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Article Summary: In 1955 Melba Scott observed Operation Cue, an above-ground atomic test in the Nevada desert. In this 1995 interview Scott describes her Nevada experiences and her feelings 40 years later about the dangers of an atomic explosion.

Cataloging Information:

Names: Val Peterson; E C "Gene" Eppley; Walter, Mike, and Gilbert Behlen; Harold Edgerton; Melba Scott; Charles "Chuck" Walters; Ellis C "Buff" Iverson; Gladys Yost

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Photographs / Images: Melba Scott with Val Peterson and his assistant at the Operation Cue test site; inset cover of Omaha Civil Defense Manual; "Operation Cue FCDA main test line," a diagram of Survival City (*Annual Report for 1955*, Federal Civil Defense Administration); images showing disintegration of Survival City buildings during the test (made using special camera technology developed by Harold Edgerton of Aurora); Behlen building that survived the atomic test, displayed at the state fair in 1955; flyer distributed by civil defense officials urging families to stock their fallout shelters with food and water



Introduction

Several hours before dawn on May 5, 1955, an atomic bomb was detonated at the Atomic Energy Commission's Nevada Test Site. The explosion, with twice the power of the bomb that had been used on Hiroshima, was only one of the above-ground tests in the Nevada desert between 1950 and 1963. Unlike the other tests, however, the May 5 "shot," called "Operation Cue," was both a civil defense exercise and a military maneuver.

Placed at varying distances from ground zero were several one- and two-story frame, brick, and concrete houses completely furnished and stocked with food. Mannequins were posed in various domestic settings within. The test site also included metal buildings, a radio tower, trailers, and vehicles. The group of buildings was nicknamed "Survival City" by the television, radio, and newspaper reporters covering the event. Although it was not the only test with invited observers, Operation Cue was certainly the largest; several hundred civil defense workers, business people, and officials were present.

Operation Cue had several purposes: to test products and types of structures—houses, bomb shelters, food, clothing, and metal buildings—for their ability to withstand an atomic explosion, to publicize the Atomic Energy Commission's testing program, and to promote civil defense preparedness.¹

Nebraska was well-represented at the May 5 test. Presiding over the event was

*By Melba Scott
with Carol Ahlgren*

former Nebraska Governor Val Peterson, who served as administrator of the Federal Civil Defense Administration (FCDA) from 1953 to 1957. Brothers Walter, Mike, and Gilbert Behlen from Columbus, Nebraska, were also present; two of their frameless metal buildings were being exposed to the blast at varying distances from ground zero. Special cameras, located throughout the "town" to document the explosion, used technology developed by Dr. Harold Edgerton, a native of Aurora, Nebraska.

And finally, Melba Scott of Lincoln was one of the hundreds of civil defense workers from around the country who were invited to observe the test. The role of these observers was crucial, as Val Peterson noted during his opening address at the test site:

For our friends representing the public media the story will be over in a few days. . . . But for those of us in civil defense, the day the program ends is really the day our work begins. It will then be our job to take back home with us all that we have learned and to make sure that it becomes of lasting value to national civil defense.²

The message would be brought home to Nebraska in several ways. The Behlens and their two relatively intact buildings returned to Columbus. In the years following the test the Behlen Company would introduce a line of "family" and "community" fallout shelters and

accessories. The company's "Shelter Products Advisor" would be former FCDA Administrator Val Peterson.

Within months of Operation Cue, one of the Behlen buildings with its dented roof and jagged window glass, would become an exhibit at the 1955 Nebraska State Fair. Inside the building, distributing civil defense literature, was Operation Cue observer Melba Scott, who would soon become deputy director of Lincoln-Lancaster County Civil Defense.

The following excerpts are from a November 20, 1995, interview of Melba Scott by Carol Ahlgren about Scott's role in Nebraska civil defense, and particularly her attendance at the Operation Cue atomic test on May 5, 1955. The entire interview tape and transcript is on file at the Nebraska State Historical Society.

The Interview

Ahlgren: Today we will be talking about the civil defense test which Melba was a witness for as a member of the Lancaster County Civil Defense. . . . I'd like to start out with you telling me how you got involved with civil defense, and bring it up to Survival City. When did you first become involved? I'm assuming as a volunteer?

Scott: Yes. And on the test, I went as the representative of the state. The county [civil defense organization] wasn't even formed at that time. It was [formed] when I came back. We established an office here then, later. I'm not sure what my original interest was and I can't really pinpoint it.

I think you have a bent for this kind of thing and maybe the fact that my

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Melba Scott with Val Peterson (right), head of the Federal Civil Defense Administration, and Peterson's assistant, Paul F. Wagner. The photograph was taken at the Operation Cue test site in 1955. NSHS-PC1306-1

grandmother was a pioneer here, and my grandfather, after the Civil War. My father was their youngest child and I'm his youngest child, so I'm only one generation away from homesteaders here in 1867. I'm going back that far simply because I think you understand from people like that, coming off the Civil War, homesteading, and my father and mother being Depression-oriented, I

think you learn how to take care of yourself. . . .

Before the test I did quite a number of things, some with the Lancaster County Extension Council. We had one thousand women here in the county that could be reached through that council and I was the civil defense chairman at that time. . . . I was taking all the courses I could get my hands on in

Red Cross: home nursing, first aid, first aid instructor. I had taken a course on Ground Observer Corps, and evidently had been doing enough that it attracted attention at the state because when the invitations came for the bomb test I was asked to go. . . .

Ahlgren: So you can't really think of a particular talk, or event, or newspaper article that spurred your involvement; it sounds like it was very gradual—to the point of Survival City?

Scott: I think so, I think so. And I suppose the fact that I lived on a chicken farm—I found a picture of John [her late husband] and I cleaning eggs—we hand cleaned every egg with a little brush. And I found a picture of us one day, standing out in the feed room doing that, and I thought, "I believe this is why I wanted to [go to an] atomic bomb test." Anything to get away from cleaning those damnable eggs [laughs]!

And so, I don't know, it was kind of far out really for a woman, especially [for] a very young woman and a young mother, to go traipsing off to do the kinds of things that I was doing. And I think I've mentioned to you before, there's no way I could have done it without John's full support and encouragement. . . .

Ahlgren: But it was your concern too, as a wife and a mother?

Scott: Oh my, yes. See there again, really, civil defense starts in the home. . . . You have to have some idea of how you're going to respond, and what the right response is. You can save a lot of people and keep from making a lot of mistakes whether you ever use the information or not, if you have that information. And I don't think that's too much to ask—personal responsibility—I think we all need that. . . .

Ahlgren: So what were the types of things you were doing before the Survival City Test? Were you appointed as one of the coheads [of Lancaster County Civil Defense]?

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Scott: Bill Swanson and I were the co-chairs of the committee that ended up getting civil defense set up as an agency within the city and county. And then Dick [Vestecka] became the first director, part-time, and I became the first deputy director, part-time. We had a little office up on, I think, the fourth floor, on the west side of the old county—city-county building. And it was an old storeroom that they cleaned out for us.

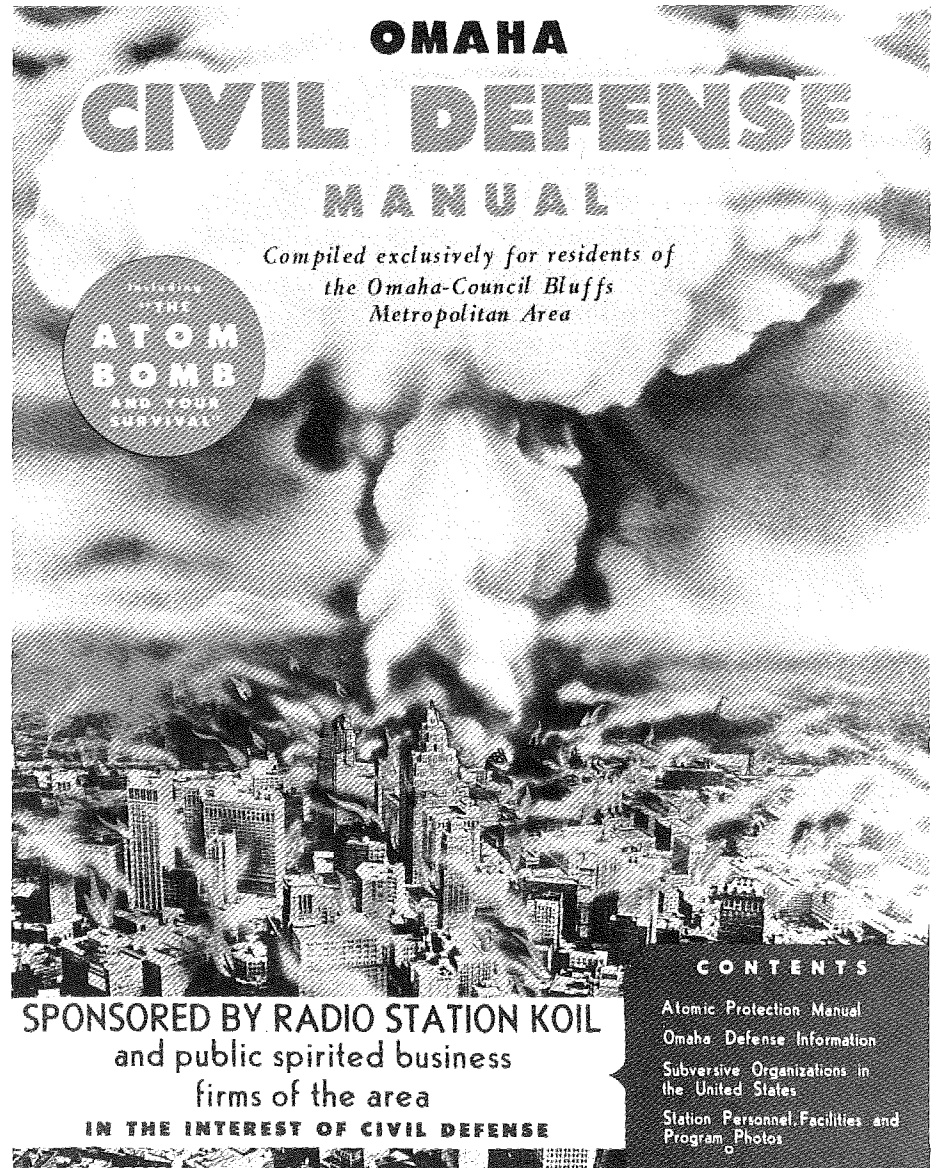
Ahlgren: And that would have been?

Scott: That was in 1955. It came close on the heels of the test. Before the test, I suppose, other than things I got involved in individually, this Extension Council thing I think maybe—there was a lot of publicity about it. Mel Greer of the [Lincoln] *Star*, and [James] Lawrence. . . was the publisher of the *Star*, and they gave a lot of space to those kind of articles. So we did a series of articles on what families can do in the home. Fire fighting, first aid, that sort of thing. That had gone on the better part of a year before I was invited to go to the test. So at the county level, kind of where it started was in the county extension.

Ahlgren: And you would have been doing that as a volunteer?

Scott: Oh yes. Even when I was deputy director [of Lincoln-Lancaster County Civil Defense] it was almost like being a volunteer [laughs]. I think it was \$125 a month. And when I went with the state it was \$400 a month because I was a woman. And the men, maybe not quite double, but it would have been, an entry level for men was probably \$600, \$625, something like that. So I did a lot of volunteer work even when I was getting paid! . . .³

Ahlgren: I was wondering [about] the mood at that time in the state or the perception about this. . . . [quotes *Lincoln Star*, Feb. 20, 1953, on the appointment of former governor Val Peterson as head of national civil defense]. I was wondering if Peterson, having been a governor,



then head of civil defense, what kind of impact, if any, that had on civil defense activities here?

Scott: Oh, I think it did, later on. Because he was very conscious of Nebraska, and he was always very good to people in Nebraska. To say other than that would be wrong because he took several Nebraskans with him. . . . Some of the people that were with him as governor followed him to that [national civil defense]. So it would be way less

than honest to say that it was not easy to pick up a phone and get somebody from Nebraska [at the national office] if you had a question or something. Certainly I think that's how I got in some of the pictures at the bomb test simply because I knew them and they knew me. . .

And the other thing, they were always very appreciative. Once I really got rolling on this, I think they thought that it was things they could do in other places. And that's smart too, if it works

one place, let's try it someplace else. So we were kind of a laboratory sometimes for things to be tested. The Nebraska National Guard was the first guard in the United States to write a program for military response to civil authorities. . . . To that extent, yes, it was an influence.

Ahlgren: So overall, the feeling was that people were very supportive of this?

Scott: Yes. There were a few [that weren't]. And I guess that's maybe when I had to learn to kind of brush that off. . . . We weren't too far [removed] in coming off World War II and then the Korean conflict. It would be hard to say that you were not interested in survival. . . . And I think anybody that's honestly interested in surviving and taking care of their own and others if they can, would be less than honest if they didn't try to find out what to do. . . .

Ahlgren: It seems like Operation Cue, Survival City—the test on May 5, 1955—it really seems like not only for yourself, your involvement, that's when things really began picking up in terms of national and state civil defense. . . . It wasn't the only [test], and it was not the first test where they had buildings and observers and cars and houses and [different] types of materials?

Scott: This was by far the largest. And the first one, I think, that was done specifically for civilians. I'm not aware of any others before or after that were just for that. There were some military [tests], but they could tell them, "Get in those tanks, and you do that." I'm not aware of any others [for civilians].

But after the bombs were dropped in Japan, you know, if you can do it to somebody, it can be done unto you. And I just can't believe that it didn't alarm people. What it did with some, I think, was bring out the very best in them and again, their personal responsibility took over.

The others that decided it didn't matter to them, they weren't going to live, I often wanted to say to those people, "Well it's your life, you know what it's

worth." If that's all that they care, then should anybody worry that much about them? You do, but it's kind of a stupid attitude. If you know a danger, aren't you going to try and avoid it?

Ahlgren: So when did you find out that you had been selected to be an observer of Operation Cue?

Scott: Let's see—we went, the shot was in May, we went out there in April—I'm guessing maybe during the winter sometime. And I think I have a letter from Austin Bacon, he was the state deputy director [of civil defense], notifying me that I'd been invited, and told me the names of the other people that had been invited. . . . The state fire marshal [Ellis C. "Buff" Iverson from Ponca, Nebraska]; Mrs. [Gladys] Yost from Milford [Nebraska], who was very active in the American Legion Auxiliary; and the man from Omaha [Charles] "Chuck" Walters, who was chief of rescue [director of Civil Defense and Rescue for the city of Omaha]; [and] the Behlens [Mike, Walt, and Gilbert]. . . . But I don't know how much preparation time that I had. . . .

Ahlgren: So you went out there in April? I remember reading that this one [test] was delayed?

Scott: Nine times, I think.

Ahlgren: Because of winds?

Scott: Yes. And I think they were concerned with surface winds. And I don't think those were the winds that should have concerned them, maybe. But I believe that was what it was. Because a lot of the people in Las Vegas that were there, the observers. . . . the press, organizations, they faded pretty fast. So that [number of observers] was cut down considerably. Nebraska's plane of people, headed by the governor [Victor Anderson] came back. They were only out there so many days, then they missed the shot, too. It was a long ride into the desert every night. They were all in Las Vegas.

Ahlgren: That's where you stayed. . . ?

Scott: No, no, we lived out in the field.

Ahlgren: Oh, I didn't know that.

Scott: That's where the thing came in about, it cost fifty cents a night, that was for laundry, I think, for the cots in this place that we stayed, the barracks. And it cost us like \$1.50 [\$1.00] for meals. No, we lived out there at Camp Mercury. . . . We were closer to the test site.

Ahlgren: And that's about one hundred miles from Las Vegas?

Scott: I'm guessing ninety some, probably.

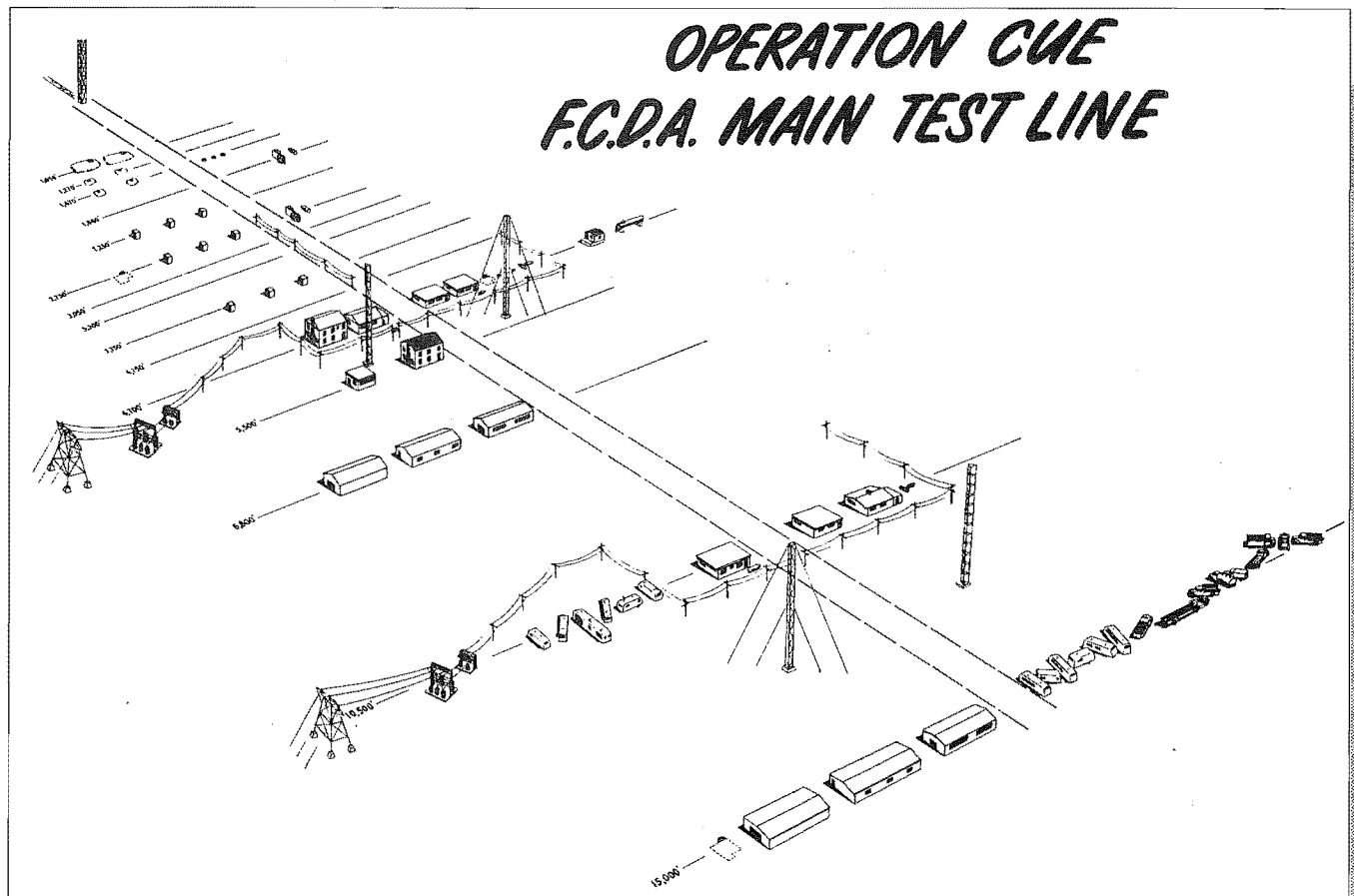
Ahlgren: So, as I recall. . . there were something like two thousand observers, invited observers?⁴

Scott: There were lots, I don't have a number. . . . But I know a lot of them, each night, would start to fade away. And many of those people were with government entities and I think, probably in the case of Nebraska, for instance, I just think they were concerned about political pressure, where a plane load of people went out, and they [taxpayers] were paying the freight for them. I can understand that.

Ahlgren: As someone involved in civil defense then, part of your being there was that you stayed in the barracks?

Scott: Yes, and we were given training. During the day they showed us films and different things. It was kind of like a little school. But I think at most they had planned—about four days [of training] was the most that they figured. And they ran out of things. By that time, we had seen the whole set up, we'd gone around and seen everything, where it was originally, and all the training films.

So we started going in to Las Vegas a little bit more often than at night. And how they signalled people [observers] in Las Vegas, they had a series of lights set up in the casinos downtown. If that red light started blinking, if there was anybody there that was supposed to be at the test site before morning, that was



Annual Report for 1955, Federal Civil Defense Administration

their warning to get out and get back to Mercury [laughs]. Didn't want anyone to miss it.

Ahlgren: So that [light] was on a tower downtown?

Scott: No, it was in all the casinos.

Ahlgren: Oh, so you just looked up and saw this light?

Scott: Sure. If you were one of this contingent, it was going to tell you if they thought they could get a shot off that night. Why then you had to report to wherever the convoy of buses were to take you out. . . .

Ahlgren: So how many barracks were there then?

Scott: I don't know, but they were for men and for women.

Ahlgren: Almost like World War II-era barracks?

Scott: Oh, yes! We're talking barracks. Remember my saying [in] the "private bath," [communal showers] there were spiders there. It was pretty primitive, yes.

Ahlgren: How far were you then from what they called Survival City, and do you recall what that looked like?

Scott: Well, everything was new and fresh and brand new.

Ahlgren: So did you go in the houses?

Scott: Before, oh yes. We went through all the facilities. We could see the tower where they were going to put the bomb, it was a tower shot. They took us out in buses. I'm trying to remember how far those barracks were back [from the tower]. I guess thirty miles, maybe. And then we would go in by bus convoy. Mercury is what slowed a lot of people in Vegas down from coming out because Mercury was a "closed" [Atomic Energy Commission, Department of Defense] town and they got a little picky on these people coming through in the beginning, I think. . . .

Ahlgren: Do you think maybe one hundred people, two hundred people [were] out there in the barracks?

Scott: Oh, I have no idea. The picture that I have on the "Fallout Lunch," I called it, would give us a pretty good idea of how many people were there the day after [the test], because we went out there for lunch. We can look at that.⁵

Ahlgren: But then I was wondering, a lot of the newspapers and the things you would read about it. . . .called it Survival City, then.

Scott: That was the name of the town.

Ahlgren: O.K. Did it really look like a town?

Scott: Oh no, no, because it was set up as a test. As I remember there was one series of things like the Behlen buildings and towers and a certain kind of a house. Then I think it was duplicated farther back so they could test at a certain level, and then at another level. But in that picture I've got, we were right in where it was all taken out [by the bomb].

Ahlgren: The closest to ground zero, or whatever they called it. . . .The Behlens, of course, they wanted to see if those metal corrugated buildings were going to survive, and they did, as you well know.

Scott: Yes, they did real well.

Ahlgren: I also read that there were things like canned goods. Was each house [filled]? There were three houses, is that right, three or four?

Scott: Well, there were types, I guess maybe four. There was one concrete slab [precast concrete], there was a two-story brick, there was a two-story painted [frame]. So there were three or four types of houses.

Ahlgren: And they were completely stocked?

Scott: They had dummies in there for the people, they had canned food, things they needed or wanted to test, and they used that as a comparison. . . .

Once they called [off] a shot and they'd run out of things there for us to do, then we were kind of on our own. And some people, we'd get together and we'd made a lot of new friends and we'd compare what people were doing [for civil defense]. So I'm not saying that all the time was spent there [in Las Vegas], but there were buses available for us to go in there, especially in the evening if we wanted to. . . .

Ahlgren: Did that [waiting] contribute to how much the media kind of played it up?

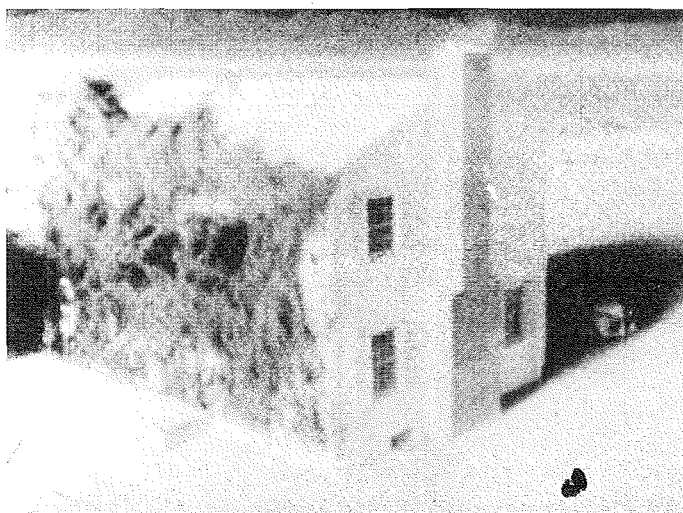
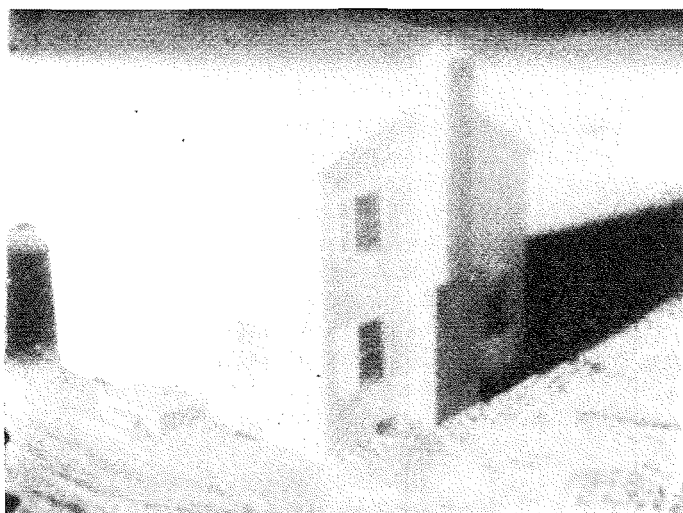
Scott: Waiting is very difficult for an American. . . .Yes, I suppose it did. . . . Maybe some just had to get back to work. The man in Omaha with the hotel [E.C. "Gene" Eppley] that was in food service, he did not stay. He was invited, and he went out and it was the group that did the mass feeding afterwards, but that gentleman didn't stay. . . .

Ahlgren: Were you in Las Vegas then, when you got the all clear that it was going to happen? Was it at night, or was it at dawn?

Scott: Well, they knew by a certain time at night because it would take so long to get everybody on board buses and get them out there before dawn. I think that's probably why I remember that system so well. Because we probably were in there [Las Vegas]. You know at that time there was fabulous entertainment in Las Vegas. . . and it was all top of the line entertainment. I think that's what happened. I'm not much of a gambler, but you couldn't help but be interested in that kind of a life. But I've only been back there once since—it was like too much whipped cream [laughs]. . . .

Ahlgren: So after all that waiting, nine days?

Scott: I think [the test was] postponed



Special motion picture cameras using technology developed by Aurora, Nebraska, native Dr. Harold Edgerton recorded the disintegration of Survival City buildings during the 1955 atomic test. From a government film, *Nuclear War and You*. NSHS-AV2.284.01

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nine times. . . .

Ahlgren: After all that, you're finally on the bus heading off to—you know it's going to be the test. Did everyone fall into their civil defense routine; was it still exciting?

Scott: No, I don't think so. I think by that time we had gone out there so many times. I think the first real realization was at the moment of the blast. All of a sudden, O.K. folks, this is what it's all about.

Ahlgren: So before that, you would get called out there and then they would send you back?

Scott: Oh, yes, and sit and wait.

Ahlgren: Oh, I thought they just said, "No, we aren't going to do it."

Scott: Oh yes! So it's like anything else, it wears thin after a while, and we'd get kind of used to that. So we were out there, but they didn't call it [off], and we kept thinking they were going to and they didn't. But when they did the countdown, I guess maybe that was the first realization, from the ten—to the nine.

Ahlgren: And where were you stationed?

Scott: I was back up on a hill.

Ahlgren: With the bleachers?

Scott: No, no. I've heard that bleachers thing before and I don't know that there were bleachers, I suppose there were. I was standing up, because the shock wave almost knocked us over—you needed to brace yourself. It was considerable. . . . I don't ever remember seeing anything about bleachers. . . . Obviously I wasn't on them because we were standing and because I remember the shock wave.

Ahlgren: And you were wearing goggles?

Scott: Oh yes, the goggles and the helmet and the coveralls. . . .

Ahlgren: I remember you saying during the talk you gave [at the State Historical Society] that you wanted to be in the trenches, they were like a mile from ground zero, with the army?

Scott: Yes, yes.

Ahlgren: Was that an option?

Scott: Oh my, yes. Oh my, yes. I think I've got the [newspaper] story that said seven women were going to be in that trench and only six were there and I was the one that wasn't there. . . . Even up until the evening [before the test?] we'd have meetings. And this one night

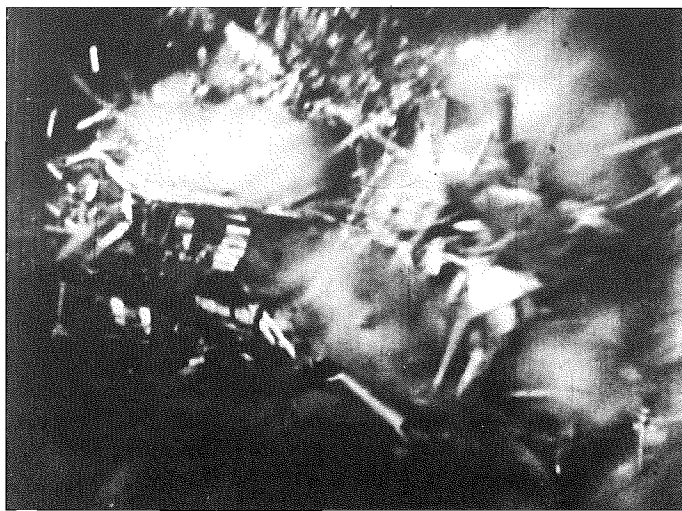
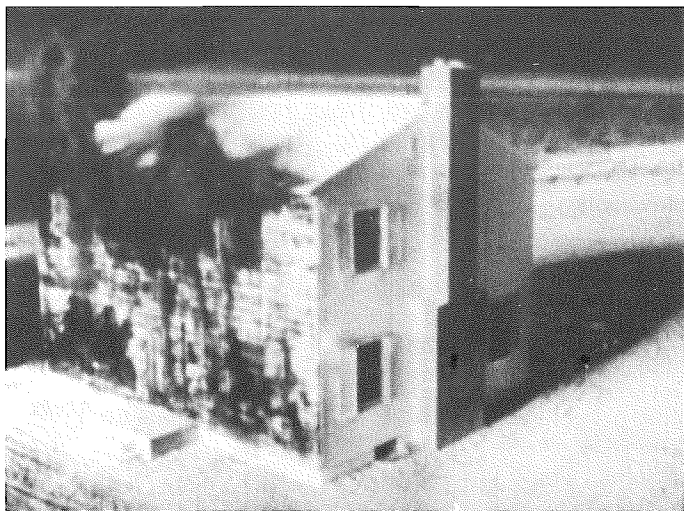
they said that there was room for some to volunteer if they wanted to go up to Baker's Trench, [that] is what it was called. And if they wanted to volunteer they needed to have their heart tested by one of the doctors. So I volunteered.

I was in the habit of calling home at least once a day—[I] wanted to see how the chickens were—and I told John. And John was a very easygoing man, very easygoing. So he wanted to know what was happening. Of course it was all over the news and the television, the big things. He wanted to know what was happening to me. And I told him about this wonderful opportunity I had to volunteer to be up this close.

There was nothing. Just dead silence on the line. All of a sudden John said, "Go unvolunteer." That's all he ever said, that's all he ever said about it, and I did. I don't think there's been twice in our married life that he felt that strongly about something. But he didn't rave and rant, he just [said] "Go unvolunteer." And I did. And I guess I can thank him. I'd like to know what happened to those women.⁶

Ahlgren: You were probably about seven miles away, at least?

Scott: Five, six to seven. I keep looking at that map and I'm not sure which little



hill we were on, but yes, we were back a ways. I'm guessing around five miles. This [Baker's Trench] was much closer. I think they had that one figured in feet [laughs]. . . .

Ahlgren: After the test did you have to wait several hours then to go [in] after the bomb? . . .

Scott: I don't remember. . . . What I remember is the silence, it was like—it was so awesome. It [the atomic blast] was so much more than anybody could ever imagine, that you just weren't able—everybody kind of retreated into themselves. It was just so quiet. There wouldn't have been any reason to stay. I think we just loaded back onto the buses. . . .

We went back then to the camp and then there was a routine for the morning after. I have that, I read the menu, so I think it was lunch that we got back there for. But I think that we did a tour of the buildings.

Ahlgren: How many hours afterwards?

Scott: Well, it would have been the next [morning]. . . .

Ahlgren: Oh, so you went back to bed, to sleep?

Scott: Yes. Let's see. We didn't stay out there. We went back again. . . . It was the next day. . . . It was a tour of the facilities and we ate. It was not a breakfast menu. So it either had to be a lunch or dinner. Within hours [of the test].

Ahlgren: Did you have an assignment, like to go in and clean up a building?

Scott: No, no. What we had were preassignments. I was with the medical corps. Chuck Walter [director, civil defense/rescue, city of Omaha] was with rescue, Buff [Ellis C. Iverson] was with fire, Gladys [Yost] was warden, and the man from Omaha was with mass feeding. So those groups would meet, too.

Ahlgren: So you had known before this what your job was going to be after the bomb was tested?

Scott: Well, this was almost more of a

training thing. You couldn't get exactly a repeat of what would happen on a city. So it was exchanging information, saying how things might have to be done, that sort of thing. . . . I think some of the first aid people might have gone through some drills and stuff. I think the rest of us just talked about what our responsibilities would be. . . .

Ahlgren: So did they test it for radiation before you went in and looked through the buildings?

Scott: I don't know.

Ahlgren: You just went in your coveralls?

Scott: I suppose we took our helmets off. . . .

Ahlgren: The main activity, then too, was this mass feeding?

Scott: Yes. Before that we went and looked at the destruction, and then we ate.

Ahlgren: So what were your impressions, overall, of the destruction?

Scott: Oh, I don't know. Some of what I got out of that was, as bad as it was, some people were going to come out of this alive. Some things, that brick building, that brick house, survived great. There was some damage, but I've seen houses sell here in Lincoln that needed more work—that's my real estate background.⁷

Ahlgren: What about the concrete one?

Scott: Well, you can bet the base was alright. I don't remember. . . . exactly. I think even the radio station they had set up could have been back on the air in a short time. They tested that. The other things like the food and that sort of thing I think they tested later on. I don't think we had any idea other than if we saw damaged cans or something like that. But I don't remember being tested before or after for radiation. I don't remember that at all and I think I would have. . . .

I can't even find out today from the government how much radiation there

would have been at that distance. My son suggested that I might file a claim. I think that's the only way you'll find out. And I think that's what they're afraid of. . . . I don't have any idea. I'm still here. Some of the other people that were there—Chuck's still alive, I guess. . . . You would think that we all would have had an early death, wouldn't you?

Ahlgren: Or that they would have checked you out before you went in. I remember Behlen talks about that [in his autobiography], he also went in. . . . He went in and checked their buildings. . . .

Scott: What might have happened was something that we didn't see. They might have [checked for radiation]—that's a very real possibility, that they went in before.

Ahlgren: I think they did do that. I'm almost positive. . . . I read about this about five years ago. They had to go through and make sure. . . . That's why you had to wait til morning.

Scott: But there really wasn't any way they could test, this happened about dawn. There was no way that they could do it during the night hours. I hope so. I hope that isn't revised history, where we think it should have been done. . . . But these scientists that did the Trinity shot, there are pictures of them standing around in their shirt sleeves with nothing on their eyes and nothing on their heads. If they thought that was so tremendously dangerous, would they have not taken precautions themselves? Are we just dealing with something that nobody knew about? That was in the 1940s [1945]. And people will bring that up. I think those were just lessons learned. So again, they might well have gone in and done some testing [at Survival City] and might have felt that it was safe. . . .

Ahlgren: So you went home pretty soon after [the test]?

Scott: Yes, I think I left the camp sometime that day and went someplace else and took a plane back home. It was hard on reservations. If you were driving

Atomic Test



One of the Behlen buildings that survived the Operation Cue atomic test was displayed at the Nebraska State Fair in 1955. NSHS-PC1783:36-22

it wasn't a big problem. But you had to keep your eye on flights. I think that's why some of us went, I think maybe to Reno, and took planes out of there. But just kind of a gradual dispersement. Kind of like, well, the sermon's over on Sunday and people start kind of gradually going out. . . .

Ahlgren: Do you remember what you were thinking on the way home?

Scott: No, I don't. I did a lot with the information after I got home, but I'm not sure but what I didn't turn off personally the effect that it had on me. That could have gotten you to the stage where you would've thrown up your hands too. That's a pretty awesome thing.

Ahlgren: I guess I should say, what were you feeling?

Scott: I don't know. I don't know.

Ahlgren: Overwhelmed?

Scott: Yes. Mute. Which is really different for me [laughs]. And the quiet reigned. We had some responsibility to the state to speak to the press and to organizations that were interested. And I remember some of us did that. But as that kind of faded away then the other work started on training and getting the civil defense going here in Lincoln and Lancaster County. I knew the reason why then. . . .

It's the same way I've survived as a widow. If I'd really ever let it all come in on me, I'd be immobilized. And so day by day, I started doing what I could. And I think it's the same way with that. It can either strengthen you, or it can do away with you. The decision is yours.

Ahlgren: Just having seen that bomb?

Scott: Yes. Sure it could. Can you imag-

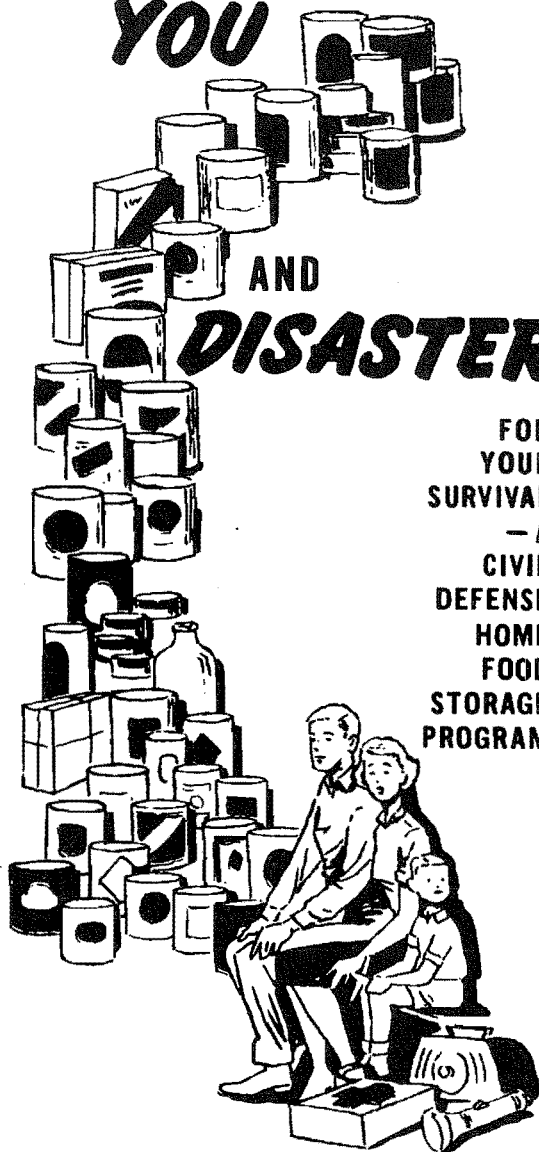
ine? I couldn't. I had never seen that film [of the test] before. . . . And they had this bomb test movie set up as one of the exhibits [at the Museum of Nebraska History].⁸ I didn't pay any attention for awhile, then I started looking and I realized what it was and I stood there and I leaned back to get something and it was like a giant bee had stung me. I couldn't move. I'd never seen it. I guess maybe I didn't want to see it. Because the first couple of times they asked me to do that talk [about the test] I said, "I don't think so." What I didn't want to do was go back and look at it. . . .

Ahlgren: Did you ever think after you came back from Survival City, aside from your obligations. . . to go and speak to groups, did you ever think. . . of saying that "I just really don't want to do this anymore?"

Civil defense officials urged families to "Remember Grandma's Pantry," and stock a seven-day food supply in their fallout shelters. NSHS-RG1:SG35:B37:F1

BETWEEN YOU AND DISASTER

FOR
YOUR
SURVIVAL
— A
CIVIL
DEFENSE
HOME
FOOD
STORAGE
PROGRAM



FEDERAL CIVIL DEFENSE ADMINISTRATION

L-1

START YOUR SURVIVAL PROGRAM TODAY

TO ESTIMATE how much food you should buy for *your* family's 7-day home food storage, multiply the number of people in your household by the amounts listed below. Amounts listed below are for 1 person for 7 days. If the children are young, the amounts can be decreased by one-fourth. If the children are infants, canned baby foods should be substituted for some of the other canned foods. Be sure to plan for old people or invalids.

Check "PANTRY" at Least Once a Month, Preferably More Often, and Rotate Regularly

Bottled Water Must Be Changed Every 6 Weeks

MILK: Powdered nonfat dry, 1 pkg.; evaporated, 2 (14½-oz.) cans.

JUICES: Tomato, 1 (1 qt. 14-oz.) can; Orange, 1 (1 qt. 14-oz.) can; Grapefruit, 1 (1 qt. 14-oz.) can.

FRUITS: Peaches, 1 (1 lb. 14-oz.) can; Pears, 1 (1 lb. 14-oz.) can; Dried prunes or apricots, 1 lb.

VEGETABLES: Tomatoes, 2 (16-oz.) cans; Peas, 2 (16-17-oz.) cans; Corn, 1 (12-16½-oz.) can; Green beans, 1 (15½-oz.) can.

SOUPS: Assorted, 4 (10½-oz.) cans.

MEATS AND MEAT SUBSTITUTES: Beef stew, 1 (1-lb.) can; Salmon, 1 (1-lb.) can or Tuna, 2 (6-7-oz.) cans; Spaghetti and meat balls, 1 (15½-oz.) can; Baked beans, 1 (1-lb.) can; Cheese, 1 small jar; Peanut butter, 1 small jar.

CEREALS: Ready-to-eat, 7 (individual-serving pkgs.).

CRACKERS-COOKIES: 1 box.

BEVERAGES: Instant coffee, 1 (2-oz.) jar or instant tea, 1 (1-oz.) jar or instant cocoa, 1 (1-lb.) pkg.

SOFT DRINKS: 12 bottles.

Atomic Test

Scott: No. It intensified.

Ahlgren: But you did say you think there were other people who didn't [continue in civil defense work] after they saw that?

Scott: Oh yes. And it was probably just real black and white, one way or the other. You just walked away from it completely, or I know several people that went [to the test] from different states that continued to be very active. . . There were state directors there, people from large cities that already had established civil defense. Mostly coastal people; a carryover from the war, I'm sure. Yes, I could see it going real strong one way or the other; you just don't want to cope with it. . . .

There are a lot of things that I can see now. One it might have been dangerous. But I would not change the path that it put me on. I would not change that at all. I don't know whether I had any or much influence, but I never veered from that course. . . .

Ahlgren: Do you have any other thoughts about Survival City in particular, or anything else you did with civil defense after that?

Scott: Well, I had been doing a lot of the things before, the door was open at that time. I was receptive. Then when I saw what happened there I suppose it was what I needed, you were either going to do something with that information or you were not going to and I decided to. So I worked many years in civil defense or related fields, emergency medical, with the helicopter ambulance.

It was one of the most impressive things that's ever happened to me, and I've been fortunate enough to have a lot of different kinds of experience. But I really never thought it through until I was to give the talk about it.⁹

Ahlgren: What it really meant being at Survival City?

Scott: Yes. And in fact I turned them [the Historical Society] down a couple

times. . . then the day that I went to that first [film], I think it was a film called *The Atomic Cafe*, I'd never seen it before.¹⁰ But as I was going in the front door a young man said to me, "They were all paranoid." I thought, "Hell, I wasn't paranoid!" And that bothered me. Then during that film they [some in the audience] got to laughing at things that were not funny to me at all. . . they acted, indeed, like they [the people in the film] were all fanatics, maybe. And that bothered me.

Ahlgren: That would have been some of the training films? As I remember, *Atomic Cafe* has some of the training things spliced together, like showing someone going into Survival City with the mannequins. . . .

Scott: I think the younger they were, they were getting a great reaction out of this, they were laughing at things that I didn't think were funny. So I waited. It brought tears to my eyes and I'm not a crier. And I sat there, kind of shook. And I waited to leave until everybody else had left. . . . And Paul [Eisloeffel, Society curator] walked over to me and said, "Are you all right?" and I said, "I think so." And I said, "You know, Paul, we did the best that we could." Because I thought that they were downplaying things that we were trying to do to save people. And that's when I really wanted to back out [of giving the lecture] but Paul said to me, "Melba, they are seeing it through the eyes of the 1990s and they don't understand the decade of the 1950s." Well then that made it all right. That's why when I did that talk, I put it in context by going back and researching some of the things that were in place or were happening in 1955. "This was what was going on in Lincoln and Lancaster County in 1955, [the] Salk vaccine, they were building the [Pershing] auditorium," some of the very everyday things. But for anybody to understand how I went to that [test], this was what our life was at that time. . . . But it was just an overview and that was how I managed to do it [give the talk]. . .

Ahlgren: Do you think maybe some of those people [at the film] were laughing in disbelief? . . .

Scott: Yes. You know, we may well look that way. I wanted to say to some of those people, "Wait until you're a grandmother or you're a grandfather and see what looks silly to you now about your time. . . ."

Ahlgren: I remember reading, some observer, a general, maybe it was during the Trinity test, that when the bomb was exploded they said that they looked into the mouth of Hell.

Scott: They did. I said that at the talk, remember? I said, "You just can't look into the bowels of Hell and not be changed." And you can't. . . any more than you could believe what it looked like. It's hard to visualize it, and certainly after seeing it, you'd be a fool not to let it [affect you]. You've got to build on something and that was building on the most potentially dangerous thing mankind has ever faced. . . .

You do the best you can with what you've got. That's what it boils down to, every day of your life. That was a big challenge. I have to admit that there were people, maybe even some people that worked in civil defense, that did not have the intensity that I had. I don't know if it was the test. It isn't really anything you can transfer to another person—your understanding of whatever something is. I can't transfer that knowledge or feeling to you.

I probably wasn't always too understanding that [some] people just didn't take it as deadly serious. I don't mean that we couldn't have fun, but the mission itself [civil defense] was almost like a military mission. The mission has to be serious. And it was to me. It still is. . . . I was just one little cog but I'm glad I was there when history was being made, it was a nice experience. Nice? Well, great. Not nice, that was the wrong word to use. Nice now, maybe, to have it behind me.

Acknowledgments

I am indebted to Melba Scott for agreeing to be interviewed and for providing photographs and scrapbooks. Thanks also to Paul Eisloeffel, curator of manuscripts and audio-visual collections, and Jill Koelling, asst. curator of photographs and audio-visual collections, for assistance in locating images and film clips. Finally, I would like to acknowledge Frank Edgerton Martin, co-author of "From Dante to Doomsday: How a City Without People Survived a Nuclear Blast," which appeared in *Design Book Review* (Winter 1989)—Carol Ahlgren.

¹ For general history of the atomic testing see Paul Boyer, *By the Bomb's Early Light: American Thought and Culture at the Dawn of the Atomic Age* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1985), and A. Costandina Titus, *Bombs in the Backyard: Atomic Testing and American Politics* (Las Vegas: University of Nevada Press, 1986).

² Opening Address by Val Peterson, Federal Civil Defense Administrator, Operation Cue Briefing Session, Las Vegas, Nevada, Atomic Energy Commission, 1955, 7.

³ Melba Scott and Richard Vestecka were appointed in September 1955. Melba's annual salary was \$1,500 and Vestecka's was \$2,400. See "Vestecka, Mrs. Scott, Chosen as CD Heads," *Lincoln Star*, Sept. 7, 1955.

⁴ From available reports, the number of observers varies, perhaps due to definition of "observer" i.e. invited participants and the military, who were required to be there. The Federal Civil Defense Administration's *Annual Report for 1955* (Washington: GPO, 1956), 44, listed five hundred observers, while the *Operation Cue Observer's Handbook* (Atomic Energy Commission: 1955) cited one thousand invited observers. An Associated Press story noted on May 2, 1955, that there were "few observers left" out of an "original number of about 5,800 civilian and military observers." *Lincoln Star*, May 2, 1955.

⁵ According to the Federal Civil Defense Administration's 1955 annual report, there were 1,200 participants in the Operation Cue mass feeding exercises that extended from May 3 to May 6, 1955.

⁶ The 1955 FCDA annual report noted, "The group of 6 women and 23 men who experienced the shot from the trench at the 10,500 foot line demonstrated that civil defenders can take it along with the troops." *Annual Report for 1955*, 6.

⁷ The two-story brick house closest to ground zero was almost completely destroyed. The pre-cast concrete house survived the blast mostly intact. Duplicate structures farther from ground zero received lesser damage. It may be one of these other brick houses that Scott recalls. "Atomic

Ruins Reveal Survival Secrets," *Popular Science* (July 1955): 49-52, 216, 218.

After its use as a state fair exhibit for civil defense, the Behlen building was painted fluorescent orange and became company advertising on U.S. 30 at the Behlen factory in Columbus. A large sign proclaimed, "Atomic Building!" Its current location is unknown. The second Behlen test building, which was hardly damaged, was donated to the University of Nebraska. Still located on East Campus, its only distinguishing feature is a small plaque that notes it had been part of an atomic bomb test. See "Building Used in Atomic Tests Now on NU Ag College Campus," *Lincoln Star*, Nov. 11, 1955.

⁸ A film clip of Survival City/Operation Cue was part of the Museum of Nebraska History's "Atomic Age" exhibit in 1995.

⁹ Melba Scott presented "Eyewitness to an A-Bomb" at the Nebraska State Historical Society's monthly "Brown Bag" lecture series on July 20, 1995. The presentation was recorded on videotape, and is available for viewing from the Society.

¹⁰ *The Atomic Cafe* (1982) used archival footage, news clips, and music from the 1950s and 1960s to suggest the naïveté of government civil defense and preparedness programs in the face of nuclear holocaust.