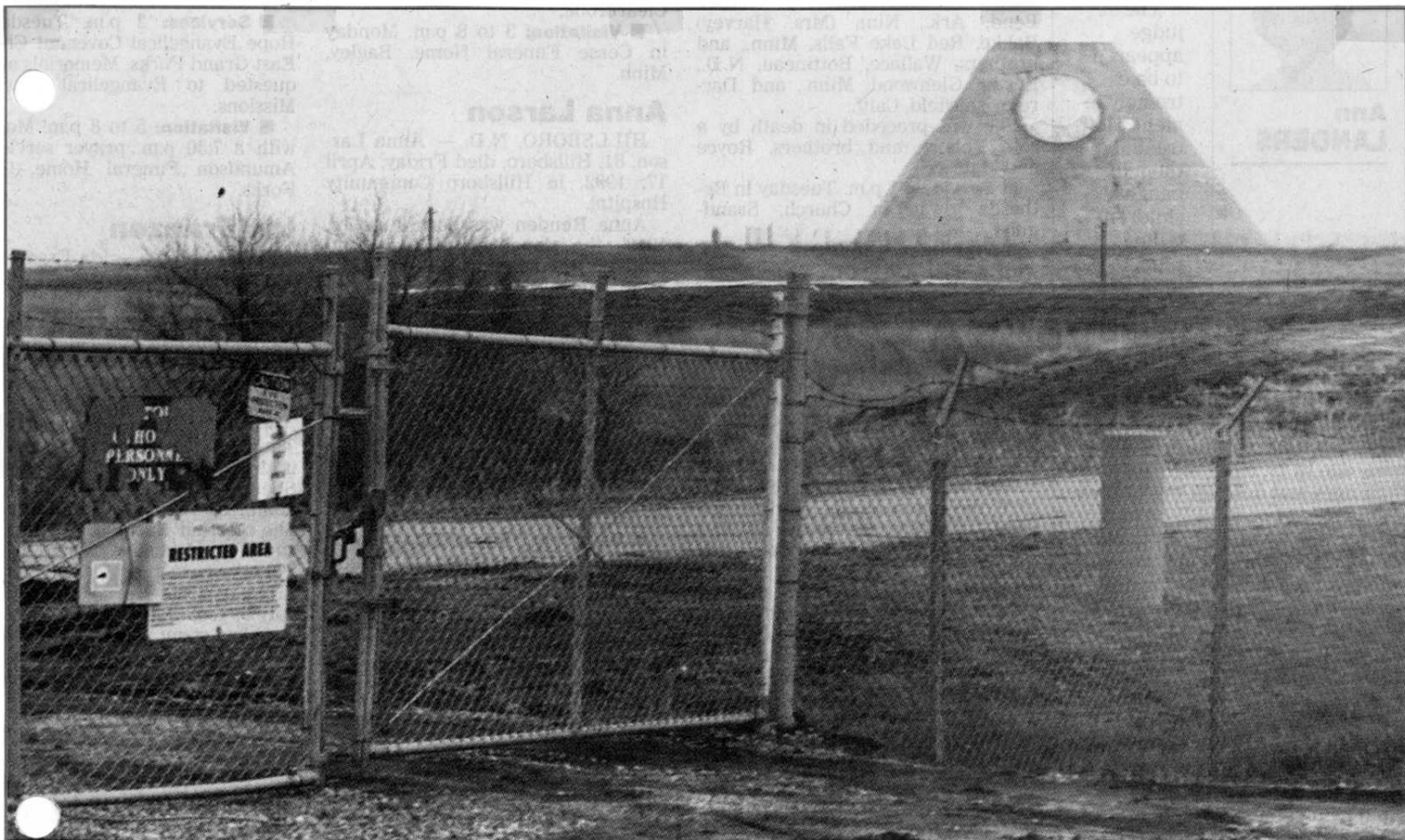


# ABM site was good for Nekoma once

■ Talk of reopening site has area residents wondering if they will benefit again — or if they even want to

SECTION **C**  
SUNDAY



The Army spent \$5.7 million to build the Nekoma anti-ballistic missile system site.

Jackie Lorentz, staff photographer

**N**EKOMA, N.D. — Tony Liebersbach has some fond memories of the Safeguard ABM site north of town.

Liebersbach, the 74-year-old mayor of this Cavalier County town, figures he has spent more time on the ABM site than anyone who was not working there. He, along with other city officials, was an honorary member of the officers clubs on the U.S. Army installation.

"I was just curious," he said. That might explain why, one day, he got in a car, drove through the gate and traveled all over the nearly 355-acre compound and then left without being stopped.

The next day, while having lunch at the local cafe, one of the ABM site's security officers sat across the table and told him a story about "some crazy local" who drove all over the site and escaped.

He didn't fess up.

Liebersbach also became friends with one of the technicians inside the concrete pyramid on the prairie. He sometimes got to visit and watch a big computer screen as weather and communications satellites flew over the North Pole and across North America.

"He could tell if it was a Soviet satellite or a U.S. satellite, get a real close view of it," Liebersbach said. "Then, he could punch another button, and he could identify a person entering the front gate. It was quite a system."

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Tony Liebersbach doesn't have that kind of access to the ABM site anymore. The ABM site closed in early 1976, just a few months after it became operational.

The Army spent \$5.7 billion to build the radar and anti-ballistic missile system, the system secured inside a concrete pyramid that extended 75 feet into the air and another 50 feet into the ground.

The site was an economic gold rush to northeastern North Dakota. In nearby Langdon, the population bulged from 2,200 to 4,600 during that period. A few miles down the road, in Cavalier, the population of 1,500 nearly doubled. Nekoma itself grew from about 80 people to more than 300.

Officials estimated that about 20 percent of the \$5 billion spent on the project was spent in northeastern North Dakota during that time. The construction payroll alone amounted to about \$35 million a year.

New schools were built. New roads. Water systems, too.

But the gold rush was short-lived.

The House of Representatives voted to close it down just one day after it officially began operation on Oct. 1, 1975. On Feb. 10, 1976, it was closed.

The SALT Agreement of 1972 permitted only one ABM site in the nation, although 12 had been planned. And Congress decided that one site, equipped with only 100 anti-ballistic missiles to wipe out 100 incoming missiles, wasn't a cost-effective defense measure. What happens, they figured, if the Soviet Union fired a 101st missile?

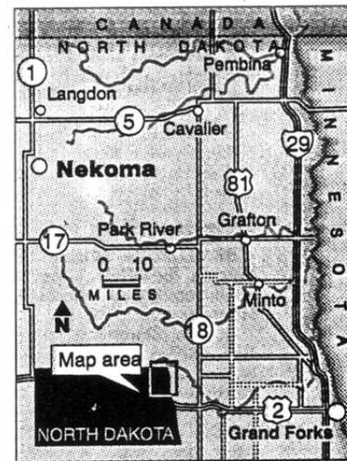
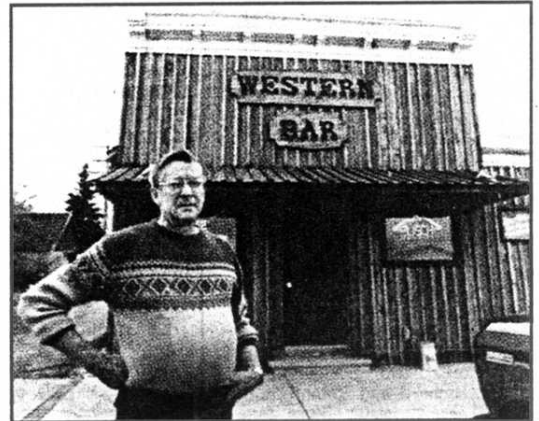
The old ABM site was abandoned from about 1977 until last fall, after Congress started talking about perhaps converting it to a new ground-based missile defense system. Last month, officials in Washington said the project, if approved at all, probably won't happen at least until 1996.

But a U.S. flag flies over the mostly empty site today. It's been there since last fall.

A few pickups and cars, most of them with out-of-state license plates, drive in and out of the site each day. They're part of a Missouri firm that was hired to get rid of thousands of gallons of water that had seeped into the abandoned site.

The old concrete pyramid isn't really a part

**Dennis Westrup served as a liaison officer between the U.S. Army and the area communities during the early 1970s. Today, he operates a bar in Neche, N.D.**



Herald map

of people's lives around here anymore. Even the 60 people who still live in Nekoma pretty much put it out of their minds. They moved on to other things.

Over the years since 1976, there has been talk occasionally in Washington about re-opening the ABM site or finding another use for it.

Most people around here have an I'll-have-to-see-it-to-believe-it attitude.

That's pretty much been the reaction since last summer, when Congress started talking again — this time about converting it into a new ground-based missile defense system.

Liebersbach is skeptical.

"I can't see senators voting to build this here, while they're shutting down bases near their homes," Liebersbach said.

Some others around here don't share the mayor's pessimism.

Bill Verwey, who was mayor when the ABM site was operating, is confident the government will reopen the site.

He's seen the flurry of activity at the site. And he figures Congress will decide it'll be a return on a \$5 billion investment a couple of

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# NEKOMA/ Residents keep their eyes on Congress

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decades ago. It also will be a promise kept.

"It'll be good for northeastern North Dakota," the owner of the Nekoma Bar said. "But it won't be good for me. I'll sell the bar."

He owned the bar in the early and mid-1970s, too, and he said he doesn't want to work as hard today as he did back then.

"I've got a good business here now, all the business I want," he said. "But the town and the area needs it to reopen — for the economy."

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A blaring fire siren blasts twice a day in Nekoma.

It was one of the benefits of the ABM site, Liebersbach said.

It used to sound only once, at 9 p.m., to announce the local curfew. But, Liebersbach says, a few women in town convinced him to change the times to noon and 6 p.m., "So their husbands know when it's time to come home."

Liebersbach is bitter about the ABM site and the effect it had on Nekoma.

He says other assets have become liabilities:

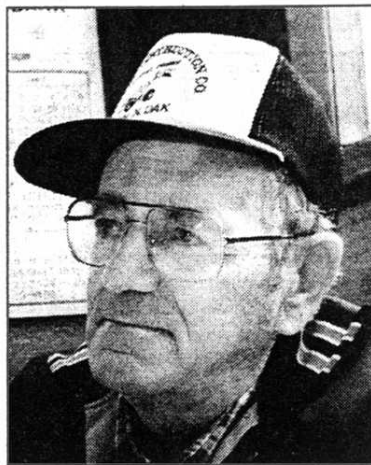
- A big, brand-new school that was closed after only a few years.

- A blacktopped Main Street that the city can't afford to fix.

- A water treatment plant big enough for 200 families that now costs this town \$600 to \$700 a month to operate. That's a strain on the 33 homes and businesses, he said.

"The ABM site didn't really make any difference to Nekoma, except for the water business," he said. "We don't have wells now. But we could have gotten along without a new water plant. The town was mostly senior citizens, even back then. And it is today."

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**Tony Liebersbach**, the 74-year-old mayor of Nekoma, N.D., figures he has spent more time on the ABM site than anyone who was not working there. He, along with other city officials, was an honorary member of the officers clubs on the U.S. Army installation.

Dennis Westrup doesn't agree with Liebersbach's assessment.

"It was a big boom for facilities in the area," said Westrup, a Neche, N.D., resident who served as a liaison officer between the U.S. Army and the area communities during the early 1970s.

He came here early, from Fort Bliss in Texas, to observe the construction, installation of equipment and to make sure the military personnel moving in had adequate facilities. Part of his job was to monitor the community impact of the Nekoma ABM Site.

He said Federal Impact Aid funds that followed the ABM site to North Dakota paid to enlarge school not only in Nekoma, but in other larger communities. It helped to expand fire, ambulance, recreation and other services.

"They still have those things," he said. "So, even if the site was shut down, the area benefited by it being here."

Westrup held the rank of major when he arrived in North Dakota in 1972. He spent about two years at Nekoma, and then became commander of what is now known as the Cavalier Air Force Station. By the time he left in 1977, he was a lieutenant colonel.

After the Nekoma site was operational, Westrup was supposed to move on to three other planned ABM sites, in Montana, Wyoming and Missouri. But they were never built.

He still isn't convinced the ABM site should have closed.

"I don't agree that it was an obsolete system," he said. "It was politically motivated to shut it down. And that really hurt Main Street."

"A lot of stores opened on Main Street in places like Langdon, Wahalla and Cavalier," he said. "But it was hard on them when it closed, and the way it closed. There wasn't any warning."

The Minnesota native returned to North Dakota after his retirement in 1980. He settled in Neche, a town of 434 on the Canadian border. A biology major in college, he got into the greenhouse business in Neche. But after five years, he sold the greenhouse. Today, he and his wife, Pauline, run the Western Bar.

In Neche, he's more than 60 miles from the old ABM site. So he doesn't think he'd see any economic benefit from it reopening. But he's convinced it could help towns around the region.

"But if it were me opening a new business on Main Street in Langdon, I'd be worried that they'd pull out again," he said. "I think people learned a few lessons back then, and would be a little more cautious this time."