The Asia-Pacific Journal: Japan Focus
In-depth critical analysis of the forces shaping the Asia-Pacific...and the world.

Reflection on the Sixtieth Anniversary of the Trinity Test (Japanese translation available)

By Bill Witherup

*Bulletin/message/564.*July 16, 2005, will be the sixtieth anniversary of the plutonium-fueled atomic bomb, tested at White Sands, New Mexico. On July 15th and 16th the Los Alamos Study Group, a nuclear-weapons watchdog, based in Albuquerque, New Mexico, will hold poetry readings and a silent auction in Santa Fe and Albuquerque. John Bradley, a fellow poet, and editor of Atomic Ghost: Poets Respond to the Nuclear Age (1995), and Learning to Glow: A Nuclear Reader (2000), and this writer, are two of the writers invited to participate.

As my father helped in the manufacture of the plutonium used in the Trinity a-bomb, and in its twin, Fat Man, dropped on Nagasaki August 9, 1945, I want to reflect on my father's thirty-year Hanford work history which began in January 1944 at what was then coded the Hanford Engineering Works (H.E.W.). Because my father was typical of Hanford workers -- most of whom came to the world's first plutonium-manufacturing plant on the banks of the Columbia River; in the scablands of southeastern Washington State; from other states as far away from Washington as Louisiana and New York, I am writing then about Hanford workers in general, and about the invisible class structure of a U.S. government "company town."

The company town was Richland, which I sometimes pun as en-Richedland; a former farming town on the Columbia plateau, as were also White Bluffs and Hanford itself. General Leslie Groves, the military head of the Manhattan Project, ordered the farmers and orchardists moved off their land -- and the farm houses, town halls and granges bulldozed over. The property was needed for the war effort, and to help defeat the Axis powers. They were paid off cheaply for alfalfa fields and beautiful apple, cherry and pear orchards- so that the US might seed atomic fruit.

The Native Americans were equally affected. The Columbia, Yakima and Snake rivers were salmon fishing grounds for the Yakama, Wanapum, Nez Perce, Cayuse, Walla Walla, and other Pacific Northwest tribes, to say nothing of the riparian wild life that depended on the rivers. The Yakama tribe was forced to give up some of their legal rights as their reservation included part of what was to be called the Hanford Nuclear Reservation.

When you read the histories of the Manhattan Project, and of the creation and use of the atomic bombs, you read about Robert Oppenheimer (the scientific head of the Manhattan Project), General Groves, and others of the nuclear and military priesthood: physicists, chemists, and mathematicians. But you will seldom read about workers, the men and women who built the huge war time plant (B-reactor); the company town of Richland, and those whose jobs it was to process the plutonium from yellow cake uranium (sent to Hanford from Oak Ridge, Tennessee, another company town) into plutonium pucks after B-reactor had been completed.

Richland, Washington, was as much a "company town" as any coal mining town owned by Peabody Coal. But instead of Pinkerton thugs watching over the town, Groves put military intelligence to work, making sure there were no communists, socialists or unpatriotic types working at the nuclear plant or in the businesses that served the community. (I wrote about ur-Homeland Security in "Mother Witherup's Top Secret Cherry Pie" in my 1990 book Men at Work). Also General Grove saw to it that the workers, and businesses in Richland, were all white folks. The African Americans who worked on construction helping to build the plant and the other reactors that went on line during the Korean War, had to live down river in Pasco, Washington, in often substandard housing. There were no Hispanics or Native Americans working at Hanford, -- and there were only one or two Hispanics and/or Native Americans in my graduating class of 1953.

The young and mostly white work force at Hanford was not by accident. Groves made certain that no workers at Hanford, Oakridge or Los Alamos -- the nuclear Holy See of the Manhattan Project -- transferred from one community to another. This, in Groves' mind, insured the security of the project. The top scientists, however, the elite of the nuclear priesthood, were able to travel from Metlab in Chicago to Oak Ridge, or to Los Alamos, or to Hanford to tune up and tinker with the fissioning and manufacturing processes with security clearances

My father, Mervyn Clyde Witherup, came to Hanford from Kansas City, Missouri, January or February of 1944. He had been working in Quality Control, checking the annealing on cartridges, at the Remington munitions plant in Kansas City. Remington was then a subsidiary of Dupont, which had contracted to build and run the very first nuclear reactor built in the United States. There were announcements at dad's work place that there was an opportunity for higher wages were one to "Go West, young man." My father decided to make the move, and the rest of the family joined him in June 1944: my mother, me, sister Sandra, and Mervyn Jr., ages 9, 3 and 1 respectively. The youngest sibling, Constance, was born in Richland in 1945.

Father was typical also of having worked for a Dupont company. Many of the other workers recruited for H.E.W. had come from Dupont plants across the country. Dad was 4-F because of a bad shoulder from an auto accident in Kansas City -- and he always felt somewhat guilty about not being in the war, though he balanced this, as did many of the other workers, and their families, with the satisfaction that he was doing important, war-time work. Few of the workers knew what they were making at Hanford, until the actual dropping of Little Boy on Hiroshima, and Fat Man on Nagasaki. Then, and throughout the Cold War, and to this day, workers and the majority of the families believed that the atomic bombs helped win the war in the Pacific, and that their use against civilian populations was justified.

General Groves saw to it that the table cracks were filled, and the table varnished over; that is, he saw to it that newspapers in Washington, Oregon and Idaho did no investigative reporting on what was going on at H.E.W. Nothing but company propaganda got through into the community. One never heard from school lectern or church pulpit any criticism of Hanford. As everyone was white, or European American, we were not aware of class or racial differences either, except when our sports teams played the mostly black Pasco Bulldogs!

The children of physicists, doctors, chemists, engineers and workers wore pretty much the same style of clothes to school: shirts, slacks and shoes ordered from Montgomery Ward or Sears and Roebuck in Seattle. And although the better paid scientists lived in

single unit government housing, while the rest of us lived in prefabs or duplexes, the gray and brown shingle sameness of government housing erased class differences. Because of government secrecy -- neither scientists or workers were to talk about their jobs with their families, or they and their family would be on the next train, or moving van.

My father's first job -- he later told me -- was to help log in the graphite blocks that were used in B-reactor. Then he was, for awhile, a Time Keeper; then trained as an Operating Engineer in the process that separated the plutonium from the slurry after the uranium was fissioned. The separation process was done in a huge two-block long facility called a "Queen Mary," and this was one of the more toxic work stations in the process. Also, most workers had to pull shift work: Days, Swings, and Graveyards. Such shift work, which made for disrupted sleep rhythms, along with the toxic work environment, may have weakened resistance to cancers and illnesses of the immune-deficiency system.

Dad had his 35th birthday on July 14, 1944, two days before the Trinity Test. I doubt he, or any of the other workers, even knew of the Trinity Test, though they had helped manufacture the plutonium, softball-sized core used in the Trinity a-bomb. Though Little Boy, a uranium bomb, of a gun-fired type, was used first, and Hiroshima thereby became the icon for the atomic age, it was the Trinity Test, an implosive device with a plutonium core wrapped in explosive lenses, which began the nuclear age, and was the template, after Nagasaki, for the nuclear warheads that followed.

Trinity Test Site

Until my father's death from prostate cancer in 1988 -- an illness due to thirty years of labor at Hanford, he held to the belief that his work had been patriotic and meaningful. He always claimed that Hanford had a history of being a safe workplace; that the various contractors, Dupont, GE, United Nuclear, etc, had the workers' health in mind. Meanwhile, workers, family members, farmers downwind from Hanford, and salmon-eating Native Americans continued to die from all kinds of cancer. Though the high school in Richland, from which I graduated in 1953, has fissioned into two high schools, the older and larger of the two, Richland High, still has calls their sports teams Richland Bombers; and there are atomic bomb logos on the green and gold letter sweaters, and mushroom cloud at the center blooming from the letter "R" in the center of the gymnasium floor.

In spring of 1994, my father having been dead six years, I toured the Hanford site with members of Washington Physicians for Social Responsibility and visiting educators and scientists from Chelyabinsk, Russia. The Chelyabinsk nuclear facility was very much like Hanford, both in its physical buildings and in its Cold War mission. I was sitting alongside a woman journalist and educator as the bus passed by B-reactor -- I forget the exact words we exchanged (my Russian had long since rusted) -- but I mentioned the word "graveyard," and it suddenly hit me, again, not only my father's death, but all the many ghosts of Nagasaki, ghosts of Hanford workers, and the ghosts of the Yakama and Wanapum people: the spirits of salmon, grouse, coyotes, geese, and rattlesnakes -- on the once beautiful Columbia plateau, a land and river still striking and resonant, but now one of the most contaminated places on the planet.

Bill Witherup is a poet living in Seattle who writes on labor, nuclear issues, and prisons. His latest book is Down Wind, Down River: New and Selected Poems (West End Press, 2000). A longer version of this essay appears in the July 2005 issue of Political Affairs. Posted at Japan Focus on June 30, 2005.

Created by Datamomentum