

# H-Net Reviews

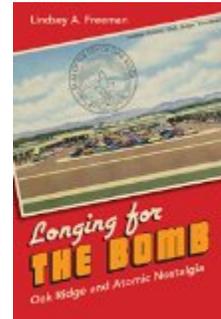
in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Lindsey A. Freeman. *Longing for the Bomb: Oak Ridge and Atomic Nostalgia*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2015. 256 pp. \$26.95 (paper), ISBN 978-1-4696-2237-8.

Reviewed by Sarah Brady Siff (The Ohio State University)

Published on H-War (February, 2016)

Commissioned by Margaret Sankey



*Longing for the Bomb* is a superb rendering of state-side social and cultural outcomes of the Manhattan Project. A mix of memoir, ethnography, and history, the book paints a new and colorful picture of war's effects on Americans. It reveals how the propagandistic intent of secret cities, such as Oak Ridge, Tennessee, was enacted in everyday mechanisms of control over the thousands of workers and residents who, assembly-line style, made the bombs that devastated Japan. Focusing on the masses of compliant mid- and low-level workers—many of whom were not aware they were working with deadly materials but did know they were supporting the US war effort—the book provides a welcome counterpart to a more extensive literature that focuses on the famously tortured scientists who breathed life into the bomb. Lindsey A. Freeman coins the phrase “atomic nostalgia.” She devotes her book to explaining atomic nostalgia, an American yen to return to the utopian atomic age that “vibrates most strongly in places dedicated to nuclear industries, places like Oak Ridge and Los Alamos.” While aiming to recover a history crumbling away at the edges with the deaths of the remaining Manhattan Project workers, Freeman warns that atomic nostalgia, the “fog under the happy mushroom cloud,” could harmfully obscure the dark corners of the bomb's legacy (p . 10).

Digging into the mythology surrounding Oak Ridge, Freeman discusses the legend of John Hendrix, a grief-stricken prophet who supposedly predicted in 1900 that the secret city would be built from nothing and contribute to a great wartime victory. In real life, the federal government kicked residents off the fifty-nine-thousand-acre site in the early 1940s without even consulting the governor of Tennessee, undervaluing their land and leaving their dislocations undocumented. As a representa-

tive of preatomic residents of the area, crazy Hendrix and his prophecies have been reconstructed at length in museums and media to alternately symbolize the inevitable triumph of the nuclear project; the rough-hewn, expendable population before Oak Ridge was built; and the agency of residents to formulate their own past.

The city was hastily constructed and its residents shipped in from all corners of the country. Planners endeavored to build it more as a community than as a military base. While some remembered this process as a sort of social leveling or a chance to start over, others pointed out that the best new homes in the most picturesque neighborhoods were reserved for the scientists and managers—“nuclear bourgeoisie” (p. 55)—while shift workers crowded into boxcar apartments, trailers, and tent cities. Along with mud from new construction projects, division by class and race were ubiquitous. While officials encouraged residents to develop a pioneer spirit in response to rustic and ever-changing conditions, Freeman points out, the state security apparatus keeping watch over Oak Ridge made a mockery of self-determination. By continually showing how the secret city's ideas about itself were formulated, Freeman keeps explaining how atomic nostalgia works.

There was community life, and then there was work life. Employee residents of Oak Ridge were told only as much as they needed to know to do their jobs, and the vast grounds and huge buildings that made up the secret city kept information as well as people carefully compartmentalized. Freeman provides detailed accounts of different buildings and jobs, emphasizing how Oak Ridge work and culture mechanized individuals and turned them into part of a bomb-production machine. “Ca-

lutron Girls,” for example, received extensive training to monitor uranium enrichment devices on par with physics PhDs; managers valued the women, straight off nearby farms and often with little formal schooling, for their docility and work ethic. Other high-tech jobs exposed unwitting workers to toxic gases and dangerous equipment, and some sacrificed their lives. The security apparatus of Oak Ridge impinged on residents’ mental space. Workers frequently were searched by armed guards, were administered lie detector tests, and were bombarded with propaganda about the importance of secrecy.

Then the United States dropped the fruits of Oak Ridge’s labors on Hiroshima, causing both hysterical joy and intense trepidation in the months that followed, as the federal government sorted out the future of atomic warfare and energy. The proud, secretive culture of the enclave endured through a dramatic population loss and postwar controversies about using the bomb. Those who remained Oak Ridgers supported Harry Truman’s decision and forged a new identity for the city as the “Atomic Capital of the World,” while those who were opposed to the use of atomic weapons left. As Oak Ridge became an important production site of atomic weaponry during the Cold War arms race, it also became a self-governing municipality. It flung open its gates to outsiders and enshrined its atomic self-image in museums.

The later chapters of *Longing for the Bomb* will interest public historians for their discussion of how memories of Oak Ridge’s accomplishments were situated in celebratory fashion almost immediately after the war, and how later iterations of the American Museum of Atomic Energy (now the American Museum of Science and Energy) tended to celebrate Oak Ridge’s role in eradicating fascism and to obscure the human devastation in Japan. Freeman offers an assessment of ongoing “dark” and “nostalgic” atomic tourism in Oak Ridge (p. 140). She also documents how particular photographers and sur-

living photographs have contributed to the city’s ideas of itself. The picture that emerges of Oak Ridge’s history and collective memory—and the place of this history in postnuclear society—is nuanced, informed, and well worth the time it takes to absorb.

Historians reading the work of this sociologist will notice a significant disciplinary difference in how Freeman uses evidence. On page 86, she claims that Oak Ridge authorities routinely fired gay men because homosexuality indicated flawed character that could extend to spying. “In the contemporary postnuclear landscape, residues of this fear show up in archives, anecdotes, and even mystery novels,” she writes, quoting extensively not from archives or anecdotes, but from novels written in 1997 and 2009. Wrapping up a chapter on the mechanization of work and employment inequality, she devotes a paragraph to her own dream about dueling cyborgs: “the Computers, who were not all white but from many diverse backgrounds, emerged out of little doorways to individual theme songs, dressed in satin capes like boxers, brandishing calculators and pencils” (p. 79). Freeman is inclined to introduce evidence with such phrases as “I have been told that” and “My grandmother once said.” At times, this artistry renders her less an authority and more another human subject of her own work, which is, after all, about the effects of Oak Ridge on the American imagination.

Because of its delightful readability, I would use *Longing for the Bomb* in a graduate course on the history of science and technology, wherein I would classify it as a work in the sociology of scientific knowledge. The book would contribute nicely to a discussion of how (or whether) our perceptions of science and progress are socially constructed. It also explores a number of accessible themes for history students, such as nuclear war, popular culture, and labor. Not purely a work of history, there is nonetheless good use for Freeman’s book in history classrooms.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at:

<https://networks.h-net.org/h-war>

**Citation:** Sarah Brady Siff. Review of Freeman, Lindsey A., *Longing for the Bomb: Oak Ridge and Atomic Nostalgia*. H-War, H-Net Reviews. February, 2016.

**URL:** <http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=44624>



This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-No Derivative Works 3.0 United States License.