

GET REAL
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URBAN LEGENDS OF LOS ALAMOS

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Petr Jandáček

FOREWORD

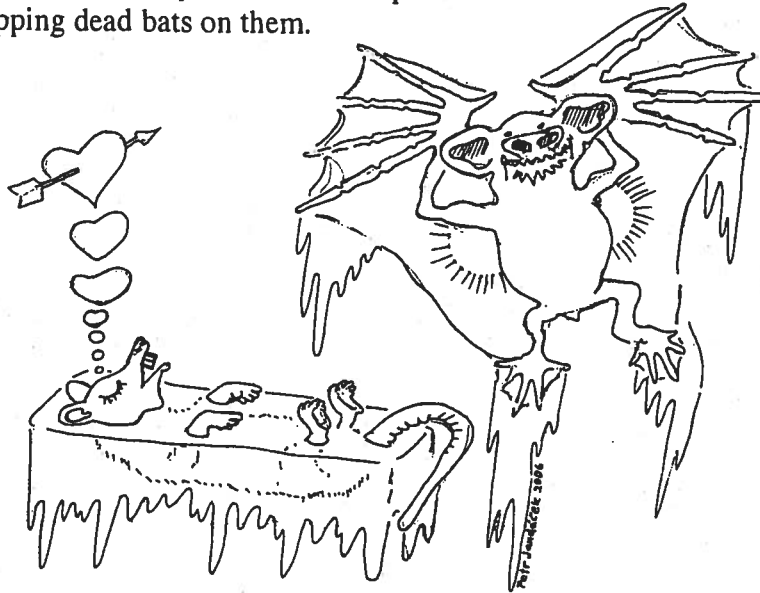
It was my good fortune to move with my wife and our little ones to the wonderful town of Los Alamos in 1972. In 2004 Los Alamos was designated as "the Best Place To Live in the USA" by The American City Business Journals. The study was picked-up by MSNBC and other media, and published nationwide. In 2005 it was further determined that Los Alamos has the highest median income in United States. Los Alamos has the reputation of being the "best educated" community in the world. Established in the early 1940s as the home of the Manhattan Project, the little "City on the Hill" brought the best scientific minds together to a remote place on the Pajarito Plateau some 35 miles northwest of Santa Fe. The mission of the world-class scientists was to design, assemble and test the first atomic bombs. The isolation of Los Alamos prompted some of the early residents to refer to their little community as "Lost Almost". Los Alamos is located in one of the most beautiful regions of the country. It has features similar to Grand Canyon, and Bryce Canyon. It has forests like those of Canada, mountains like those in Colorado, colors like the Painted Desert, and wildlife like that of Yellowstone...without the hordes of tourists. The most endearing feature of Los Alamos is the ethics of the people. In 2000 Los Alamos area endured a forest fire, which invaded the residential area and destroyed several hundred homes. The town was evacuated. There was not a single case of looting in this town of 18,000 people.

Alas! I do not possess the intellectual prowess of my friends, who (as scientists) are solving the world's challenges in genetics, medicine, chemistry, physics, space science, and other cutting edge technologies. I neither earn nor deserve their salaries. I *do* make the claim that I can match them in jocularly. When I came to "Lost Almost" in 1972 I taught at the Los Alamos High School. The graduates of that year are now in their fifties and are the parents and grandparents of the elementary students in my classes now. As I teach the second and third generation, I tell the kids about (some of) the misadventures of their progenitors a third of a century ago. Some of the anecdotes I reserve for more mature audiences. =)

The stories I tell you are those that I have heard from reputable scientists, fellow educators, and friends in Los Alamos. I cannot certify that all these tales are absolutely factual and accurate. I suspect that they are all **based in fact** but embellished as oral traditions encourage and often demand. Thus I relay them faithfully with a disclaimer as "**URBAN LEGENDS of The LITTLE ATOMIC CITY**".

Petr Jandáček © 2006

Los Alamos is most famous for the atomic bombs, which were dropped on Hiroshima and Nagasaki. Few people know that the City on the Hill also did other projects in the war effort against Japan. It is common knowledge that phosphorus ignites spontaneously when exposed to air. In early days, Los Alamos also developed a squadron of "**Kamikaze Bats**". Los Alamos scientists applied phosphorus to the armpits of bats. They then covered the phosphorus with honey. The plan was to drop the phosphorus and honey covered bats over Japanese cities from planes. In theory the bats would roost in the thatch roofs and would spontaneously ignite when they licked the honey from their armpits, thus, setting Japanese cities on fire. Alas! The bats were dropped from high altitude and froze solid on the way down. The Japanese could not understand why the Americans were dropping dead bats on them.



The Nazis of the Third Reich killed many hapless prisoners in concentration camps by freezing them to death. The German military knew that the best way to treat troops exposed to mustard gas or other bio-chemical weapons was to lower the body temperature and thus to **lower metabolism**. Subsequently the near-frozen soldier could be subject to enemas, transfusions, skin-scrubs etc. The much lowered body temperature would greatly reduce the effect of the pathogens. To revive the prisoners in the concentration camps the torturers used saunas, heated blankets, warm and hot water baths, and hot and warm water drinks and/or enemas etc.. The speediest recovery was accomplished by a sexual experience.

A young woman in Los Alamos conducted such cryogenic experiments on laboratory mice in the 1940s. One may wonder why the Los Alamos National Laboratory would want to freeze male mice and revive them with sexually receptive female mice. When dealing with nuclear material there is an irreducible chance of accidents. The rationale was - that if an accident happened, the subject would have his body metabolism and temperature lowered to a point where the toxicity of the radiation would be minimized while medics would perform procedures of cleansing him inside and out. Subsequently, the individual would have been revived by "women practicing the oldest profession". **Not hunters/gatherers...**The project was abandoned out of fear that someone would *deliberately* cause such nuclear accident for the sake of his libido.

During the early years of Los Alamos it was a “rite of passage” for some of the less well- informed staff members at the Trinity Sites nuclear testing grounds to use masking tape and create two “X” marks on their bottoms. They would turn the “other cheek” towards the blast ---- and then compare their “suntans”. It is safe to assume that this was a self-limiting creative departure from protocol. Trinitite is a greenish glass produced by melting *White Sands* into radioactive blobs. It is a common man-made mineral found near Alamogordo NM.



A long tunnel is the home of a linear particle accelerator in Los Alamos. Several workers at the Los Alamos Meson Physics Facility have claimed that the site is haunted by a shapely female ghost.

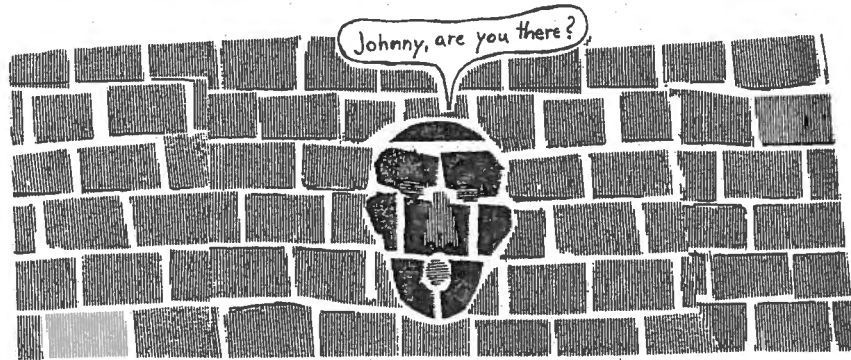
Los Alamos Meson Physics Facility



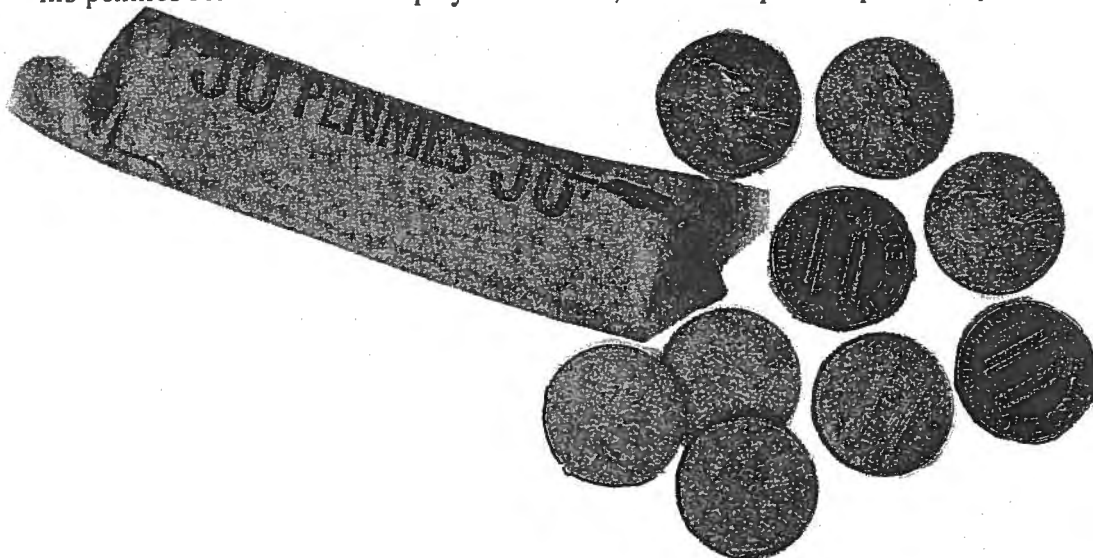
"TRIPOD" a mule-ear deer lost a leg in a car accident but continued to thrive. She had several foals. Tripod became a neighborhood pet in the Barranca Mesa community. In the minds of the local people she personified the "can do" attitude of Los Alamos.



A Los Alamos Public Schools counselor had a little boy in his office. Momentarily the counselor left the little boy to get the student's file in the adjacent room. It took a few seconds longer than the counselor anticipated so he used the intercom to say: "Johnny, are you OK in there??" With no answer forthcoming – the counselor repeated: "Are you OK, Johnny?" An answer came back on the intercom - "YES, WALL!"



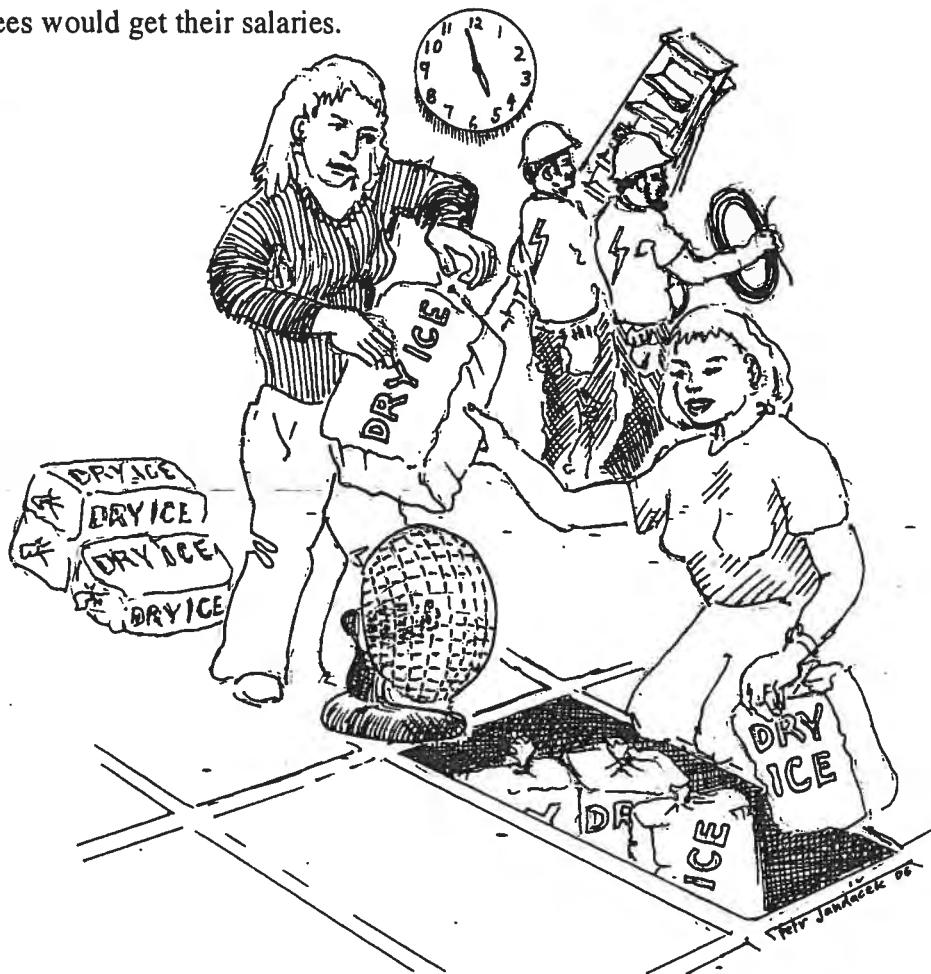
Counselor and other school employees at a Los Alamos school went into "panic mode" when a child wrote about the party at a relative's house where the uncle took out his pennies for all the kids to play with. Alas, the child spelled "pennies" phonetically.



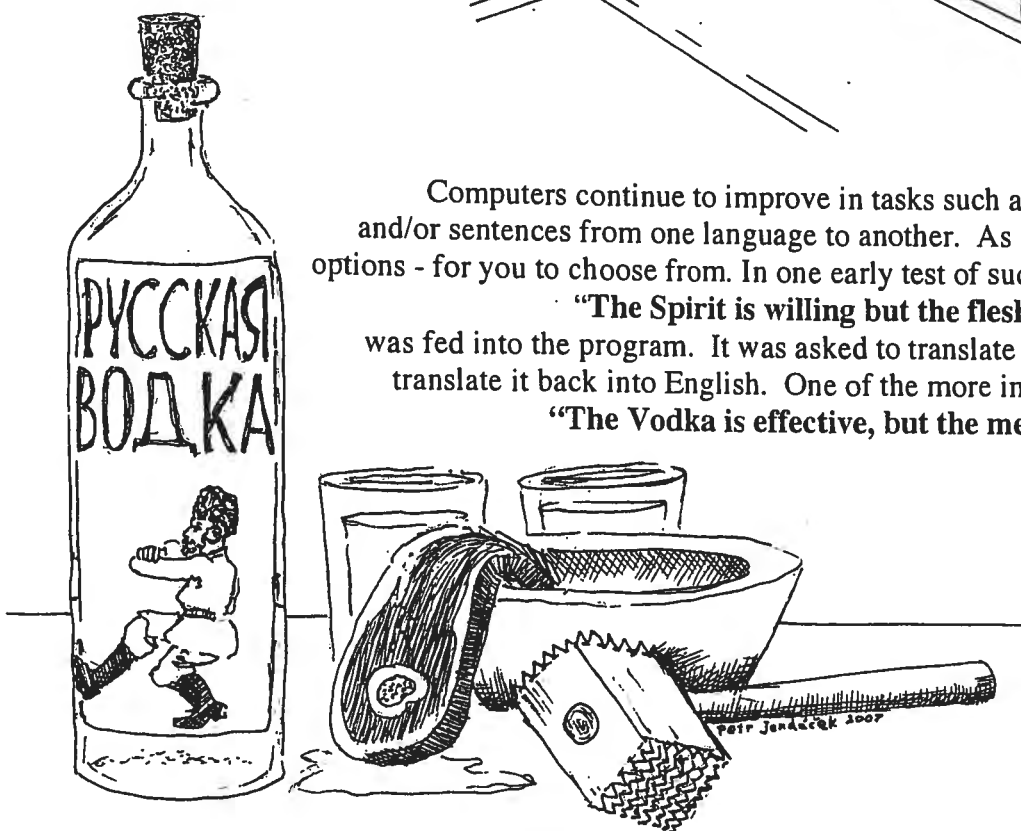
At times there had been a perception that school administrators did not communicate news of the district to the teachers in a timely manner. The teachers in Los Alamos often lamented that they learned of school news from the local newspaper (Los Alamos Monitor) rather than from the policy makers. When one teacher retired she retaliated by informing her principal, superintendent and other administrators by A LETTER TO THE EDITOR.



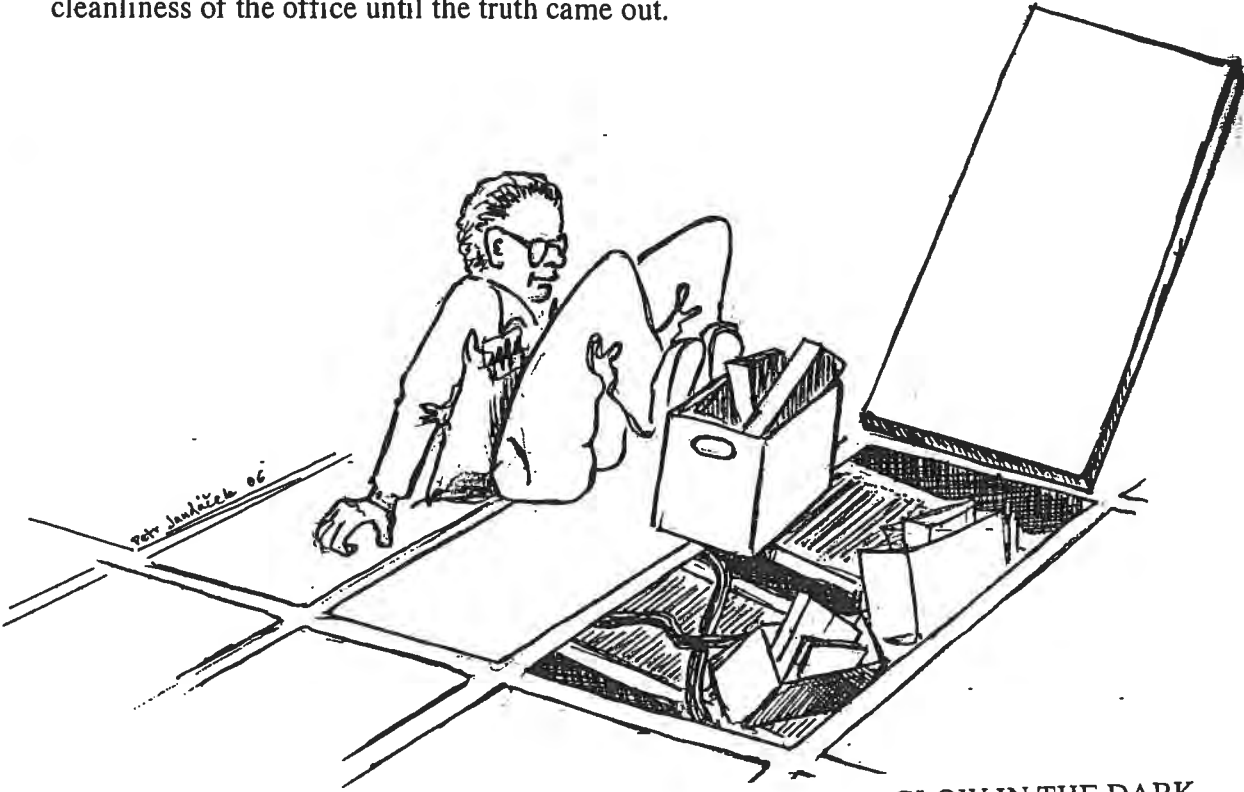
“CHILLER” is the extensive cooling system which circulates cold air beneath the floors to keep the computers at operating temperatures. One day the chiller broke down. Electricians went home at quitting time. The payroll for the lab employees had to be processed! The women in charge of the payroll brought fans from their homes and bought up every bit of dry ice available in northern New Mexico so that the Los Alamos National Laboratory employees would get their salaries.



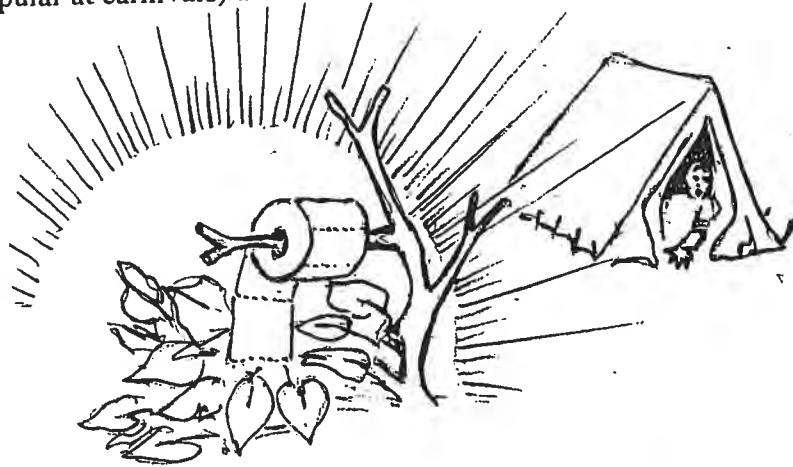
Computers continue to improve in tasks such as translating concepts and/or sentences from one language to another. As a rule the system gives you options - for you to choose from. In one early test of such program - the scriptural line “The Spirit is willing but the flesh is weak” was fed into the program. It was asked to translate it into Russian and then to translate it back into English. One of the more interesting versions was – “The Vodka is effective, but the meat is limp”.



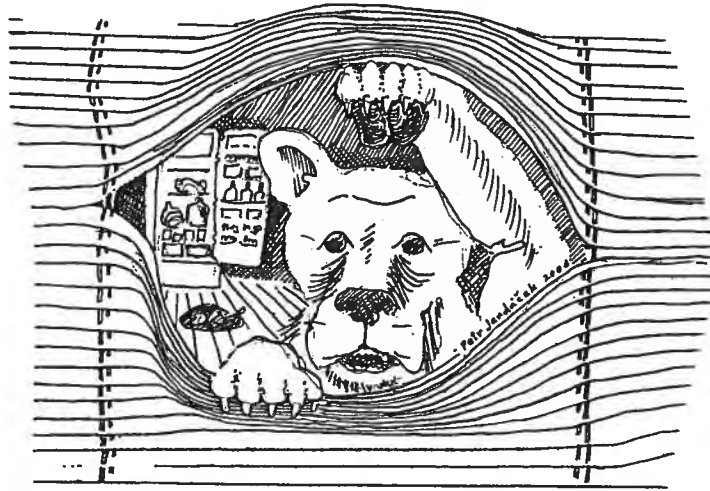
The Los Alamos Laboratory hires “babysitters” to compel the world class scientists to keep their offices reasonably clean and orderly. After being “nagged” and “badgered” for several days by his “babysitter” one such famous scientist opened up the panels of the floor (under which all the cobwebs of computer cables connect the work stations) and shoved all his junk under the floor. The “babysitter” was astounded by the cleanliness of the office until the truth came out.



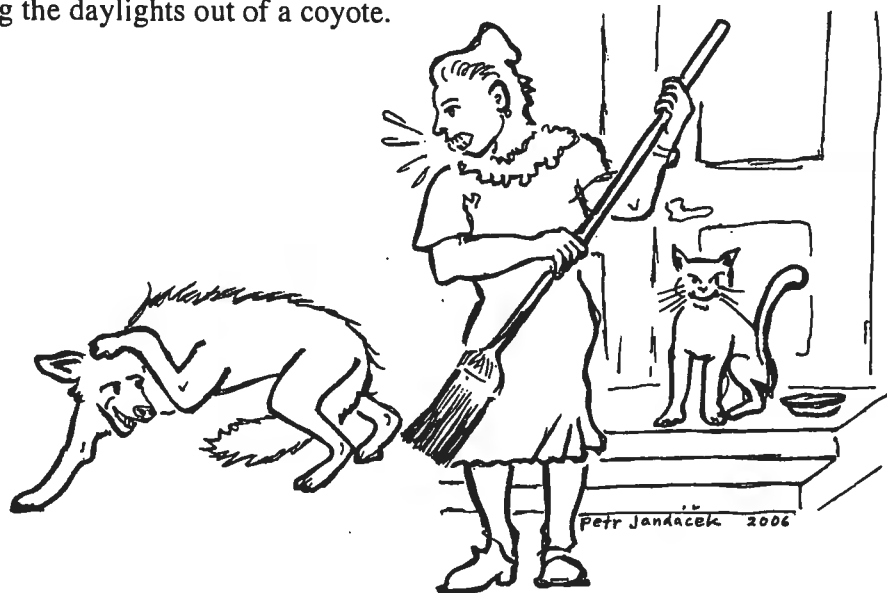
Many a wannabe comedian suggests that Los Alamos residents GLOW IN THE DARK. Most of these versions fall under the category of “UNORIGINAL SINS”. This following one has a bit of merit. Some campers in the South-West had among them a Los Alamos physicist. After he chose an enclosure of shrubs to serve as his privy another camper activated the light-producing plastic bars (such as are popular at carnivals) and added them to the mix.



Bears often visit Los Alamos and harvest fruit from the trees or feed at the garbage cans. We have had at least one **home invasion by a bear**. A Los Alamos resident came home one day and found her home trashed. The police investigated but could find no culprit. In the middle of the night the lady of the house heard a lot of noise in her kitchen. Carefully she sneaked out of her bedroom to investigate. In her kitchen she saw a bear standing by her opened refrigerator door and having a late night snack. She called the Los Alamos Police department. Several police cars were dispatched and officers surrounded the house. The bear would pull the Venetian blinds apart and look through the window for the amusement of the large crowd of neighbors. Eventually the bear broke through the window and tried to escape into the nearby woods. The bear was shot by the police officers. For many months afterwards the Department was accused of "Police Brutality".



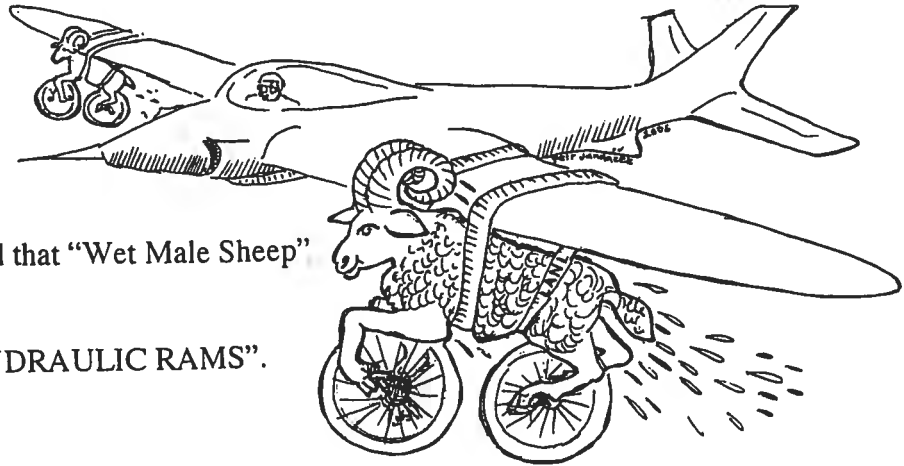
A lady in Los Alamos noticed that her cat, while sunning herself outside of the front door, was being stalked by a stray dog. She grabbed a broom and attacked the stray dog. The neighbors watched in disbelief because the broom-wielding lady did not realize that she was beating the daylights out of a coyote.



The Los Alamos National Laboratory had made significant contributions to The Human Genome Project. On occasions "Human Genome" was misspelled to read "The Human GNOME Project".



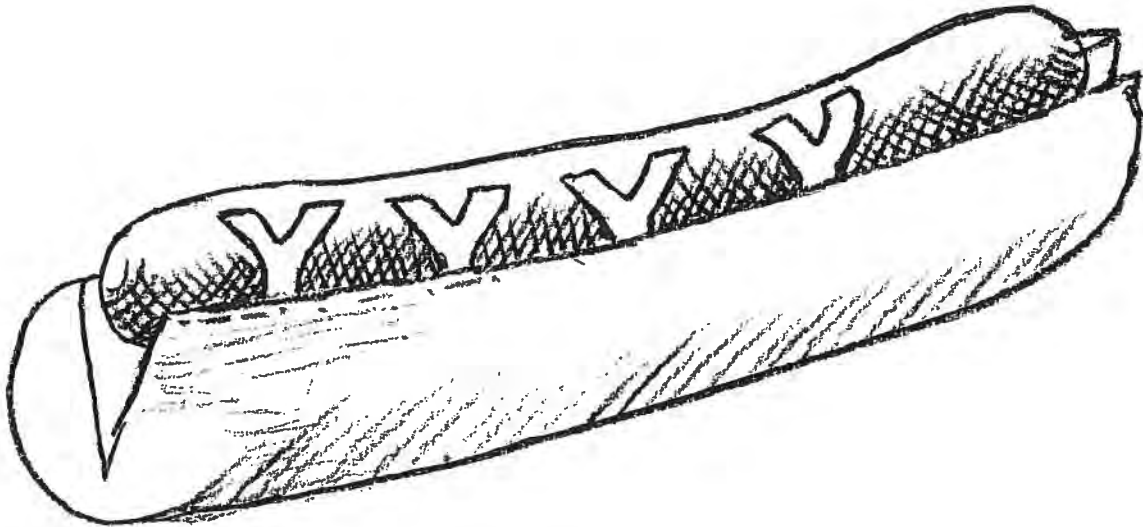
During the years of the "Cold War" the Soviets got a hold of secret plans for a new American jet plane. The translation into Russian proposed that the landing gear was held in place by "WET MALE SHEEP". The Soviet military pondered the unusual Los Alamos design.....



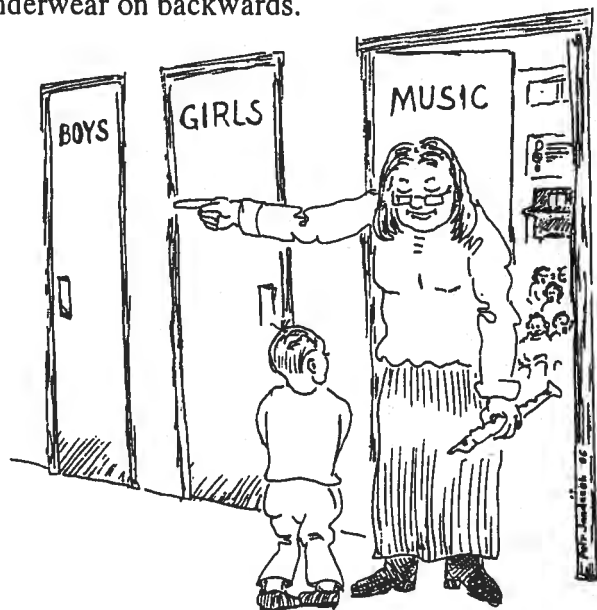
Finally, they concluded that "Wet Male Sheep"

really meant: "HYDRAULIC RAMS".

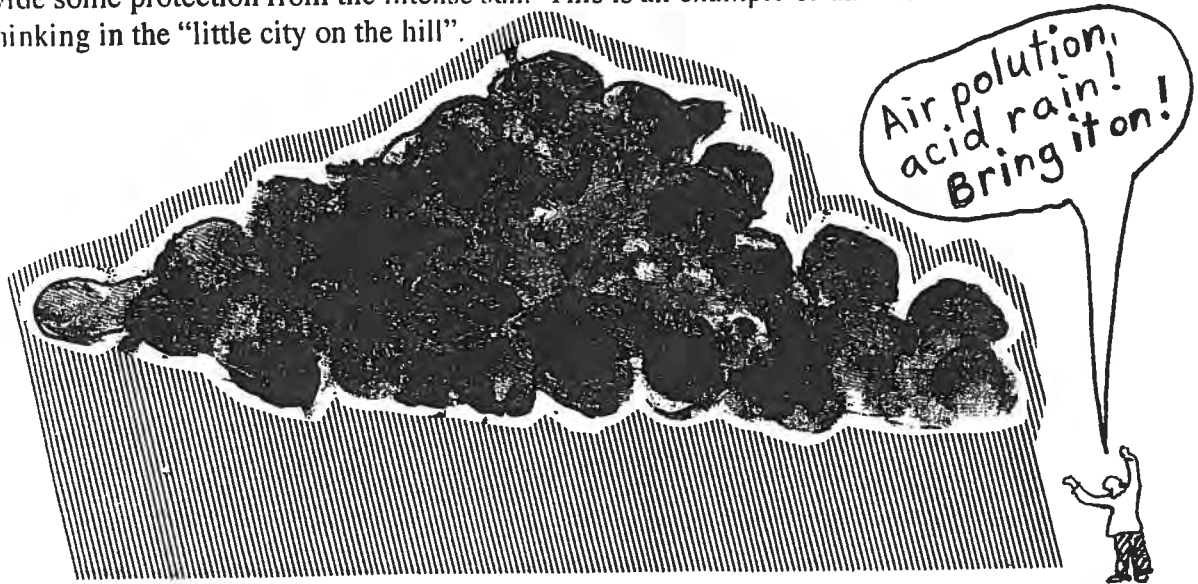
A Los Alamos elementary teacher was outside on playground duty during recess one day. A little girl came to the playground supervision teacher and tattled that a boy just used “The Y Word”. Puzzled, the playground-supervising teacher leaned her head to the little girl and quietly inquired “Which Y Word is that??” The little girl replied: “WEENIE”.



A kindergarten boy asked a music teacher in Los Alamos if he could go to the restroom. “Yes” said the music teacher, “It is out in the hall, second door to the right”. The boy left, but a minute later he was back pulling on the teacher’s sleeve – saying: “I can’t find it!” The music teacher repeated “it’s the second door to the right!” Eventually the boy made about a half dozen unsuccessful trips to the rest room. By this time he was in tears! It turned out that the little boy had his underwear on backwards.



While the rest of the world bad-mouths air pollution as detrimental to the environment—some scientists in Los Alamos point to the **silver lining** around the coal burning clouds of smoke coming from the electrical plants in the “Four Corners” region (where Arizona, Utah, Colorado and New Mexico are in contact). These scientists point out that we have alkaline soils and that acid rain helps to lower the Ph and makes the land in northern New Mexico more hospitable to agriculture. Furthermore, the high elevation and clear skies make sunrays the most significant source of skin cancers. The products of combustion provide some protection from the intense sun. This is an example of uncommon modes of thinking in the “little city on the hill”.



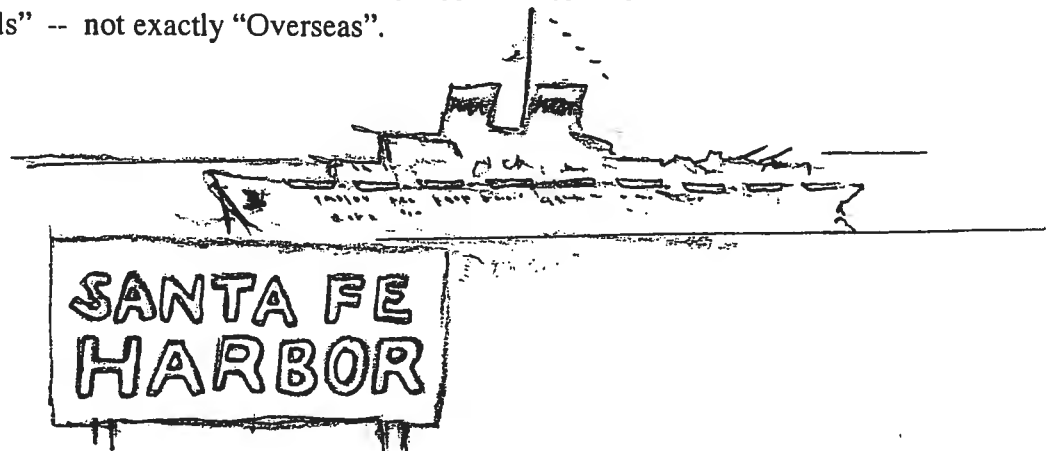
When the Rabbi in Los Alamos was blessed with the birth of his daughter he named her Orli (which means “My Light” in Hebrew). He was explaining to a colleague at the laboratory that the name is much like that of the airport in Paris. A passer-by overheard parts of the conversation and concluded that the Rabbi named the fruit of his loins - “Charles De Gaulle”.



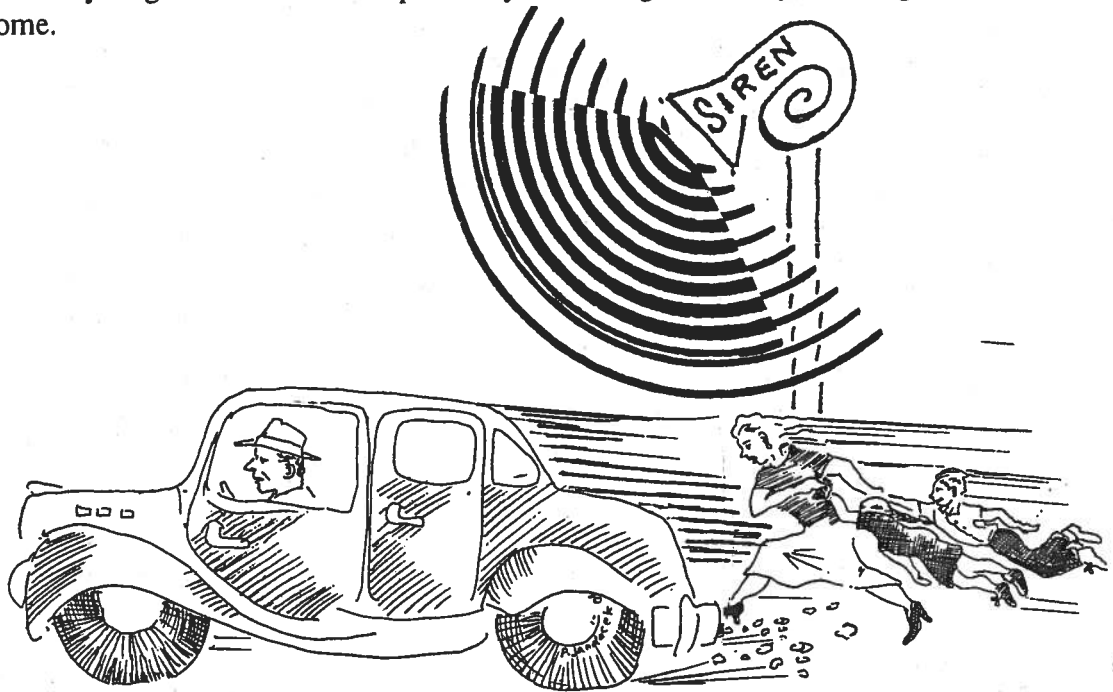
In the 1970s Soviet scientists had opportunities to visit Los Alamos. Unlike the local lab employees, who categorically dressed in cutoffs and other very informal “threads”, the Russians always wore old, ill-fitting “Al Capone” type suits. The visitors from behind the Iron Curtain were convinced that the “atomic city” had plenty of goods on the store shelves because it received preferential treatment -- so as to impress the foreigners. The Russians truly believed that the store displays and merchandise was strictly for their benefit. They would stock up on “luxury items” like coffee, meats, watches and toilet paper in anticipation that the stores would soon run out of such items. It was an epiphany when the Russians realized that every store in America had similar merchandise.



In the early 1940s a WAC (Women’s Army Corps) was told to report for “Overseas Duty”. Certainly, she was bewildered because her train tickets were to Santa Fe, New Mexico. In the early years when Los Alamos was a secret destination it was designated as “Overseas”. From Santa Fe to Los Alamos was “Over the River and Through the Woods” -- not exactly “Overseas”.



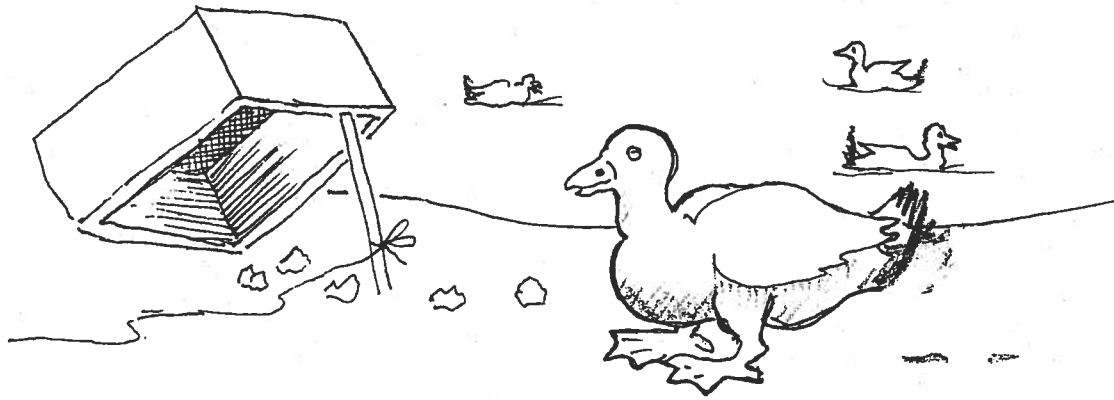
In the early days of Los Alamos there were frequent evacuation drills. When the sirens blared -- all families were to get in their cars and drive away from the potential military target. One scientist sped away -- leaving his family standing in front of their home.



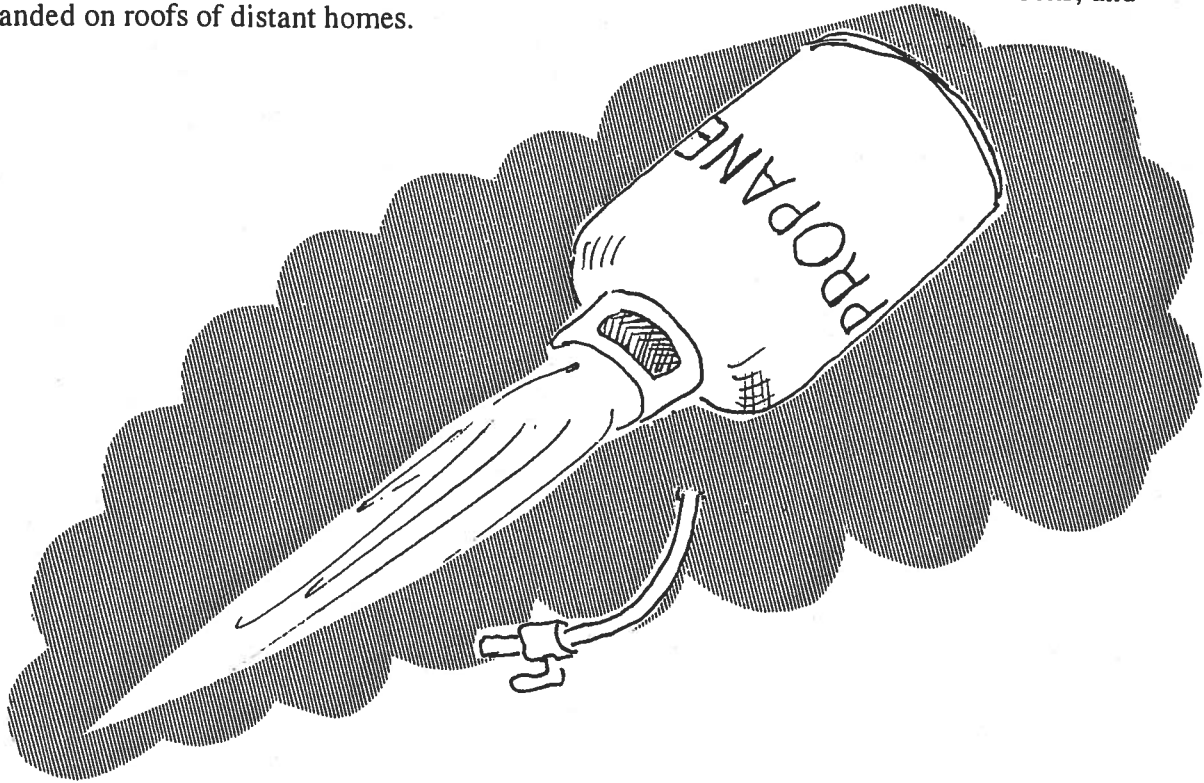
The teacher of Russian at Los Alamos High School was born in Czechoslovakia. While he spoke Russian very well, he had a tendency to always place the stress on the first syllable of each word (as is the rule in the Czech language). Thus (for instance) the little yellow songbird would be pronounced as a "cannery". When the students went to Russia they were mocked for sounding like they just came from Prague.



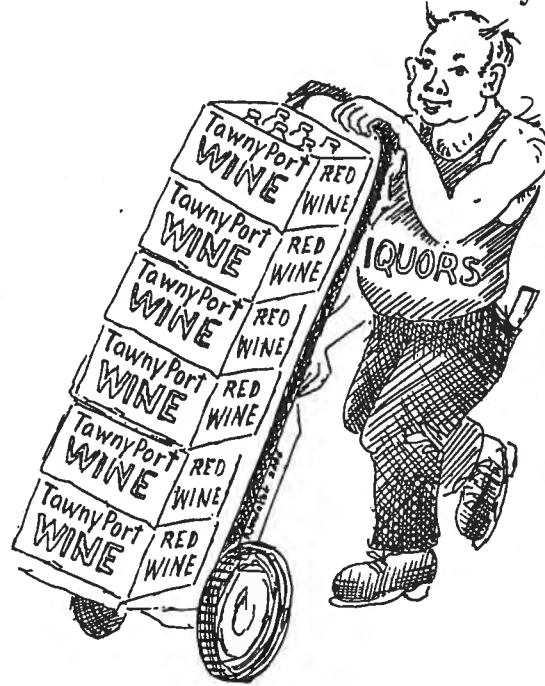
In the middle of Los Alamos is an ornamental fishpond called Ashley Pond. Ducks provide delight and amusement for the people in the park. Los Alamos hosts people from all over the world. Sometimes the mores of Los Alamos and the rest of United States are different from the customs of people on the other side of our planet. Some foreigners need to be reminded that the ducks are to be viewed, not tasted! As a rule, the foreign scientists learn not to **harvest the ducks** for their table after informed by the local police.



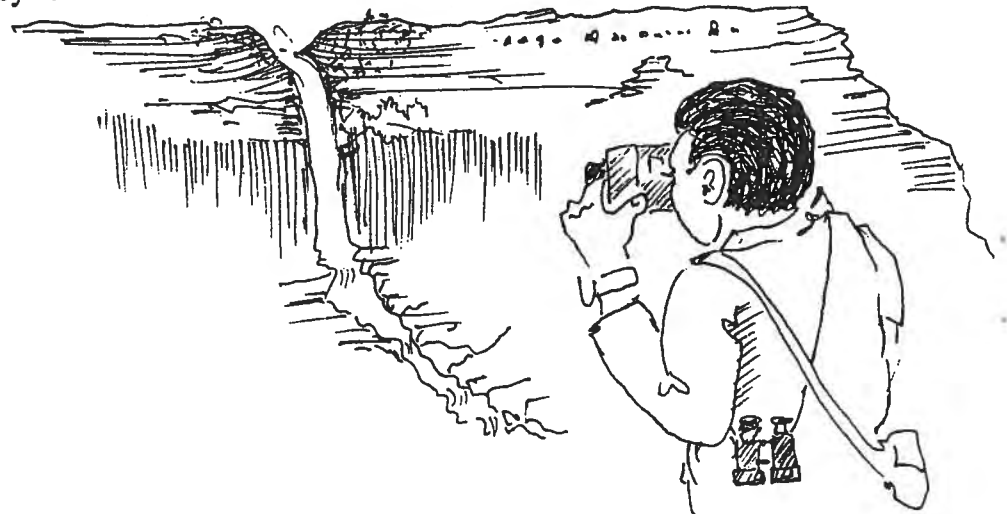
During the Cerro Grande Fire of 2000 whole neighborhoods of houses burned down. Occasionally, a single house in the middle of a block burned while other houses right next to it were untouched. The puzzle was solved when investigators found **propane tanks** from backyard grills - which ignited and **flew like rockets** for several blocks, and landed on roofs of distant homes.



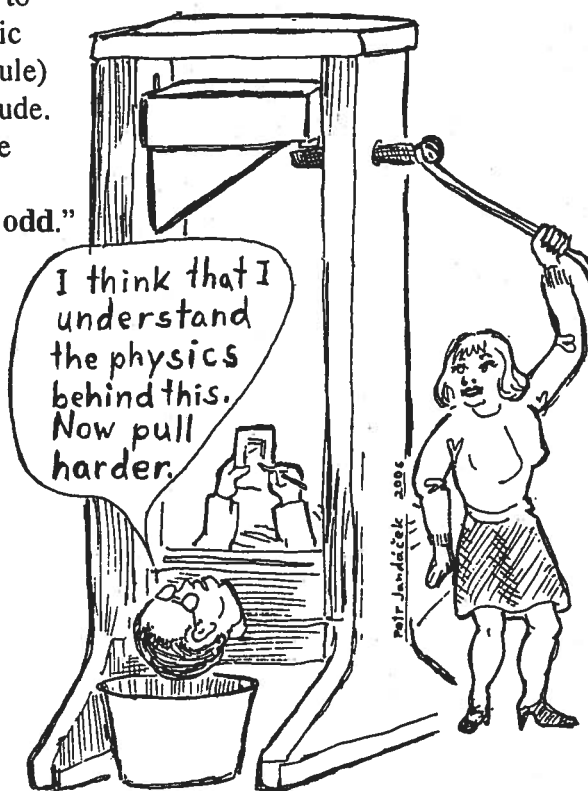
By the 1980s Los Alamos had the whole gamut of places of worship, which catered to a wide range of spiritual appetites. It is safe to say that all were opposed to alcohol abuse and misuse. But, in moderation, some, like the Jewish Center, the Roman Catholic Church, and the Episcopalians used wine in their Services. Trinity Drive (so named after the nuclear test site) is a major street in town. Along that route several churches incorporate the word "Trinity" into their name. One time Trinity On The Hill Episcopal Church ordered several cases of wine to be used for sacramental purposes for the next several years. To the horror of the office manager of The Trinity Bible Church the delivery man wheeled in several hand cart loads of Tawny Port wine. In panic, the Bible Church official ushered out the libations merchant and sent him to the Whisky-palians' Church!



In the southern part of Los Alamos (White Rock) there is an absolutely lovely waterfall. It plunges for several hundred feet off a mesa and into the Rio Grande Canyon. White Rock residents encourage visitors to take many pictures and videos of the falls and rapids below.....before they tell the tourists that the source of water is the community's sewage processing plant.



The world-class scientists who gravitate to Los Alamos are largely men. The scientific acumen of these “geeks” - does not (as a rule) come free. Often the price is social inaptitude. Single women in the little atomic city have been known to lament that:
 “The odds are good – but the goods are odd.”



The seismological stability of the Los Alamos was a real concern before the laboratory was established. In fact, **the area is free of major earthquakes**. The database for the go-ahead, however, was on “shaky grounds”. At the bottom of the Los Alamos Canyon are some “chimney rocks” about two feet in diameter and eight to ten feet tall. It was presumed that these stratified formations were of “geologic age” and good indicators of the fact that no major earthquakes occurred in thousands of years. The good news is that indeed the location is safe. The bad news is that the formations are only a couple of hundred years old and in no way do they prognosticate the seismic activity for the region. Fortunately there are *now* many other indicators to put our minds at ease.

