



Trinity Site
Twice a year, visitors flock
to the place in New Mexico
where the nuclear age began.
By Larry O'Connor.

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Where the World Changed

Twice a year, the site of the first nuclear explosion draws visitors to New Mexico

By LARRY O'CONNOR

ON the road south from Albuquerque to Trinity Site, the dry plains of scrub cactuses are calm except for the occasional dust devils whirling across the desert floor. Of the few highway signs, none point to Trinity. No advance articles or public announcements advertise Trinity Site's twice-a-year openings. In October, tourists from Santa Fe and Taos usually head to the mountains of golden aspens and azure skies or to the annual hot-air balloon fiesta, held in Albuquerque. But along a southern road that on most days is traversed by more tarantulas than automobiles, a steady stream of cars was wending its way toward the White Sands Missile Range.

Somehow the word gets out. I wouldn't call them fans of the bomb, but they come in the hundreds — many year after year — to see Trinity Site, where in 1945 the first nuclear explosion occurred and the history of man was changed forever. One woman drives from Philadelphia, using her two weeks of vacation to be there. Others come in a caravan, a hundred or more cars in a line that snakes across the desert from the south at Alamogordo.

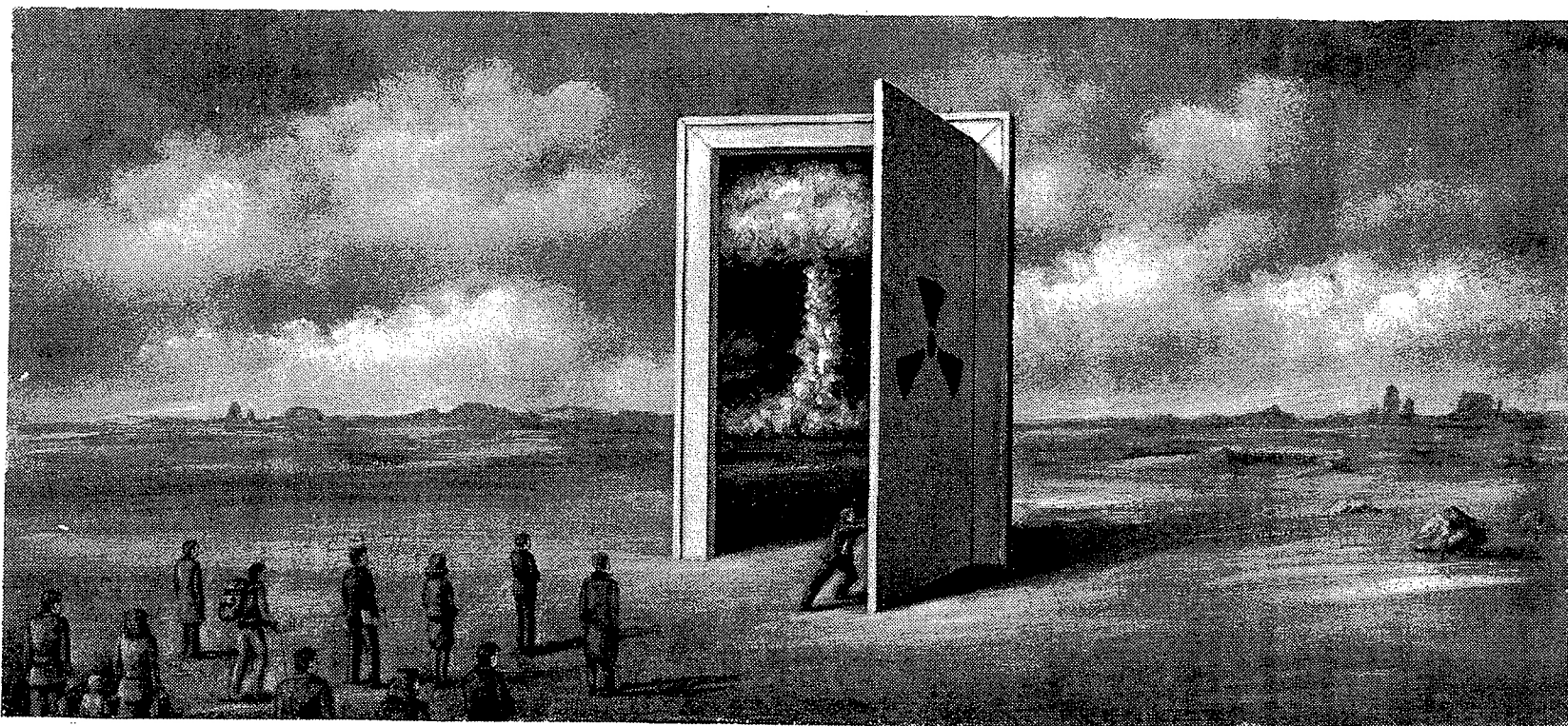
Twice a year the military opens for visitors a fenced-off area in south-central New Mexico called Ground Zero, Trinity Site. The dates — the first Saturday in October and the first Saturday in April — are fixed.

Since Trinity Site does not open until 9 A.M., we stopped for a short visit at the nearby Bosque del Apache wildlife refuge on the first Saturday in October. Shortly after daybreak this man-made series of marshes brims with life, breaking the monotonous desert terrain. Here we surprised golden hawks, sandhill cranes, families of killdeer and a coyote that bolted in front of our car from its hiding place in a thicket of willows.

There is only one way to get into Trinity Site. From the Interstate 25 turnoff at San Antonio, one goes 12 miles east to the north entrance to the missile range, on Route 525 three miles south of the intersection with U.S. 380. At the gate, long glances from a military guard lingered on our late model car. "Hope your car's in good working order, it's not downtown," he said, smiling at our New York license plates. Traffic will be light, we're told. Only about 700 people are expected.

Once inside I thought of men and women 45

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years ago heading to the site, unsure of what they would see but sure they would keep it secret. A sheet of instructions told us that protests of any kind inside military installations were prohibited, that bits of glass called trinitite, which were created by the million-degree heat, should not be taken home as mementos. To reassure us, the sheet said background radiation at Ground Zero is approaching normal; more radiation would be absorbed from a Los Angeles-to-New York flight than from an average visit, it said.

We drove in silence for 17 miles, following a slow procession of cars to the parking lot at the site. Young families maneuvered packed minivans; the elderly drove Cadillacs and big Fords. Working men came in pickup trucks. At the site itself, people gathered before several unsigned booths that sold small glass trinkets with Trinity Site emblazoned on them. There were T-shirts and stuffed bears with similar markings, soft drinks, books both critical and supportive of the nuclear war industry.

Children, too, seemed to pick up the somber mood. They did not clamber up Jumbo, the oversized casing of reinforced steel that was built to contain the contamination that would result in the case of a malfunction, which lay on the ground like a play structure. Some ran the walkway from the parking lot to Ground Zero, but their shouts went unheard, absorbed in the desert vastness.

WE walked with a military man, his ears protruding from his cap like potato chips, and talked of Illinois farmlands and the Gulf crisis. Along the walkway a bookish-looking man handed us a survey on the impact of the nuclear industry in New Mexico. Those who stopped to talk to him were like history buffs at a conference, trading knowledge of Truman and Potsdam for facts on New Mexican

workers. Beside us strolled visitors of Japanese descent. Their journey is a personal one, for they also go in great numbers to the Peace Park in Hiroshima to try to understand. For others, including the hundreds of Americans who come, it seems something of a pilgrimage to power. They stand at the center of a shallow crater, the bull's-eye, Ground Zero of Trinity Site, as they do against the railing at Niagara Falls.

The land within the fence at the end of the walkway was stony and coffee-colored, scattered with cactuses. In the middle of the half-mile-diameter enclosure, a cluster of people milled around a 10-foot-high dark obelisk upon which were carved the words: "Trinity Site Where the World's First Nuclear Device Was Exploded on July 16, 1945." To the right of the monument were ankle-high remains of a concrete pillar from which the bomb was suspended before it was detonated. Familiar photos of mushroom clouds were strung along the eastern fence. A photo of J. Robert Oppenheimer, in his trademark porkpie hat,

and Brig. Gen. Leslie R. Groves, the leaders of the Manhattan Project, which built the bomb, hung there too.

From the parking lot shuttle, buses took us three miles to the McDonald ranch site where the bomb — a plutonium one — was assembled. Restored to 1940's authenticity, the ranchhouse is now a museum, open just two days a year, with exhibits of military artifacts. A sign crudely written in white paint warned of top secret work in progress.

Before leaving the McDonald ranch we stopped to listen to a tape recording of a period radio broadcast, arranged by the public affairs office, of the public's discovery of Trinity. The broadcaster tried to summarize the best he could what had happened there. Forty-five years later, hundreds of people are still coming to find out for themselves.

Information on visiting Trinity Site is available from the Public Affairs Office, White Sands Missile Range, N.M. 88002; telephone 505-678-1134.