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## Review of *Making a Real Killing: Rocky Flats and the Nuclear West* By Len Ackland

Michael A. Amundson

Northern Arizona University, Michael.Amundson@nau.edu

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*Making a Real Killing: Rocky Flats and the Nuclear West.* By Len Ackland. Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1999. Illustrations, epilogue, notes, index. xi + 308 pp. \$34.95.

Between 1951 and 1989, the Rocky Flats nuclear weapons plant northwest of Denver processed more than a hundred and fifty tons of plutonium while manufacturing more than 70,000 nuclear bombs as part of America's Cold War nuclear deterrence policy. In the name of national security, the bomb factory also provided good blue-collar jobs to more than 23,000 people during its operation and contributed millions of dollars to the Colorado economy. But at what cost? As author Len Ackland clearly suggests, Rocky Flats also created extremely unsafe working conditions

for many of its employees and caused billion dollar damage to the environment. Further, the mismanagement of the plant by both the government and its contractors not only endangered the citizens of nearby Denver during several potentially catastrophic accidents but undermined the very democracy that the plant's operation was supposed to be protecting.

*Making a Killing* begins with a brief history of the area from its homestead days to the creation of the factory in 1951. It explains the Cold War context that created the need for the plutonium processing plant and shows how Colorado's leaders worked to get the plant sited there. The book then details the plant's day-to-day operation, its safety problems, labor force, and waste products. The study's watershed is clearly the Mother's Day fire of 1969, a narrowly-averted potentially Chernobyl-level disaster. Afterward, increasing environmental monitoring combined with the growing anti-nuclear movement to change the public image of Rocky Flats from a top-secret representation of national security to a symbol of corruption, war, and environmental devastation. This transformation climaxed with the unprecedented 1989 raid by members of the Federal Bureau of Investigation and the Environmental Protection Agency searching for Department of Energy documents showing wrongdoing. The effects of this inter-government raid converged with the simultaneous end of the Cold War to close Rocky Flats and begin a billion dollar clean-up.

*Making a Killing* is a model for making sense of the Cold War Atomic West. It combines personal stories, excellent Cold War historical context, simplified technical explanations of complicated nuclear science, labor history, and corporate history into a compelling narrative. For Great Plains readers, seemingly removed from the Nuclear West except for the Pantex plant near Amarillo, Texas, this book should raise questions about how the nearby nuclear missile ranges, nuclear power plants, or possible radioactive waste dumps are being managed. Thus, *Making a Killing* should find

its place not only alongside other recent atomic histories, but also next to the best books on understanding the American West of the last half-century.

MICHAEL A. AMUNDSON  
Department of History  
Northern Arizona University