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A History Worth Preserving

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The Manhattan Project transformed the course of American and world history, science, politics and society. If we can read about this in books and watch History Channel documentaries, why do we need to preserve some of the properties of this enormous undertaking? The presentation, “A History Worth Preserving,” will address why some of the physical properties need to be preserved and which ones we are struggling to maintain for future generations. The story of this effort begins in 1997 as the Department of Energy was posed to demolish the last remaining Manhattan Project properties at the Los Alamos laboratory. Located deep behind security fences, the “V Site’s” asbestos-shingled wooden buildings looked like humble garages with over-sized wooden doors. The “V Site” properties were almost lost twice, first to bulldozers and then the Cerro Grande fire of 2000. Now, visitors can stand inside the building where J. Robert Oppenheimer and his crew once worked and imagine the Trinity “gadget” hanging from its hoist shortly before it ushered in the Atomic Age on July 16, 1945. As Richard Rhodes has commented, we preserve what we value of the physical past because it specifically embodies our social past. But many challenge whether the Manhattan Project properties ought to be preserved. Rather than recognize the Manhattan Project as a great achievement worthy of commemoration, some see it as a regrettable event, producing an instrument to take man’s inhumanity to man to extremes. While these divergent views will no doubt persist, the significance of the Manhattan Project in producing the world’s first atomic bombs is irrefutable. Preserving some of its tangible remains is essential so that future generations can understand what the undertaking entailed from its humble wooden sheds to enormous first-of-a-kind industrial plants with 125,000 people working in secret and living in frontier-like communities. With continuing pressure for their demolition, what progress has been made in preserving some properties of the Manhattan Project? The presentation will share the handful of remaining properties that we believe are needed to tell the story of the Manhattan Project. It will share our successes, what is still at risk, and the on-going struggle to preserve this history.