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Printed from ABQjournal.com, a service of the Albuquerque Journal

URL: <http://www.abqjournal.com/north/opinion/3012126460northopinion12-30-09.htm>

Wednesday, December 30, 2009

Historic Park A Fine Idea

Very tentatively, the Department of the Interior appears to be moving towards designating parts of Los Alamos as a National Historical Park. The designation would include several historic buildings that were used during World War II's Manhattan Project — the secret World War II effort to build atomic bombs.

Creating such a park is a fine idea. Most obviously, it would complement nearby Bandelier National Monument and the Valles Caldera National Preserve, also being discussed as a National Park Service-managed property, as attractions that, taken as a whole, do justice to the complex history and geography of this piece of northern New Mexico.

But more importantly, the war effort at Los Alamos was remarkable in any number of respects. It brought together scientific talent from many countries and trained a new generation of young scientists. It involved ordinary people, too, both northern New Mexicans and military conscripts, often highly trained and skilled workers who hailed from all over the country. Many of the scientists and the others involved were so smitten with their wartime experiences on the Pajarito Plateau that they returned, and together with local people built what became Los Alamos National Laboratory into the engine for economic growth in a heretofore impoverished corner of the country.

Equally remarkably, most of the wartime science and highly technical fabrication of the first bombs took place in what now seem to be astonishingly primitive conditions. A very few of these old buildings — a Quonset hut, or the equally primitive bomb assembly site — still exist and are being preserved. The log lodge that was the social hub of the military encampment and later the town has been lovingly maintained.

It isn't accurate to say that the bomb itself was made in a log cabin, but that isn't far wrong. Many visitors, accustomed to viewing science as a rarified activity carried out in “clean rooms” amid high tech computerized instruments, may be astonished by what they see. Plans also call for the park to include Los Alamos's existing historical museums as part of a self-guided tour that also takes in “Bathtub Row” — log houses again, but where the Manhattan Project's intellectual glitterati — an incongruous word given their surroundings but no less accurate for that — lived.

Some might argue against giving National Park status to the site that gave birth to that horrific modern reality: weapons of mass destruction. Bombs that were the product of the Manhattan Project were used on two cities and killed more than 200,000 people in Japan, in effect ending World War II.

But the moral problem posed by Los Alamos's history is no less significant than the questions posed by Auschwitz, say, or the massacre ground at Wounded Knee, both preserved for contemplation of just these issues. Or, on a lesser scale, Santa Fe's internment camp for Japanese citizens, also of World War II vintage, just across the Rio Grande Valley from Los Alamos and now marked by a commemorative plaque.

Some of the leading scientists of the Manhattan Project were later to question the wisdom of what they had done at Los Alamos, as did the project director Robert Oppenheimer, whose house may be part of the Historical Park. No good history — or museum — dedicated to the bomb-building effort can ignore this aftermath. In this sense, the park designation provides the perfect opportunity for education and debate. It wouldn't hurt to mention the still-rankling displacement of local Pajarito homesteaders for the war effort, either.

It remains to be seen what Los Alamos residents and others think about the park proposal. They're invited to have their say at a meeting Feb. 2. We hope they're enthusiastic — and that federal officials respond in kind.

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