

Salvage business centers in Nekoma pyramid

D-14 The Sunday Forum
FARGO-MOORHEAD
November 27, 1977.

By HAL SIMONS
Staff Writer

Two Minnesotans have opened a salvage business selling goods housed in a pyramid. But they didn't have to travel to Egypt or some exotic spot in the Mideast. They merely moved to Nekoma, N.D.

Buford Faust, 43, and George Moe, 48, are both veterans in the salvage business. Faust, in the business for 20 years, owns Buf's Auto and Truck Salvage near Cannon Falls, Minn. Moe, in the trade for 22 years, owns George's Used Equipment in South St. Paul, Minn.

But now Faust and Moe are also the owners of G&B Salvage at Nekoma. Today they're peddling "junk" which once helped form the most sophisticated military missile defense post in the Western Hemisphere.

On Oct. 26, the two were awarded the salvage contract for salvageable property at the Stanley R. Mickelson Safeguard Complex near Nekoma, in north-easterly North Dakota. The complex, which housed the nation's only anti-ballistic missile site, was deactivated in early 1976, after Congress cut off funding, and was effectively terminated in October 1976.

With the closing, the Department of Army began shipping to other defense posts all of the ABM site's tactical hardware, including the missiles, weapons systems and equipment essential to strategic information. Anything else the government deemed valuable was shipped to other government installations.

Most of what remained at the site, the government decided to put up for sale. The housing facilities and defense buildings themselves, however, were not included. Similarly, property at the non-tactical facilities was kept off the selling blocks.

Earlier this year, the Corps of Engineers, in charge of disposition of government property, sent 4,700 bid invitations to "prospective buyers" interested in netting the ABM salvage contract.

"We'd let many, many salvage contracts on missile sites before but none the size of this one," said Vern Finch, chief of the real estate division at the Corps' Omaha, Neb., headquarters. "What the top bidder wins is the right to remove the salvageable material from inside the Missile Site Control Building (the pyramid which formed the hub of Safeguard operations), the power plant and the four remote launch sites.

"Everything there of value to the government was removed. All the materials in the buildings were screened throughout the Department of Army and much of it was removed and shipped. What is left is the residue, in a sense, like tons and tons of wire and scrap metal."

But for folks like Faust and Moe, that residue has a particular glitter. "We wrecked a power plant last year in the Twin Cities and it was a satisfactory job for us," Faust explained. "So we figured this was a good one to bid for."

In all, 24 prospective buyers, some from foreign counties, returned bids. The bid, totaling nearly \$367,000, by Faust and Moe was the highest. With it, they won the contract under which they have one year to salvage the site. After that, the buildings will be sealed.

The Corps had the salvageable property at the site appraised, but declined to release the appraisal figures. However, Finch said, the "contract awarded was over and above the appraised value." But that doesn't bother the two Minnesotans. "We feel we got a good deal, if everything goes right," Faust said.

In early November, the two set up an office in the tunnel leading into the pyramid. Since then, they've been busier than a pair of pack rats in a kitchen. Recently, they hired 15 men to help them out and Faust figures the crew might soon grow to "around 25 or 30 men."

While his partner inspected the four remote sites, Faust, who works most of the day inside the pyramid, emerged long enough to chat a bit about the new business.

"It's dark when you go in, and dark when you come out," he said. "It's really different working inside a pyramid. And it's a pretty funny feeling knowing you're in what used to be the largest missile defense site in the free world."

What Faust sees inside the pyramid is a pile of goodies which the two hope to turn into a tidy profit. Among those items in the "not-so-ordinary junk collection" are:

- Computers, or at least parts of them — three floors full of them. "The government has stripped a lot of stuff off of them but they say they're still adaptable to commercial use," Faust explained. "But I haven't found anybody who thinks they're right."

- Faust and Moe have decided to sell the computers on a bid basis. Several Grand Forks, N.D., businessmen have shown an early interest "but we just haven't gotten around to doing some real dealing yet," Faust said.

- Also interested are three firms from Taiwan. Representatives from each foreign firm "have been over to take a look at the computers, including one who has been over twice," Faust said. "They buy what they call breakage — what they consider precious metals — and these computers here have aluminum cases."

The two salvage traders also are "trying to find a market for the special flooring for the computers."

- Massive generators and inotors. Included are three Westinghouse generators and motors, running at 3,250 horsepower. Each unit originally "sold for about \$218,000 but we're open for offers," Faust commented.

Their treasure chest also holds three complete sets of Boge generators and motors, running at 1,250 horsepower. "I suspect each unit probably sold for about \$160,000 originally," Faust said.

- Armfuls of bathroom and lighting fixtures; nearly 400 tons of copper wiring; tons and tons of various valves and gauges and about 200,000 gallons of anti-freeze.

"We're in the process now of trying to sell all the valves off the four remote sites to a Long Beach, Calif., valve firm," Faust said. "And we're trying to sell the anti-freeze to a local party — two gentlemen from the Langdon area."

- Stockpiles of electrical gear — which Faust feels will be G&B's hottest item.

"This plant had an awful lot of electrical switches and switch gears, dry transformers and wet transformers, just about everything in the electrical market," Faust explained. "It's all in very good shape. We've sold quite a bit of switch gear to an outfit in Cincinnati, Ohio, although we're still waiting for final confirmation on that."

- Rooms full of steel shelving and flooring — an item which Faust feels will be the hardest to unload. "We'll have the toughest time selling the steel scrap because the price is down so low," he said, adding "There's a lot of items that I suppose we'll just end up just scrapping because they aren't adaptable to commercial use."

One of the benefits of a massive salvage job such as Faust and Moe are undertaking is very little advertising of their goods is necessary. Those who are interested in G&B's "junk" knew about it long before the two Minnesotans took on the job.

"Most of the companies that bid on this particular job are actually the ones we're dealing with," Faust explained. "They're the people in the industry and they kind of pass the word around."

One of the biggest drawbacks is, since the salvage job has a one-year deadline, the two Minnesotans will have to spend much of the next year away from their families. Both will live in Langdon, visiting their families in the Twin Cities area only on special occasions.

"I'm sure we'll go home for Christmas," Faust remarked. "But we won't get home very often. We've got a year to do the job and we're going to do it."

And, after that year, do they expect to have at least broken even on their \$367,000 investment?

"I tell you, you better have a good welfare program if we don't," Faust chuckled.