



August 2023

NM's Sci-Fi Tech

By Jay Nelson

Most residents of our fair city have probably never considered the possibility that they may be residing in the future capital of the Solar System. Yet a sprawling government complex next to the Sandias, complete with its own busy spaceport, soaring towers and seedy underworld, was once foreseen by a revered local science fiction writer.

As with visual artists, New Mexico has provided refuge to a surprising number of imaginative scribblers. The **Public Library** lists over **100** NM science fiction and fantasy writers, including George R.R. Martin, Fred Saberhagen and Roger Zelazny, our own **Daniel Abraham** (co-author of *The Expanse*) and too many other big names to list here.

A few sci-fi stories with the Duke City as the premier city of the planet were written back in the day by several authors but most especially by **Jack Williamson**, a homesteader who later taught at Eastern NM University, and a Grand Master of SF.

One such novel is his *The Legion of Space*, a space opera **begin** in 1934 but still **available**. It is about three space cadets blasting off to save a girl who knows the secret of a disintegration ray from the invasive tendrils of flying alien jellyfish.

Here's the hero's **first glimpse** of the capitol:

From the ports of the descending strato-flier, that afternoon, he first saw the Green Hall — seat of the Supreme Council of the united planets.

Like a great emerald, it shimmered darkly cool in a waste of sunbaked New Mexico mesa — a colossal marvel of green, translucent glass. Three thousand feet the square central tower leaped up, crowned with the landing-stage to which the strato-plane was dropping. The four great colonnaded wings spread over a full mile of luxuriantly verdant parkland — a solitary jewel in the desert, under the rugged, mile-high wall of the Sandias.

Well, OK, maybe *that* particular vision of Albuquerque's future need not be taken too seriously.

However, it did make *some* sense at the time. Before Florida stole the show, New Mexico was *the* place to test the newest rockets. Starting with Von Braun's captured V-2s, **White Sands Missile Range** remains a top-secret military facility to this day, with the same flight restrictions as Area 51.

White Sands, of course, was also where the atomic bomb was first exploded. Built up north in the secret labs of **Los Alamos**, the bomb's deadly core had been driven down through Albuquerque street traffic (!) to the **Trinity test** site. Supposedly, a few lab workers in the know secretly watched the unprecedented blast from atop Sandia Crest.

Yet nearby Roswell had already made tech history as the place where another Moon dreamer, **Robert Goddard**, sent his own rockets skywards.

After the war, the world's *only* air command equipped with atomic bombs was posted at the **Roswell airbase**, too. Powerful **radars** not only tracked launches but defended these vital national security sites. In the post-war Atomic Age, anyone on Earth – or in the sky – could easily see that New Mexico was where all these things came together.

It didn't take much to hope that the cutting edge research and technical development going on in the Land of Enchantment just might continue. And that Albuquerque, situated right in the middle of this activity, would profit immensely.

Ironically enough, it *almost* did. Who is to say it might not in the future? After all, what other states boast of a **licensed commercial spaceport**?

Dreamers in the desert

J. Robert Oppenheimer was most likely unaware of our state's history when he chose a boarding school in **Los Alamos** as the site of the hidden laboratory to build the bomb. It fit the requirements of being isolated inland, safely away from dangerous coasts, but with a major transcontinental railroad nearby for materials and people.

But the Land of Enchantment has always drawn dreamers with secrets. Long before the Spanish came, local natives built the massive mysterious monuments of **Chaco Canyon** carefully aligned to sun and moon. The Pueblo Indians still do not speak of what happened there.

The Conquistadors invaded in the late 1500s looking for the “**seven cities of Cibola**”, a legendary land of gold settled by seven bishops fleeing the Moorish invasions. But the only gold they found was yellow corn. Perhaps that and the many thriving adobe towns here were enough to inspire them to call the place “New” Mexico, just like the Vikings promoted a huge ice-bound island as “Greenland” to attract settlers. If so, it worked.

Many who came had a good reason to flee Spain, like herbal healers, Jews clinging to their faith, and even a few free-thinkers, for the **Spanish Inquisition** tracked them relentlessly. Eventually the settlers along with native Pueblos formed a rich cultural stew. The **Anglo** scientists who joked about how they were “Lost Almost, Near Mexico”, and whose only address was a PO box in Santa Fe, would add their own intellectual flavor to the mix.

From Roswell to Redmond

While science fiction writers of the Golden Age spun tales with lots of robots and giant computers, they completely missed the one invention that has shaped those machines more than anything else: the **integrated circuit** a/k/a the computer chip.

In those old stories, robots were just like people: singular individuals connected only by speech. Likewise, sci-fi computers could be gargantuan but ran everything directly. Chips changed all that.

These tiny bundles of switches led to both the **personal computer** and the **internet** as we know it today. Computers could now be small but powerful, and chips can be connected with other chips, thus multiplying their computing ability.

What sci-fi somehow overlooked was the power of the **network**. The interconnectivity of integrated circuits has allowed the building of world-spanning hierarchies that bind the whole planet together. So much so that the entire internet and all devices attached to it are one system.

Could writers have missed this because it might have come literally from **out of this world**?

One man well-placed to know said that the technology came from the legendary flying saucer crash near Roswell. The late **Philip J. Corso** ran the Foreign Technology desk at the Pentagon in the '50s. In his book, **The Day After Roswell**, he tells how he secretly doled out selected portions of Roswell debris to labs to be back-engineered.

These included fiber-optic cables and cookie-like disks that were **microprocessors**. Other wreckage also containing **transistors** – the fundamental basis of integrated circuits – had already been farmed out. Since transistors were officially invented at Bell Labs out of nowhere in December, 1947, just a few months after the Roswell Incident, there could be a real basis to these claims.

Roswell and other **alleged crash sites** are not our only link to UFOs. From **green fireballs** over Los Alamos and Sandia Labs and rumors of alien **underground bases** near Dulce, our great state attracts more weird **sightings** than most others.

Perhaps it is because the ancient past and the wonders of the future mingle here. New Mexico has several great national laboratories, including Los Alamos and **Sandia**, and is home to a huge **Intel chip-making plant**, yet it was from their fringes that our great chance came and went.

In 1975, two rocket hobbyists who had worked at the Air Force Weapons Lab here at Kirtland began selling DIY computer kits. Their **Altair 8800** computer featured rows of switches for input and a row of lights for output. My best friend Stan built one but I could not imagine any real use for it. Yet it was one of the very first PCs: **that box** is now in the **Computer History Museum** in Silicon Valley.

Somebody much smarter than I who truly appreciated the Altair was **Bill Gates**, who moved to Albuquerque to work on it. And so **Microsoft** was founded **here** in 1975. However, unable to secure funding from local banks, Gates returned to his hometown in Washington, and the rest is history.

That ain't all, folks

There will be other opportunities, no doubt, for this Land of Enchantment is uniquely diverse, and we are adaptable. Among us are forward-thinkers like Mark Costlow and Jamii Corley, to whom I am extremely grateful for letting me use this soapbox. I'm stepping back now to give our talented staff a chance to offer their solid advice and insights, but I may return with more weird tales someday.

Thanks, and keep watching the skies!

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