

A R. Wegner stands among picnic tables being cleaned and painted by YACU on rollees.

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# A breath of ne

BY ROSS COLLINS  
Staff Writer  
NEKOMA, N.D. — The military ghost town of the North Dakota antiballistic missile site near here has been recolonized. New settlers of the 355-acre, \$5.6 billion military on the Dakota grassland are

50 enrollees of the Young Adult Conservation Corps and their staff. The facilities left when the military abandoned the site make the YACC "probably the best facility in the U.S.," says A.R. Wegner, camp director.

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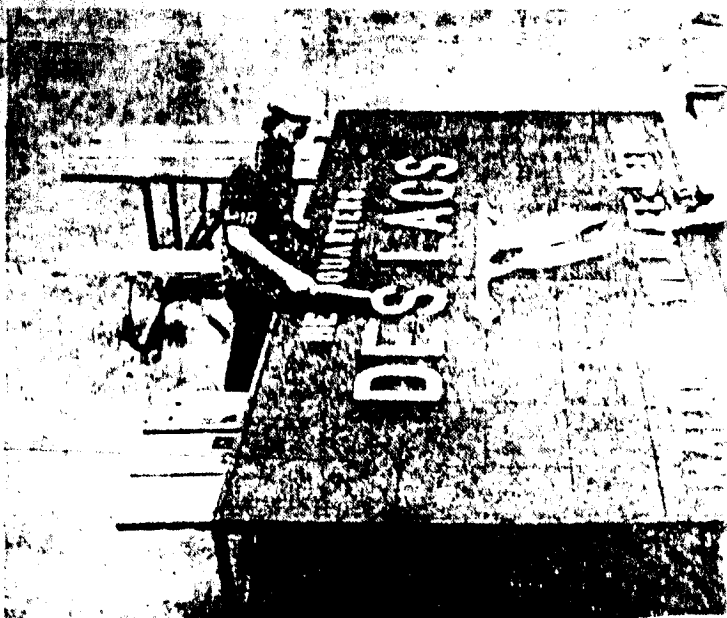
A.R. Wegner stands among picnic tables being cleaned and painted by YACC enrollees.



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Rita Mondor, YACC enrollee from Langdon, N.D., helps cooks with dinner at the camp kitchens.



Deborah Wiedrich, Nekoma, and Roger Lien, Lawton, N.D., finish painting sign.



## Some benefits

Y CORPS

# A breath of new life

BY ROSS COLLINS  
Staff Writer

NEKOMA, N.D. — The military ghost town of the North Dakota antiballistic missile site near here has been recolonized. New settlers of the 15-acre, \$-6 billion military on the Dakota grassland are

80 enrollees of the Young Adult Conservation Corps and their staff.

The facilities left when the military abandoned the site make this YACC "probably the best facility in the U.S.," says A.R. Wegner, camp director.

Wegner says enrollees in this camp, one of many around the nation sponsored by government agencies to provide one-year jobs for 18 to 23-year-olds, enjoy "beautiful dormitories that have carpeting, bathrooms in every room, and stereo, television, a fantastic dining room, dance floor and bandstand, and their own bar — where they serve soft drinks."

All are leftovers from the 447 military personnel at the base only two and one-half years ago. The military staff, plus the 1,500 or so civilians who supported this most sophisticated military defense post in the Western Hemisphere, melted away when Congress chopped funding for the facility. That was Oct. 1, 1976, the day after the site became fully activated.

The ABM site project was launched in 1970. It was built to protect the minuteman missiles and offensive bombers at the Grand Forks, N.D., Air Base and in northeastern North Dakota. The idea then was to make the base only one many dotting the nation, says Wegner, a retired army major who supervised mothballing of the facility.

"It started out as 24 (ABM sites), dropped to 12, then 12, then four, then two." But North Dakota's was the only one fully operational, says Wegner.

Construction on the site, which includes a chapel, dispensary, barracks, store, bar, and rows and rows of houses, began in 1971. The surrounding communities of Nekoma (just south of the base), Langdon, Walhalla, Cavalier and other communities struggled to adapt to thousands of strangers in an area where everyone knew everyone. Construction and military workers jangled community business cash registers, and their children stuffed the small community schools.

But closing of the site popped that balloon, and again the communities struggle to return to their slumber past (see related story).

"People like you and me come here and see the radar building,"

says Wegner, about the sophistication of the site designed to shoot down Russia's missiles. "But they can't see the power plant, and most of the radar building is underground."

Wegner says the radar facility — a hilltop pyramid of concrete dominating the base like the Egyptian Cheops — is an iceberg of underground complexity. From here omniscient computers could spot any enemy projectile down to the last bolt. And next door a two-story underground power plant kept the sanctum of technology humming with six generators, each capable of powering a city of 75,000, says Wegner.

"Small components cost millions of dollars for testing and development," explains Wegner of the lowering cost.

The sophisticated and secret hardware was plucked by the military when the site closed, says Wegner. Civilian scavengers grabbed the rest, and the actual radar facility, called the tactical facility, was sealed in January.

But that final welding torch was only symbolic, because a year and one-half earlier a steering committee was set up to find a new use for all, or any, of the buildings.

"We felt all along that it would best be utilized as an educational facility," says Langdon Mayor Harold Blanchard. "It is a complete little city all its own." Proposed were a vocational education and rehabilitation training center, several industry plants, and most seriously, a juvenile corrections center.

"That raised quite a furor," says Blanchard about the latter proposal. That's because residents feared what amounted to a prison for juvenile offenders. The plan was rejected finally by the federal Bureau of Prisons.

Last May the Department of the Interior answered the question with YACC proposal, to be administered under the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service. It opened Aug. 1.

"We were good news to everybody," says Wegner. "There is just no employment up here, and when you do find something, it doesn't pay anything. People leave. The objective of the whole program is to provide the highest unemployed group — 18 to 23 year-olds — with employment."

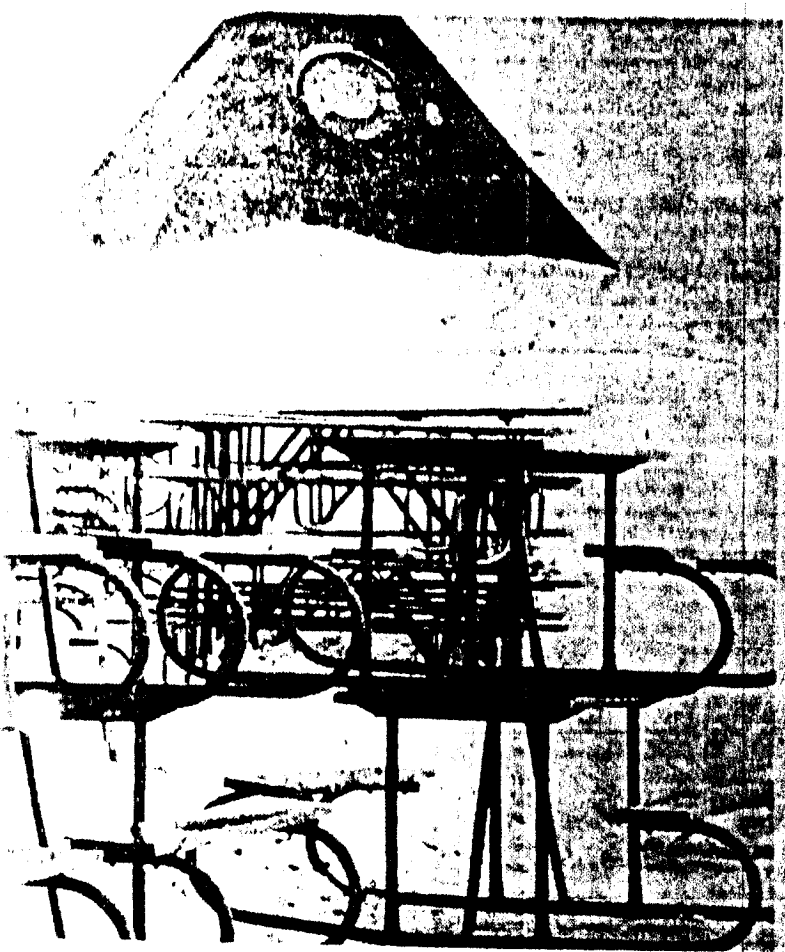
Employment under the program is mostly manual skills: enrollees make duck nests, duck houses, boat ramps, mostly for the Fish and Wildlife Service. But Wegner says the YACC also provides employment services for local firms and state and local governments.

"What we are is a free labor force," explains Wegner. "Seventy percent of the work is on fish and wildlife projects. But we are not a make work program. They would have to hire a contractor if the YACC did not do the work."

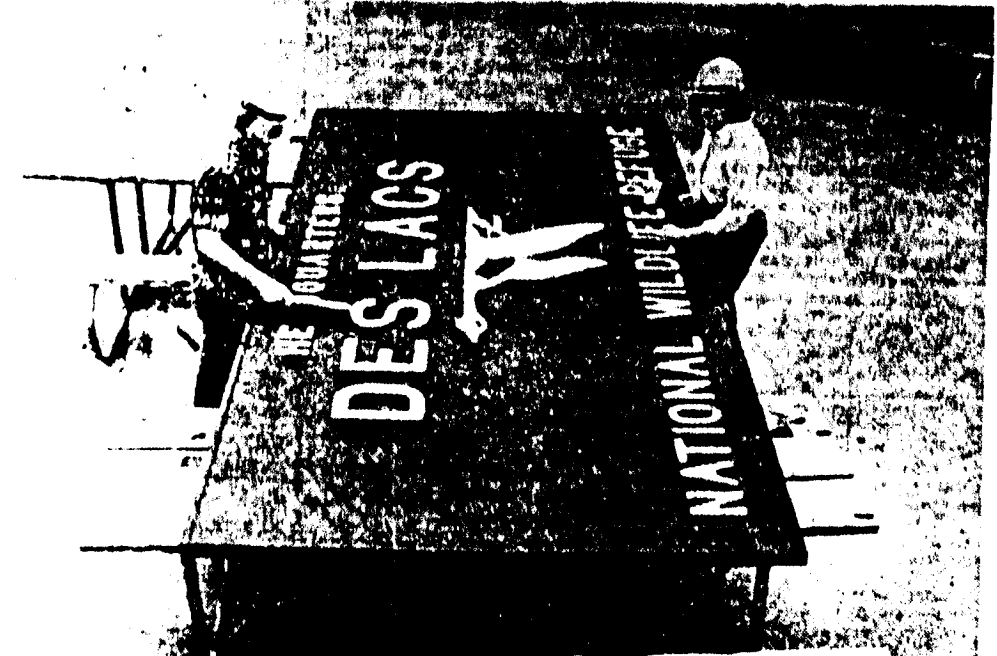
Wegner says the North Dakota YACC, which costs \$2 million a year to operate, has saved the Fish and Wildlife Service about \$200,000 since August. "Once we get going we can save more than that — maybe we could even break even," says Wegner.

Wegner hopes to employ 200 enrollees in the year long program, if government funding is available.

Of the 80 enrollees, about half have a high school diploma, says Wegner. They come from around North Dakota, but the bulk are from surrounding towns. Thirty stay at their homes instead of the



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Deborah Wiedrich, Nekoma, and Roger Lien, Lawton, N.D., finish painting a wildlife refuge sign.

NEKOMA

(Cont on Page D2, Col 1)

Enrollees and cooks take a coffee break in the dining room.

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## Nekoma—

(Continued from Page D-1)

on-site room and board — which cooks them \$3 a day — and Wegner says seven or eight of the women in the co-education corps are married and live off the facility. Enrollees under 18 also live at home.

"We pay our enrollees \$2.90 an hour, minimum wage," says Wegner. "If they show good work, leadership, we can raise this. This gives them a little incentive to be motivated on the job."

There are no exceptions to the one year limit on the corps. "We are not in the placement business, but we try to get them a job," says Wegner. "To help upward mobility, we have military services come up here, talk to enrollees. We do not have to give GEDs (high school graduate equivalency diplomas), but we took it on our own to give the programs." He adds that YACC works closely with the North Dakota Employment Service, through which prospective enrollees must register to join the corps.

Twenty-seven staff members tend to needs of the workers. Seven work leaders supervise the projects, which may include "on-site" work anywhere in the state.

"We have camp trailers, and our workers and work leaders will go across the state to do a job, do the job and return to camp," says Wegner. He says many of the staff are college graduates in an outdoor-related field who get experience working with the corps.

Wegner says that no changes were needed in military structures. And although the military hardware is gone, the furniture, cooking utensils, tools, recreational facilities, and medical facilities were left behind, and for good reason. "When you shut down a site, and it makes as much of an impact on a community as this, you put a freeze on supplies and equipment, to attract a potential user," says Wegner. Enrollees moved into furnished

rooms and use recreational facilities including a bowling alley and theatre. Wegner says among his plans is to convert the theatre for use as a playhouse for student productions.

During his 27-year military career Wegner has been assigned to bases around the country and paid a four-year visit to Vietnam. The Seattle, Wash., native is glad he's running the North Dakota YACC.

"I went to talk to a high school in California (he was stationed in San Bernardino before coming to North Dakota seven years ago). You talk to 16 or 17-year-olds. Up here you can have a meaningful conversation. Down there you can't. In a job like this, you expect problems, but I haven't had any. The only surprise I've had is that we haven't had trouble. In other places you hear about knifings, fighting, riots and strikes."

Wegner says six or seven enrollees have quit since the camp opened. He says this is good, because at other camps "the enrollment turnover rate is much higher."

Because some of the participants are not 21, alcohol is not allowed, says Wegner. "I'm aware they sneak it in," he acknowledges, but says it is not a big problem. Other than that, "I don't put any restrictions on them. All they must do is come in and work in the morning." Wegner who, "can honestly say we're better (than other camps)," confesses "everyone says that," but insists "kids in North Dakota are more mature. They are given more responsibility when younger. In California, what are there for kids to do? But here responsibility comes naturally because kids work on their own."

Even though Wegner plans to use more of the still-vacant military facility, his YACC can't make use of the pyramid on a hill. "In fact, no one knows what to do with this," says Wegner. "We were looking out for ways to use

the site — grain storage, amusement or as a landmark."

The YACC can't make use of the houses — 200 of them — housing military personnel when the site was activated. The Air Force owns the houses, and wanted to cart them to the base in Grand Forks. "But they can't get anyone to move them cheap enough," says Wegner.

Wegner was in charge of support services, including recreation, for the military when the site was activated. He said he put many hours of work into coordinating the expensive facilities; the bowling alley alone cost several thousand dollars. Everything is almost new. "I don't know why they closed it down," he reflects. "It was not obsolete. I was never told it was obsolete. I was told it was purely political — Congress didn't appropriate the money. If it were obsolete they shouldn't have built the damn thing in the first place."

## Handicapped children special education meet scheduled here

The third annual regional conference on special education of handicapped children will be held April 19-21 at the Town House Motor Inn, Fargo.

The conference is designed to facilitate pre-service and in-service training for administrators, teachers, paraprofessionals and parents who serve emotionally

the Minn-Kota's Training Consortium which includes North Dakota State University, University of North Dakota, Bemidji State University, Mayville State College, University of South Dakota, Valley City State College and Southeast Mental Health and Retardation Center. Also sponsoring the conference is the Red River

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ROLL-A-WAY Twin Size. Reg. 99.95.....	\$78
UNFINISHED CHEST Five drawer. Reg. 49.95.....	\$41
SQUARE COMMODOE TABLE Oak Finish/Formica®. Reg. 79.95.....	\$58
MODERN NITESTAND Pecan Finish. Reg. 99.95.....	\$45
COLONIAL BOOKCASE Three Shelf. Reg. 84.95.....	\$68
6 FT. BOOKCASE Six Shelf. Reg. 89.95.....	\$75
ASSORTED SEALY MATTRESSES Full Size, Odd Covers.....	\$68

Carleton

# Some benefits remain

North Dakota towns which stretched painfully to accommodate thousands of antiballistic missile base personnel now are shrinking just as painfully and trying to plug the empty spaces when the workers departed.

"Closing it down had a tremendous impact on nearby towns," said A. R. Wegner, a major in the army who supervised deactivation of the ABM facilities. Wegner retired after the site closed and now is director of the Young Adult Conservation Corps using part of the base facilities.

The massive installation, within two years, drove the population of Langdon, N.D. eight miles north, to double its pre-ABM size. Schools were jammed. Retail sales salled and water systems and roads were worn out.

Optimism, similar to that of the gold rush era, shone in Nekoma, Cavalier, Walhalla, Langdon and other communities through new businesses: 27 in Langdon alone between 1970 and 1975; new schools: a completely new building costing more than \$600,000 in Nekoma, a town with fewer than 100 non-ABM residents; new housing: mobile home courts and

buildings pushed Langdon city boundaries out 30 percent. The Langdon tax base grew 67 percent in five years. Retail sales volume, 42 percent.

Then in 1970 the vein of ABM "gold" ran dry. Congress moved to abandon the site. The thousands of builders, electricians and highly skilled technical experts had no market for their talents on the rural dirt of the North Dakota prairie. Military personnel were transferred. Business and population spiraled downward.

"We've lost 2,000 from Langdon," said mayor Harold Blanchard. "It was 3,000, now it's 3,000. We lost 350 mobile homes, and school enrollment has dropped drastically."

The town needed help from the government — through grants — to cope with the boom; now it has asked for help to cope with the bust.

"We set up a steering committee, composed of members of communities of Nekoma, Langdon, Walhalla and Cavalier," said Blanchard. "We have applied for an industrial development grant, and have a contract with the Red River Planning Agency for the ac-

quisition of small industries."

Blanchard said the area is trying to lure industry to keep up the momentum begun by ABM. "We lost our youth, the one thing we did lose," said Blanchard. "The missile facility presented a job opportunity. That is one of the things we are trying to do."

Blanchard said one industry — Polyco American — has moved to a commercial-industrial building provided at Langdon. And he says that although businesses there cut back their operations, "I can't think of any that have closed down. One grocery store closed, but I wouldn't specifically say it was due to loss of population."

Blanchard said some people who came with the ABM stayed on, "those who could find employment here. They didn't want to go back to the city."

It was tougher for Nekoma. They didn't have much to begin with, said mayor Bill Vervey. "It just about shut the town down," he said, noting one of the bars closed, and that's a lot for Nekoma.

The government paid for building a new school in Nekoma to handle children from the base.

Three hundred students were in the Nekoma district then, said superintendent Donald Boe. Now it is only a fraction of that figure: 61 students last fall, and still declining.

"The ABM left the school system in pretty good shape financially," said Boe. "But the money will be gone in two years."

The district already has sold one school building, and has abandoned another. Boe said probably the entire system will close down after the money runs out. Children probably will be bused to Langdon.

Blanchard said the ABM era was "an awful waste. When you're talking that kind of bucks (\$5.6 billion) you would wish and hope lawmakers would have a little more foresight."

But, he said, Langdon does retain some benefits from the ABM. "We have additional streets, a brand-new water system. We have new housing, and we got rid of lots of substandard homes. We have an addition to the hospital, addition to recreational facilities, an expanded lagoon system. We gained, there's no question about it."