

CHAPTER FOUR

THE PARTY PLAN

There is nothing to get excited about.

—J.S. Gardner, Blackfoot legislator—

It must be at least humorous, if not pathetic, to the engineers in charge...to observe so much falderol,” wrote the editor of the *Arco Advertiser*. His scorn was aimed at the Idaho Falls Chamber of Commerce, which had created a presumptuous new letterhead for its stationery. A map of the state showed Idaho Falls, designated with a heart, as the only city in the region and named “The Atomic City.” The town was going too far in its campaign to headquarter the AEC’s new atom plant. The AEC could not possibly be influenced, the editor felt, “by the bowing and scraping of two-bit bigwigs in any of the prospective towns of the area.”¹

If Leonard E. Johnston, the chief engineer-in-charge, felt either amusement or pathos as he surveyed the towns of southeast Idaho, he never revealed it. He was supremely a diplomat, and this quality was to serve him often in the next five years. He had to invent a reactor testing

station—an entirely new concept in the history of the world—out of nearly nothing. Soon construction workers would be flooding into the desert by the thousands and looking for places to

live. The Manhattan Project had built government towns at its isolated nuclear sites, but this time the AEC planned to let the private market provide housing. Johnston needed all the nearby towns as allies.²



Courtesy of the Winfield Marvel Family

Bill Johnston, his wife, and their two children along with the children of Arco’s Mayor Winfield Marvel.

He and five AEC colleagues arrived in Idaho in mid-April. They had a lot of exploring to do. Besides surveying their hoped-for inheritance from the Navy, they had to figure out where they were going to house people—and where they would settle their own Idaho Operations field office, officially abbreviated as IDO.³

Leonard Johnston, born in South Dakota in 1911, cared little for his given name and liked to be called Bill, after his father. He was a visionary and completely unflappable, intense without being provocative. He had been associated with very large projects for most of his career. He had worked on the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers’ Ft. Peck Dam in Montana during the 1930s, eventually becoming executive officer of the Corps’ Ft. Peck District. During the war, the Corps sent him to Oak



E.F. McDermott, Mayor Tom Sutton and Bill Holden (left to right) congratulated each other after the AEC chose Idaho Falls as the headquarters for the NRTS.

Courtesy of the William Holden Family

P R O V I N G T H E P R I N C I P L E

Ridge, Tennessee, where he was assistant unit chief of the Gaseous Diffusion Plant K-25, a giant facility of over two million square feet. Later, he became deputy director of operations for the Manhattan District. In 1946, as a civilian, he opened up and managed the new Schenectady Operations office for the AEC in New York, the site of the Knolls Atomic Power Laboratory (KAPL), an experience that proved, among other things, that he could survive face-to-face contact with the Navy's formidable Captain Hyman Rickover. As an ex-military employee of the Manhattan Project, Johnston was typical of the executives in the managerial ranks of the AEC.⁴

As soon as he was named, Johnston became the focus of great interest from the communities of southeast Idaho. All of them were wide open to the opportu-

nities about to come their way. Like many regions of the American West, the history of the area was a tale of economic booms brought about by outside investment in mining, railroads, or irrigation. It had been some time since the last good boom in southeast Idaho, but no one had forgotten how to hustle.

Johnston toured the towns east, west, and south of the site. Community leaders everywhere welcomed him with gratifying enthusiasm. If warmth and goodwill could build houses, the government would have no trouble at all. The business people in the region had plenty of energy and ambition.⁵

The town of Arco flung itself into a festive celebration only hours after it heard that the AEC had selected the "Arco site." State Senator E.J. Soelberg deployed the Arco High School band

for a torchlight parade down the main street of the town. *En masse*, the citizens had themselves a dance in the recreation hall. Someone had calculated that the \$500 million that the AEC said it would spend on the site was greater than the assessed valuation of the entire state of Idaho. Arco saw the AEC project as a boom to outclass all other booms. Being the town closest to the site, it felt sure that good fortune was on the way. No longer would the *Idaho State Encyclopedia* say of Arco: "Points of Interest—There are none of note in the town."⁶

Arco had fewer assets than Idaho Falls but nevertheless felt that it could remedy its deficiencies. Arco mayor Winfield Marvel and others flew to Hanford to look around and solicit advice. Soelberg went to the state capitol at Boise to meet with Governor



Courtesy of the Winfield Marvel Family



Courtesy of the Ada Marcia Porter Family

Above. Torchlight parade in Arco. Left. Arco and Butte County leaders undertook a comprehensive planning process to prepare for growth.

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Courtesy of the Winfield Marvel Family

Mayor Winfield Marvel on his way to Hanford, Washington, to learn what Arco might expect with the NRTS as a neighbor.

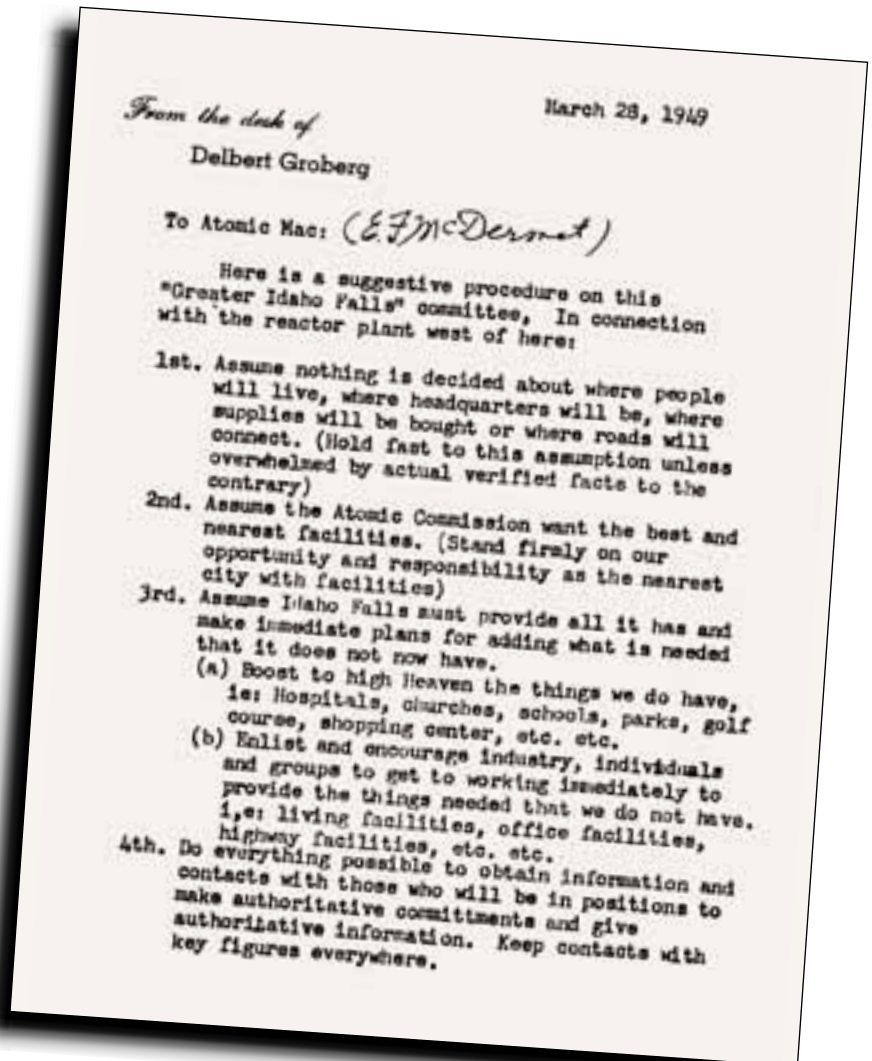
C.A. Robins and the state's Director of Aeronautics, Chet Moulton, to discuss airport development. Later Arco welcomed an urban planner from the Federal Housing Administration to help prepare a comprehensive land use and utility expansion plan. Despite the small size of the town (548 inhabitants, according to the AEC's Detroit consultant), its citizens were ready for action. They started swapping real estate and expanding their businesses within days of the announcement.⁷

The leaders of the Idaho Falls Chamber of Commerce, particularly Bill Holden, an attorney, and E.F. McDermott, the publisher of the Idaho Falls *Post-Register*, were equally quick to react, but not by dancing. They started organizing themselves and their regional allies. Making the most of the prized opportunity at hand was going to

require careful attention to detail. They knew that it would "probably take super-human efforts on the part of everyone to digest this large assignment which has been served to us." They focused quickly on the target of landing the operations field office in Idaho Falls. One of the barriers to that goal was the unhappy fact that no proper road connected Idaho Falls to the Site.⁸

The chamber organized a special Atomic Energy Plant Committee consisting of sixteen past chamber presidents "to work with and for the orderly and complete integration of our community in the overall development." Within days of the AEC announcement,

The Idaho Falls plan to win the IDO took shape early. Delbert Groberg, a past president of the Idaho Falls Chamber of Commerce, offered his advice for attracting the AEC to Idaho Falls.



From the desk of

March 28, 1949

Delbert Groberg

To Atomic Mac: (E.F. McDermott)

Here is a suggestive procedure on this "Greater Idaho Falls" committee, in connection with the reactor plant west of here:

- 1st. Assume nothing is decided about where people will live, where headquarters will be, where supplies will be bought or where roads will connect. (Hold fast to this assumption unless overwhelmed by actual verified facts to the contrary)
- 2nd. Assume the Atomic Commission want the best and nearest facilities. (Stand firmly on our opportunity and responsibility as the nearest city with facilities)
- 3rd. Assume Idaho Falls must provide all it has and make immediate plans for adding what is needed that it does not now have.
 - (a) Boost to high Heaven the things we do have, i.e: Hospitals, churches, schools, parks, golf course, shopping center, etc. etc.
 - (b) Enlist and encourage industry, individuals and groups to get to working immediately to provide the things needed that we do not have, i.e: living facilities, office facilities, highway facilities, etc. etc.
- 4th. Do everything possible to obtain information and contacts with those who will be in positions to make authoritative commitments and give authoritative information. Keep contacts with key figures everywhere.

PROVING THE PRINCIPLE

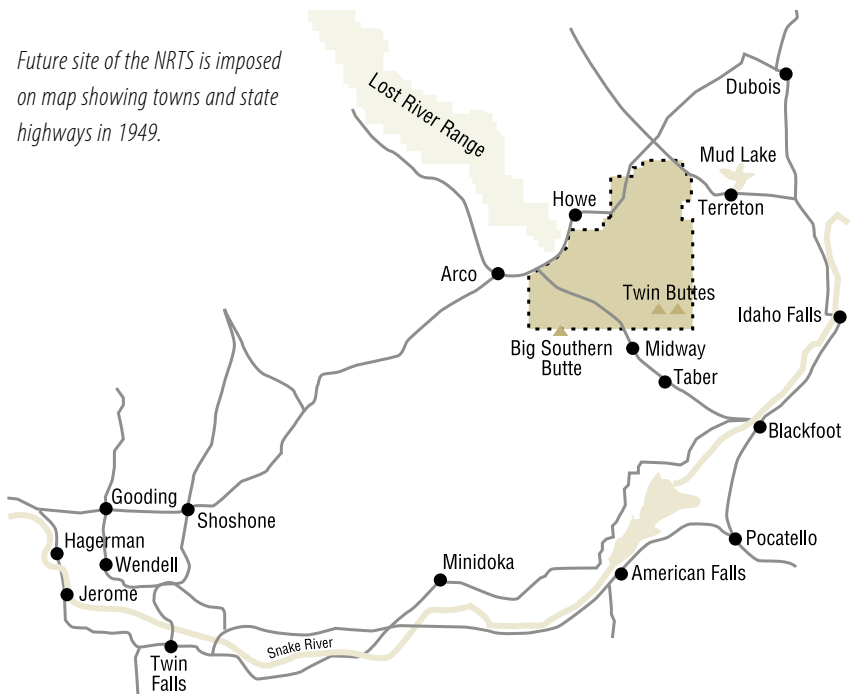
Idaho Falls sent a delegation from the towns north of Idaho Falls to meet with the governor. These towns were on the route between Idaho Falls and the west entry to Yellowstone National Park. They had for some time desired a direct highway connection to Arco, and this obviously was the time to renew the campaign. Urgent and unanimous, the towns petitioned Robins to enlist the State Highway Department in the task of building the new road.⁹

The town of Blackfoot was only thirty-six miles from the site—and connected to it by a paved, albeit primitive, road. With a population of 5,500, the agricultural center also was home to the Idaho State Hospital South, originally named the Blackfoot Asylum for the Insane, and thus had a good-sized commercial center.

Pocatello was larger than Idaho Falls' 19,000 people by a few thousand, and was home to the growing Idaho State College. The Naval Ordnance Plant complex included office space, transfer warehouses, and other facilities that could serve the IDO immediately despite being sixty-five miles from the testing station. The town leaders welcomed the prospect.

So the four contenders for the IDO's home town were Arco, Idaho Falls, Blackfoot, and Pocatello. The winner could look forward to a multitude of commercial opportunities, not to mention heightened prestige and a general boost in the cultural evolution of the town. The AEC officially activated the IDO on April 4, but it was up to Johnston to choose its permanent home.

Future site of the NRTS is imposed on map showing towns and state highways in 1949.



By the time Johnston arrived for his first visit, competition among the four cities already was getting rough. On April 6 the mayors and newspaper publishers of the four towns met together to “overcome the selfishness which seems to abound in all our communities.” Together they sent a telegram to Johnston to say they had all united to work with him on the project he was to supervise. It would help, they said, if he could tell them what to expect. An AEC news release followed, indicating that in all of 1949, only fifty people were expected to arrive for work. Growth would be gradual and there was time to get organized. Once more, a delegation went off to Boise for another planning session with the governor.¹⁰

Despite the official declaration of amity, each town did its best to win the headquarters. As Johnston and his small entourage made their first round of visits during the week of April 18 (begin-

ning respectfully with Governor Robins), the towns prepared to make their welcomes and their first impressions.¹¹

Arco took the approach that its proximity to the site was so self-evident that the plum would have to fall on its side of the fence. The committee rounded up old college friends of Johnston who happened to live in Arco and deployed the town's most distinguished citizens, Idaho's former governor Clarence A. Bottolfson and his wife, Elizabeth. They prepared an evening's dinner and the next day a cordial breakfast gathering for the visitors.¹²

The Idaho Falls Chamber busied itself creating happy memories and magical illusions for the visitors. Some called it “the party plan,” as it included rounds of luncheons, cocktail parties, dinners, and tours showing the sunniest and most appealing features of the city.

CHAPTER 4 - THE PARTY PLAN

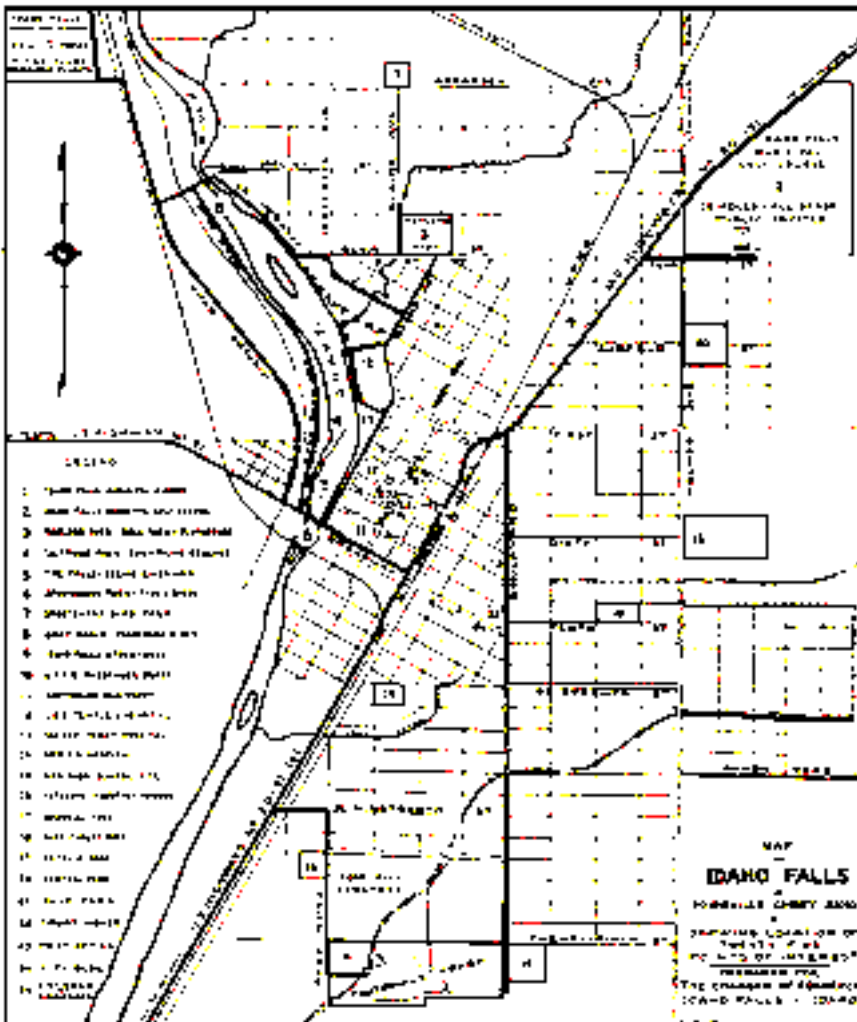
Guest lists were carefully crafted to include the young wives in town who were “as winsome as possible.” The visitors were shown the site of the new civic auditorium, where 2,500 people could be seated. The high school art teacher, a talented artist and the nucleus of a group of mature artists, organized an art exhibit, to which the guests were adroitly exposed. “Yes, we absolutely can and will build new houses fast,” was the consistent message. The men from the AEC heard good things about the schools, saw the city’s parks, and had a look at the spectacular

Yellowstone country just up the road. In Idaho Falls, AEC scientists would not be destitute denizens of a cultural desert, but would be eagerly embraced by a friendly and hospitable town with everything going for it.¹³

Idaho Falls’ most important illusion concerned the existence of a road to the Proving Ground. To weave that magic, the chamber arranged for Bonneville County road grading vehicles to go to the western edge of town where they moved sufficient dirt around to give a convincing impression that the road to

Arco already was under construction, at least to the county line. Activity was particularly heavy on the day that the visitors were brought to see for themselves. The road seemed, for all practical purposes, a *fait accompli*. Holden’s orchestration was so thorough that some of the vehicles appeared to be regular daily traffic already using the road for routine business.¹⁴

Blackfoot’s Chamber of Commerce held a public meeting (which was covered thoroughly by a reporter from the Idaho Falls paper) more to persuade the populace that little further needed to be done than to rouse them to action. “There was no dither,” said the reporter of the meeting. Blackfoot felt confident that its sewer and water planning, which pre-dated the AEC announcement, and a school system with a capacity for three hundred more children meant that it already was prepared for growth. But the road to the site was its ace in the hole. It would take Idaho Falls and the state too much time to build a new road to the site. Pocatello too would require a more direct road, and it would have to bridge the wide Snake River, another project that would take too much time and money before it could meet AEC needs. Therefore, the Blackfoot chamber concluded, “Blackfoot, willy nilly, looked like the port of entry.”¹⁵



Street map of Idaho Falls circa 1949.

PROVING THE PRINCIPLE

At Pocatello, the obvious attractions, aside from its size, were the facilities of the Naval Ordnance Plant and the college. The Pocatello leadership, however, was reluctant to make any guarantees about housing or expanding urban infrastructure for the rapid population growth sure to come. And, it was said, Pocatello parties tended to exclude women and were, as a result, “rather stiff” affairs.¹⁶

The AEC must have noticed a missing airport in Blackfoot, a too-small hospital under construction, and too few business services in the little town. Arco’s wholehearted commitment and desire, with its rational approach to sound planning,

could not overcome its small size, even with the state’s pledge to finance a small airport. From Pocatello, the AEC could not detect the commitments it would need.

The party plan worked, or at least it did not fail. On May 18, 1949, after circumspect deliberations, Johnston announced that the field office would locate in Idaho Falls, leasing office space at the Rogers Hotel downtown. A new road to the site would improve travel time, and construction workers could live conveniently at Arco and Blackfoot. Rail connections would be handled from Pocatello.¹⁷

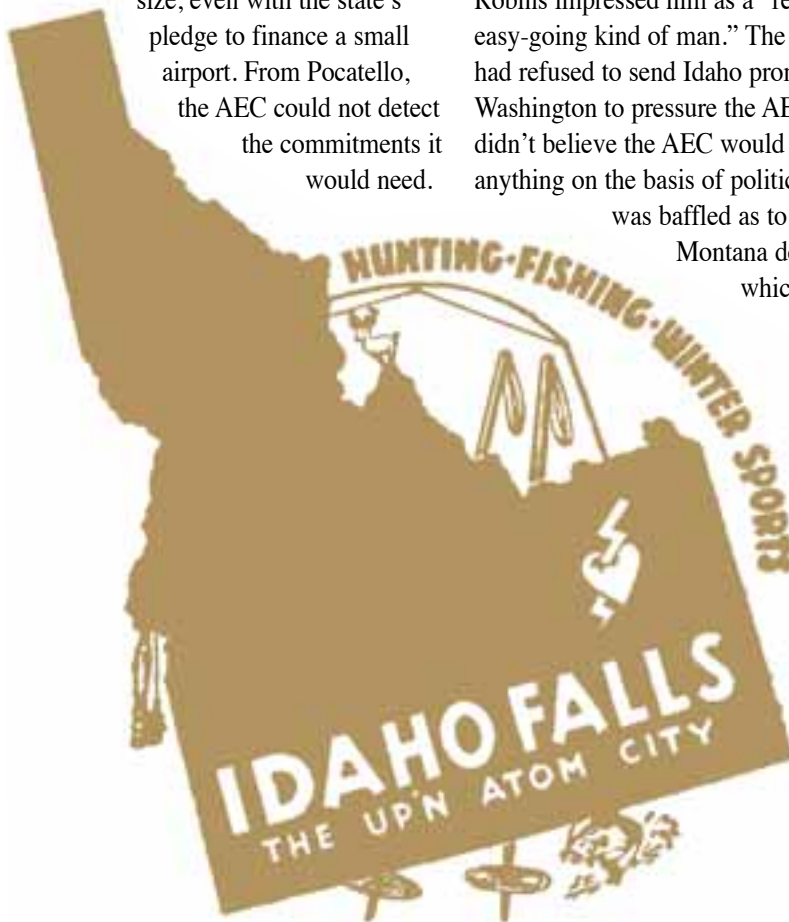
The craftsmanlike execution of a clever strategy in Idaho Falls contrasted sharply with the serene, perhaps passive, attitude at Idaho’s Statehouse. Chairman Lilienthal also had been one of Robins’ mid-April visitors. Writing of the encounter in his journal, Lilienthal said Robins impressed him as a “relaxed, easy-going kind of man.” The governor had refused to send Idaho promoters to Washington to pressure the AEC. He didn’t believe the AEC would decide anything on the basis of politics, and he

was baffled as to why the Montana delegation, which at that moment

was “trying to raise enough Ned” to get the testing site relocated to Ft. Peck, couldn’t see that. Montana’s governor had even telephoned Robins to ask him what Idaho’s angle had been. Then he refused to believe Robins’ denial that there had been any angle at all.¹⁸

With no evidence to the contrary, the AEC had every reason to believe that it could continue its tradition of independent operations in Idaho. No opposition appeared anywhere. The government’s habit of secrecy in atomic matters had originated during a patriotic war. With the growing threat of a communist enemy, secrecy would have to continue. Johnston told one of the Rotary clubs in August that employees “must at all times be checked and double-checked on our loyalty standing.” Citizens seemed content to accept details about the testing station whenever Johnston felt free to provide them.¹⁹

Scientists had produced the awesome bombs that ended the war, and they enjoyed an image as being far above the daily play of political persuasion—at least in southeast Idaho. Bill Johnston’s conduct did nothing to dispel that notion. People instinctively trusted him as soon as they met him. He didn’t fit the stereotype of an engineer with a single-faceted personality. He was stylish in dress—even the frames around his eyeglasses were *au courant*. He and his equally popular wife Helene enjoyed entertaining Idaho Falls associates and the many political and industrial visitors who came through the city. His friendly and candid



This logo appeared on the cover of the Idaho Falls Chamber of Commerce’s 1949 Annual Report.

manner, easy sense of humor, and the absence of anything officious about him all went a long way to creating a promising start for the AEC in Idaho Falls. He felt that IDO employees should become part of the fabric of town life, so he set that example and encouraged it in others.²⁰

Leaders in Idaho Falls, for their part, turned from parties to the sobering duties of development. The editor of the *Post-Register* wrote:

But once the flush of excitement has given way to sane analysis it becomes increasingly apparent that the first phase of the program was by all odds the easiest. Now that we have the headquarters of this mammoth project located here we are confronted with the greatest civic project that we have undertaken. To house all the people who are bound to come here to live, to see that our school facilities are quickly expanded, that water and sewer lines are extended into new areas, that sidewalks and roads are built... The city—and in fact, this entire area—is on the threshold of its greatest era of development.²¹

It was clear that Idaho Falls and the other nearby towns viewed the AEC as the region's next source of growth. In fact, Idaho Falls delivered on its promises, building 1,648 new houses between 1949 and 1951. With this beginning, town leaders hoped that the momentum would carry farther than previous booms that had gone bust, and they were eager to nurture this promising sprout in their midst. Besides, developing atomic power for peaceful uses was a worthy adventure for patriotic citizens.²²

Hiring On at the NRTS

In 1949 the Navy put its civilian employees on notice that the AEC was coming and that they would lose their ordnance jobs. One of them was Al Anselmo.

Around September 1949, the [Ordnance Plant] boss asked if I had a job yet. I said, "No." He had met a man named A.R. Tuttle, who worked with the AEC. "They are taking over the Site soon and they have problems because they will be shipping things into the Site right away. I volunteered you."

Tuttle rode with me a few times out to the Site. One time I asked him if he would need a traffic manager or warehouse manager. "I can't talk to you. You have to have Q clearance," he said, and he handed me some forms. By the time the job opened, the paperwork was done. I started on October 10, 1949.

At first we had no badges. Then they issued badges numbered 1 to 99 for the Idaho Falls employees. Numbers 100 and up were for the Site employees. Mine was 100.

After I was hired, I said to Tuttle, "I don't have a job title." He told me I had six jobs—property management, surplus, excessing, warehouse, traffic, and receiving. He said when I got too busy to do them all, I should let him know so we could hire people to do them, and to keep the one I wanted. So I kept traffic and receiving and assisted him in hiring the rest.

The first time I had to deal with a shipment of radioactive materials, I was scared—not of the stuff, but of violating the regulations unintentionally. Even then, there were lots of regulations. In those days, the AEC sent security escorts with the truckdrivers. We shipped stuff all over the United States—to Chicago, New York, Oak Ridge, Hanford.

As the years went on—especially during the ten years we shipped Three Mile Island debris to Idaho—I developed contacts in the governor's office of each state our shipments went through. I had good rapport with all of them. We trained the various state police departments in how to handle an accident if there were any.

Al Anselmo