

Lab's economic influence

Los Alamos National Laboratory's impact on the northern New Mexico economy:

■ In 1993, the lab bought \$253.25 million in goods and services in Los Alamos County, \$26.41 million in Santa Fe County, \$686,768 in Rio Arriba County and \$115.5 million in Bernalillo County. Statewide that year, the lab purchased \$400.58 million worth of services and goods.

■ The total lab-related payroll for fiscal year 1995 is expected to total \$634.2 million. Lab employees and employees of subcontractors living in Rio Arriba County will take home paychecks totaling \$86.2 million. Lab-related paychecks will total about \$305.3 million in Los Alamos County, \$94.8 million in Santa Fe County and \$11.5 million in Bernalillo County.

■ Although there is talk of layoffs through August, the lab began the year with 7,667 full-time employees. Student interns and subcontractors bring the lab's workforce for the year to 14,317.

Source: Los Alamos National Laboratory community relations office.

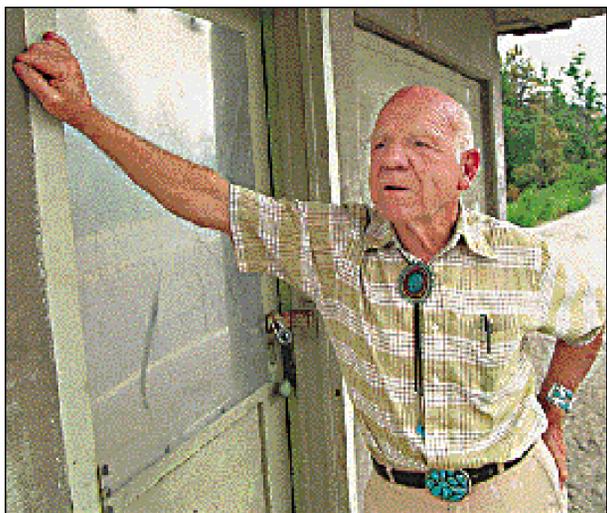


RICHARD PIPES/JOURNAL

This photo of the official state historical marker on U.S. 380 east of San Antonio, N.M., was taken at 5:30 a.m., nearly the exact time of the Trinity explosion a half-century before. The actual Ground Zero site is between the sign and the Oscura Mountains.

Economic Shock Waves

Los Alamos Lab brought money, opportunity to northern N.M.'s rural poor



Bob Waterman came to Los Alamos in 1947 and worked shifts in the guard towers that controlled access to the town in its early days. Today, a good share of its large commercial buildings have been built by his family's company, TRK Management Inc.



Viola Jaramillo-Pepin, who's been in Los Alamos for 34 years, came to town with her first husband to operate a restaurant. She says selling red and green chile in Los Alamos paid for the raising of seven sons.

BY PATRICK ARMILIO
Journal Northern Bureau

It doesn't take a rocket scientist, or in this case a nuclear scientist, to figure out that Los Alamos National Laboratory — with annual budgets in the 1990s of more than \$1 billion — has changed the economic face of northern New Mexico in the past 50 years.

Business owners in Los Alamos and the Española Valley say most people underestimate the lab's importance to the economy.

These are the stories of a handful of longtime residents who have reaped the benefits of federal bounty.

'They financed a lot of children's educations'

Richard Cook, often referred to as an "Española gravel magnate," has lived in the valley all his life.

His dad arrived in the valley in 1915 and found a job cleaning stables. Cook remembers as a boy riding on the back of a wagon as his dad resupplied the area's Hispano shepherds, who were grazing thousands of sheep in the nearby mountains.

In 1940, according to the census that year, the most common occupation was being a farmer or farm laborer. The Bond Mercantile Co., the region's largest business, bought all the produce, and it sold chile and piñon across the country in the first half of the century.

"In 1942, (Española) was a sleepy little village. Very few people had jobs, and those that did earned maybe \$50 a month," Cook said.

"But everyone had a big garden, and they all raised cattle. They supplemented whatever income they had, and they were able to survive. But nobody had any money."

Cook said the lab's big impact has been financing the education of the valley's post-war generations.

"Most of the jobs the valley people have at the lab are blue-collar work. I think that's changing now, too. But those were good jobs at good wages for the people of the valley. They financed a lot of children's educations."

Cook, who started in business in the 1940s, said the lab played no small part in his own fortunes.

"I have a Redi-Mix plant in Los Alamos that's supplied almost all the cement at the lab and the bulk of the sand and gravel that went up there, too. We've benefited directly," he said.

'In some way the lab figures in'

Henry Valencia, owner of Española's General Motors dealership, says his family, with roots that go way back in the valley, provides a pretty typical profile of what lab jobs mean in Rio Arriba County.

"I've got two brothers and a sister working at the lab now. Almost everyone in the valley has applied at the lab at some time. They're good jobs. The average pay is higher than the average for the state," he said.

When he came out of the Air Force in 1968, his father, Martin — who worked at the lab for 35 years with the old building and maintenance subcontractor, the Zia Co. — had a computer job lined up for him.

Valencia had worked on computers in the Air Force, but before he joined the lab he had two months' leave to play with. He ended up selling cars, and he loved it.

"I told my dad I had my fill of computers, and I wanted to do something different, and I liked selling cars. He thought I was crazy — throwing away a good lab job with benefits for something risky like selling cars," he said.

In 1980, he decided to buy his own dealership.

"At the time, if the lab wasn't there, I don't think I'd consider opening a business in Española," he said.

Now, Valencia sells 1,000 cars annually. And the money for a good portion of those rides comes from the lab.

"Virtually every car we sell has some lab money tied to it in some way," he said. "Either a lab employee or subcontractor buys it. Or a lab employee is helping his daughter buy her first car — whatever, but in some way the lab figures in," he said.

'There were good deals to be had here'

Mabel Waterman heard there were jobs in a place called Los Alamos, N.M., while listening to the radio one day in 1947.

Her husband, Bob Waterman, was working the night shift at the Beech Aircraft plant in Wichita, Kan., and moonlighting days moving furniture.

Within the year, Bob Waterman began night shifts in the guard towers that controlled entrance to the town.

"I wasn't going to spend my life in a guard tower," Waterman said. "I noticed a lot of people were moving in and out," he said of the lab's hectic early days.

In 1951, he started his own furniture moving company. Eventually, the company began moving the large buildings required by lab operations.

Today, the Watermans operate TRK Management Inc., a Los Alamos and Albuquerque developer and construction company; The Hilltop House, the main hotel in Los Alamos; and the Bandelier Inn.

But in the 1960s, government fire sales helped the Watermans.

"There were good deals to be had here if you had a little money to invest," Bob Waterman said. "The government was selling stuff 10 cents on the dollar."

Waterman bought "quads," ugly, Uncle Sam-made fourplexes that cost the government \$250,000 to build but were sold in fire sales for \$40,000.

Waterman would tear apart the fourplexes, remodel the four resulting houses and sell them mostly to Española Valley families desperate for roofs over their heads.

"The quads were the first real money I made. We'd make about \$1,000 on every house we sold," he said.

'You couldn't help but be busy'

Viola Jaramillo-Pepin raised seven sons by introducing lab scientists and visiting physicists from around the world to the wonders of red and green chile.

Her first husband, who was blind, gained ownership of the old Zia Snack Bar through a federal program that helped the disabled own and operate businesses.

It didn't take Jaramillo-Pepin long to convert the snack bar into a Mexican restaurant, and the chile proved an immediate hit.

Eventually, Zia Snack Bar moved into a restaurant at the Los Alamos Meson Physics Facility.

But when her husband died, Jaramillo-Pepin, whose operation was dependent on the government-assistance program, had to close it.

Since then, she's owned several restaurants. The latest, Viola's, is in the community center near the Bradbury Museum.

"Lunch used to be a lot better, but with the RIFs (layoffs), people have stopped spending as much. That, and there's a lot more competition now," she said. "I remember when there were only three restaurants in town, and I was one of them. You couldn't help but be busy."