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El Rio Arriba Environmental Health Association

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Spring 2004

Racial Divide

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Gilbert Fuentes, an honored veteran of WWII and former group leader at the Lab, talks about an incident that occurred over 50 years ago, but still burns in his memory.

"In 1947 I was building my house and commuting to Los Alamos every day by Army bus. They would come in the morning and take us home each night. The Army was still in charge of security at that time." the busses would be loaded coming home each night. One time this young G.I. was at the gate. He got everybody off the bus by yelling at us to get off. So we did. Getting down, I decided to ask him why this was going on. I felt it was out of place. The war was over and I had fought in it. I knew. He got very arrogant and wanted to take me to the Provost Marshall so I shut up and didn't say any more. I just let it be."



CIC-9: 3220





Anthony Sanchez, retired decontamination worker speaks candidly.

"I'll tell you that the Anglo bosses there were the ones who treated me the best. After I worked at TA-50 for a while, they are the ones who asked me if I wanted to go with the Lab. I joined, but once I did I noticed a lot of jealousy from the Hispanics. They did everything they could to pull me down. They couldn't see anyone going higher than them."

Virginia Stovall, a "living treasure" at age 94, doesn't mince words when she expresses herself.

"A friend of mine said a while back that there definitely was a caste system in Los Alamos....We had never spoken about it, but it was really felt. The scientists and the Ph.D.s were at the top, and the people who worked for Zia and kept the roads going were down at the bottom. I feel there was a difference, I will admit, between the people who are college graduate and those who are not. I think a college degree gives you a sense of satisfaction that you don't get any other way."

"The Spanish people feel they have been here longer than my ancestors who came in 1600. Many of them are Catholic. Many of the Anglos who have come in are Protestant. The locals had not had the schooling that the Anglos had. That creates a sense of difference. We have women come up from the valley to work as maids. They don't have the same kind of homes or the same kind of background, or the same financial security that we have. But when I met them in Truchas, these were primarily Spanish kids who came to day care. They were as cute as they could be, and smart, but maybe they wouldn't have the same chance to go to college as our kids in Los Alamos."

Emelina Grant dug deep into her past to recall the sad days of removal from their land on Pajarito Plateau

"We had to move. They brought the soldiers there. I don't know why. They didn't explain anything. When we left, we left in a hurry. They gave us so many days to move. We gathered what we could in the truck. I had a big box, a shoebox full of pictures. When we went back after two or three days to get more stuff out, I found my pictures all scattered and torn. Nobody else but the soldiers had been there. They got into everything. That made me mad."

Ruth Archuleta from Dixon shares some of her feelings about work in Los Alamos hospital in the 1950s.

"I was glad to work at the Los Alamos Hospital because the pay was better than what I had been used to....But there was discrimination over there. I had three patients that refused my work with them, two ladies and a man. I was Spanish....One of them was a nurse from back east. They didn't put up with her refusal. They said "the little girls" would do their work, - that's what they called us."

"There was another fellow who wasn't pleasant at all. He didn't want me touching his bed. When they told him it was either me or hiring a private nurse, he reluctantly agreed. He kept asking me about my chile and my beans. I said, I don't know what nationality you are and what you eat, but I'm sure whatever you are, you have your special dishes too. I bet you love to eat them, just as we love our beans, chile and tortillas. There were some nurses upstairs who loved my bunuelos or chile. They would come down with their steaks and we'd trade. I told him that. The Chinese eat their rice, the Italians have their pasta, so I don't feel bad. I'm proud of what we eat."

Mr. & Mrs. David Salazar. These are the frank thoughts of husband and wife. David was a highly skilled machinist who suffered chemical exposures as a result of his many years of work. Mrs. Salazar reflects on the larger issue of how our two communities relate to one another.

(David) "There was quite a bit of that (discrimination). Every time they recruited a new one, they'd go to Philadelphia, New York, or Chicago to get someone out there. They didn't know the work too well. I didn't respect their skills too much. Pretty soon after a year or so, they would catch up to us in pay and then pass us."

(Mrs. Salazar) "I think the people of Los Alamos have a lot of pride. They think they are better. We're thankful that we have Los Alamos because it is our bread and butter....As far as the people of Espanola and Los Alamos, I don't think there will ever be a coming together. I don't think we are 'good enough.' There will always be a gap there."

"When the fires came, I know a lot of people who contributed lots of things. I went to the Stroke Center (in Espanola) myself. They didn't come here to be helped. They went to White Rock and if they couldn't get help there, they went to Santa Fe."

"I never worked there, but I can tell you my husband and son did and hundreds of friends. There is hostility and hurt over the way people have been treated. My husband, you can see what he has been through. They have never offered help. The people who were riffed are so hurt that I doubt if they will ever get over it. It continues to go on."