



BOB BRAWLEY, THE CITY HEAD

B Reactor

A NUCLEAR ICON

IF YOU'VE EVER DRIVEN State Route 24 from Othello to Yakima, you may have glanced across the Columbia as you neared the Verita Bridge and noticed the B Reactor. There it sits across the river, stark, intriguing, and mysterious against the shrub-steppe Hanford Reservation. But that's probably as close as you're going to get. Public access is limited, possible only through special arrangement with the Department of Energy.

Tim Cowan ('00 Architecture) wants to change that.

Cowan adopted the B Reactor as his architectural thesis project and has never let go of his idea. Now an architect with the Portland firm Yost Grube Hall, Cowan continues to promote his vision of building an Enrico Fermi Interpretive Center as a place for the public to learn of the role the B Reactor and Hanford Works played in winning World War II and in the nuclear buildup of the Cold War.

On a tour arranged by Cowan and others last summer, we were greeted by members of the B Reactor Museum Association, including Dee McCullough, the first B Reactor operator, who worked under Fermi's supervision. The building is carefully maintained, and inter-

pretive posters hang on the walls of the entry hallway.

The B Reactor is as haunted and fascinating a place as you'd ever want to visit. The first full-scale plutonium-production reactor, it was a major component of the Manhattan Project. It produced plutonium for the Trinity test in New Mexico and for Fat Boy, the bomb that was dropped on Nagasaki in 1945, which killed approximately 75,000 people and led to Japan's surrender.

Rather than turn the reactor building itself into a museum, as some propose, Cowan believes erecting a separate interpretive center and maintaining the reactor much as it was when its operators shut it down in 1968 would be the better option for "memorializing its meaning."

Built in only 13 months, the B Reactor was completed less than two years after President Franklin Roosevelt approved the Manhattan Project. Fermi managed the first sustained nuclear chain reaction at the University of Chicago in 1942, then supervised the design of the B Reactor. On February 3, 1945, B Reactor plutonium was delivered to Los Alamos, New Mexico. That plutonium produced

the world's first nuclear explosion in the Trinity Test at Alamogordo on July 16.

The B Reactor is an engineering marvel. According to the Department of Energy's history division, the reactor core itself is a 1,200-ton, 28- by 36-foot graphite cylinder, penetrated horizontally by 2,004 aluminum tubes. Two hundred tons of uranium slugs, the size of rolls of quarters, were inserted into the tubes. Cooling the reactor core required water pumped from the Columbia at the rate of 75,000 gallons per minute.

Whatever form the preservation of the B Reactor takes, the effort has moved forward with a bill authored by Sen. Maria Cantwell and Rep. Doc Hastings. The Manhattan Project National Historical Park Study Act was approved by both houses of Congress in September and directs the National Park Service to study the potential for developing the B Reactor and other Manhattan Project facilities as historical sites. ■

—Tim Steury

For more information:
www.b-reactor.org

The End of an Era

BBROKEN BONES, lacerations, and late-night illnesses were among the thousands of maladies that brought students through the doors of Pullman's community hospital during its 57 years on Washington State University's Pullman campus.

That era ended December 16, 2004, when Pullman's hospital moved its last patient from the brick building it shared with WSU's Student Health and Wellness Services and settled into a new site on Bishop Boulevard a half-mile away.

Since 1903, when a smallpox outbreak in Ferry Hall forced college officials to house patients in a gymnasium, people have turned to Washington State for medical help. That year, the need for beds prompted the college to open a two-story infirmary called Maple Cottage, which sat in the place now occupied by WSU's fire station.

But the small, seven-bed cottage couldn't accommodate the fast-growing student population for long.

In 1928, a new four-story brick building, the architectural match to Honors (White) Hall to the north, was built with donations and student money on its current site bordered by Washington and Nevada streets. It was named Finch Memorial Hospital, in honor of the project's greatest benefactor, the estate of John A. Finch of Spokane.

Dr. Betty Adams recalls the building from her time here in the late 1940s as a student and nurse's aide. She remembers seeing all things typical to a student health clinic: football injuries, stomach flu, car crash victims, and sometimes homesickness.

Seriously ill patients were sent off to the hospital 16 miles up the highway in Colfax. "In the middle of winter, that could be a chal-