

Miss Atom Bomb

Introduction

On December 18, 1950, President Harry S. Truman authorized the establishment of a continental testing site on a 680-square mile section of the Nellis Air Force Gunnery and Bombing Range. First known as the Nevada Proving Grounds, it officially became the Nevada Test Site in 1955, opening the door to an atomic age that not only affected national security, but national culture as well.

Testing Captures America's Attention

The Ranger test series, the first at the Nevada Test Site in early 1951, was followed by the Buster-Jangle series of shots later that year. As with the Ranger series, public interest increased each time the early morning sky was lit up by the detonations. The next test series, Tumbler-Snapper, was conducted in the spring of 1952. This time the entire nation witnessed an atomic blast from the comfort of their homes as the media provided live television coverage of the event.



Linda Lawson is crowned 'Mis-Cue' by military personnel participating in Operation Cue at the Nevada Test Site.

Source: Sands Collection, UNLV Library

As Americans witnessed the first televised atomic blast, atomic fever swept the country, reflected in a variety of curious cultural phenomena. Designers of everything from clocks to lamps to corporate logos soon adopted what came to be known as "Atomic Style" into their work. It was a form of design that commonly included rays and spheres simulating the path of electrons around the nucleus of an atom. The Franciscan China Company created the wildly popular Starburst dinnerware pattern. High schools across the country named their football teams the 'Atoms.' Movies such as "Godzilla," and popular music all reflected this atomic fever, but perhaps none were as curious as the creation of the atomic pin-up girl.

Miss Atomic Blast

Reflecting the culture of the day while combining two of Las Vegas' biggest attractions: showgirls and atom bombs, the first known photo of an atomic pin-up girl appeared on May 9, 1952, in the Dixon, Illinois *Evening Telegraph* and the Statesville, North Carolina *Daily Record*. Depicting Miss Atomic Blast, otherwise known as Las Vegas dancer Candyce King, the caption stated "radiating loveliness instead of deadly atomic particles, Candyce King, actress appearing at Last Frontier Hotel in Las Vegas, Nevada., dazzled U.S. Marines who participated in recent atomic maneuvers at Yucca Flats. They bestowed on her the title of 'Miss Atomic Blast' finding her as awe-inspiring in another way, as was the 'Big Bang.'"

Miss A-Bomb

During the Upshot-Knothole series of tests at the Nevada Test Site in the spring of 1953, the city of North Las Vegas held its annual beauty contest. Paula Harris was selected Miss North Las Vegas of 1953. In accordance with the title, Ms. Harris rode atop the North Las Vegas Chamber of Commerce float in parade with the theme of motion picture titles. The North Las Vegas Chamber of Commerce chose "The Atomic City," a popular spy movie set in and around Los Alamos, New Mexico. The sign on the side of the float proclaimed North Las Vegas as "new & modern as the A-Bomb" and Paula was nicknamed "Miss A-Bomb."



Mis-Cue

One test in the Operation Teapot series, in early 1955, was used evaluate the potential impact of a nuclear attack on civilian communities. This joint Atomic Energy Commission - Federal Civil Defense Administration program, known as Operation Cue, measured how well houses, household items, food, shelters, metal buildings, equipment, and mannequins wearing everyday clothing would survive at various distances from a nuclear blast.

After several delays due to high winds, personnel began calling the test "Operation Mis-Cue." During one such delay, Cue personnel descended on Las Vegas, where six U.S. Army personnel from Camp Desert Rock crowned Linda Lawson, a Copa Girl at the Sands Hotel, "Mis-Cue." On May 1, 1955, the Sands Hotel released a photo of Linda Lawson being crowned "to illustrate another mis-firing of the Operation Cue Bomb." Her crown was, of course, a mushroom cloud.

The detonation finally occurred on May 5, 1955.

The Last Miss Atomic Bomb

On May 24, 1957, the Las Vegas News Bureau released the last, and arguably, most famous "Miss Atomic Bomb" photo of all to coincide with Operation Plumbbob at the Nevada Test Site.

All Las Vegas Strip hotel showrooms had their own "lines" of showgirls, who performed in between the famous headliners. Donald English took the famous Miss Atomic Bomb photo of Copa showgirl Lee Merlin at the Sands Hotel. With a cotton mushroom cloud added to the front of her swim suit, the publicity photo of the last Miss Atomic Bomb has appeared and continues to appear in hundreds of publications worldwide.

The End of Atmospheric Testing

By the last atmospheric test series at the Nevada Test Site, nuclear testing was no longer the great tourist attraction that it once was. Testing had become routine and was soon to go completely underground. The general public had moved on to new and different interests such as the space race.



The most famous atomic pin-up girl: Lee Merlin was the last Miss Atomic Bomb.

Source: Las Vegas News Bureau

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