



Chuck Hansen, 55; Unearthed Files on Nuclear Weapons in U.S.

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TIMES STAFF WRITER

Evidence of Chuck Hansen's obsession with once-secret nuclear weapons documents fills 10 file cabinets in the garage of his suburban tract house in Sunnyvale, Calif. More can be found crammed into a floor-to-ceiling bookcase in his cluttered home office, with still more forming piles on the floor.

"He sort of ran out of patience with filing toward the end," said Eleanor Hansen, his wife of 25 years.

Hansen died of brain cancer March 26 in the hospice unit of a Palo Alto hospital at the age of 55. But long before that, he had assembled what is believed to be the nation's largest private collection of declassified nuclear weapons documents.

Using the Freedom of Information Act, the former computer programmer spent three decades requesting copies of the declassified documents from the military, nuclear weapons labs and other government agencies.

But Hansen didn't just collect the 10,000 to 5

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of obscure reports and memos, piecing together a technical history of the production, design and testing of the weapons in America's nuclear arsenal.

His 1988 book, "U.S. Nuclear Weapons: The Secret History," exposed a wealth of declassified information about America's atomic past.

The first decades of nuclear testing, for example, were not as successful as officials publicly proclaimed. Instead, Hansen's research revealed, they were filled with bombs that failed to explode or blasts that were smaller than anticipated.

And in the 1950s, a time when the federal Atomic Energy Commission, predecessor to today's Nuclear Regulatory Commission, was claiming success in making "clean" weapons -- largely free of radioactive fallout -- Hansen's digging showed that, in fact, no significant progress was made.

"The foreign policy of this country since the end of World War II has been predicated on the big nuclear stick," Hansen told the New York Times in 1989. "It's about time to understand what it all meant."

Hansen first came to public attention in 1979, when he supported the efforts of the Progressive, a leftist magazine, to publish an article on the secrets of the hydrogen bomb.

By 1996, Hansen's continued research grew so large -- 2,600 pages and 345 photographs -- that he had to publish it on a CD-ROM, which he titled "The Swords of Armageddon."

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Hansen's research for his 1991 nuclear thriller "The Sum of All Fears."

Historian Priscilla McMillan, who is writing a book about hydrogen bomb development during the first decade of the Cold War, said last week that she also was a beneficiary of his research.

"Until Chuck came along, very little was in the public domain about the technology of that weapon and how it was developed," she said.

And Richard Rhodes, who won a Pulitzer Prize for his 1987 book "The Making of the Atomic Bomb," used Hansen as a consultant on his 1995 book "Dark Sun: The Making of the Hydrogen Bomb."

Rhodes called Hansen's published research "probably the best technical history of U.S. nuclear weapons development and testing outside the world of official government secrecy."

History, Rhodes said, is written from documents.

"In the case of the history of the development of nuclear weapons, most of those documents from those times have been secret, classified," he said. "But bits and pieces have slowly become available across the decades.

"Chuck Hansen's great gift was to track down -- really relentlessly -- every scrap of information about nuclear weapons development and to pull all these pieces together and figure out the sense that they made, and then very generously to make that information available

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out were the same, and often they weren't.

"So by this almost microscopic process he could legally and appropriately find more information than any one document by itself could supply."

Rhodes made frequent visits to Hansen's document-filled home.

"You could barely thread your way around the house, there was so much material there," he said. "This put him in a somewhat adversarial relationship with the federal government, needless to say."

He said the FBI visited Hansen's premises more than once.

"They couldn't believe anybody legally did what he did," Rhodes said. "But he only found what was legally declassified," and he wasn't giving away nuclear secrets.

"Those, after all, were still protected," Rhodes said. "He was trying to understand what this was all about. His was a gadfly role and a very important role in that regard."

A child of the atomic age, Hansen was born in Salina, Kan., on May 13, 1947.

"My father was aboard a troop ship headed for the invasion of Japan when the first bomb was dropped on Hiroshima," he told the Los Angeles Times in 1979. "Had it not been for the atomic bomb, Dad would probably have died on the beach, and I would never have been an

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His interest in digging into America's atomic age past had been sparked in high school.

"I wanted to know more about the kind of people who would tinker with the primal forces of the universe," he told the New York Times in 1989.

He studied mechanical engineering at the University of Washington in Seattle but dropped out in 1967 after two years to become a computer programmer at the Boeing Co.

Hansen later worked as a computer programmer for various companies, including Ford Aerospace. All of his nuclear research was done in his spare time until 1995, when he turned to it full time.

Even then, he never really made money from it. Any income "basically covered the costs" of paying for copies of the documents, said his wife, a tax accountant.

Historian McMillan described Hansen as "a driven man," but one of few words.

"He was not a guy with any small talk at all," she said. "He barely would know to say hello to you; he'd start right in telling you whatever you needed to know. But he was absolutely generous with everybody in giving them his stuff and hoping they'd do a good job with it."

Eleanor Hansen said she didn't share her husband's obsession with nuclear weapons, but she understood it.

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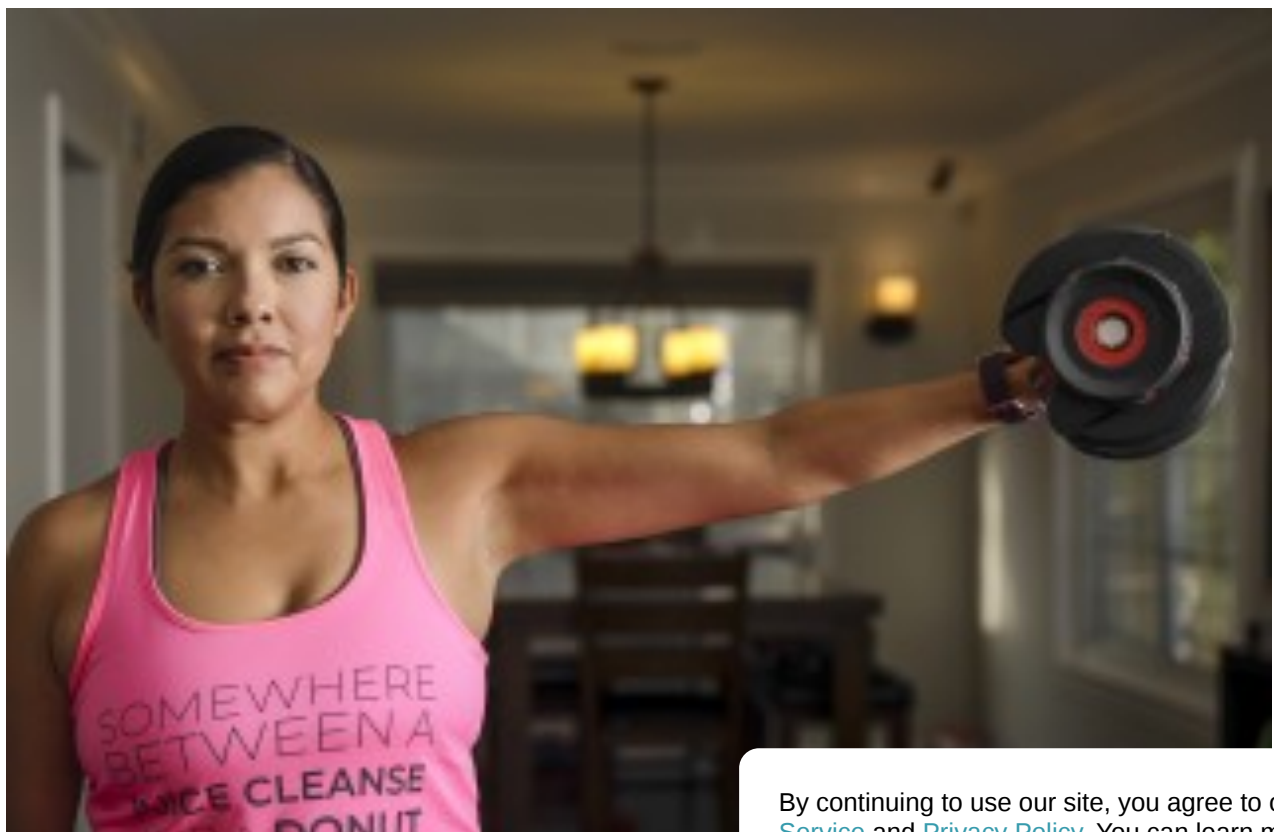
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Her husband's files, she said, will be sent to the National Security Archive at George Washington University in Washington, D.C., which requested them.

In addition to his wife, Hansen is survived by two sisters, Karen Hansen of Lakeland, Fla., and Laura Hansen of Winter Haven, Fla.

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
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