

INTRODUCTION

This new edition of an old story of man's first self-sustaining nuclear chain reaction is itself a document of historical interest and significance.

Because of the extraordinary secrecy that surrounded the Manhattan Engineer District, America's \$2 billion project to harness atomic energy, the postwar public was largely ignorant of its history.

The original essay on "The First Pile" was written in the fall of 1946 because nowhere in the extensive records of the Manhattan Project was there a narrative history of the first self-sustaining nuclear chain reaction. Prepared for a press release by the Manhattan Engineer District, the report included background material which was part of the final report on a significant experiment.

The original authors of "The First Pile" were Corbin Allardice and Edward R. Trapnell, two public information officers for the Atomic Energy Commission, the agency that succeeded the Manhattan Project on January 1, 1947. Allardice later served in various public information posts for the Atomic Energy Commission and Trapnell became Special Assistant to the AEC General Manager with responsibilities for congressional relations.

Trapnell and Allardice felt that the story of the experiment which was successfully completed on December 2, 1942, was of such significance that it should be written down while still relatively fresh in the minds of those who took part. Their essay is based on postwar interviews with more than a dozen of the 43 scientists present at the Stagg Field on December 2nd. Another valuable source was the tape on which was traced the neutron intensity within the first pile.

In addition, *The First Reactor* contains the firsthand reminiscences of Enrico Fermi, the Nobel prize-winning project director, and his wife, Laura. Written in the 1950's, they provide valuable insights into the human and technical challenges of a secret enterprise conducted by American and European refugee scientists.
