In 1943, Robert Oppenheimer, the brilliant, charismatic head of the Manhattan Project, recruited scientists to live as virtual prisoners of the U.S. government on a barren mesa thirty-five miles outside Santa Fe, New Mexico. Los Alamos was a secret city, a primitive barbed-wire-enclosed encampment whose makeshift dormitories and labs housed scientists, their young families, and some of the most advanced scientific equipment in the world. Thousands of men, women and children spent the war years sequestered in this top-secret military facility. They lied to friends and family about where they were going and what they were doing, and then disappeared into the desert. The women came to Los Alamos over the Army's objections. But Oppenheimer insisted it would be the only way to recruit the world-class physicists he needed and keep them reasonably sane and content during the many months - even years - it would take to create this new weapon. Conant shows how the stringent security, lack of privacy, spartan living conditions and loneliness of their isolated mountain hideaway drove some residents to the brink of despair. Yet only a handful gave up and left. Oppenheimer was a leader who, for all his flaws, inspired great devotion, and the author tells the story of the patriotism, sacrifice and triumph of the bomb project through the eyes of a young Santa Fe widow who was one of his first and most loyal recruits.

Features:
* hardcover
* signed edition

My Personal Review:
109 East Palace presents a surprisingly engaging story about the members of the atomic bomb project in Los Alamos. The author, Jennet Conant, states early on that she is focusing on the human side of projects history: the technical aspects have been well covered elsewhere. The
brilliant and colorful denizens of Los Alamos threw wild parties, worked long hours, and chafed under mandates of government secrecy.

In the midst of World War II, an undertaking this monumental had to remain strictly secret. The community was built atop a small school in the middle of the desert. The only link to civilization was across a long, unreliable road and an inadequate bridge. Naturally, logistics were strained. An entire town was built from scratch, and it was in constant construction for years. Scientists, engineers, their families, and soldiers streamed into Los Alamos. They crammed into small apartments with thin walls, and all housing for miles around was filled. Electricity was usually unavailable, and cooking took hours using ancient stoves. Rules limited their ability to leave town or communicate with the outside world.

Although these conditions caused some conflict, the citizens responded amazingly well. The insular community became very intimate. They worked at an exhausting pace, anxious to develop the bomb that could end the war and save American lives, and then released their tension by engaging in wild parties. Entranced with their beautiful environment, they went on long hikes and skied in the winter. Los Alamos became a wonderful and sociable place to live.

Although Conant describes many people, she focuses mainly on Robert Oppenheimer and Dorothy McKibbin. Oppenheimer was the intensely charismatic director of Los Alamos. McKibbin held an office in Santa Fe and served as the link between the top-secret community and the outside world. She handled many administrative issues and addressed everyones complaints with superhuman patience. Oppenheimer and McKibbin contributed greatly to the Projects unity and success, and they rise up as heroes during the story.

The rest of the story provides great drama. After completing the bomb, the scientists reflect on the responsibility of creating a destructive weapon. Later, the weary Oppenheimer faces anti-communist wrath.

109 East Palace is definitely worth reading. It presents an inspiring tale of citizens coming together during great adversity and proving triumphant.

-Zach Zelmar

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