

jaunty brochures, each featuring a lovely model on the cover. The first sported an "Atomic Hairdo," the second sipped an "Atomic Cocktail," and the third, clad in – what else? – a bikini, held a Geiger counter to the beard of a grizzled prospector.

The boosters recognized the enormous economic and PR potential of playing host to the test site. Soon images and evocations of the mushroom cloud were everywhere: promotional materials, events, slogans, and gimmicks, and even on the official seal of Clark County (see page 1).

The tests drew hundreds of journalists, military brass, and elected officials. And, despite the *Review-Journal's* first post-blast headline, "LAS VEGAS ATOMIZED!" tourists came, too. Las Vegas made the most of the attention. When an early test shattered Fremont Street store windows, a haberdashery swept the shards into a barrel and offered them as "Atomic Bomb Souvenirs – Free!" (The barrel was empty within an hour.) Before the first series was over in February, dawn parties and atomic hairdos, back-combed and beglittered, were *de rigueur*. Strip hotels staged Miss Atomic Blast beauty contests and floated mushrooms in their swimming pools. Fashionable fêtes demanded mushroom cloud cakes. It was still "Playtime All the Time" in Las Vegas; the bomb just added that little extra thrill.

During dawn parties at the Desert Inn, casino play and drinking reliably increased as shot time approached. House pianist Ted Mossman perked up the crowd, maudlin from endless atomic cocktails, with his signature boogie-woogie the "Atom Bomb Bounce." For those who preferred open-air viewing, several Strip hotels provided tour buses to Mt. Charleston and the Tonopah Highway. Gamblers bet on the date and

time of the next detonation, information the AEC originally kept secret. When the tests involved servicemen, Strip resorts staged special shows at the Test Site's Camp Desert Rock, complete with showgirls, sequins, and feathers. Between tests, the press produced a steady stream of "human interest" stories about the troops.

By the spring of 1952, an average of 19,000 people a day were coming to Las Vegas to see the bomb, though the locals were already blasé about the blasts, and the more sophisticated Strip habitués barely bothered to glance up from the tables at the sudden flash of weird light. One nightclub proprietor told a reporter that folks were just waiting for "bigger bombs." "Americans," he explained, "have to have their kicks."

The next test series provided both, and shook Las Vegas from their complacency. The first shot demolished a "Doomtown" of houses, shacks, and cars (see photo below). Two others blanketed parts of Nevada and Utah with radioactive dust. Radioactivity in rain puddles at New York's Rensselaer Polytech measured 270,000 times the drinking water safety level. What had come to feel familiar was suddenly tinged with fear.

Throughout the 1950s, the yields, numbers, and types of shots increased with each test series. Experiments, military maneuvers, and civil defense exercises steadily pushed the margins of safety. Reports grew more frequent of

radioactive snow and rain, isotopes in milk, beta-burned livestock, and clusters of sick children at points downwind. When fallout landed on Las Vegas itself during one series, the *Review-Journal* warned against reacting with "hysteria" and denounced any notion of a test ban.

Local boosters continued their cheer-leading for their backyard bomb tests, touting their economic and national security benefits. Beyond Las Vegas, though, a rising tide of alarm and criticism threatened to end the testing program. Early in 1958, the Soviet Union and the U.S. agreed to a moratorium on nuclear testing, effective November 1. In the next months, the U.S. accelerated testing of thermonuclear devices ("H-bombs") in the Pacific, and of lower-yield "A-bombs" in Nevada. On Halloween, fallout from the final Nevada shot landed on Los Angeles.

Between January 1951 and November 1958, 119 nuclear detonations took place at the Nevada Test Site.

A Geography of Interconnection

During that period, Nevada's nuclear landscape was shaped by processes, events and decisions made elsewhere – Washington, Moscow, Seoul, Havana. Nevada was reinvented as a nuclear testing zone, and Las Vegas, whose surrounding wide open spaces offered both visibility and secrecy, was its staging ground. The Cold War nuclear arms race inscribed on the Nevada desert a

geography of the technological sublime, and of a particular, and terrifying, set of scientific and technical logics – especially of zealous weapons experimentation, development, and stockpiling. When, in 1961, the Soviet Union unilaterally ended the test moratorium, it took the



Miss Atomic Bomb (1957) symbolizes the strange love affair between the city of Las Vegas and its former flame.

CREDIT: DON ENGLISH, LAS VEGAS NEWS BUREAU



These four frames show the impact of an atomic bomb blast on a test site nicknamed Doomtown in the Nevada desert.

U.S. just two weeks to respond with its own earth-shattering barrage. The new tests, conducted beneath the surface of the Nevada Test Site, efficiently reduced an apparent backlog of experimental designs. Two years later, in the wake of the Cuban Missile Crisis and of growing international concern and criticism over the health effects of fallout, the Soviet Union, the U.S., and the U.K. agreed to ban atmospheric, underwater, and space-based nuclear test detonations. While the 1963 Limited Test Ban Treaty may have signaled some thawing of Cold War relations, it merely drove the testing in Nevada underground. It did not slow it down.

At the test site, a workforce of up to 10,000 dug diligently beneath the desert to build some fifty miles of tunnels and new subterranean infrastructure. Even as public health officials began to understand that the downwind effects of atmospheric tests were much worse than they had thought, AEC and military scientists not only continued, but accelerated the testing program. Once moved underground, and thus less constrained and scrutinized, the tests continued for

nearly another thirty years. Despite occasional radioactive ventings and fallout from near-surface blasting an astonishing 814 underground tests were conducted in Nevada before the current testing freeze took effect in 1992.

Throughout the Cold War decades, the test site continued to tie Las Vegas and southern Nevada to a larger geography of nuclear weapons science and production: at Los Alamos and Livermore; Hanford, Oak Ridge, and Savannah River; Rocky Flats and Paducah. Current federal plans for a nuclear waste repository at Yucca Mountain, abutting the test site, would broaden that connection to include

nuclear power plants and waste storage sites around the country. Thus would this swath of the Mojave Desert, land still claimed by the Western Shoshone Nation, become the endpoint of a routinely geography of weaponry and waste (of which 120,000 metric tons would be stored by 2033).

The State of Nevada has lent its voice to a growing chorus that challenges the legality and scientific soundness of these plans. Among opponents' concerns are the long-term (10,000-year) viability of storage containers and, in the relatively



Tourists view a drifting atomic cloud from poolside at the Frontier Hotel on the Las Vegas Strip in the 1950s.

CREDIT: LAS VEGAS NEWS BUREAU



Atomic detonations were visible from downtown Las Vegas in the 1950s and 1960s.

short term, the hazards of transporting radioactive waste to the repository for the next 25 years. Having long since looked elsewhere for entertainment, Nevadans seem far less willing, fifty years on, to underplay or overlook the potential dangers, to themselves and their economy, of an "atomized" landscape. Nevada's nuclear future may be somewhat less spectacular than its past, but it promises to be more long lasting – and in some ways, may have only just begun. ■

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Note: The Atomic Testing Museum, at 755 East Flamingo Road, Las Vegas, contains a fascinating collection of Nevada Test Site artifacts, photographs, and narratives. www.atomictestingmuseum.org.

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