



Hands Across History



A joint newsletter for the White Sands Historical Foundation and the White Sands Pioneer Group.

Volume XV, Letter IV

November 2019

Bill Agee Latest Hall Of Fame Inductee

Mathematician Bill Agee was inducted into the White Sands Missile Range Hall of Fame on Oct. 22. The ceremony was combined with a luncheon that was held in the Frontier Club. About 50 people attended.

David Himelright, who once worked for Agee and nominated him for the honor, delivered a tribute to Agee that was both serious and humorous. He highlighted Agee's almost magical math formulas that made test data more accurate for the missile range's use and for its customers. In fact, Himelright's group came up with the highly original tag line for Agee's hall of fame certificate. It says, "Mathemagician" of Applied Theory.

In addition to family and co-workers, several of Agee's Eagle Scouts attended to pay tribute to their old scoutmaster. According to one of them, Agee mentored at least six Eagle Scouts in time as an adult leader in Las Cruces.



Col. David Trybula, WSMR Commander, presents Bill Agee with a flag was flown in front of Bldg. 100 in his honor. Photo by Vanessa Flores, WSMR PAO.



Bill Agee poses by his hall of fame display. Photo by Vanessa Flores, WSMR Public Affairs Office

What's To Become Of The White Sands Hall Of Fame?

By Jim Eckles
Editor

Last month we had a very nice hall of fame induction ceremony to honor a most deserving Bill Agee. Bill became the 55th inductee since Brig. Gen. Duard Ball started the hall of fame in 1980. Is he to be the last honoree???

The hall of fame was created to honor those past employees, the pioneers, who made long lasting contributions to the mission of White Sands. It is open to civilians, military personnel and even contractors. It was created as strictly a missile range honor and meant to be the highest award that White Sands could bestow on its own to one of its own.

In the weeks before the ceremony, lawyers in the WSMR Staff Judge Advocate Office, proposed that the hall of fame is essentially illegal. According to the command group, the lawyers cannot find a way that would allow government funds to be spent on a local hall of fame. This is important because there was a great deal of money spent by WSMR to create the initial physical hall of fame in Bldg. 122 and procure the medals, picture frames and other items used in the inductions. Years later, when I was coordinating hall of fame inductions, we had to order new medals and framing for the photos. WSMR paid for it.

So, what do we make of this? One could propose that Gen. Ball and his resource management people knew he didn't have authority to spend thousands on a hall of fame but did it anyway.

That seems pretty serious. No one has suggested accusing the general or his staff of misappropriation of government funds. On the other hand, my wife has joked about a defrocking ceremony for all past inductees and we'll have to return our medals and certificates.

Another possibility is that the lawyers in the 1980 JAG office were bumbler who didn't know how to read the regulations or that they deliberately provided an interpretation that everyone wanted to hear. I doubt if the current team of legal beagles wants to say either thing.

The current command group is proposing that they wash their hands of any financial responsibility for the hall of fame and make it a White Sands Pioneer Group and Historical Foundation function. There are no details on how that would work except that WSMR is still willing to house/display the hall of fame inductees in some venue.

The Pioneer Group is basically out of business. Dolores Archuleta has been the only member who is active and she says she is done running the hall of fame review committee. In the end, the responsibility would fall to the White Sands Historical Foundation. If the Foundation takes this on, who selects the hall of fame inductees in the future - the WSMR commander or a group from the Foundation?

I worry about the loss of prestige. If it isn't an official WSMR award, the emphasis is gone.

WHAT DO YOU THINK? Write us with your opinions and, more importantly, your suggestions.

Statement of Purpose and Membership

The "Hands Across History" newsletter is published by the White Sands Missile Range Historical Foundation and the White Sands Pioneer Group (WSPG). Both nonprofit organizations aim to preserve the accomplishments of White Sands Missile Range.

The newsletter is intended to keep members of both groups informed about current events and share information of common interest. The edi-

tor is Jim Eckles. He can be contacted by **email** at nebraska1950@comcast.net or at either address below.

Membership to either organization is open to anyone who shares their goals. However, details of membership (dues, etc.) differ between the two groups. For more information, please contact the appropriate organization and we will send it via the Post Office or email.

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History Data Can Come From Some Unexpected Sources

By Jim Eckles
Editor

I've been digging into the history of the first atomic bomb test at Trinity Site since 1977. I arrived at White Sands Missile Range in the middle of September that year and a few weeks later I worked my first Trinity Open House. Didn't know a thing so I just played like I was a sponge, soaking it all up. By the way, it was hot - something like 98 in Las Cruces that day.

One of the little known stories about Trinity Site is the Pope siding, 30 miles west of the test site on the Atchison, Topeka and Santa Fe Railroad. This is where much of the material for the bomb test was shipped to. The 100 tons of TNT that was used in the May 7, 1945 simulation blast was unloaded here. The building materials for base camp were shipped to Pope as well.

But it is Jumbo that has captured most people's imagination. The 214-ton steel container was built by Babcock and Wilcox, a famous ship boiler manufacturer in Barberton, Ohio, and was shipped by rail to Pope. It was unloaded there, placed on a huge trailer with 64 wheels, and then pulled and pushed by bulldozers to Trinity Site. The bomb was supposed to be placed inside Jumbo and then

detonated. If the bomb was a bust, Jumbo was designed to contain the conventional explosion and keep the plutonium from being spewed all over the

See 13.5 Pound Plutonium Core, page 4



Jumbo still on its railroad car after arriving at Pope siding. There was only one railcar in America at the time capable to carrying Jumbo's mass. Also, because of its weight and size it took a circuitous route to New Mexico to avoid some bridges and tunnels.



Los Alamos photo of Pope siding before being used by the Manhattan Project. Interestingly, it is the very first negative in the hundreds of images that have been released by the government. Photo by Berlyn Brixner

13.5 Pound Plutonium Core — CONTINUED FROM PAGE 3



Wooden boxes of high explosives destined for the May 7, 1945 100-ton calibration explosion are transferred from a freight car at Pope siding to a truck for the ride to Trinity Site.

countryside. The idea was to be able to recover it and use it again.

The plutonium core weighed only 13.5 pounds but it was a very rare commodity at the time. Jumbo had 15-inch walls because it had to contain the explosion of 5,000 pounds of high explosives

that were designed to crush the plutonium ball into a critical mass.

Long before it arrived at Trinity, the decision was made not to use Jumbo. Confidence in the bomb's mechanism was high and using Jumbo would have interfered with many of the planned measurements. So, Jumbo stood on end 800 yards from Ground Zero during the test.

People often ask me about the location of the Pope siding and some wonder about its name. I have heard more than once the theory that the siding was named after the Pope in Vatican City because of the world famous Italian scientist Enrico Fermi who was working on the project. Their thought process is that Fermi, being Italian, had to be a Roman Catholic and that the siding was dubbed "Pope" in his honor.

In response I used to say I disagreed and that it was probably always Pope. I had nothing to back it up, other than the theory that the story just didn't sound very real - more like an urban myth. But now I

See Gene Rhodes To The Rescue, page 5



Jumbo still covered at Pope siding after its long ride from Ohio to New Mexico.

Gene Rhodes To The Rescue — CONTINUED FROM PAGE 4

know for sure how it didn't get its name and a fair indication how it was named.



Enrico Fermi's official portrait from the Manhattan Project.

Recently I bought a used copy of *The Rhodes Reader*, a collection of stories by Eugene Manlove Rhodes. It has probably been out of print for decades so I had to order online. I bought it because it has an essay called

“In Defense of Pat Garrett” which Rhodes penned after the book *The Saga of Billy the Kid* by Walter Burns was published in 1926.

In perusing the book, I came across a story called “No Mean City.” In the piece, Rhodes provides a fictional story focused around Engle - the place just east of Truth or Consequences that was a prominent railroad stop for the big and little ranches on the Jornada del Muerto. Engle's main claim to fame now is that it is where you turn south to go to the New Mexico Space Port. Ted Turner's Armandariz Ranch (buffalo herd) has an office there as well.

In the introduction to his story, Rhodes wrote that some of the railroad sidings through the Jornada were named after a bunch of young railroad employees who built them. He lists them as: “Morley, Pope, Crocker, Engle, Cutter, Upham and Grama.”

The book's editor quotes a letter dated Oct. 3, 1947 in which J.W. Higgins, a valuation engineer with the Atchison, Topeka and Santa Fe Railroad, said they did a little digging and were able to confirm that Crocker, Engle, Cutter and Upham were indeed all engineers in charge of construction when the line was laid. No mention is made of the other names.

Whether or not Rhodes was correct



Eugene Manlove Rhodes. Rhodes loved New Mexico and when he died in California, he asked to be buried here. His grave is on the missile range at what is now called “Rhodes Pass” in his honor.

in his assertion that the places, including Pope, were named after railroad employees is actually irrelevant to meet my need. He clearly named the sidings and Pope was included. The key here is that the Rhodes story appeared in the *Saturday Evening Post* in May 1919. There is no way that the siding's name had anything to do with the Manhattan Project's work at Trinity Site.



Since Jumbo was essentially a cylinder, it was relatively easy to roll it off the railcar and onto the bed of the special trailer used to move it Trinity Site.

Sixty Years Ago, Mrs. Tyson Was A Winner

Editor's Note: The following article appeared in the missile range's *Wind and Sand* newspaper on Nov. 13, 1959.

A housewife at White Sands Missile Range has a lucrative hobby.

Mrs. T.P. Tyson, whose husband at Integrated Range Mission invents things, has won thousands of dollars, chiefly in merchandise, during the past 20 years by entering and winning contests.

"When I first started entering contests as a hobby, there were seldom more than two or three national contests a year. But, they have increased until today it is impossible to keep count of them," Mrs. Tyson said.

Her most recent prize was a television set for the Conoco "Cadillac Full of Cash" contest.

"I won a Sealy mattress and bed not long ago on a blank that I got from the Las Cruces Furniture Co." Mrs. Tyson said.

Among the large items she has won during the years are a Plymouth car, deep freezer, several refrigerators, radios and polaroid cameras, and a \$500 cash prize. Things she doesn't want or need, she gives away or sells. She lost count long ago of small items such as toasters, irons and watches.

Mrs. Tyson doesn't enter just any contest. She stays with the slogan type, completing stories and jingles and essays such as "Why I like..." in 25 words or less. She won a couple of contests with essays on "Places I'd like to Visit."

Mrs. Tyson was born in Oregon but spent most of her childhood in San Francisco, Calif. and Denver, Colo.

It was in Denver in 1939 that she became interested in contests. Later, she and a group of friends formed a Contest Club and held regular meetings to discuss problems and exchange ideas. Since coming to the missile range, her hobby has actually become a diversion.

"My greatest problem now is getting entry blanks," Mrs. Tyson mused. "I see and hear about contests that sound interesting but I can't always find blanks at local stores.

Mrs. Tyson attributes much of her success to the training she has had in short story, drama and

scenario writing.

"Those courses taught me to say a lot in a few words, and that is what is needed in most contests," she said.

Mrs. Tyson concluded by saying that contest season seems to be the fall of the year for it drops off considerably after New Year's. And she ought to know.

December 1959 *Wind and Sand* Ad



Annual Membership Meeting

For

White Sands Historical Foundation

January 21, 2020

10 a.m.

at WSMR Frontier Club

To Elect New Board Members

**All Members & Interested Parties
Are Welcome**

Back To Basics With Another NASA Launch Abort Test

Some of you may have noticed the NASA test of the Boeing Starliner spacecraft at LC-32 out at White Sands Missile Range on Nov. 4, 2019 - see the test photo below. It is amazing how history keeps repeating itself.

The basic idea is to equip vehicles for manned flight with some sort of escape system in case the rocket fails. The Starliner is the next in several generations of vehicles equipped with such systems tested at White Sands.

The first was Apollo with its "Launch Escape System (LES)." Like the Starliner, two Apollo tests involved firing the escape rockets while the capsule sat on the ground at LC-36. These were done in Nov. 1963 and June 1965.

There was also a series of tests at White Sands where a boilerplate Apollo capsule was launched using a jury-rigged bundle of rocket motors dubbed Little Joe II - see photo to the right. This gave the tests the reality of having the system traveling at high speed with significant G forces.

There was one Little Joe II flight without a capsule on top which was followed by four tests using the mock-up. These took place on May 13, 1964; Dec. 8, 1964; May 19, 1965; and Jan. 20, 1966.

Fast forward to May 6, 2010 when the Orion Launch Abort System was successfully tested at the missile range's LC-32. Orion was supposed to be the replacement space vehicle for the Shuttle system when it was abandoned. However, Orion was soon scuttled.

Starliner flew to an altitude of 4,500 feet and was in the air about 95 seconds. The system only deployed two of its three parachutes but NASA and Boeing say the passengers would have been fine.



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The three Trinity Amigos at the last Trinity Site open house. From the left: Robb Hermes, Jim Kunetka and Jim Eckles. Each brings a particular expertise in answering questions from visitors. The sign says: Free Answers / Factual Information / Myths Debunked / Maybe More Than You Want To Know.