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Remembering Los Alamos: oral history by Joe Baca
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I was born in Albuquerque, NM along with my sisters and brothers, Emma, Pat, Rupe and Gabe. My youngest brother, Trinidad, was born in Los Alamos in July of 1944.

My father had a job with the city of Albuquerque but in 1944 he got a job as a carpenter in Los Alamos, so we moved there in April of 1944.

My first impression of the town would have been on our arrival at the gate, where we had to receive our passes in order to enter the town. Our passes weren't ready. I was only eight, so I don't remember how long it took. My sister said that we were there all night.

We lived in four different types of housing during our years there. The first one was like an old barracks. Small, two bedrooms, kitchen and living room. Our parents had the one bedroom and we five children had the other. When Trini was born, he was with my parents. We lived there for two to three years.

The second house was at 1571 12th St. I believe those were McKee houses. A frame, stand alone house; three bedrooms, big living room, kitchen and bathroom (I think). There was a fence too.

The third house was the bottom apartment of a two storey building on Rose St. There were three bedrooms. By this time my three older siblings were married and gone, so it was roomy!

The fourth house was a Denver Steel home on 36th St. It was a corner house and had a gas cook stove.

My daily life consisted of home, school, family and friends. I started school a day or two after we arrived. My father walked my three older siblings to school the night before, so that they knew where it was. I didn't go because I was too little. Next morning, I walked there with them, but when I got out, I didn't see any of my siblings, so I walked home alone. But, I wasn't sure of which house it was. My mother said that she saw me walking back and forth in the street and wondered what I was doing. She eventually came out to get me.

Friends in elementary school were Lawrence Garcia (through High School), Pete Lovato (after seventh grade), Dimas Chavez (First Communion through High School), Joe "Pepe" Romero, Bobby Cooley (fifth and sixth

grades), and Homer Blackledge.

When I broke my arm at age ten, Pepe carried my books home for me. My sister Emma walked me to the hospital. I was there for two weeks. I would swing on a ceiling track by one hand, a practice which the nurses quickly stopped.

Once Bobby and I got hold of a piece of construction tar, which we chewed. Made our mouths black! Bobby always called me his brother. He later moved to Hotchkiss, CO.

With Homer, I shot marbles. For other entertainment, I amused myself. I did take care of my new baby brother as he grew older. Most times, I would swing on the swings at the park near our house, all by myself. I remember that the boardwalk by the PX was about two or three feet off the ground. I would crawl under there to find coins. One time I found a packaged condom and blew it up. It got very big. Another time I found a cigar, smoked it and got sick.

In High School, I knew Carol Huber, Donna Henry, Pat Hodges, Joyce Joslin, Lloyd Wheat and Mike Kelly, in addition to the boys listed above. I took Carol to see "Creature of the Black Lagoon". Donna was in my science class. I gave both of them rides on my motorcycle.

Once, on the school bus, Pepe and I were sitting behind Joyce. She had on a fringed leather jacket. Pepe pulled on the fringe. She turned around and slapped both of us.

Pepe had a bit of a rascal in him. I had a confetti egg at Easter and he took it and stomped on it.

Mike Kelly and I went hunting once. He married his high school sweetheart. Pat Hodges married Clyde Guerin. Lorey Garcia married Judy Johnson.

Teachers I remember are varied. Shirley Fries in high school. Leo Winks taught music and gave me saxophone lessons in sixth grade. We had show and tell and I played my sax. Dimas Chavez held the sheet music for me. Coach Hudson taught me to swim in seventh grade or early high school. Coach Bob Cox was in charge of athletics and ran my PE classes. In shop, Horace Gampbell taught wood/metal/auto shop. I liked all of those. Our High school principal was Donald Rousch.

We attended St. Mary's Immaculate Heart of Mary church. I had my First Communion there, but as the priests rotated coming up from Santa Fe and

Espanola, I do not remember who he was. Services were held in the community center, which was shared with the Protestant churches.

* My father's badge number was 302. The job he had as a carpenter ended shortly after we moved to Los Alamos. If you didn't have a job, you had to leave the site. We were still in the first house. My mother said we had to pack and move back to Albuquerque. But then Dad got a job as a machinist and we were able to stay.

All of us had to have ID badges. When I was younger, my mother kept them. Once I was older, and we had to leave town for some reason, Dad and I would switch badges to see if the MPS would notice. None of them ever said anything.

My parents had good friends in Severo and Annie Martinez and Dimas Chavez's parents. Mr. Martinez was also laid off as a carpenter but he moved to Santa Fe and began building houses there.

In 1953 my parents bought an unfinished adobe house in Espanola from Bartolo Valdez. They worked on it on the weekends and eventually moved in in 1957.

Since my parents' families were from Lemitar, NM, my mother would take us children there for the summer to stay with her family and visit the relatives there. We did that every year from 1944 until 1950, when my grandfather died. We would stay until Labor Day. I always missed the first day of school because we would come back from Lemitar that day.

I remember that in the spring of 1945, in school, a girl said that the war was over. Looking back, I realize that she was referring to the war in the European theatre, as Hitler had surrendered. I don't remember the teacher saying anything about it, or any celebration. After the bombs were dropped on Hiroshima and Nagasaki and Japan surrendered, in August, we were in Lemitar. Our grandparents had no telephones and did not have newspapers, so news this important did not reach us there.

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After I graduated from high school in 1955, I attended NMSU in 1956 and 1957. I had worked for Elmo C de Baca who was in auto sales. He taught me to change oil, rotate tires, etc. His wife, Lois, made calls to help me enroll at NMSU. My friend Lorey Garcia and I rode our motorcycle to Las Cruces for the fall semester. My father drove to Las Cruces with Lorey's dad to bring the curtains, towels and bedding we would need for our dorm rooms. Lorey was in Kent Hall and I was in Garcia. I asked if I could change to Kent, and for some reason, that was allowed, even though we weren't supposed to be able to make changes like that. We roomed together. Once, when we rode our motorcycles down to NMSU, it rained. I had a windshield on my Harley, but Lorey didn't have one on his cycle, so we would switch off. True friendship! I applied, and got a job for the summers to work as a draftsman at the lab, with Mike Kelly. I had to go to the old Memorial General Hospital in Las Cruces to be fingerprinted for the job. My badge number was 14178.

As my grades weren't too good by the end of the spring semester of 1958; it was suggested that I take a semester off. I was drafted in 1958. My brother had picked up the mail, saw the notice, and was afraid to give it to me for a few days. When I did get it, I had to report in Los Alamos. My dad drove me up there as we were by then living in Espanola.

When I got out of the army in 1960, I worked in Los Alamos as a furniture mover, with my friend from high school, Donald Blake.

- * In 1963, my father died suddenly of a heart attack. He was still working as a machine operator on the hill. Men from his job site came to our house in Espanola with money that had been collected for my mother. One of the men asked me if I wanted to come work with them at GMX 3. I was hired as a CPO (chemical plant operator). My badge number stayed the same : 14178.

Being a child of one of the carpenters/machinists, my family associated with people who also worked in those areas, and their children were my friends. Other than at school, I did not have much exposure to the children of the scientists. They and their parents were not in my sphere of reference. My father worked a set shift and was home in the evenings. My mother, unlike the wives of the scientists, did not work outside of the home. She was a

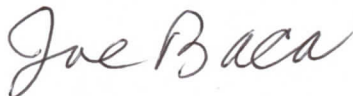
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homemaker and was always present. Our lifestyle was not at all like that of the scientists and their wives, who worked erratic, very long hours, and whose children were left on their own a lot, to do as they pleased.

In choosing to work in Los Alamos as a draftsman, furniture mover and CPO, I did not think of the impact that the work the scientists were doing would have on the world. I saw what I was doing as normal for the place and the times. I always thought that it was a great opportunity to work there.

As far as national security and the significance in my life of being in this place that changed the world, I would say that it was the powers that be that directed what was to be done. We couldn't change any of it. The decisions were a reaction to the actions of Germany and Japan. The work done in Los Alamos was necessary to achieve peace.

Thank you,



Joe Baca