PRESERVING HANFORD'S HISTORY

By Michele S. Gerber

B Reactor, situated at the far northwest corner of the Hanford Nuclear Site in southeastern Washington, was the world's first full-scale nuclear reactor of any kind. When it began operation in September 1944 nothing remotely like it had existed in the world before. Amazingly, in view of the speed of its construction and lack of prototypes, it actually worked as designed, transforming tiny bits of its massive uranium fuel load into plutonium.

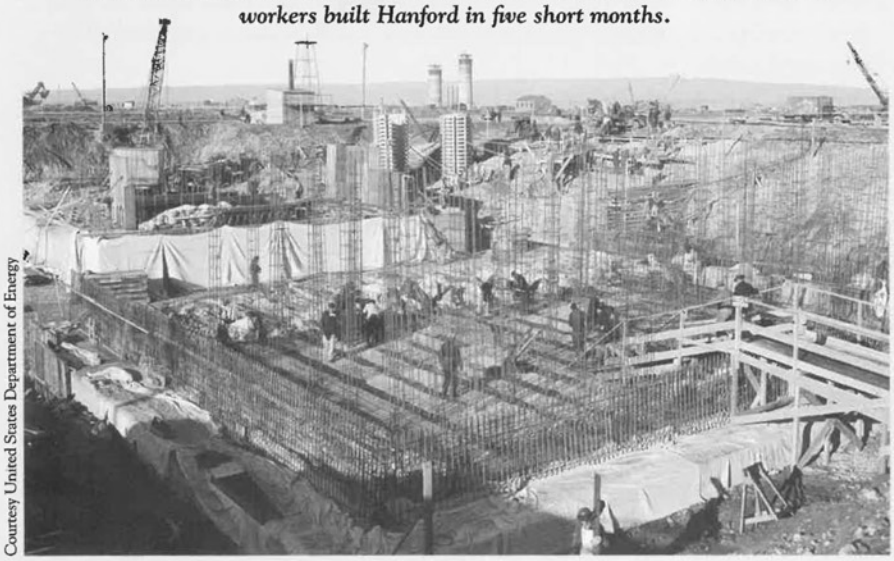
This opened wide the door to our human capacity to tinker with "things nuclear"—weapons with great power to destroy and deter, medicines, space exploration missions, and energy supplies. For good or ill—most likely both—B Reactor changed American and world history in fundamental and significant ways. It "super-sized" the United States to an international leader and transcendent power. It altered the global balance of power from the very moment its product—the Nagasaki weapon—ended World War II, and it will continue to do so far into the future.

Nuclear isotopes, whose practical production was demonstrated by B Reactor, fueled the "space race" with all of its spin-off technologies in satellites, cells, computers, and other inventions that now permeate our lives. Moreover, the huge government/industrial complex that was organized to build and operate B Reactor grew and spawned a life of its own, transforming industries, workplaces, and the very fabric of social life in America. Interesting, well-paying jobs at huge government facilities lured young families from hometowns, creating communities without grandparents, displacing and disorienting familiar patterns and expectations of life outside the workplace, and helping to change the very nature of society.

Anything *that* significant—anything that altered so many aspects of our lives—ought to be preserved, studied, and debated. We know from experience that if a building, battlefield, concentration camp, or ancient temple is wiped from the face of the earth, we will remember it less, talk and think about it less. Eventually, somewhere down the line of generations, it will be forgotten.

The preservation of B Reactor should not be done in the spirit of "triumphalist history" or be favored only by those who admire the machine and its groundbreaking technology. It should be desired just as much by those who think the reactor was/is an abomination that should never have been built. It should be desired by all Americans who want to know and want their descendants to know who we are as a people and a culture, as well as by those who believe it is good and necessary for present and future generations to look at the positive and negative aspects of B Reactor and ask, "Who built such a thing, and why?"

B Reactor excavation began in April 1944; by May, workers were laying graphite. The reactor went critical in September. Some 43,000 workers built Hanford in five short months.



Courtesy United States Department of Energy

Preservation Update

The Hanford Site in Benton County has been included in the "Manhattan Project National Historical Park Study Act" passed by Congress and signed by President Bush in October 2004. The act authorizes the National Park Service (NPS) to study historically significant sites at Hanford, the Los Alamos National Laboratory in New Mexico, and the Oak Ridge Reservation in Tennessee to determine their feasibility for preservation and interpretation as park service units. After the study, a distributed national historic site interpreting the Manhattan Project, with Hanford's B Reactor as the key component, may be possible. The NPS study is currently under way.

Construction and exhibit design for the Hanford Reach National Monument Heritage and Visitors Center is in progress in Richland. The 80,000-square-foot museum is to feature displays and programs about Hanford Site history and cleanup and the history of local towns, Native Americans, landforms, and geology. The center is expected to open in 2009.

For more information on Manhattan Project historic preservation in Washington, visit: www.b-reactor.org or www.atomicheritage.org.

Michele S. Gerber, a historian in Richland, has a long career in World War II and Cold War history. She is on the board of directors of the Hanford Reach National Monument Heritage and Visitors Center and author of On the Home Front: The Cold War Legacy of the Hanford Nuclear Site, *now in its third edition.*

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***COVER:** "Mountain Goat" (1973). During his career as a commercial artist, John Clymer drew 80 cover illustrations for the* Saturday Evening Post. *His transition from magazine illustrations to "easel painting" resulted in many wildlife canvases. Clymer's travels throughout the Pacific Northwest and Canada inspired mountain goat paintings, including this excellent canvas. See related story beginning on page 20. (Courtesy of the Clymer Museum of Art, Ellensburg, Washington, and David Clymer)*