

emerald

Los Alamos: From day one

Olum, Novick recall, regret first A-bomb

An afternoon breeze sifts through loosely woven drapes in the University president's office.

Paul Olum runs his fingers through his thinning gray hair. He shifts in his chair, then fidgets with a yellow legal pad and a felt tip pen set before him. Across the round oak table Aaron Novick, the head of the biology department, settles back into a cushy leather chair. His hands are still, loosely folded in his lap.

The arid New Mexico desert seems like another world. The world's first atomic bombs, like ancient history.

"Where do we start?" Olum asks.

At Los Alamos, 1942. Olum and Novick were both working on the first nuclear development mission — the Manhattan Project — while taking graduate courses; Olum at Princeton and Novick at the University of Chicago.

Olum headed for Los Alamos, research headquarters for the project, in the first few months of 1942. Novick followed in the last few months of 1943.

Both went eagerly, but now, 40 years later, both have regrets about their contribution to the birth of the nuclear age.

Emerald: When you were first asked to go to Los Alamos, how much of a decision was involved?

Olum: For me, not much. The decision was made to stop the Princeton project and go to Los Alamos to be a part of the project of building the bomb... it wasn't a hard decision. The project at Los Alamos seemed like the most important, most exciting work.

Novick: I lost interest in what I was doing and wanted to get into (Enrico) Fermi's (one of the leading scientists at the project) group at Los Alamos. My boss said absolutely not, so Fermi called, and my boss said, "You have an hour to pack."

Olum: We went at different times, I went at the beginning.

Novick: (Pointing at Olum) He was a pioneer.

Olum: Pioneer!

Novick: Yeah, he was one of the Daughters of American Revolution.

Emerald: There have been accounts that there was a "cloak and dagger" atmosphere.

Olum: There was no cloak and dagger. We knew what it was. We knew where we were going, and we knew what we were going to work on... We had to know what we were doing it for.

Novick: We didn't know any details. There was an article that appeared in *Time* magazine that gave me a clue as to how the bomb would probably be built. When I got there, my friend said, "How do you take the quegs?" I told them, and they were absolutely horrified that I knew.

Emerald: How much did you know before you went?

Olum: We knew we were going to build a bomb.



University Pres. Paul Olum (left) and Aaron Novick, head of the biology department, share 40-year-old memories about their part in the development of the first atomic bomb.

Novick: We were working on the pile going 'super critical.' How they were going to ignite it, we didn't know. But we knew they were making plutonium to use in the bomb.

Emerald: What was it like to work with so many famous scientists at Los Alamos?

Olum: If you could forget what you were working on. If you could forget the implications and anything like that... it is the best in our history.

If you leave aside the moral issues, which I don't want to leave aside in the long run. If you're asking what it was like, then for a young scientist, a young physicist in the beginning of your career and surrounded by people like Hans Beter, Fermi and Niels Dohr, the greatest names in science in the world.

Novick:... never before in history was there such a concentration of people like that.

Olum: And here we were listening to these people and getting a chance to discuss their ideas. Seeing them informally. Talking science night and day — there's nothing else like it on earth for a young scientist... you could hardly imagine a better place to be.

Emerald: What were the living conditions and the social activities like?

Novick: There were dormitories and they really were quite comfortable. They had ping pong tables, one

played endless ping pong. There were parties on the weekend were one drank much too much. Some people broke ankles and legs playing ping pong while drunk, but there wasn't a lot to do otherwise.

Olum: And we played touch football whenever we could. You could play all year round at Los Alamos.

With the mention of the lighter side of Los Alamos, the tension in Olum's face eases; Novick grins.

Novick: I also played softball.

Olum: So did I...

Novick: They were short a pitcher, so when they heard I was coming to Los Alamos, they said 'Oh good! Aaron can be our pitcher.' God...

Olum: One softball pitcher I remember well. He was a professional player. I batted against this guy, and I've never seen anything as frightening... The ball came, I would say, about 150 m.p.h. I was paralyzed.

Olum and Novick both laugh at the exaggeration.

Olum: We built our own ski slope... the mountain behind us, Paharika I think, went up to 9,000 feet. There was a nice slope there, with some trees on it. Our ordinance division, which was blowing up things all the time anyhow, was delighted to practice blowing up the trees. So they cleared the slope and we put together some old circus tent rope and an automobile motor and

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Green story had errors, says dean

By Ann Portal
Of the Emerald

A Thursday article about a confrontation between Affirmative Action Director Bean McFadden and audience members at a Women's Symposium discussion had a "number of errors of fact," according to Robert Berdahl, dean of the arts and sciences college.

The article described the outrage of audience members who felt that History Prof. Barbara Green had been unjustly served with a dismissal notice.

Green, a visiting assistant professor, had been brought to the University this year on a two-year contract, but her

position was changed to a one-year contract and the position was offered to a black man from Wayne State University, audience members charged.

They protested the action, which they said discriminated against Green, a black woman and therefore a member of two protected hiring classes.

Berdahl said Thursday that Green was hired last June for only one year. Her contract stated that her term would be up June 15, Berdahl said, adding that there has been no "dismissal notice" sent to Green.

"It was not a matter of firing Barbara Green," he said.

Green was later informed that the po-

sition would be filled on a permanent basis next year, and that she was welcome to apply, Berdahl said. She did apply, and was one of three finalists, but Tyrone Tillery of Wayne State University was the first choice of the search committee, he said.

Tillery was subsequently offered tenure at Wayne State, and he asked to come to the University for a year as a visiting professor. The history department, hoping to recruit him on a permanent basis, agreed that he could come in September as a visiting professor, Berdahl said.

The entire search and hiring process was an "affirmative action procedure."

McFadden said Thursday she is in the process of taking action on the matter, "in accordance with what I was hired to do at this University."

She said the symposium audience seemed not to understand exactly what someone in her position is able to do. "I can't think of any position in the University that is so misunderstood."

McFadden characterized the anger of the men and women at the Wednesday discussion as "entirely legitimate." They are right to be concerned about a black man being brought in to replace a black woman, she said, adding that she has told them how to get answers from the University.