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# Golden Anniversary: L.A.'s Nuclear Meltdown

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By Steven Mikulan, Wednesday, Jul. 15 2009 @ 6:31AM  
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This week marks the 50th anniversary of one of the Los Angeles area's most closely guarded secrets -- the partial meltdown of an experimental nuclear reactor operated by Atomics International Inc. near Chatsworth. For 20 years information of the event had been confined to a terse, euphemistically worded press release issued a month after the accident, as well as whispered conversations among nuclear energy officials and reports quietly buried in libraries affiliated with the Atomic Energy Commission.

Then, in 1979, Michael Rose, a UCLA film student in search of a subject for his Project One class, stumbled across information about the incident in an anti-nuke newsletter. He and a team of fellow students and researchers began digging in a part of the university's archives belonging to the AEC's "depository library" system and discovered a fantastic record of stupidity and secrecy that seemed to come from a pulp thriller. According to Rose's [reminiscence, which appears on the Huffington Post](#), the team discovered that "at approximately 6:30 PM on the night of July 13, 1959, engineers working at an experimental reactor in the Santa Susana hills confronted their worst nightmare: an out of control reactor."

Rose, quoting John Pace, an employee called in to clean up the damage at the Santa Susana Field Laboratory plant, notes that cleanup workers, ignorant of why they were being sent in to the damaged-reactor room, were given no protective clothing "and started

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to scrub the floor and walls. They soon found this approach was too expensive because 'the brooms, sponges and mops got contaminated quickly and had to be thrown away.' Their solution, 'we decided to use Kotex, sanitary napkins to scrub the floors and the walls,' which were disposable".

As the nuclear janitors scrubbed and wiped, Rose says, "the suits' bright idea was to start up the reactor again and then see what happened when they tried to shut it down. Pace said they did this repeatedly for about a month during which time more radiation was released, especially when one of the workers operating a small crane 'panicked, hit the wrong button and dropped' one of the highly contaminated control rods. This work also contaminated many of the records of the accident which had to be destroyed."

It was mostly by sheer luck that the accident, as bad as it was, did not evolve into a catastrophe for Los Angeles.

Rose's group also debunked post-war nuclear safety myths that had more in common with Soviet propaganda than with an open democracy -- chief among these fables being that no one had ever died at a nuclear facility.

"In fact," writes Rose, "during this time six deaths of nuclear workers (not the general public) were, 'attributable to nuclear causes.'"

**(For more history and information, see Michael Collins' 1998 L.A. Weekly cover story, "Rocketdyne's Red Glare.")**

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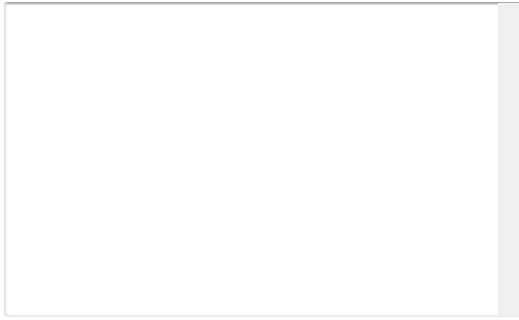
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