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# These folks are no fans of 'Oppenheimer'

Blockbuster movie never acknowledges the people who lived near the A bomb test site.

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Washington Post

TULAROSA, N.M. — A strong rumble woke 13-year-old Lucy Benavidez Garwood, shaking the three-room adobe house where her family lived and rattling dishes in the kitchen cupboard. Neighbors who gathered that morning agreed it must have been an earthquake.

They learned the truth several weeks later when U.S. forces dropped bombs on Hiroshima and Nagasaki, Japan. The atomic bombs dropped on the two cities had been developed in Tularosa's own backyard — that predawn test blast jolting communities across southern New Mexico, sending a mushroom cloud 10 miles into the sky, then raining radioactive ash on thousands of unsuspecting residents.

What happened in the aftermath, surviving "downwinders" and their relatives say, is a legacy of serious health consequences that have gone unacknowledged.

See **OPPENHEIMER** on E6 ▶



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Lucy Benavidez Garwood remembers being roused from sleep by the force of the atomic bomb that in 1945 was secretly tested just beyond the New Mexico town where her family lived.

# These folks are no fans of 'Oppenheimer'

◀ **OPPENHEIMER** from El edged for 78 years. The blockbuster film "Oppenheimer," which spotlights the scientist most credited for the bomb, ignores completely the people who lived in the shadow of his test site.

Yet for all their ambivalence about the movie's fanfare, locals also have hope that the Hollywood glow will elevate their long quest to be added to a federal program that compensates people sickened by presumed exposure to radiation from aboveground nuclear tests.

"They were counting on us to be unsophisticated and uneducated and unable to stick up for ourselves," said Tina Cordova, a Tularosa native who for 18 years has led the Tularosa Basin Downwinders Consortium, which she co-founded after being diagnosed with thyroid cancer. "We're not those people anymore."

The Trinity site, about 60 miles northwest of tiny Tularosa, was chosen in part for its supposed isolation. Nearly half a million people lived within a 150-mile radius, though.

Manhattan Project leaders knew a nuclear test would put them at risk, but with the nation at war, secrecy was the priority. Evacuation plans were never acted upon. The military concocted a cover story: The boom was an explosion of an ammunitions magazine.

"I feel like we weren't valued," said Garwood, 91, with a family tree scarred by cancers. "Like they didn't value our lives or our culture."

The July 16, 1945, blast was more massive than J. Robert Oppenheimer and his fellow scientists expected,



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Evarista Baca, Lucy Benavidez Garwood's grandmother, died of breast cancer just three years after the world's first nuclear detonation.

equivalent to nearly 25,000 tons of TNT, according to recent estimates. Witnesses said the plutonium ash fell for days, on areas where people grew food, drank rainwater collected in cisterns and cooled off in irrigation canals.

## 'Still paying'

Jimmy Villavicencio was 4 years old when the bomb detonated near his home in Oscura. He was outside helping his mother and a neighbor do laundry in the cool before sunrise.

"I looked over to a big old cloud, what my mother called a tsunami," said Villavicencio, another cancer survivor. His mother frantically removed the wet clothes from the line and hung the pillowcases in the windows to protect their home from the incoming dust. "We heard like a gush of wind, and right behind it

came the dirt, and I mean dirt."

The debris caked the pillowcases. A powder coated their car. Long after the seeming storm had settled, "snowflakes kept falling," he said. Weeks later, a neighbor's chickens began dying. "We ... are still paying the price," he added.

Proving that radiation caused the cancers that have afflicted New Mexico's downwinders is extremely difficult. A major study published in 2020 by the National Cancer Institute concluded that Trinity fallout may contribute to as many as 1,000 cancers by 2034, most in people who lived very near the test. There is "no evidence to suggest" cases among subsequent generations were related, the study noted.

"Why is our suffering different?" asks Bernice Gutierrez, who was born eight days after the test. She

lived in Carrizozo, directly east of the Trinity site. She, her eldest son and daughter and 20 other family members have battled cancer, she said.

To many here, scientific proof is unnecessary. They say the evidence is clear in their family albums, at town gatherings and funerals.

Garwood's daughter, Doris Walters, 68, became active with the downwinders consortium after her own breast cancer diagnosis. The group has collected about 1,000 family health histories from people in the area and found new supporters along the way.

Edna Kay Hinkle is one. Her father grew up on a ranch 27 miles from the Trinity site and was 14 at the time. A few years later, he, his brother and their wives — all young newlyweds — walked around the site. The gate was wide open.

"They picked up all this melted sand, all this glass, took it home and had it in the kitchen floor by the door," Hinkle said.

A decade ago, a consortium leader approached and asked her to make a list of everyone she knew who was sick or had died of cancer. Hinkle, who had recently learned she had breast cancer, started her list.

That's when "it dawned on me," she said. All four of the newlyweds who'd explored the site had cancer. So did 25 other relatives from her grandparents' generation on. A cousin had been born with no eyes and later suffered ovarian cancer.

Hinkle has no plans to sit through "Oppenheimer." Any glorification of the bomb, she said, "ticks me off."