



# Connections With Geography

## Main Idea: The Home Front



### Locating a Laboratory

The nation's effort to build an atomic bomb had been going on for several years at scattered sites. Then in 1942, General Leslie R. Groves came to J. Robert Oppenheimer to discuss building a single laboratory. The laboratory would have to be top secret. It would have to be isolated. In *The Making of the Atomic Bomb*, Richard Rhodes discusses other considerations:

Site Y, as the hypothetical laboratory was initially called, needed good transportation, an adequate supply of water, a local labor force and a moderate climate for year-round construction and for experiments conducted outdoors. . . .

The general assigned the task of identifying a suitable location for the laboratory to Major John H. Dudley of the Manhattan Engineer District. Groves gave Dudley criteria . . . : room for 265 people, location at least two hundred miles from any international boundary but west of the Mississippi, some existing facilities, a natural bowl with the hills nearby that shaped the bowl so that fences might be strung on top and guarded.

Dudley found two locations that met the requirements: Oak City, Utah, and Jemez Springs, New Mexico. At the first site, several families would need to be evicted and bought out. The second site was beautiful but confining. Oppenheimer, who lived in New Mexico, recommended a site atop a mesa near his home. An old boys' school named Los Alamos was the only building there.

Richard Rhodes continues:

The Corps of Engineers' appraisal prepared on November 21 describes a large forested site thirty-five miles by road northwest of Santa Fe with no gas or oil lines, one one-wire Forest Service telephone, average annual precipitation of 18.53 inches and an annual range of temperatures from  $-12^{\circ}$  to  $92^{\circ}\text{F}$ . . . . The school was willing to sell.

Construction started immediately, and Oppenheimer began recruiting scientists. Because of the need for secrecy, families had to sign up for the full term of the project. Their travel would be severely restricted. The thought of moving to this community miles from civilization was daunting. In the end, however, nearly everyone whom Oppenheimer recruited joined the project.

1. Why was a moderate climate important for the location of the laboratory?
2. What made Los Alamos a good choice?

### ★Activity

When nuclear testing began in the deserts of New Mexico, Nevada, and Utah, fallout was blown by the wind as far as Chicago. Today, we know much more about the dangers of atomic testing than was known in the 1940s. If you were looking for a site to build an atomic bomb today, what guidelines would you include? Make a list and compare it with those of your classmates.