

History Comes Alive!

Tales From the City Archives

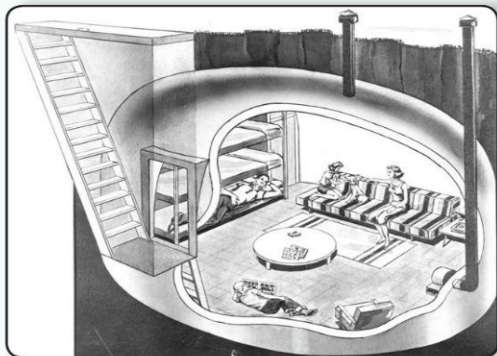


by Michael E. Holland
City Archivist



ON THE RADIO

Some *History Comes Alive!* columns can be heard on 89.3-KPCC's Off-Ramp, online at www.kpcc.org/offramp/



A model of an eight-by-twelve-foot fallout shelter from the Fox Hole Shelter Co. 1961.

Photos courtesy the City Archives and the Los Angeles Public Library Photo Collection

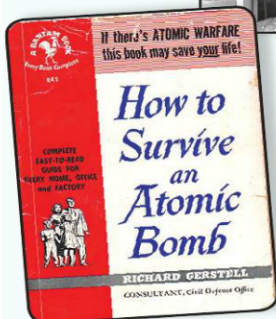
Los Angeles has been preparing for many worst-case scenarios for many decades – and why not? Our history of earthquakes, floods and fires have provided many “teachable moments” that have translated into stronger building codes, better fire suppression techniques and technologies that allow various agencies to communicate better in times of need. It’s not perfect yet, but we plan and prepare a lot for actual real-world events.

This month’s column looks at the ultimate unforeseen events that have kept most of the civilized world on edge for almost 70 years – the threat of nuclear attack. The Los Angeles City Archives houses some of the reports and supporting materials in the City’s Civil Defense efforts. These materials still carry an ominous warning along with a healthy dose of gallows humor.

Let’s look at Box B-2196. It’s important to distinguish the two forms of “Civil Defense” in our story. The first was the form of civil defense practiced during World War II. It was called the “L.A. City Defense Council.” Its job was to oversee local deployment of emergency medical personnel, police and fire brigades and other public services with trained civilians instead of professionals. Remember that many of the men employed as police and fire personnel had been drafted, so the slack had to be taken up by local citizens. The necessary expansion of the local factory sector brought women into jobs that had to be done if the war was going to be won. The City had to respond with support for



Mary Lou Miner poses on top of a concrete block bomb shelter at 10333 Santa Monica Blvd. 1951.



Cover for 1950 survival guide after a bomb attack.

women, especially those with young children. How to deal with childcare 1940s style? How about a local government/civilian service that provided childcare to LA’s “Rosie the Riveters” with the burdensome title “Child Care Coordinating Committee for Women in Industry.” A future column will highlight the collection of press releases stored in the archive.

But let’s fast forward to the response to the Soviet nuclear threat after 1947. The Civil Defense and Disaster Board and the Civil Defense and Disaster Corps were created nationally at the same time the City Council was enacting Ordinance 97,600 in January 1951. It defined a disaster as “an act of violence affecting the local, state or national welfare... floods, fires, earthquakes or other acts of God...” Most of these events happen from time to time in Southern California, so why was the need so critical at this time?

Because Southern California had become such a major producer of military technology, in addition to the importance of the seaports at San Pedro and Long Beach as well as the airports, that a possible enemy attack wasn’t unreasonable. Keep in mind that there was actual evidence of atomic warfare in the Japanese cities of Hiroshima and Nagasaki that gave validity to a possible nightmare scenario on a global scale. An entire industry based on worldwide devastation emerged and continues today with different threats. Some of the technologies originally employed in the name of civil defense have also found roles in today’s new emergency scenarios.

One example comes from the transcript for “Atomic Attack Survival,” a City Council committee hearing from August 1959. A Mr. J.H. Goodrich, representing Pacific Telephone and Telegraph, described an early version of what we would now call “reverse 911 calling,” whereby authorities could call a number of citizens simultaneously in an emergency. He said, “There are a number of units that can be rung at one time by just energizing the signal... but we would have to charge for that.” Left unanswered was the age-old question of who would pay for the service.

SURVIVING THE WORST

After 70 years, preparing for the worst can look both serious and less so.



The Rade family of Van Nuys spent four days in a simulated fallout shelter to demonstrate a concentrated food compound as part of a commercial demonstration of the food technology, 1962.



The I.J. Lenack family of Roseda stocks their backyard fallout shelter, which houses a TV, phone, canned goods, lanterns and furniture. 1962.

Meanwhile, throughout the 1950s, the strength of the radios in police and fire vehicles, utility trucks and even animal control cars increased, partly to be better prepared in times of need. The City Council approved and spent both local and federal civil defense resources to upgrade infrastructure everywhere. Soon, police and fire departments could keep in contact while inside tunnels and in remote locations due to better technology. Outdoor mounted sirens and other warning systems were part of the school experiences for children of a certain age, who may still remember the classroom drills that would have provided some protection in case of attack. Those drills, updated to reflect the current dangers in our society, are still practiced today.

I sensed a touch of dark humor just under the surface of our topic. Alongside the rational public safety discussions reside the assortment of materials on what a post-Bomb world might look like. The pamphlets and books may have tried to reduce the fear of atomic death by offering resilience as a mantra. But the end result can best be described as macabre humor.

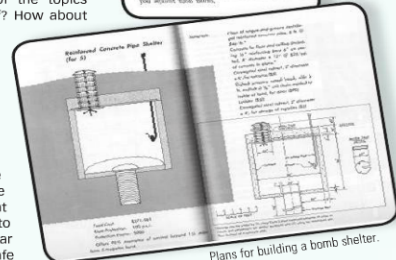
One such book on our collection is titled – I kid you not – *How to Survive an Atomic Bomb*, published in 1950. The paperback cover carried the warning, “If there’s atomic warfare, this book may save your life!” Looking past the bomb shelter layouts and what constituted fallout, what were some of the topics that we should be aware of? How about whether food containers would be safe to eat out of? Page 74 answers that question. “Atomic rays can pass through tin and glass very easily. This does not cause them to spoil and make them dangerous to eat. But don’t eat anything from a car or jar or package that was opened before the atomic bomb went off or that was broken open. Better to throw it away.” After a similar discussion on what was safe

water, the topic on page 76 shifts to the use of tobacco. “How about smoking? Is it all right to smoke?” Let’s not even get into the question contained on page 111 about rural living that went, “You said earlier that light-colored materials throw off the heat of the bomb-father better than dark-colored ones. Does this apply to animals, too?” You’ll have to come to the archive to get the answer to that one.

So far, we have avoided the real-life fate as depicted by a number of Hollywood disaster movies. Earthquakes, fires and floods have taught us a great deal about where we build things or if they should be built at all. We did – or perhaps we still do – have plans to deal with nuclear attack should it ever happen here. On the other hand, I know a guy who turned his bomb shelter into a wine cellar. I suppose there are more enjoyable ways to ride out the end of Los Angeles, but that one is good enough for me.



Sample from *How to Survive an Atomic Bomb*, 1950.



Plans for building a bomb shelter.