



# Aliens On Earth.com

Resources for those who are stranded here



[UFOs](#) | [Paranormal](#) | [Area 51](#)  
[People](#) | [Places](#) | [Random](#)  
[Top 100](#) | [What's New](#)  
[Catalog](#) | [New Books](#)

Search... for keyword(s)

in Book Title/Author

**Our Bookstore**  
is **OPEN**

[Mothership](#) -> [Book Catalog](#) -> [Childla](#) -> Here

[Book Catalog](#) [An Excerpt from Children of Los Alamos](#)

## Introduction

In the 1940s the town of Los Alamos did not appear on any map. Its very name was classified, not to pass the lips of those who lived there, even within the fences that circumscribed the isolated wooded mesa in northern New Mexico. Surrounded by mountains, barbed wire, and armed guards, scientists were working on a new kind of weapon, more powerful than anything yet imagined. They believed they were in a race against Hitler to create a weapon that could well determine the outcome of the war. The bomb they built has been used twice, both times against Japan. On 6 August 1945 it was dropped on Hiroshima, and three days later it was dropped on Nagasaki. Although it has not been used again in war, the atomic bomb has hovered over all military and political planning ever since.

The scientists at the Los Alamos Scientific Laboratory were striving to transform a theoretical possibility into an explosive reality. They were attempting to develop two kinds of bomb at once: one to be fueled by enriched uranium and the other by plutonium. Because neither fuel was yet available in significant quantities, calculations and experiments had to be done with something similar or with small, impure quantities of the real thing. The scientists were told to have the bombs ready by the time the fuels would be ready in sufficient quantities--probably the summer of 1945.

As the wife of one scientist recalls, there was "the feeling that you've got to make that bomb, you've got to get it done; others are working on it; Germans are working on it; hurry! hurry! hurry! This is going to save our boys! ... Get that damn bomb done!"

To attract top scientists from such institutions as Harvard and Stanford, along with other civilian workers needed for the project, the government allowed employees of the project to bring their families. The children who came to Los Alamos entered a town unlike any other--one that would have a profound effect on their lives. The town of Los Alamos had been hastily constructed on the site of a small preparatory boarding school for boys, the Los Alamos Ranch School. The name *Los Alamos* was derived from the cottonwood trees that thrive on the hillsides and in the canyons. At 7,200 feet above sea level, Los Alamos is just a bit higher than Santa Fe, 35 miles south and east, but the two locales are separated by a wide valley. The road connecting them descends into the valley then rises steeply, especially on the final approach to Los Alamos. Here the narrow winding road hugs the jagged, rocky cliffs as it climbs by switchbacks. The road from Santa Fe led up a steep incline; much of it was unpaved--dust in the dry season, almost impenetrable mud when it rained. Climbing that hill to the place where it levels off as the Pajarito Plateau on one-lane rutted roads is an experience the children never forgot. The first view of Los Alamos is still strong in the recollections of children old enough to remember their arrival; many of them arrived with a churning stomach and a cringing fear that the car would go over the cliff.

Part way up the hill are Los Alamos's nearest neighbors, the Native Americans of the San Ildefonso pueblo, whose ancestors had carved out homes in the cliffs of what had become the Bandelier National Monument and who now were sharing their land and traditions with this strange band of newcomers.

Some years before the Pilgrims arrived at Plymouth Rock, Spanish explorers already had established a provincial capital in northern New Mexico, just north of present-day Espanola. Their Spanish-American descendents homesteaded the Pajarito Plateau (Pajarito means "little bird") and became farmers around the area of Los Alamos Lab sites. The first Anglo homesteader to brave the region's snows with a year-round ranch was an intrepid lumberjack named Harold Hemingway Brook. He filed on 160 acres of land in 1911-- a year before New Mexico became the forty-seventh state. Constructing a series of log buildings, he called his place Alamos Ranch. Seven years later, at the tail end of World War I, Ashley Pond bought the ranch from Brook, renaming it the Los Alamos Ranch School. In December 1942 the headmaster called the boys together to tell them that the school would close in February. Its land and buildings were being taken over for a special project to help the war effort. The army soon moved in with a clamor of heavy machines. Amid the chaos and commotion, contractors threw up homes as fast as they could for the military, the scientists, the machinists, and the technicians.

During the war the average age among Los Alamos residents was 24. There were no unemployed, elderly, or disabled individuals; there were no garages or sidewalks and very few street names. There were few paved roads and plenty of mud. The residents officially lived at P.O. Box 1663, Santa Fe. Many called their home simply "The Hill." The Los Alamos of the war years can be considered a plateau of privileges unknown in the surrounding valleys or anywhere else in the state. Because of the importance of its mission, it had the best of everything. Its commissaries stocked items not found in those at other military bases or even in civilian stores--like chocolate bars. And the brand-new school was exceptionally well equipped with books and art supplies.

To encourage wives to work, the army arranged to hire women from the San Ildefonso pueblo as housekeepers. Each morning an army bus arrived at the pueblo to bring the women to the new town. Some were soon looked upon as nannies or even extended family members. The children of Los Alamos have fond memories of their Indian caregivers and cherish the pueblo culture they assimilated. Some trace their sense of spirituality to association with the Indians. Others were fascinated by the nonverbal communication they developed with the Indians. Still others recall with awe the experience of watching the dances on feast days. Almost all took away some treasured Indian craft--a black pottery bowl, or pottery animal. To the children born at Los Alamos, the Indian housekeepers often gave a name in the Tewa language, which these children recall with affection.

While the children of Los Alamos did not think of themselves as unique when they were children, as adults they realize that many circumstances they accepted were peculiar, that, as one of them puts it, "this was not the way in which most people grew up." They lived in a community that was not only secret but intense (and often tense), carefully selected, and diverse in geographic and cultural background. These children were a microcosm of the United States--children of scientists, many of whom had grown up in Europe; of machinists and technicians from around the country; of construction workers from Texas and Oklahoma; and of Spanish Americans.

Uniting this group of children from such diverse backgrounds was their physical isolation from the rest of the country. Still another dimension was added by the urgency of the town's mission, combined with the sense of impermanence of the town itself. With the exception of many of the Spanish Americans, everyone else in the town came from somewhere else. The children quickly accepted the town's unusual aspects--its fences, guard gate, soldiers, PX, all of which were less interesting than the wonders of the cliffs and canyons, the woods fragrant with the scent of pinon, and the nearby valleys of tall grass and wildflowers.

Still, that early secrecy has left a mark. One daughter of a physicist, now in her fifties and an administrator at the Los Alamos Scientific Laboratory, has trouble shaking the idea that "you don't ask." The son of a metallurgist says the years of silence created a communication chasm that he and his father were never able to bridge. And in the decades that passed after the secret was made public in August 1945, many parents never did talk about those years. Their children know generally what their parents did but are left to guess how they felt about it.

The recollections of those who were children in Los Alamos from 1943 to 1952 reveal three common threads. One is a magnetic attraction to and sense of connection with the land. The second is a sense of security--that Los Alamos was a place where children felt safe. With a fence around it and constantly patrolling military police, what little danger there was involved getting lost in the woods or canyons, and there were plenty of soldiers to help find a lost child. Since everyone had a job and had been investigated, there was no fear of crime. The third common thread is multiculturalism.

Almost all the children list interest in other cultures and ability to get along with all kinds of people as very important to them, and they attribute this interest directly to their experience at Los Alamos.

"There was a tremendous sort of melting-pot thing that occurred," observes Tim Bradbury, son of Norris Bradbury, director of the Laboratory from 1945 to 1970. "The Ulams [from Poland and France], the Fermis [from Italy], the Kistiakowskys [from Poland]. Their children mixing with . . . the [Native- American] Atencios and the [Spanish- American] Sandovals.... Here you had this tremendous diversity in people . . . in nationalities and ethnic groups, in roles, yet somehow . . . you had this bond of something happening that kept you all together." Some of the children go so far as to say, "The children felt no prejudice--none." Others disagree, noting that in some important ways Los Alamos was an unusually stratified community, but by education and occupation, not ethnic origin.

On one point all agree: academic success was the leveler. Scholastic achievement, not family background, determined one's place in the children's social strata. This New Mexico town that initially did not appear on any map brings to mind Garrison Keillor's description of the mythical town of Lake Wobegone, Minnesota, "where all the women are strong, all the men are good looking, and all the children are above average." The women of Los Alamos were strong--they had to be to withstand the isolation, the secrecy, and strange living conditions; the men were not all that good looking; but most of the children could be safely called "above average." Academic achievement was respected, encouraged, and, to a large extent, expected. Particularly notable are the accomplishments of those whose parents had little education. The son of a heavy-machine operator who had not finished high school holds a prestigious job in the State Department. The son of a carpenter is a nationally known artist. The daughter of another carpenter is a university professor. Daughters of machinists and construction workers have earned doctoral degrees. A security guard's son is nationally respected as an authority in African- American history.

The children of the scientists had a harder road to follow, but they also have achieved. For some, their parents' level of achievement served as a goal, but it was a goal they suspected they would never attain. This predicament was particularly true of sons. Several are physicists--some even working at Los Alamos and other national laboratories. Some went into physics because it was all they knew of a profession: all their parents' friends seemed to be physicists. Others deliberately chose professions where they would not feel they were competing with their fathers.

Daughters of scientists (with some exceptions) generally felt less pressure pulling them to a scientific career and appear to have had an easier time finding their own path. A common theme in their reminiscences is the sense of intellectual excitement they recall from the conversations of their parents and their parents' friends at Los Alamos. Several say they have never again experienced anything quite like that intellectual zest.

Most of the children of wartime Los Alamos left the town, either when their families moved away at the end of the war or, for those whose families remained, when they went off to college. Many have since returned, either because they knew they could get a job at the Laboratory or because of an attraction to the land and the area's cultural mixture. Many have chosen to live not in Los Alamos but in the surrounding villages or Santa Fe.

A surprising number of those who spent only a couple of years of their childhoods at Los Alamos say they think of Los Alamos as home, more so than places at which they lived much longer. And they keep returning for visits. Those who now live in California, Chicago, Boston, or New York have taken a bit of the culture of northern New Mexico with them. One is likely to meet a now-grown Los Alamos "child" in Chicago or Pittsburgh wearing her favorite New Mexico Indian jewelry. And it's not unusual to walk into a colonial home in Virginia or a Manhattan apartment and see New Mexico landscapes on the wall, an adobe incense burner with pinon sticks on the mantle, or some of the famous black pottery from the San Ildefonso pueblo.

Along with this connection to the culture is a connection to the people. The children of Los Alamos know and care about one another even if they haven't seen each other for more than 40 years. They know about one another's work, triumphs, and difficulties. The scientists who were together at Los Alamos during World War II frequently had known each other previously, through their university research or their graduate study. And they would continue to interact over the years, coming together at physics conferences or when they returned to Los Alamos, as many did for a summer or a semester. The families became extraordinarily close.

Discussing the project that brought Los Alamos into existence--the development of the atomic bomb--the children have

a variety of responses. In general those whose parents returned to universities grew up immersed in liberal ideas and are likely to have participated in antinuclear campaigns and given serious thought to the idea of pacifism. The children who remained in Los Alamos, whose parents continued to work for the Laboratory, tend to be more staunch defenders of the Lab and its work. But almost all believe that, given the circumstances of World War II, the threat of Hitler, and the likelihood that Germany was working on atomic weapons, their parents made the right choice. And they are proud of their parents' contribution to ending the war. Their pride, however, is often qualified. As Henry Bethe, son of physicist Hans Bethe, puts it, "It's not a pride that says, 'God, aren't we great.' It's more of a pride that there was this thing to be done and they did it."

What follows is the story of what it was like to be a child in Los Alamos in its first decade, 1943-52. It is not a history of the atomic bomb or the nuclear age but the story of a place, the town of Los Alamos, as seen through the eyes of its children.

---