gardens of physicists, and they may invite physicists to share their parties and dances, but they remain unfamiliar and different. The oral histories being compiled by the tribes will do much to demythicize the Indian-white relationship.

Indians as victims. The stories of the Navajo uranium miners and the dispossession of the Wanapum Indians present the Indians as victims. The characterization of Indians as victims is a theme that runs through most of the later anti-nuclear books. The rare exception seems to be the story of the Eskimos presented in *Firecracker Boys*. Even as victims of government misfeasance, the Navajo miners must have been more multi-dimensional than they have generally been portrayed in the literature. We need more research in this arena to support tribal oral history projects.

The Manhattan Project as an agent of cultural, economic, and political change. The literature provides tantalizing bits of information that suggests that, especially in the case of Los

Alamos, the Manhattan Project caused major changes in the cultural, economic and social life of Indian tribes, Pueblo, and people. We know that Pueblo women moved into the workforce. We know that there were extensive interactions between Pueblos and whites. We know that the market for Pueblo arts and crafts surged.

Using these themes, we can see a definite story structure emerging from the material that is being annotated. There needs to be a significant amount of more time put in to researching material that will develop these themes. Once the themes are solidified, a true story can be written on the impacts the development, operation, and clean up of DOE's weapons complex had on the tribes.

The material from the annotated bibliography has and continues to be a source of leads for the tribes developing their oral histories. As individual tribal members and events are identified in the literature, the information is passed on to the respective tribe to aid them in their work.

One of the hardest parts of compiling this annotated bibliography lies in the paucity of referenced to Indians or Indian tribes in the official records of the Manhattan Project. This has made the research task extremely difficult. Almost every place the historian looked nothing concrete existed. There were only hints and clues that led the researcher on. The places that contain primary source information that the current research has pointed to are the official records of the involved tribes. This means that that the locus of the research needs to shift from the current libraries and archives and in to those of the Indian Health Services, the Department of the Interior's Bureau of Indian Affairs, and those of the individual tribes. We need to look at state records as well. What changes to the tax rolls, what numbers of business licenses were granted to Indians, how many driver's licenses were awarded to Indians, how many automobiles were registered? The answers to these questions and more lie in state, county and municipal archives.

Health records from the IHS need to be analyzed in the time periods prior to the Manhattan Project, during the Manhattan Project, and following the Manhattan Project (i.e. during the Cold War). A complete analysis of what types of ailments tribal members were treated for and how often, may reflect impacts exposure to the weapons complex have had on the general health of the tribe or conversely, may demonstrate an improvement in health spurred on by the tribal and individual families enhanced economic circumstances.

Time also needs to be spent researching the changing economy of the tribes prior to the Manhattan Project, during the Manhattan Project, and following the Manhattan Project (i.e. during the Cold War). As it is known in the case of the Pueblo women working at the Los Alamos site, money was being made. For example, by looking at the number of new cars and/or houses purchased during this time period a number of deductions can be made from the historian. By looking at all the records, the official Manhattan Project records at the Sites archives and National Archives, etc., as well as those records contained within the tribal institutions, a truly complete account of the written record can be documented. As the research stand now, a complete understanding of the story does not exist. And will not exist until it is possible to gain access to those records and documents stored at IHS, BIA, and various tribal offices.