

New Mexico and the World War II Home Front

Introduction

The Land of Enchantment is widely known for its involvement with testing and creating nuclear bombs on the World War II home front at the secret laboratory in Los Alamos, one of three main sites of the Manhattan Project. However, New Mexico contributed to other facets of the war effort as well. Shifts in agricultural and mining production, rapid increases in military infrastructure, Japanese American incarceration, and the labor of prisoners of war also left a lasting mark on the sociopolitical and physical landscapes of New Mexico.



Dr. Enrico Fermi, a scientist with the Manhattan Project at Los Alamos, and Maria Montoya Martinez, a celebrated Pueblo potter. Credit: Los Alamos National Laboratory, Department of Energy

Mobilization: Military and Industry

Federal aid and attempts to offset the effects of the Great Depression among rural mining and agricultural communities impacted the ways that local populations, the United States military, and international communities of scientists interacted with New Mexico's numerous ecosystems during the war. In terms of agricultural production, many small family-operated dairy farms consolidated in the early 1940s, resulting in fewer yet much larger farms and a newfound reliance on agricultural mechanization.¹ Pueblo communities, who in some cases inhabited the region for centuries prior to Euro American settlement, also experienced changes in their traditional agricultural practices during the war. Some

communities cultivated alfalfa for the feed market amid the rising demand for livestock and agricultural products, while others grew small grains such as wheat.² New Mexico's resource extraction industry also experienced a wartime increase. Coal production in Dawson, a dying mining town in northern New Mexico, jumped from 234,843 tons in 1940 to 374,630 tons in 1944. Overall, federal incentives created massive industrial growth and turned the state into a vital producer of minerals, especially through the high-volume extraction of potash (used for fertilizer and munitions), zinc, and copper.³

The military and city officials established the Kirtland Army Air Field in Albuquerque toward the beginning of the war. The base quickly became a national hub for bombardier and combat crew training. The thousands of military trainees impacted Albuquerque's economic patterns and demographic landscape. Some military personnel, from pilots to aviation mechanics, stayed in the area long after the war.⁴

¹ Joan M. Jensen, "Dairying and Changing Patterns of Family Labor in Rural New Mexico," *New Mexico Historical Review* 75, no. 2 (2000): 177.

² James Vlasich, "Transitions in Pueblo Agriculture, 1938-1948," *New Mexico Historical Review* 55, no. 1 (1980): 40.

³ Richard Melzer, "A Death in Dawson: The Demise of a Southwestern Company Town," *New Mexico Historical Review* 54, no. 4 (2021): 314; T.D. Benjovsky, [*Contributions of New Mexico's Mineral Industry to World War II*](#) (1947).

⁴ Robert B. Fairbanks, *The War on Slums in the Southwest: Public Housing and Slum Clearance in Texas, Arizona, and New Mexico, 1935-1965* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2014), 77; Carmen R. Chavez,

Los Alamos and the Manhattan Project are intimately connected to the Pajarito Plateau in New Mexico's southern region. In 1942, the US government took over land that belonged to farmers and ranchers before the war, displacing both Pueblo people and Anglo and Hispanic homesteaders. The Army Corps of Engineers bulldozed and cleared forests of ponderosa pines for the sprawling laboratory buildings of the Los Alamos complex, where scientists built bombs such as "the Gadget," "Little Boy," and "Fat Man." They also created the White Sands Missile Range, where the first atomic bomb was detonated at the range's Trinity Site on July 16, 1945. Scientists did not know how detonation would impact local ecosystems. Two years after the Trinity test, scientists found radioactivity forty-two inches beneath the surface in the direct vicinity of the blast and traces of plutonium particles more than one hundred miles from the site.⁵ According to historian Mark Fiege, Los Alamos demonstrated a "complicated convergence of science, nature, and military necessity." The isolation of the remote high desert site helped scientists and their families "to believe that their ultimate purpose was to build civilization, not destroy it."⁶

Mobilization: Changes for Workers

New Mexico had one of the highest rates of military service of any state, with roughly 9% of the population serving. This included many of the famous Navajo Code Talkers. These high rates of enlistment, coupled with the draw of defense industry work in urban locations, greatly impacted labor demographics in the state's mining towns.⁷ Agriculture also experienced profound labor shortages both in the wake of enlistment and ongoing agricultural consolidation, mechanization, and commercialization. Many multigenerational farming families left places, such as the rural Zuni Plateau, to seek economic opportunities in regional urban centers throughout the Southwest.⁸ Labor shortages hit New Mexico farmers particularly hard in late 1942. By early 1943, newspaper editorials called on senior citizens, young children, high schoolers, women, and Native Americans from reservations to help with agricultural labor needs.

Despite the mobilization of numerous New Mexicans, many farmers were left little choice but to plow under unharvested crops when the new planting season arrived in the spring of 1943. In late June, the United States Army announced that prisoners of war (POWs) would be available "for contract work, either in agriculture or other sectors of the economy." Within a month, approximately five hundred German POWs were working on farms in the southern portion of the state. By the following harvest season, more than 5,500 POWs were working as agricultural laborers, largely during cotton harvests to support production of military textiles for the Allied war effort.⁹

At Los Alamos, the Manhattan Project brought over 6,000 scientists, engineers, technicians, and military and support personnel to work on the top-secret project. Entire family units lived at Los Alamos during the extensive laboratory work. Local Native and Hispanic peoples were hired as well but

"Coming of Age During the War: Reminiscences of an Albuquerque Hispana," *New Mexico Historical Review* 70, no. 4 (1995): 389.

⁵ Ferenc M. Szasz, "Los Alamos in the Context of State and Nation," *New Mexico Historical Review* 72, no. 1 (1997): 26; Ferenc M. Szasz, "The Impact of World War II on the Land: Gruinard Island, Scotland, and Trinity Site, New Mexico as Case Studies," *Environmental History Review* 19, no. 4 (Winter 1995): 23-24.

⁶ Mark Fiege, *The Republic of Nature: An Environmental History of the United States* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2012), 296, 300.

⁷ Melzer, "A Death in Dawson," 313.

⁸ Jensen, "Dairying and Changing Patterns of Family Labor in Rural New Mexico," 177.

⁹ Jake W. Spidle, "Axis Invasion of the American West: POWs in New Mexico, 1942-1946," *New Mexico Historical Review* 49, no. 2 (1974): 109-111.

discrimination kept them from higher skilled positions with some exceptions. Native and Hispanic men largely worked in construction or maintenance, and women as servants and in childcare. Older scholarship on Los Alamos and the Manhattan Project downplayed the role of women in terms of their presence in domestic spaces as well as their scientific and administrative contributions. However, more recent publications highlight how the women of Los Alamos accounted for as much as thirty percent of employees at the site's Tech Area, contributing to the war effort through technical jobs and computing-related work.¹⁰

Discrimination and Fights for Equality

In the mining town of Dawson, unionization and shifting labor relations reflected rising community tensions during the war. In early May 1943, Dawson coal miners joined a nationwide strike asking for higher wages and better working conditions. Some Dawson residents who were actively fighting in the war expressed frustrations with the striking miners, calling their actions unpatriotic. Negotiations between the mining companies and miners lasted more than two months, which led to the federal government seizing control of the mines near Dawson twice in 1943.¹¹

The total number of POWs and incarcerated Japanese Americans in the state varied considerably over the course of the war, but overall, "the New Mexico camps were consistently among the ten largest."¹² Most people of Japanese descent incarcerated in New Mexico during the war came from California, and to a lesser extent, Washington, Oregon, Arizona, the territories of Hawaii and Alaska, and Latin American countries. New Mexico held four sites of Japanese incarceration: Santa Fe, Lordsburg, Fort Stanton, and Baca Camp (also known as Old Raton Ranch). Instead of being run by the War Relocation Authority, they were managed by agencies of the Department of Justice (DOJ), or in the case of Camp Lordsburg, the US Army.¹³

The Lordsburg Internment Camp covered two square miles of greasewood and mesquite bush habitat. Double barbed wire fences, military-grade floodlights, and concrete watchtowers encircled the facility's more than 150 structures. In June 1942, the camp began incarcerating mostly middle-aged and elderly Japanese immigrant men who were considered security risks, usually for being leaders in their community. Within a month of opening, the camp faced rising tensions between Japanese prisoners and administrators over labor conditions and incarcerated health in Lordsburg's unforgiving high desert environment. Tensions resulted in the death of two incarcerated. On July 27, a private in the Military Police Escort Company shot fisherman Hirota Isomura and farmer Toshiro Kobata, who were arriving at the camp from Bismark, North Dakota. Scarce eyewitness accounts allege that the two elderly men, who needed help walking, veered from the main road and began running toward the camp boundary. Violent incidents like this, as well as mismanagement of the camp, led to all incarcerated being moved to DOJ camps. Lordsburg transitioned to holding Italian and German POWs for the rest of the war.¹⁴

¹⁰ For an example of downplaying women's contributions at Los Alamos, see George E. Webb, "Leading Women Scientists in the American Southwest: A Demographic Portrait," *New Mexico Historical Review* 68, no. 1 (1993): 52. For newer scholarship, see Jordynn Jack, "Space, Time, Memory: Gendered Recollections of Wartime Los Alamos," *Rhetoric Society Quarterly* 37, no. 3 (Summer 2007): 240.

¹¹ Melzer, "A Death in Dawson," 317.

¹² Spidle, "Axis Invasion of the American West," 97.

¹³ The CLOE Project, "[Confinement in the Land of Enchantment](#)" (2018).

¹⁴ John C. Culley, "Trouble at the Lordsburg Internment Camp," *New Mexico Historical Review* 60, no. 3 (1985): 226-227, 230-231, 234.

Life on the Home Front

Like all Americans, New Mexicans experienced rationing of necessities, cultivated victory gardens, and organized war bond drives. In Albuquerque's Barelmas community, a historically Hispanic neighborhood, residents rode bicycles instead of commuting in automobiles throughout the course of the war. Some Barelmas residents remember the war effort in their community as an extension of hardships experienced during the Great Depression, such as food and gasoline rationing, community gardening, and keeping animals such as chickens and goats. The war also impacted the sense of close-knit community cohesion that existed in Barelmas for decades prior to the 1940s, as many residents left the region seeking jobs and economic opportunities beyond the boundaries of New Mexico.¹⁵ In the "secret city" that sprung up around Los Alamos, the community developed a strong interest in local Pueblo and Hispanic communities, leading to some cross-cultural exchanges centered on art and dancing.¹⁶

After the War

World War II forever changed New Mexico from a largely rural and agrarian state into a critical site of military technology and nuclear research. During the war, the state's population nearly doubled, supported by the federal investment in jobs. Today, the Los Alamos National Laboratory is one of sixteen research and development laboratories run by the Department of Energy. New Mexico's nuclear legacy has come with lasting health and environmental impacts, particularly from the "downwinder" effects of the 1945 Trinity Test. Many living near the test site experienced heart disease, infertility, leukemia, and other cancers at increased rates, leading to high financial and emotional costs. Both downwinders and homesteaders who lost property to the Manhattan Project have fought to receive compensation and reparations.¹⁷

Places of World War II History

- **Manhattan Project National Historical Park at Los Alamos:** The [park](#) encompasses many of the historic properties that defined life and work during the war in Los Alamos County, now a designated American World War II Heritage City. These places are only accessible through limited guided tours on Department of Energy land. See also [White Sands National Park](#).
- **Kirtland Army Air Field:** Now an Army Air Force Base, during World War II, this Albuquerque defense site acted as a major training base for bomber crews and logistical hub for the Manhattan Project.
- **Camp Lordsburg:** The only mass confinement camp built and run by the US Army during WWII for people of Japanese descent. It held Japanese immigrant men considered high security risks for a year before converting into a POW camp. You can visit the [Lordsburg-Hildago County Museum](#) to learn more.

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¹⁵ Chavez, "Coming of Age During the War," 385, 390.

¹⁶ For more on cross cultural exchanges between scientists and the local Pueblo population, see Sarah Nestor Lane, "[\(H\)our History Lesson: Native American Home Front Contributions in Los Alamos County, New Mexico, WWII Heritage City](#)," National Park Service.

¹⁷ Jade Ryerson, "[Trinity Test Downwinders](#)," National Park Service. "[Hispanic Homesteaders and the Los Alamos National Laboratory](#)," National Park Service.