

The atom's ugly legacy is a toxic landscape

By David Steinberg / Albuquerque Journal Staff Writer on Sun, Nov 20, 2011

V.B. Price said that reading Kevin Fernlund's book "The Cold War in the American West" was a inspiration for him. It got Price thinking about whether the Cold War, as he himself put it, transformed and/or deformed the American West.

"I'd always wanted to try and make use of the thousands of clips on the environment I'd collected since 1966, but it was just too vast," he said.

"So when I read his book it came to me, that instead of trying to do the impossible – an entire history of the state since day one – I should start with the Manhattan Project."

The Los Alamos-based project developed the atomic bomb during World War II.

Price, a veteran Albuquerque-based journalist, poet, novelist and teacher, believes the Manhattan Project was indeed the right place chronologically and logically to begin his new book, "The Orphaned Land."

"It did indeed at once transform us into one of the leading intellectual centers in the world in terms of nuclear weaponry and research, and it also resulted in an extraordinary amount of pollution. So in that sense it deformed us as well," Price said.

His book looks at major environmental pollution sites across the state, and he believes the sheer numbers of sites began to overwhelm him in his research.

Price cited as examples the ground and water pollution in the South Valley, the waste sites in Los Alamos and the waste sites at Sandia National Laboratories. All were eye-openers for him.

"I remember reading in 1995 that the federal Agency for Toxic Substance and Disease Registry said in its report on Bernalillo County that there were 150 significant pollution events in our aquifer and at least 20 of which should be Superfund sites," Price said.

"I believe we only have three Superfund sites now. So that (report) was largely ignored. It was reported in the (Albuquerque) Journal, and never mentioned again.

"What became clear to me is that New Mexico's problems are a microcosm of a global environmental crisis, which has to do with global warming, extractive industries," he said.

Price said Nell Farrell's photographs, which are in black and white in the book, may be seen in color on her website – www.nellfarrell.com.

V.B. Price discusses, signs "The Orphaned Land" at 7 p.m. Monday, Nov. 21, at Bookworks, 4022 Rio Grande NW.