

Dig In and Get Dirty

Adventures for the hands-on type

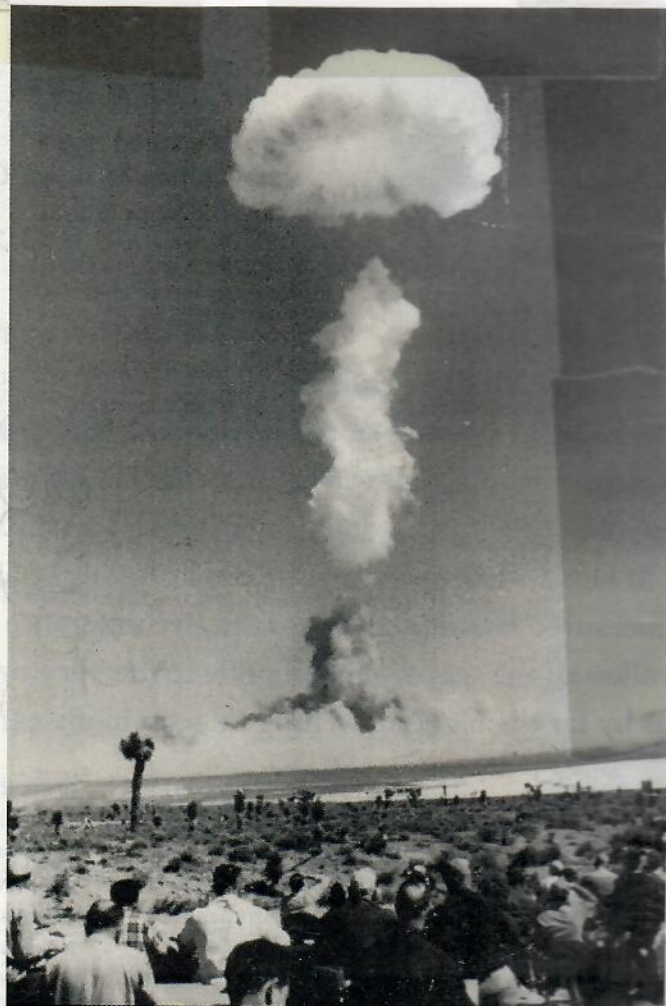
ATOMIC ARTIFACTS

Bayo Canyon, New Mexico

Three miles east of Los Alamos, this canyon lies between two volcanic mesas. There, the U.S. military perfected the implosion mechanism used in the Fat Man bomb detonated over Nagasaki, Japan, in 1945.

These days, a hiker passing through the canyon might not notice anything unusual, other than a few posted signs instructing visitors not to collect firewood in the area. Closer inspection of the ground will reveal bits of "interesting-looking metal," says Carl Willis, a nuclear engineer at Qynergy Corporation in Albuquerque. These bits include sockets for photomultiplier tubes from the radiation detectors, and coaxial cables used for signals and timing purposes. The detritus is fair game for anyone who wants to take home a piece of the Manhattan Project (Native American artifacts at the site are strictly off-limits, however). Most of the items aren't radioactive, Willis says, "but there is hot stuff for people who get down on their knees with a Geiger counter and sort through all that rubble."

Several other hot spots dot the surrounding mesas and valleys. A two-hour drive south from Los Alamos lands visitors at the National Museum of Nuclear Science and History in Albuquerque. For those willing to venture even farther, Willis says, there is a remarkable site just south of town, a half mile west of the government-run Sandia National Lab, where in 1957 a bomber accidentally dropped a mammoth Mark-17 hydrogen bomb. "There's a huge swath of debris, and anyone can go out there and look for stuff," Willis says. Ever-so-slightly radioactive bits of white plastic, chunks of lead, and green-painted pieces of the bomb's casing are among the most common finds. nuclearmuseum.org



ABOVE An atomic bomb detonation in 1952 was one of the many nuclear tests that took place near the deserts of the Southwest. **OPPOSITE** Dozens of fish species, including the gray angelfish, swim the reefs of Cozumel, Mexico