

Health and Human Consequences

The legacy of nuclear testing extends beyond politics and military strategy. Hundreds of thousands of people were incinerated when atomic bombs were dropped on Hiroshima and Nagasaki in 1945, with many, many more suffering in the days, weeks, and years that followed. Since then, thousands more have died from nuclear weapons' use through radiation fallout and contamination from testing in the Pacific ocean and at the Nevada Test Site.

Through the early 1960's, one hundred nuclear bombs were detonated above ground at the Test Site, known as atmospheric testing. Bombs larger and more devastating than those dropped in Japan were detonated in the desert, miles from communities of American citizens. Those most clearly affected, were communities in Utah, Idaho, and onward across the nation, with the fallout of radioactive substances carried by the wind. But such radiation fallout was identified as far away as New York state thousands of miles from the Test Site.

While scientific study and understanding of the affects of radiation fallout pre-date any testing [as far back as 1939 government employed scientists wrote that radiation fallout was sure consequence of nuclear detonation], but the American public has been pacified for generations with incomplete information. A clear example of this is that while the government claimed that there were no ill effects of radiation, they delayed testing on days when the wind was blowing toward Los Angeles or San Francisco.

Cancer rates and incidence of birth defects are greatly increased in areas exposed in the radiation fallout. According to the National Cancer Institute, exposure to radiation during the atmospheric testing era resulted in an estimated 120,000 extra cases of thyroid cancer and 6,000 deaths.

Nevada Desert Experience is one of many organizations working for nuclear transparency and fallout victim justice.

For more information on radiation fallout contact:

Utah: HEAL Utah at www.healutah.org

Idaho: Downwinders at downwinders.org

www.downwinders.org

Facing Fallout: At odds over nuclear history

Utah cancer survivor says Atomic Testing Museum ignores the plight of downwinders

By Christopher Smart
The Salt Lake Tribune
Salt Lake Tribune

LAS VEGAS - When Michelle Thomas was growing up in the 1950s and '60s, her mother tacked up a hand-drawn map of their St. George neighborhood. She would mark an "X" for every house where someone had cancer.

That diagram - filled with dozens of X's - isn't on display at the newly opened Atomic Testing Museum on Las Vegas' storied Flamingo Road. But that isn't what angers Thomas.

"It's like we didn't even exist," says the lifelong St. George resident. "As a downwinder, that's deeply offensive."

Aided by a wheelchair last week, Thomas toured the new 8,000-square-foot facility that highlights the development of nuclear weapons at the Nevada Test Site, 65 miles northwest of Las Vegas.

She sees the museum as a monument to the bomb with little attention to its price in human lives. "In a word," she says, "propaganda."

Thomas can walk with a cane, but her polymyositis - the degenerative autoimmune disorder she has endured for the past 30 years - makes it difficult. Born in 1952, just after the onset of above-ground nuclear testing, she also has suffered from ovarian cysts, breast cancer and a benign salivary gland tumor.

The \$4.5 million museum - built with public and private funds, including handsome donations from defense contractors Bechtel and Lockheed Martin - harks to the final days of World War II and the dawn of the Cold War. The Defense Department, called War Department during World War II, and the Atomic Energy Commission were racing to develop the atomic bomb to defeat the Japanese and, later, the hydrogen bomb to stave off the Soviets.

The museum is replete with technological and cultural timelines that encompass both the forward march of nuclear arms capability as well as pop icons like Marilyn Monroe and Elvis Presley. It features mock civilian bomb shelters as well as other signs of the times, like women sporting atomic hairdos.

Thomas groans upon spying a life-size cutout of a nude Miss Atomic Bomb, a beauty pageant winner whose private parts are covered by a mushroom cloud.

"That's ironic," she smirks. "We've all had cancer of the ovaries and breasts."

But while the museum and its gift shop boast kitschy trinkets, the bulk of the exhibition is serious and sobering.

"The purpose of the museum is to capture the history of the Nevada Test Site and nuclear testing in general," explains curator Bill Johnson.

Exhibits emphasize the huge national undertaking that was the arms race. "If there is a message," Johnson says, "it is that the Cold War really was a war."

But people in southwestern Utah's Washington County and thousands of other downwinders were unwilling participants, "guinea pigs" who were lied to about the effects of radioactive fallout, Thomas says.

"We are veterans of the Cold War. But we didn't sign up," she says. "We were always told the government was very interested in our health. We thought, 'Oh, aren't we lucky.' "

Federal officials tested St. George schoolchildren's thyroids twice a year, Thomas recalls, and sometimes recommended the gland be removed. During bomb tests, residents were advised to stay indoors. "It was like, 'Go inside and watch "I Love Lucy" for a couple of hours and everything will be fine.' "

At the Las Vegas museum, visitors get a glimpse of the violence in an above-ground nuclear test in a small auditorium. After a countdown, benches vibrate as the screen shows a roiling nuclear explosion. Blasts from air cannons mimic the shock wave.

Al O'Donnell, an 82-year-old museum docent who worked at the test site for all 100 above-ground explosions between 1951 and 1968, says the blasts were vital to America's security.

"What I did, I did to protect the liberty of the United States," he says during a 10-minute video. "I'd do it all over again."

As the auditorium lights go up, Thomas struggles to hold back tears and tells O'Donnell, who is standing nearby, that she paid a price for the testing. "I've been walking with a cane all my life and my friends are dead. I don't have the freedom you talked about."

In an emotional exchange, O'Donnell tells Thomas he is sorry for the pain and suffering that came out of the tests. He also concedes that many of his colleagues died from the radiation.

"I'm afraid to go up to St. George," he says. "I'm afraid they'd stone me to death."

Dina Titus, a professor of political science at University of Nevada-Las Vegas, also makes an appearance on the bomb-test video, noting that downwinders indeed were misled by the government. Her two-minute monologue is among the examples that curator Johnson and others point to as attempts to include downwinders in the museum.

In an interview with *The Salt Lake Tribune*, Titus, who criticizes the weapons program in her 1986 book *Bombs in Our Backyard*, explains that at the onset of the testing, southern Utah residents backed the program, portrayed to them as vital to the nation's security.

"Not only were they harmed, but they were lied to by the people who said they would protect them," Titus says. "It was like a double whammy."

A downwinders exhibit should be added, Titus says. The price they paid was too high. "It wasn't worth it, to put people at risk like that."

The museum's most important function, Titus adds, is that it houses all the records from the 928 tests at the Nevada site (828 below ground) between 1951 and 1992. Among those documents is government evidence dating to the late '40s and early '50s that fallout is hazardous.

Despite such knowledge, the downwinders' battle for recognition and compensation took almost 40 years.

After meeting 27-year-old Connie Selzer, of Washington, D.C., during the tour, Thomas worries that many museum patrons will walk away with little or no knowledge of downwinders.

"It's a whole side of the story I didn't know about," Selzer says after chatting with Thomas. "It's like not knowing about the Holocaust."

Near the tour's end, Thomas looks quizzically at an exhibit that includes a chunk of 9-11 World Trade Center wreckage.

The Cold War and the creation of the nuclear weapons were fueled by fear and hate, she says. "This is a reminder to be afraid."

Talk of resuming nuclear testing - including from Utah Congressman Chris Cannon - baffles Thomas.

"It's like going back 50 years when they came to town and said, 'Don't be afraid,' " she says. "For them to say that now is serious crazy-making."

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Atomic Testing Museum

* Location: 755 E. Flamingo Road, Las Vegas.

* Hours: 9 a.m. to 5 p.m. Monday through Saturday and 1 to 5 p.m. Sunday.

* Admission: \$10 for adults; \$7 for those under 17 or over 65.

* (Posted for educational and research purposes only, in accordance with Title 17 U.S.C. section 107) *