

FIRST ATOM BOMB TEST RECALLED

By: Graham E. Jones

Spaniards looking for gold four hundred years ago called it Valle de Muerta.

In 1945, some 300 American scientists came back to the place and made it live up to the name, Valley of Death.

That was the place where, 20 years ago today (July 16, 1945), they exploded the first atom-bomb.

Dr. Worth Seagondollar, new head of the Department of Physics at North Carolina State University at Raleigh, was one of the scientists in the valley during the pre-dawn darkness of that historic morning when the bomb was detonated.

"The guards got up at three o'clock, an hour before the countdown was scheduled to start. We went out to the trench because we didn't know if the blast would crush our buildings."

In the trench, dug to a depth of four feet by a bulldozer, Seagondollar and the other scientists did what they had been told to do: They put eye shields on and turned their backs toward the tower which held the bomb.

Seagondollar did not have a pair of sunglasses with him

when he got to Valle de Muerta so he made himself a pair from blue glass like that found in welder's hoods.

The blast was delayed while a pair of B-29's maneuvered into position. At 4:20 a. m., the countdown began.

At zero, Seagondollar said, "I counted — one thousand one, one thousand two . . . and one up to 15 seconds. Then I turned around and looked.

"My first reaction was: 'You darn fool! You forgot to put on your blue glass.'

"Actually I hadn't forgotten. I had it on. It was just that I could see no trace of blue. What I saw was pure white light."

Looking at the glare was "like looking at a photographer's flash bulb, except the flash bulb is concentrated and brief. This light was everywhere and it lasted a long time.

About 45 seconds after the blast, the shock wave reached the trench area, propelled by a force equivalent to 17,000 tons of TNT.

"It was like the puff of air when somebody slams a door in your face," Seagondollar recalled.

The sound was similar to thunder "that rolls and rolls and rolls.

A British demolition expert who had helped disarm some of Hitler's most potent bombs stood next to Seagondollar

in the trench. The Britisher kept muttering: "My God. My God.

Within a month A-bombs had been dropped on Hiroshima and Nagasaki and World War II was ended.

Seagondollar returned to Valle de Muerta in September, 1945 with another scientist and walked into the crater gouged by the bomb from the earth.

"We were looking for fragments of instruments. We didn't find any.

"What we did find was appalling." The tower from which the bomb had been suspended, had gone up in vapor—not torn to bits but heated until it turned to moisture and gas.

Concrete posts, used as foundation stones for the 100-foot tower, were still there. "But, they were many feet shorter."

Seagondollar was amazed that the bomb really had not dug too deep a hole in the valley floor—only eight to 10 feet deep and 30 feet across.

"What was horrifying was what we saw outside the crater."

The desert sand, which had withstood the blazing desert sun for a good many centuries before the Spaniards came across, had melted under the heat of the bomb.

For about 1,000 yards on every side of the crater Seagondollar saw not sand but

murky, green, glass as thick as three-fourths of an inch.

"We also saw the remains of lead bricks. Those bricks had been the size of regular house bricks before the blast. When we saw them, they were the size of those little soap bars they put out at hotels.

"There wasn't any molten lead around either. It too had been vaporized."

Seagondollar was one of the scientists at Los Alamos who worked on establishing the proper critical mass for the A-bomb.

The answer, Seagondollar recalled, was to determine "whether we had a critical mass strong enough to break a beaker, or blow up a laboratory or the southern half of New Mexico."

What the scientists arrived at was a mass strong enough to equal 17,000 tons of TNT, enough for a city the size of Hiroshima.

Now that five nations have nuclear capabilities far exceeding the bomb that made the hole in the floor of Valle de Muerta, will man blow himself off the face of the earth?

"I hope to high heaven, no," Seagondollar said.

There might even have been a rainbow in the mushroom cloud that rose above the desert.

Seagondollar notes that with nuclear power, you can dig a new Panama Canal, make salt water fit to drink, turn the wheels of industry.

And, you might even send a space ship into the high heavens.

New Films In The Library

New films recently added to the collection available through the public library includes the following four:

COLLEGE, 19 minutes in color, an experimental film showing the abstract world of the mind that a college education stimulates through broadening that mind.

THE LIVELY ART OF PICTURE BOOKS, 27 minutes in color, interviews three illustrators of children's books and shows a complete film story within the film that is the work of one of the illustrators.

NAHANNI, 19 minutes in color, is a beautifully made masculine film documenting the search for a lost gold mine in Canada's Northwest Territories.

PUERTO RICO: THE PEACEFUL REVOLUTION, 25 minutes in black and white, shows the progress made in Puerto Rico since it started its "Operation Bootstrap" program in 1949.

Herschel V. Anderson, Audio-Visual Consultant of the North Carolina State Library, suggests that a person planning to use these films contact his public library at least two weeks prior to his program date in order to receive the films on time.

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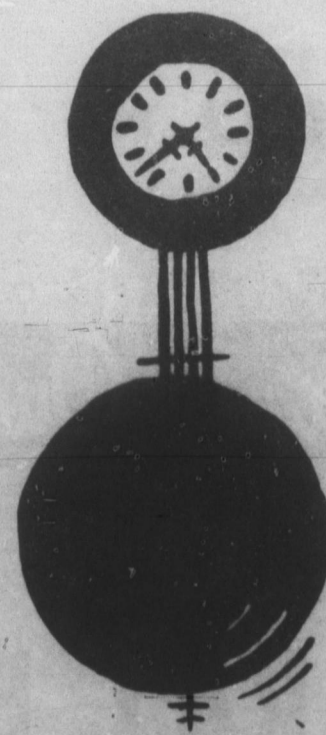
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