New York, December 1, 2016 – In post-WWII America, the nuclear bomb was a national obsession. But in one corner of Nevada, it was a cottage industry, a daily entertainment and cultural phenomenon like no other. A new Smithsonian Channel hour-long special, A-BOMBS OVER NEVADA, uses remarkable contemporary footage to capture the extraordinary period in the 1950s and 60s when hundreds of atomic bombs were dropped over the Nevada Test Site. The race to create bigger and better bombs led scientists to push the limits and turned a sleepy desert town into a theater of the absurd. A-BOMBS OVER NEVADA premieres Monday, December 5th at 9/8c on Smithsonian Channel.

On January 27, 1951, a B-50 Super Fortress flew through the pre-dawn darkness three-and-a-half miles above Nevada’s desolate Frenchman Flat. On board, precious cargo – a 1,000-pound atomic bomb named Able. At dawn, the crew released Able toward the desert floor below, officially beginning the age of nuclear war testing in the continental United States.

The dropping of the “Little Boy” and “Fat Man” atomic bombs over Hiroshima and Nagasaki at the end of World War Two had launched the Atomic Age of the 1950s and 60s. With the Cold War between the United States and Soviet Union
raging on, each superpower sought to perfect the science of the atomic bomb despite the grim promise of mutually assured destruction that came with it. The United States created the Nevada Test Site situated a mere 65 miles from Las Vegas – which at the time had only 50,000 residents. The desert oasis was utilized by scientists and military leaders looking for ways to build bigger and better nuclear weapons.

Between 1951 and 1992, the Nevada Test Site saw more than a thousand detonations, 100 of which were above ground. Amazingly it became a tourist site. People from all over the country traveled to Nevada to witness the horrifying but awe-inspiring devastation of an atomic bomb blast.

Bruce Church was a young boy growing up in rural Utah, near the Nevada border, who has vivid memories of the explosions. “My dad would drag me out of bed about 5 o’clock in the morning, and we would be working away and the whole western sky would be lit up like a huge light bulb went off,” he recalls. “And we’d go about our business milking the cows.”

In Las Vegas, hotel casinos hosted atomic parties on their rooftops, where guests would drink until dawn and finish their evening with a nuclear blast. It was like New Year’s Eve in Times Square, but with a much more explosive and threatening end to the evening. An “atomic pop culture” was born and, for a time, became as American as apple pie.

At the height of the nuclear craze, Vegas casinos were crowning Ms. Atomic Bomb and a local hairdresser offered a style in the shape of a mushroom cloud.

While scientists knew the bombs were releasing radiation, they assumed the fallout would not be dangerous enough to affect human health. Some experiments even sent troops into the blast zone. “Atomic veterans” ended up receiving $800 million in compensation from the government. By 1963, the risks from fallout were clear enough that President John F. Kennedy urged passage of the nuclear test ban treaty. The atomic party was over, but not before leaving an enduring stamp on American culture.

A-BOMBS OVER NEVADA is a production of 1895 Films for Smithsonian Channel. Tom Jennings is the producer for 1895 Films. David Royle and Charles Poe serve as executive producers for Smithsonian Channel.

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popular genres such as air and space, history, science, nature, and pop culture. Among the network’s offerings are series including Aerial America, Million Dollar American Princesses, The Weapon Hunter, Mighty Ships, Mighty Planes and Air Disasters, as well as critically-acclaimed specials that include Civil War 360, 9/11: The Heartland Tapes; MLK: The Assassination Tapes and The Day Kennedy Died. Smithsonian Networks also operates Smithsonian Earth™, through SN Digital LLC., a new subscription video streaming service delivering spectacular original nature and wildlife content. To learn more, go to www.smithsonianchannel.com, or connect with us on Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram.

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CONTACTS:

Joanna Brahim  
212-708-8014  
Joanna.brahim@smithsonianchannel.com

Josh Gross  
212-708-1578  
Josh.gross@smithsonianchannel.com