First We Bombed New Mexico. Lois Lipman, Director and Producer; *Joel Marcus*, Editor and Co-Producer. *Doug Blush*, A.C.E., Executive Producer. *Jhane Myers*, The Gale Family Foundation, *Tina Cordova*, Executive Producers. 47th State Films, 2023.

The problem of how to remember and acknowledge the history of the first atomic bomb has plagued the United States since the very moment it tore across the New Mexican desert eighty years ago, on July 16, 1945. By December of that same year, the Department of the Interior's National Park Service wrote an interpretive plan for the site, stating explicitly that it should be open to the public, and that it would be "one of the few national park areas where the story can best be told in a museum" that would allow visitors to grasp a "full and proper understanding" of the events that unfolded there. The authors of this plan warned that "[s]uch an understanding *could not possibly be secured merely by allowing visitors to roam at will and unattended over the area*."[1]

And yet, Lois Lipman's documentary, *First We Bombed New Mexico*, opens with a crowd wandering the largely uninterpreted landscape commemorating this event: the camera pans around the Trinity Test site, which includes an obelisk, some mangled tower footings, and black and white portraits of male scientists and military leaders zip-tied to a fence that circumnavigates the blast area on the White Sands Missile Range, surrounded on all sides by White Sands National Park—a bizarre conflation of violence, recreation, and cultural amnesia. This was the challenge *First We Bombed New Mexico* faced: telling a story that the nation itself refuses to acknowledge or properly tell.

First We Bombed New Mexico follows Tina Cordova, a seventh-generation New Mexican and cancer survivor from Tularosa, New Mexico, as she and her fellow downwinders—which includes both the people who lived downwind of the Trinity Test and the post–1971 uranium miners and their communities—organize. Cordova and these downwinders seek their inclusion in the Radiation Exposure Compensation Act (RECA), from which they have been historically excluded since its enactment in 1990 despite being riddled for generations with aggressive, radiation-related cancers. This documentary was released just months after the 2023 blockbuster hit *Oppenheimer*, a film that aligns the entire history of this bomb with the biography of the man who directed the Manhattan Project. With a budget

1 United States Department of the Interior, National Park Service, Report on Proposed Atomic Bomb National Monument, December 20, 1945, 15. (Ferenc Szasz Collection, University of New Mexico, Center for Southwest Research.) Emphasis mine.

Mary Martinez White, Tina Cordova, and Bernice Gutierrez at the Trinity Downwinders peaceful protest outside the White Sands Missile Range, October 21, 2023. (Photograph by Nicholas Valdés)

of $100 million and a star-studded cast, it amassed extraordinary wealth and was impossible to miss in American theatres. On the other hand, to watch *First We Bombed New Mexico,* I drove to Las Cruces, in southern New Mexico, to a special screening organized for the local community. Produced over the course of a decade with funding from donors and a sizeable portion of Lipman's own life savings, this film reveals that the true legacy of the first atomic bomb is not a scarred piece of earth, nor the biography of a troubled man, but is written into the DNA of the nearly 500,000 people who lived within a 150 mile radius of this site at the time of the test, their descendants, and those who moved into this deeply irradiated area in the decades after—unknowing, unwilling, and, as the film points out, still uncompensated victims of a war that's long been over.[2]

The film's genius is in taking an event that has historically been abstracted into obfuscating and scientific terminology like "half-lives" and "rads" and making it materially real, human, and contemporary. What does it mean that the nearly ten pounds of extremely radioactive plutonium blasted all over New Mexico in the Trinity test has a half-life of 24,000 years? It means New Mexico—and wherever else this fallout landed—is irradiated for at least seven thousand generations, explains Cordova. If we can't see radiation deforming DNA, does that mean it's actually happening? The film brings us to a vigil where Jeni Bebe Alexander, who was thirteen years old at the time of the blast and lost two of her siblings to cancer,

2 Lesley M.M. Blume, "Collateral Damage: American Civilian Survivors of the 1945 Trinity Test," in *Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists,* July 17, 2023, https://thebulletin.org/premium/2023-07/collateral-damage-american-civilian-survivors-of-the-1945-trinity-test/. See especially the map by Bryan A. Kendall, a mechanical engineering student at the University of New Mexico.

Trinity Downwinders hold a peaceful protest outside the White Sands Missile Range, October 21, 2023. (Photograph by Nicholas Valdés)

mourns losing yet another son to the same disease. If the blast happened in 1945 in Alamogordo, it can't possibly be dangerous for kids riding their bikes in the dirt and dust of Bingham, New Mexico, a town over ninety miles away, decades later, right? Enter Trevor Douglas, who was diagnosed at thirty-five with an aggressive and fatal glioblastoma, a known radiation-related (environmentally caused) cancer: Lipman follows the final, devastating stages of his treatment before he dies, and travels to his family home in Bingham, which was nicknamed "Hot Canyon" by the US government because it was so extremely irradiated—yet its residents were never warned. Shot in situ all over the state of New Mexico, California, and even the US Capitol, the film spans nearly ten years. This long duration allows us to witness the devastating and real-time fallout of this bomb in the lives of all of these downwinders, and to observe their relentless activism. We watch, for instance, as Douglas loses mobility and passes away; as Alexander slowly loses her faculties to dementia after the devastating loss of her sons; as the downwinders present their case to the US Senate Committee on the Judiciary just to be denied reparations, yet again.

Interviews with historians, writers, and journalists including Myrriah Gómez, Luis Campos, Kate Brown, and Joshua Wheeler, and a medical doctor, Arlene Brown, who practiced in the area for forty years, contextualize the larger implications of this test, explaining the extent to which the public was misled about the dangers of radiation. Worse, some companies *were* warned of potential radiation in advance of nuclear testing so they could shut down production, but American citizens were not; nor were the farmers producing the nation's food supply. Clips of propaganda films interspersed between these interviews emphasize the government's message to the public that atomic bombs were patriotic, not poisonous. And

Tina Cordova hikes in Three Rivers, New Mexico, 2018. (Image courtesy Lois Lipman)

yet, the film shows, despite official denials, the impact of this bomb on New Mexicans was well known—a quote from Manhattan Project Senior Health Officer Dr. Louis Hempelmann floats across the screen: "People were probably over exposed but they couldn't prove it and we couldn't prove it, so we just assumed we got away with it." Indeed, irradiated, burned cows were carted off for further study; the irradiated humans were not.

Until now, the history of the Trinity Site has always been buried in the larger narrative of the Manhattan Project which, itself, has always been bound to biographies of the scientists involved, chiefly Oppenheimer. Since the release of Nolan's *Oppenheimer,* we've seen a reissuing of that literature—from Kai Bird and Martin J. Sherwin's six-hundred-page *American Prometheus* (2005) to Richard Rhodes's eight-hundred-page *The Making of the Atomic Bomb* (1987). Like the film *Oppenheimer,* both books are lavish in their details of the bomb and of the man synonymous with it, but neither give substantial space to the people who are its first victims. And both are so long that it would take an incredible amount of time to read either of them—further ensuring that this history is buried and inaccessible to most Americans. Arguably, they are just as obfuscating of this history as the original propaganda. However, in just over ninety minutes, Lipman's documentary puts us in direct view of the people and places still impacted by this bomb, reveals the documents in which Manhattan Project officials admit culpability, shows how New Mexico has been treated as a nuclear colony of the US—an extension of waves of colonization that have impacted the region for centuries—and includes testimony from doctors, journalists, and historians who corroborate the facts of the downwinder's exposure. This film distills an astonishing amount of research into a highly engaging, devastating work—it is at once a history, a documentary, and a work of social justice and reparation. And perhaps this is why this remarkable documentary has not yet found a streaming service: it is more than a film. It is a call to action. To watch this film is to feel strongly allied with the downwinders' demand for

accountability. *First We Bombed New Mexico* locates this history where it belongs—not in the past, but in the present and in the future.

And, that present moment is complicated, the future ever-shifting. Near the end of the film, Tina Cordova stands at the edge of the Jackpile-Paguate Uranium Mine, grieving with Loretta Anderson and Arlene Juanico of the Southwest Uranium Miners Coalition, who are organizing on behalf of the workers and community who have been exposed to highly radioactive uranium dust on the Laguna Pueblo. Living out the consequences of opposite ends of the nuclear weapons continuum—testing and production—their fight for reparations was far from over when the film was released in October 2023. At that moment, there were eight months left to persuade Congress to vote to expand RECA and the film ended with the downwinders at a press conference in front of the US Capitol. In June 2024, RECA expired despite all of this support, and the film was edited to end with an appeal from Tina Cordova's niece, who at only twenty-three had been diagnosed with thyroid cancer. As I write this, in August 2025, the One Big Beautiful Bill Act has recently been passed. With it, on the eightieth anniversary of the first atomic bomb detonation, the US government (in a narrow margin) voted for the largest-ever expansion of RECA, reauthorizing it through December 31, 2028, and making both the New Mexico downwinders and post–71 uranium miners eligible for federal compensation, a move that Cordova acknowledges is long-overdue and yet comes with a heavy price: a huge cut to health care, which is critical to anyone surviving the health consequences of this test. In fact, it is described by US Rep. Teresa Leger Fernández as, among other concerns, "the biggest cut to health care in history."[3] The end of the film, undoubtedly, will be updated again—as the film is a living document of this journey for justice.

The film, and its evolving ending, raise critical questions that public historians must continue to address: what does this signal for our future *here* in New Mexico, the only state in the nation that contains the entire nuclear lifecycle—from mining to production to testing to the storage of nuclear waste? What does this mean *now*, at a moment when Los Alamos National Laboratory has begun to lay the groundwork to manufacture new plutonium pits—the core of a nuclear weapons? As the Heritage Foundation publishes pieces arguing that the US should resume testing of these nuclear weapons?[4] The film is a glimpse into our future—and that future, it makes evident, concerns all of us.

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3 Daniel J. Chacón, "New Mexico Downwinders Celebrate 'Bittersweet' Victory in Trump's 'Big, Beautiful Bill,'" *Santa Fe New Mexican,* July 3, 2025.

4 Robert Peters, "America Must Prepare to Test Nuclear Weapons," *Heritage Foundation,* January 15, 2025.