

The quiet on the street

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LANGDON, N.D. — The ghost of Christmases past hovers over the downtown streets of this Cavalier County community in northeastern North Dakota.

The holiday selling season is peaking, which should ignite the steady clatter of cash registers and smiles on the faces of Langdon businessmen. But there's something missing.

What's missing is the steady influx of money from the Stanley R. Mickelson Safeguard anti-ballistic missile (ABM) defense system site. ABM, which spelled an economic boom for area communities in the early 1970s, is now a ghost.

Located 11 miles south of here at Nekoma, N.D., the ABM site was deactivated Feb. 10. Although materiel and equipment are still being removed, the site was effectively terminated Oct. 1. ABM is gone.

With it went hundreds of persons who had moved into the area in the early 1970s to work in ABM-related activities, including military, civilian and contractor. ABM's departure also eliminated on-site jobs for hundreds of local persons who remain here.

According to most estimates, the ABM site annually generated about \$35 million in site goods, services and salaries. A significant portion of that wound up in retail tills in area communities, particularly Langdon. With the monetary spigot turned off, communities are wondering how to cope with the loss of millions of dollars in revenue.

For the residents of Langdon, the loss of ABM is visible every time they drive downtown. When ABM was around, parking places were scarce. But in the last month, one Langdon merchant revealed, "it seems like you can get a place to park downtown anytime you want."

"Things can get pretty quiet on Main Street now," another Langdon official said. "Things used to just hum down there. Those federal people were big spenders."

Retailers began feeling the pinch of an ABM-less economy late this fall, when sales began slacking off a bit. Now, the Christmas rush is on and business seems fairly good, but not as good as it was when ABM was alive. Early Christmas sales are down anywhere from 10 to 40 per cent.

For a while, the loss of ABM was buffered by the presence of another military-related operation. While ABM-related personnel were gradually being phased out after Feb. 10, nearly 1,000 Boeing Co. employees, updating the minuteman missile system in northeastern North Dakota, helped bolster area economy. However, Boeing finished its task and pulled out in early October, at the same time ABM was effectively terminated.

But ABM is not the only culprit in the economic dip at Langdon and other nearby towns.

Compounding the problem is the falling price of grain.

Langdon has always been an agricultural community. Even at the peak of ABM, the prime factor in Langdon's economy was agriculture. When farm prices were high, Langdon prospered. But now, farm prices are sliding, which spells double-trouble for a community which is still adjusting to the loss of ABM.

"I would say the people here were a little apathetic, particularly the retail community, when they made the announcement that ABM was going to be shut down," explained Langdon Mayor John MacFarlane. "Now they're realizing it and they really will alter the first of the year."

"To date, none of our businesses have closed but after the first of the year, that may be different. We expect there may be some closings after the Christmas rush. I think January, February and March are going to be long, cold months."

MacFarlane said the biggest change resulting from the loss of ABM "has been the decrease in population and the effects that brings." Estimates place the city's current population at about 3,000 persons, nearly 1,500 below its peak in 1972 when ABM was riding high. The mayor also pointed to "secondary effects" such as the elimination of nearly 1,400 contracting jobs at the Nekoma site. Many of those on-site jobs were held by area residents.

"We're not in desperate straits but certainly there's a definite decline in terms of dollars passing through Langdon," he said. "People like clerks in the stores have lost their jobs. Most of the businesses will survive, I think, but the people who they laid off are the ones in trouble. And those people who had jobs at the site — those people are the real losers."

Terry Phelps, a Langdon car dealer and president of the Chamber of Commerce, feels the next six months will be critical for most businesses. Already the loss of ABM has cut sales by at least 25 per cent to perhaps as high as 50 per cent for some businesses, particularly those dealing in services or non-essential goods, Phelps feels.

"I would think when we're really going to feel it is about after the first of the year," Phelps said. "Now we're in the Christmas season but when that's over, I don't know what's going to happen."

"I think everybody's going to have to take a look at their business and see what they can do. I would say maybe 5 per cent of the businesses may have to fold, but I hope I'm wrong. There's going to be employe cuts, too. Maybe 10 per cent of the work force might have to be cut."

Phelps readily acknowledges some retailers are worried, especially those in "some of the younger businesses. I mean, you knock off 25 per cent of your sales but not 25 per cent of your

overhead, that's pretty tough to look at."

"If some businesses don't get some help in the next six months, it won't matter. By then, they'll either be over the hump or they'll have gone under."

First Bank of Langdon vice president Arlo Maag agrees the next few months are critical to the community's economic outlook.

"Right now our biggest concern is working with the businesses to help get them through if it appears there's going to be a big loss in sales," Maag said. "There's bound to be some adjustment downward but how much is purely conjecture. Also, how much is ABM impact and how much of it is falling grain prices? Certainly, falling grain prices tend to make it tougher than it would have been."

"It's going to be tougher from this point forward. We probably won't know how serious it's going to be for another six months. But with inventory and expense controls, the businesses will survive."

Although the city itself has not had to cut services in the wake of ABM's departure, the Langdon school system has been affected. Since the 1975-76 school year, Langdon schools have eliminated 21 teacher positions, although several teachers left voluntarily.

Enrollments have dropped significantly. In October 1975, enrollment in Langdon schools was 1,347. On Dec. 1, 1976, enrollment was 1,014.

The enrollment slide is even more drastic at Nekoma, where

the population is down to 125 after peaking at more than 400 in the early 1970s. Nekoma schools benefitted early from ABM, gaining a \$630,000 elementary school addition funded almost exclusively by federal impact monies. But now, enrollment at Nekoma schools is less than 100, more than 200 below last year's total. Only half of last year's 20 teaching positions have been retained.

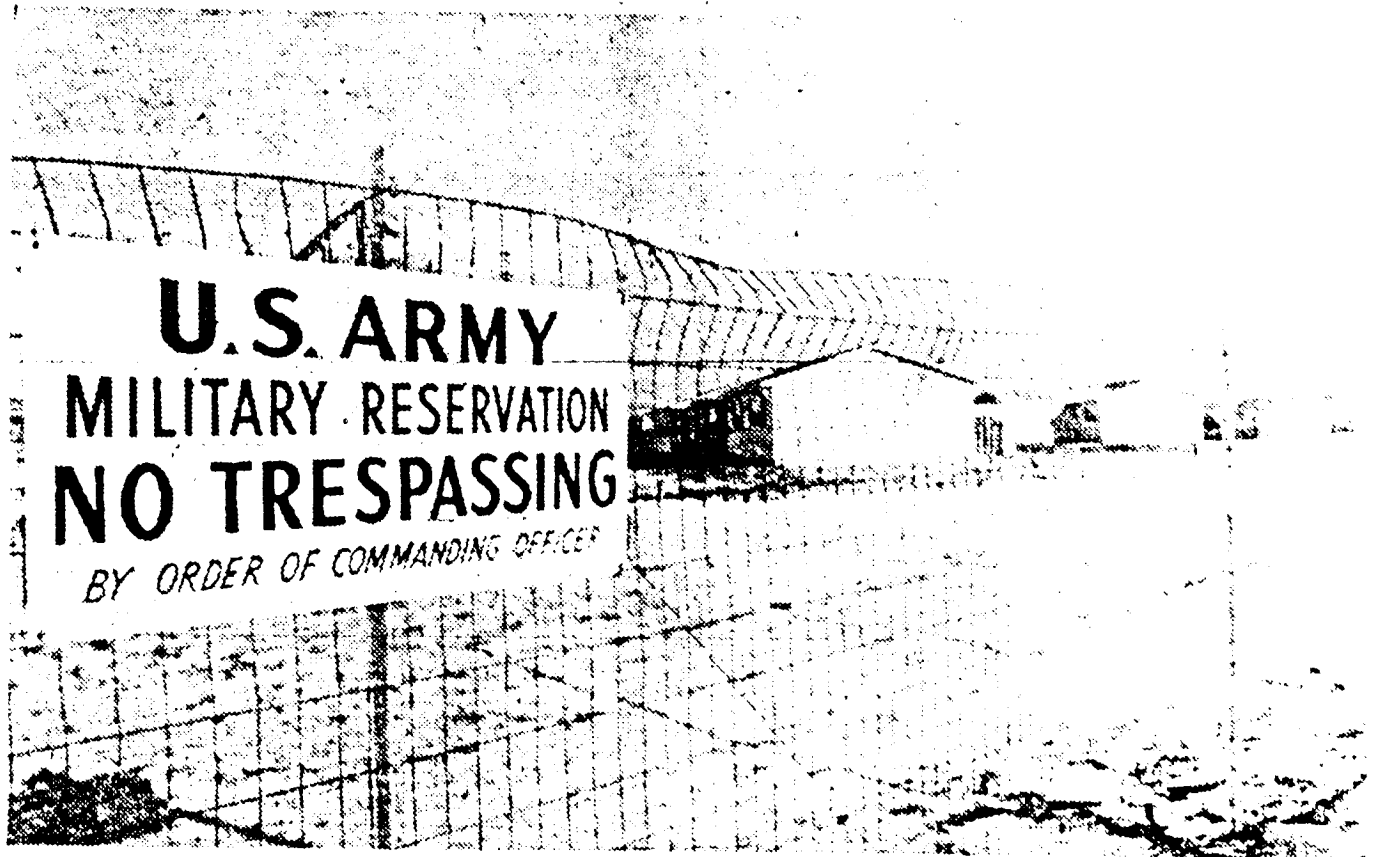
Ultimately, the enrollment drop has its biggest impact on those students who remain, Langdon school superintendent Delmar Lewis explained. Courses which previously could be offered must now be eliminated or doubled up.

"The loss of students does, by its nature, affect what you can do for the students," Lewis said. "You need the heads. The whole problem is that we aren't able to do as many things as we did with the flexible curriculum. What I'm worried about is just how far are we going to have to go in and start snipping away courses."

In the end, everybody here has had to learn to live with a little less after ABM packed its bags. MacFarlane is confident the people can handle the adjustment.

"I think the people here are pretty resourceful," the mayor said. "People don't get down too easily. Everybody's trying in their own areas. We're pretty independent people."

"We're still here and life goes on. Nobody's going to shoot themselves. Really, if anything good is going to happen, we have to do it ourselves right here."



Deserted housing remains behind security fencing.