The Nevada Nuclear Test Site (review)

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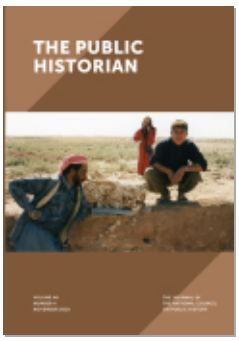

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The Nevada Nuclear Test Site. Las Vegas and Mercury, Nevada. *John Spahn*, Tour Guide; *Anthony Graham* and *Andrew Kirk*, UNLV Tour Leaders. April 18, 2018. https://www.nnss.gov/pages/PublicAffairsOutreach/NNSStours.html.

A pleasantly cool and overcast morning greeted the forty-five historians who left Las Vegas on the first day of the NCPH annual meeting for a tour of the Nevada National Security Site, formerly the Nevada Test Site. John Spahn, a decades-long site worker for the National Weather Service and the Department of Energy, guided our tour. Affable and knowledgeable, Spahn wove together historic and scientific details, jokes, and anecdotes during the seven-hour tour. Andrew Kirk, chair of the history department at the University of Nevada, Las Vegas (UNLV), shared the microphone with Spahn. He offered remarks not only about the environmental history of Las Vegas but also insights from his leadership of UNLV's Nevada Test Site Oral History Project and his 2017 book, *Doom Towns: The People and Landscapes of Atomic Testing*. Anthony Graham, a graduate student in history at UNLV, organized the trip and attended to the group's practical matters.

After an hour drive, the bus veered off US 95 towards Mercury, the test site's nerve center. We immediately confronted the site's security regime. First, Spahn reminded us that no cameras, or cell phones with cameras, were allowed. Next, he pointed to two chain link pens, one for men and one for women, each equipped with a mid-century modern pit toilet. These pens have held anti-nuclear protesters while the Nye County judge made the forty-mile drive from Pahrump, Nevada, to cite them for illegal trespass. Next, we stopped at the site's badging office, where we produced appropriate identification. Adorned with badges, we passed through the main security gate and went into Mercury.

The old Atomic Energy Commission built Mercury with a practical aesthetic. Plain wooden World War II-era buildings and cinder block buildings from the 1950s dot the town. Nobody lives in Mercury on a permanent basis now, though recently built dormitories can house up to one thousand site workers on a project-by-project basis. Still, the town bears the marks of the atomic workforce that used to live there. The steak house, cafeteria, and post office give Mercury the feel of many desert towns whose heyday has long passed. There is no interpretive center or museum in Mercury, so the tours stop at the cafeteria. The building exuded normalcy, from workplace safety banners to the Earth Day poster ("There is No Planet B") to the Snickers bars and M&M's for sale.

The Main Entrance to the Nevada Test Site. No cameras are allowed on the site. The corrugated trailers obscure the view of the site's main town, Mercury, Nevada. (Image courtesy of author)

Leaving Mercury, we encountered no normal landscape. On the drive to Frenchman Flats, Spahn explained the status of the site's contamination. According to its federal administrators, only around ten percent of the site's 1350 square miles have been used for the nuclear program. Of these, only another ten percent have surface contamination at "a level of concern." Based on the low square mileage actively contaminated by radioactivity, Spahn remarked of the site, "it's pretty much a pristine area." Of course, this assertion is up for debate. Downwinders, residents of northern and eastern Nevada and southern Utah, have challenged the federal government over their exposure to radioactive fallout by both legal and political means. Nevertheless, no one disputed Spahn's ecological assessment and the bus trundled deeper into the site.

I found that the test site shared one thing in common with so much of the desert West: it was covered in rusting, unused junk. Dilapidated materiel, decrepit machinery, rotting building materials, and abandoned buildings dotted the landscape. This was especially true as we drove across Frenchman Flat. We went past the concrete "motel" units, bunkers, Quonset huts, and other structures that had been built in the 1950s to see how they might withstand an atomic blast. We got out of the bus to investigate gnarled twenty-four-inch steel girders that mimicked the supports of a bridge. Spahn regaled us with details about the force of the blast, 441 lbs/square inch of pressure, that twisted the metal like putty. The girders inspired

awe and fear, but also pointed to the fact that the test site is perhaps the most quantified landscape in the United States. Engineers and scientists have numerically equated nearly everything on site to an atomic blast.

Leaving Frenchman Flat, we drove over a rise to Yucca Flat. We passed the rotting benches of the "news knob" where Walter Cronkite shared his experience of atomic fireballs with the American public. We passed Yucca Dry Lake, home to an endemic population of brine shrimp. We carried on past a host of subsistence craters, the scars of underground nuclear testing, to Sedan Crater at the far end of the valley. At nearly 1300 feet wide and over 300 feet deep and on the National Register of Historic Places, it dwarfs the subsistence craters. A relic of the Project Plowshare, the US attempt at peaceful nuclear earthmoving, the crater represents an unrealized atomic future. Spahn explained that the test did move 6.6 million cubic yards of rock and sediment, twice the volume of the concrete in Hoover Dam. But the atom has not hewn harbors, canals, and roadcuts, largely because Sedan created so much contaminated earth. Signs at the observation deck explained that radiation from the test still lingered, though not at dangerous levels. After we took in the spectacle, Spahn took our group photo, the only picture permitted on the trip.

From the crater, our bus ascended Ranier Mesa to an elevation of around 6800 feet. At this altitude, we encountered patches of snow nestled among firs and junipers laden with blue-purple cones. We ate lunch, enjoying the views and fresh air. Adits from underground testing lined the side of the mesa. After our picnic, we visited a quick succession of historically interesting sites on the west side of Yucca Flat. First, we drove past the succession of trenches used by GIs during the Desert Rock exercises. These tests studied the psychological impact of atomic bombs on combat troops. Over twenty thousand soldiers took part in tests that required them to run out of these trenches immediately after an atomic detonation. Next we toured the remnants of Survival Town, a collection of houses and outbuildings used in the May 1955 Apple-2 test to show damage to an average American town. The house we explored stood eerily alone, no longer fully furnished and inhabited by a mannequin family as it was before the test. Finally, we visited the site of the last planned test before the 1992 moratorium. All that remains now of "Icecap" are rusting instruments and the drilling rig that would have lowered the device into its temporary subterranean home. More rust, another unrealized atomic future.

From "Icecap," we returned to Mercury, where a guard came on the bus to collect our badges. On the ride home, Spahn showed a short film, "Operation Cue," about the Apple-2 test and Survival Town. The footage concluded as the bus approached the recently developed outskirts of Las Vegas. As tract homes came to dominate our field of vision, the doomed atomic town seemed far away indeed. But, distances in the desert deceive. The tour taught, more than anything, that in the American West, the atomic past is never far away.

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