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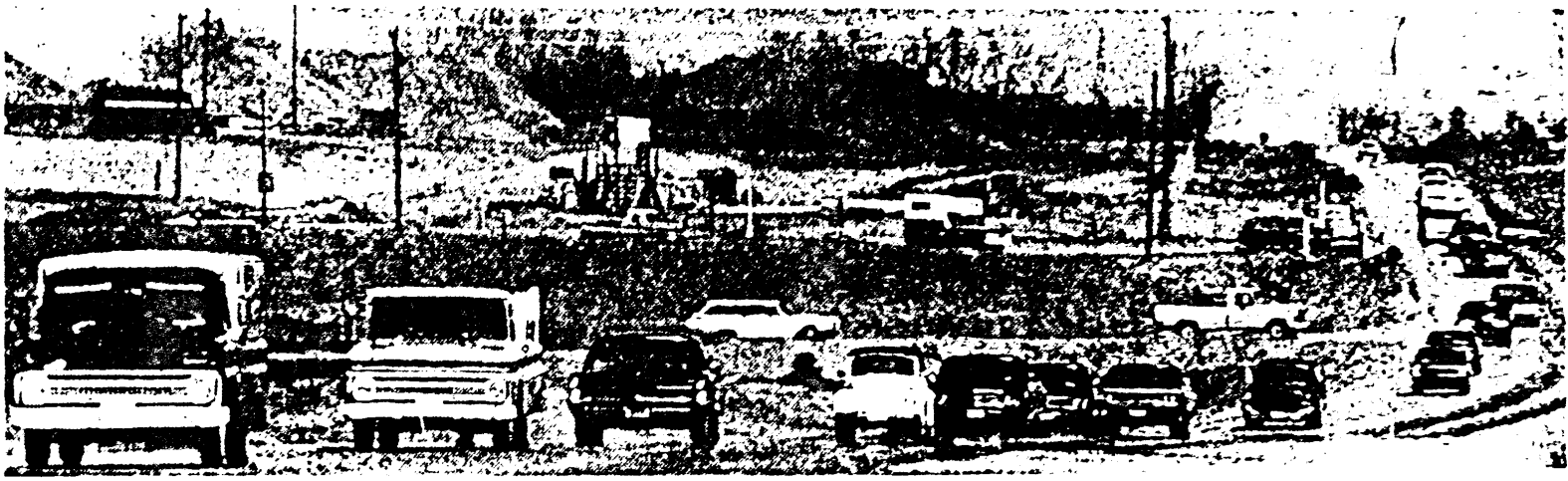

Day-shift construction workers left the missile-base site at Nekoma, N.D., at their 4:30 p.m. quitting time.

Missiles alter N.D. living

By David Kuhn
Staff Writer

Langdon, N.D.
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Across the world, in Vienna, Soviet and American diplomats are into their second year of strategic arms limitation talks. Despite President Nixon's hopeful statement Thursday indicating that those SALT negotiations have made some progress, they have yet to produce any limitations.

So, while the talks go on, the arms race also goes on here in the flat, windswept wheat-and-barley country of North Dakota, up against the Canadian border.

In quiet, sparsely populated Cavalier, Pembina, Ramsey and Walsh Counties the traditional springtime activity has been in the fields. Farmers enclose themselves in the cabs of the huge, expensive red, green and yellow tractors that pull the disc and harrow tandems across hundreds of acres of black soil, newly thawed and dried out from the long winter.

The tractors are in the fields again this spring, but they are no longer the major attraction and these counties are no longer so quiet or so sparsely populated.

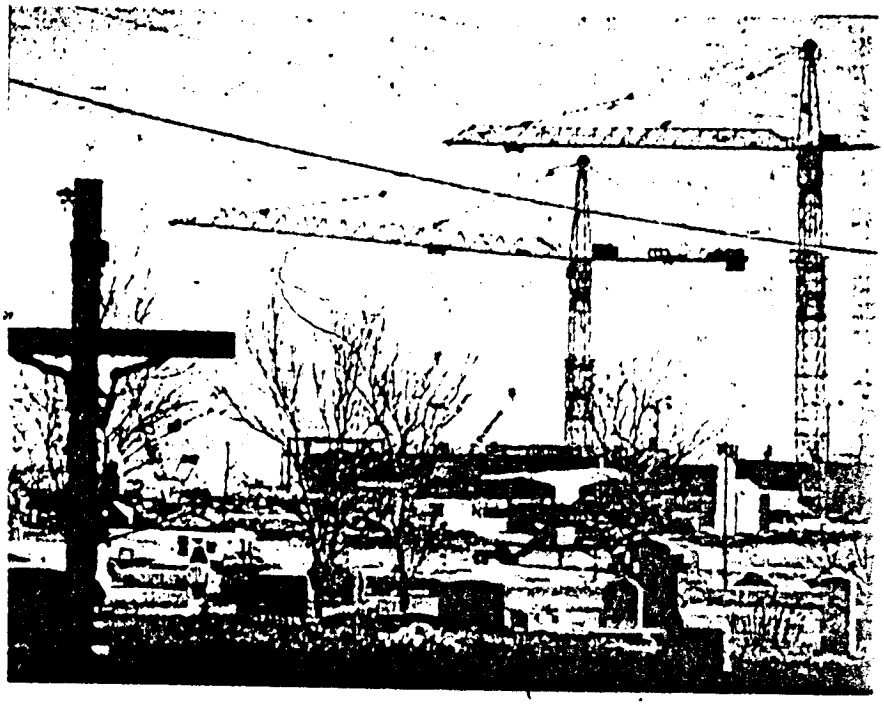
The antiballistic missile (ABM) system, a technological product of the cold war and a narrow vote in the Senate, is being built nearby. In its second and largest construction season it has brought in thousands of new people, millions of new dollars and dozens of new problems.

The ABM is here because several hundred Minuteman intercontinental ballistic missiles were already here, scattered throughout northern North Dakota in tubes under the ground in little, fenced plots.

The ABM system—large, complex radar installations, missile controls and living quarters, all "hardened" against nuclear attack—is supposed to protect the Minuteman missiles, or at least a portion of them, by detecting incoming enemy missiles and destroying them before they can destroy the Minutemen.

When construction is completed, 30 long-range Spartan missiles and 80 shorter-range Sprint missiles will rest in tubes at five sites—at least that is how many the engineering drawings show.

According to the official Army description, each Spartan will carry a nuclear warhead "in the megaton range" and each Sprint will have a nuclear warhead "in the kiloton range."



The missile-site radar complex under construction north of Nekoma is across the highway from a cemetery.

Add to all those megatons and kilotons the warheads of the Minutemen, some of which are now capable of carrying three each, and the nuclear-bomb-carrying B-52s at Air Force bases at Minot and Grand Forks, and it is no wonder that a popular joke here goes something like this:

"If North Dakota seceded from the union, it would be the world's third largest nuclear power."

But most people in this region apparently aren't worried about all those nuclear-nosed neighbors. "I just figure it's there and we can't do much about it," said Mrs. Alerd Slaybaugh, who will have 46 ABMs about a mile across a field from her home near Nekoma.

Over and over, businessmen, farmers and housewives displayed a similar lack of concern. They said they never give it a second thought; or, they couldn't stop it anyway; or, if the Minutemen make them a target already, the ABMs might as well be here too.

They are worried, however, about overcrowded schools, overcrowded streets and overcrowded housing — all caused by the ABM.

As of a week ago, the construction work force was about 2,500 and "growing almost daily," according to an Army spokesman. Employment is expected to peak at between 3,000 and 3,500 in July.

Some of the workers — engineers, draftsmen, accountants, superintendents, carpenters, electricians, ironworkers and laborers—have brought their families, but no one knows for sure how many dependents are here.

The influx has hit hardest in Langdon. In pre-ABM days the population was about 2,100. Now, Mayor Harold Blanchard estimates, it is 3,500 to 4,000.
The city has had to expand its sewer and water works and add six new employes, two of them patrolmen, although Blanchard said there have been no serious law-enforcement problems.

Missiles

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There will be some new tax revenues coming in, but the city is still operating on its previous tax base. "It's really hard to know where we stand," said the mayor, a chiropractor. So far there's been money each month to pay the bills."

The impact on the Langdon school system is more easily measured. Out of an enrollment of nearly 1,400 students, more than 300 are from families that moved here because of the ABM.

Their presence, combined with the closing of a parochial school a couple of years ago and repeated rejections of a mill levy increase by voters, has forced major cuts in the school program.

Art, home economics, vocational agriculture, golf, girls track, and all sports below the 10th grade will be eliminated next fall, according to Superintendent James Wiese. More reductions are possible. Students also will have to buy their books instead of renting them for a small fee.

On the other hand, there is a lot of new money around. A "community impact report" issued by the Army a year ago estimated the primary employment payroll from the ABM at $44 million for 1971 alone, and said ABM-induced secondary employment should add another $18 million to the area.

Some of that payroll ends up out of the area — sent home to families in other states by construction workers, spent during weekends in Winnipeg, Fargo, or Grand Forks, or taken back to home towns 50 to 100 miles away in North Dakota and northwestern Minnesota where some of the workers return each night.

Nevertheless, many merchants report that business has increased noticeably.

Nestor Metzger, who has an appliance store in Langdon, said "business is booming." Now he orders two or three dozen small TV sets at a time from his supplier, instead of just two or three.

More strangers are bringing their heads into Erv Hellum's barber shop, the one where the floor slopes gently from the door to the single barber chair, and Hellum said he'd hire another barber, if he could find one.

At the 42-room Nodak Hotel in Langdon, an aged, dirty-gray, three-story structure, owner Vic Kertz said occupancy is now close to 100 percent, up from 50 or 60 percent a few years ago.

Undoubtedly, housing is the biggest problem for newly arrived workers and their families.

Single men rent rooms or basements in town or on farms. Vacant farmhouses are in demand. Mobile homes are here by the hundreds, perched in twos or threes on farm lots and spaced uniformly in new subdivisions in Langdon.

Indeed, the housing market presents plenty of evidence that those basic principles of economics, the demand-supply curve and the profit motive, are still operating.

At Edmore, a town of some 300 persons 14 miles from the construction headquarters and site at Nekoma, houses which used to rent for $50 to $75 a month are now going for $150 or $200, said the Rev. Harold Hofstad, pastor of Concordia Lutheran Church.

The housing situation is "downright nasty," said Mr. Hofstad. "I think it's exploitation. Greed is as catching as chicken pox."

At Cavalier, about 12 miles east of the second major construction site, Mayor Robert Olson pointed out a small, frame building, perhaps 10 feet by 30 feet, which he said was being converted into three sleeping rooms and a bath.

Formerly an insurance office renting for $40 a month, the sleeping rooms will rent for $80 a month each, Olson said.

Although housing is in short supply, establishments dispensing food and liquid refreshments are not. In the best traditions of American enterprise, a few men have sensed the right moment and seized the opportunity.

There is, for example, Granny's Goodies, a jerry-built establishment in Nekoma (pop. 100), just a mile down a gravel road from the construction site and offices.

Granny's is the creation of several Rapid City, S.D., partners who came north to contract for janitorial and chemical toilet services at the construction complex and found they needed both a place to live and a place to eat.

Consisting of a roofed and floored area between two 12-by-60-foot mobile homes, it abuts an old service garage which has been transformed by the magic of carpeting and imitation-wood paneling into Granny's Bar, a busy watering hole right after 4:30 p.m.

In a model of efficiency, cafe patrons occupy the space between the mobile homes, while Granny's owners occupy the mobile homes.

At the other major construction site, the Perimeter Acquisition Radar complex east of Langdon, the "Par Bar" is only a few beer-can throws away from the gate.

Business has been jumping since the Par opened last June, according to Harry Lesher, one of three area farmers who own it.

There are 10 full-time employes and a cafe open 24 hours to accommodate workers on three shifts. Lesher and his partners are now building an addition— a drive-up window to ease the 4:30 crush at the beer cooler and space to bring in bands and go-go girls.

Lesher estimated the partnership has at least $35,000 invested in the Par. "Everybody thinks we're nuts, which I think maybe we are," he mused. "We really don't know how we're doin' yet, whether we made the money or not, but the way farming's goin' now it's better than that."

The people who have come here to build the ABM are a varied group. There are engineers, accountants, supervisors and superintendents employed by the Army Corps of Engineers and the construction companies headed by the Morrison-Knudsen Co. of Boise, Idaho. In many cases, their employers helped them get housing and their families are with them.

But most of the new workers here are tradesmen who have had to scratch a little on their own, men like Arnold Briggs, James Jones, Larry Eggleston and Phil Mills.

Briggs, 29, seated in the barber chair one recent morning while Hellum trimmed his brown flat-top, explained that he'd worked here last summer, was laid off over the winter, and went back to work in April.

Working six days a week as a welder on the swing shift, 4:30 p.m. to 12:30 a.m., he "took home $297" the week before, counting overtime minus deductions.

Six days a week he sleeps in the basement of a house in Landgon — "damn cheap, $8 a week. I was staying down around Nekoma and paying $20 a week." After work Saturday night he drives home to see his wife and two sons in Garrison, N.D., arriving about 4:30 a.m. and leaving again about 11 a.m. Monday.

Jones, his tall, slim wife, Lucille, and their blonde 5-year-old daughter, Pamela, own a mobile home in Arkadelphia, Ark. But they rent a furnished one here for $150 a month because it would cost $1,000 to move theirs to North Dakota.

Jones, a friendly, outgoing man of 45, started heavy construction work in 1963 in his home town of Jasper, Texas. Since then he has worked in Arkansas and Louisiana, sometimes as a carpenter, sometimes as a foreman.

"I'll be foreman on one job and work my tools on the next, just depends on what they've got for me," he said as he sipped coffee on the brown couch in his home.

Here, he is a foreman of a 15-man crew building forms for concrete and he draws $6.10 an hour "for pushin," as he calls it, on the swing shift.

A month ago Eggleston was an ironworker in Dayton, Ohio. Work was spotty so he and two buddies decide to head for North Dakota. "We decided at 9 o'clock one morning and took off at midnight," he recalled.

They have been staying in a $45-a-week room at the Nodak Hotel, but on a recent Monday night Eggleston drove 25 miles west to Clyde, N.D., and bought a vacant farmhouse for $200 in back taxes.

Now, he said, he plans to move his wife and child to North Dakota. "I'd be crazy not to, there's a lot of money to be made here. I'm gonna stay. There's no air pollution, no people pollution, no niggers."

Mills started work 10 days ago, also as an ironworker. Just three weeks ago he was driving an oil truck in Indianapolis, Ind., for $250 a week. Why did he quit to come to North Dakota? "Five hundred dollars a week, that's why."

He isn't sure that his schoolteacher wife and 2-year-old daughter would want to move to North Dakota and he plans to stay only through the fall, when layoffs will come.

"But it would be a better environment to raise my daughter," he said emphatically. "The air is so clean up here, I woke up at 5 this morning and felt great... And they're trusting people up here, not like they are in a big city."

As new people continue to pour in, anxiety over the impact of their presence is spreading to Walhalla and Cavalier, towns to the north and east which haven't had Langdon's problems, at least up to now.

At present Walhalla's estimated ABM population is only a couple of hundred over its previous total of around 1,450, according to Mayor Leon Dubourt. Cavalier, starting from the same size, has about 400 more, Mayor Olson said.

However, Western Electric Co., a major ABM contractor, plans to establish a 275-unit mobile-home court in the area. The effect of that on schools and city services worries officials of both towns.

For the communities most affected by the ABM boom there is some hope of federal funds. A special ap-

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MISSILES: Impact on region to be permanent

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propriation of $14 million has been authorized to aid impacted areas of North Dakota and Montana, where another ABM installation is under way, but little of it has been doled out as yet.

North Dakota communities alone have applied for more than $19 million of the special aid. That figure, however, is somewhat misleading. It includes a $7 million request for road funds from the State Highway Department, plus some other applications judged by state planning officials to be unrelated to the ABM impact.

For example, the Hamilton Civic Club asked for $2,000 "to install indoor toilets in the cafe owned and operated by the club for the city." And the Walhalla Park District sought, among other things, $55,000 to develop a ski facility.

Those requests went to the bottom of the list. But projects totaling $3.2 million—for streets, water and sewer improvements, upgrading of law enforcement, schools and hospitals—were listed as urgent. Projects totaling $5.5 million were given second priority.

Even after Morrison-Knudsen finishes its $138-million contract in 1973, there will be radar and computer installations to be completed before the system goes into operation sometime in 1974. And after that some 2,200 military and civilian personnel and their families will be required to operate the system.

Nevertheless, there are lingering doubts about the ABM's permanency—and the permanency of its economic stimulus — among farmers and townspeople. Said Don Gaetz, the 23-year-old editor of the weekly Cavalier County Republican:

"There's constant suspicion that this project is all for naught, that it won't work or that it will be traded away in Vienna."

Even if that happens, there may still be something salvageable from the ABM.

Edsel Boe, the Cavalier County agent who is serving as community liaison person for the Army, has had some calculations made on the mammoth underground MSR radar and control facility.

He figures it would hold about 2½ million bushels of durum wheat.