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Remembering the Missiles

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During the summer months, visiting researchers are sometimes a daily occurrence either on the phone or wherever they run into me. They often leave hours or days later without mentioning their names and are never heard from again. However, one appeared at the Cavalier County Library on a Wednesday afternoon planning to leave for Montana by 6 a.m. the next morning with an eventual destination of Denver by Saturday evening. His research topic was the Safeguard Missile System under construction in Cavalier County approximately fifty years ago. The librarians on duty that day were either too young to remember the missile era personally or newer residents of the area so were happy to go back to their regular duties when they saw me. To make a long story short, for the next three hours I was seriously wishing an actual "missile kid" or former worker at one of the facilities would walk in the door!

A very polite young man introduced himself as John (no last name) and shook hands. He had apparently been driving non-stop from Detroit, Michigan, where he works with the Detroit Fire Department, and this was his third visit to Cavalier County. After he had left, I learned our visitor was John Grover, and he is writing a book about the missile complex at Nekoma. He shared no details on the first visit, but on his second visit he had worked with the people at JDA, had a guided tour of the site and been allowed to take pictures underground. On this visit he wanted more pictures and was concerned about how soon it would be dark. Our visit started around 3 p.m., and between then and nightfall he had many questions regarding the impact of the missile influx on the city of Langdon both when the people came and when they left. I was surprised to realize he thought of both events as more or less overnight events. In truth local people had been getting acquainted with the waves of sub-contractors for various projects over the previous decade so the construction at Nekoma was another wave of arrivals. And actually, many temporary residents stayed only for the time they were needed and left when re-stationed to another site. Both the arrivals and departures now appear to have been gradual coming and going processes. Early questions were: How did this massive influx of people affect long-time residents of the area, and were there possibly any actual people who had worked at the site that he could talk to?

The only real information I could give him was to head to Nekoma where they would be serving chicken at the Pain Reliever that night and to suggest he talk to Clint Eskilsen before he left the area. Early on he had told me he had only the one evening here and planned to leave the next morning to visit a second safeguard site that had been under construction when the project was terminated by the SALT Treaties in 1976.

Local readers will probably smile at the mention that he wanted directions to the Eskilsen house (possibly for GPS use) and wondered if anyone in Nekoma would be able to help him. Everyone in Nekoma would be able to help him! To make his visit more enjoyable I could assure him that the food at the Pain Reliever was good, and their clientele is often willing to tell stories. He had been to the Pain Reliever on a previous visit so that was a must on his

list of stops. Possibly because I might have mentioned Esckilsens live by a church, he remembered seeing a church with a steeple on his earlier visit (probably St. Edward's). Nekoma has had three churches for many years, but only one is on their Main Street. He did visit with Esckilsens the following morning, and they provided me with his last name, phone and e-mail in case any readers would like to contact him personally. He seemed very interested in talking to "missile kids" who married into the community or other employees who retired here at the end of their work on the site. He now has a copy of Clint's film which includes some of the Pan American picture collection and was able to photograph a scrapbook at the library to add to his internet collection of facts.

One of his questions for me was to describe Main Street in Langdon when the missiles came and how it has changed. Looking back fifty years makes that question difficult to answer. Yes, the sights have changed but many of those changes might have happened with or without the missile years. It is also possible the arrival of the workers helped to hasten those changes.

In 1970 Langdon's business community was almost entirely on Main Street. J.C. Penney and the Skogmo Store across the street were the cornerstone of the business community with the only Langdon bank on a third corner of that intersection, which is now the present home of the Eagles. There were three bakeries; four or five restaurants; lady's clothing shops; a store for menswear; three pharmacies; depending on who you ask, three or four barber shops; several independent beauty shops; a flower shop; three basement level bars and at least that many above ground; two hotels (UCT and Nodak); doctor and dentist offices in numerous locations like the Fischer Building, the Masonic Temple, and upstairs over stores; several hardware stores (Gambles, Coast to Coast, Ace, Our Own Hardware and Elenbaums); the Dime Store; Kertz Bowling over the Sportsman; law offices; appliance stores for radios, television, washers, dryers, stoves and space heaters; Cavalier County Republican; Quality Printing; two lumberyards and at times three car dealerships with almost all of these sites on Main Street. Both on and off that business area were several grocery stores: Hartz, Piggly Wiggly, Red Owl, Red and White, and some known by the first names of the people operating them; Carlson Jewelry, which might, by the 1970s, have become Herrud's; plus I am told at least five gas stations. Tastee Freeze east of town had car hop girls, A&W on Highway 1 may also have had that service, Dairyland was on the west side of the highway, and there was a popular fast food/ice cream store before the Dairy Queen west on Highway 5. Hank and Nadine Charbonneau had a gift shop and in early years served ice cream, the Roxy had movies every night with draws like Bank Night and special events, Fairmont had ice cream and a coffee shop with a locker at the rear while Bodnars had their locker and meat market where the Kelland lockers had previously been located. Al Lundquist had dry cleaning and was the first to offer laundromat facilities. By the missile era Sears, Montgomery Ward and J.C. Penney all offered catalog services, and there is a memory of some appliances and furniture "on display" near the catalog desk. Two or more blacksmith shops were still in business, and there were several implement dealers possibly not on Main Street but close by. Several I spoke to commented on both cemeteries being still "out in the country". If you needed something sewn, altered or repaired there were people who sometimes did that work downtown and sometimes out of their homes.

Most people remembered the shopping during and for some years after the missile era as excellent. Customers asked for name brands, and the stores worked hard to meet their requests. People with steady paychecks made for good business.

The missile kids were only a fraction of the over-crowding at the schools, but they did make a crowded situation worse so the new high school was constructed

at that time. That crowding situation had begun a decade earlier and resulted in the Langdon Elementary School construction after bond fund after bond fund had been turned down. The original crowding had to do with closing the last 100 or more of the rural schools in the county, and not only did the over-flow reach Langdon but affected all the "town" schools in the county.

Churches in Langdon and some of the surrounding towns benefited by new members who chose a denomination they were familiar with and added their voices to the congregation. There was also a non-denominational chapel at the Nekoma base site staffed by military chaplains or leaders. In Langdon Kingdom Hall (Seventh Day Adventist), a Southern Baptist group, a Mormon group and an independent Assembly of God started groups. Some mentioned a congregation of Evangelical Free denomination which may have arrived in the aftermath of the missile years. Rural areas were hardest hit with shortages of denominational pastors who found it difficult to serve multiple communities on a regular basis. With children going to town schools the farm families gradually moved to churches in the nearby towns.

I do not know if the house numbers and street name changes were mandated by city laws throughout the state or were hastened by the missiles. For local residents one of the least appreciated changes came with house numbers and changing all the east and west streets from trees to numbered avenues while the north and south streets named for individuals (some wives and daughters of the original property owners) became numbered streets. Main Street became Third Street. Telling a visitor to go north two blocks and then turn west was meaningless. We learned to say stay on this street until you get to the court house, the Dairy Queen, the railroad or other obvious locations. Some locations did have signs.

Farmers moving into town had had years of rural free mail delivery and continued to drive out to the farm each day to pick up their mail. With many new families the post office reached a higher classification and delivered mail became available to Langdon residents. This was partly door-to-door and partly a rural route with the actual mailbox some distance from the house. Some of us learned that a box at the post office eliminated the wear and tear of vandalism, stolen social security checks and falls wading through snow to get to the route boxes. All of these improvements came with both benefits and downsides.

One change in Langdon came with the missile people who brought their golf clubs in the trunks of their cars. Langdon's Country Club had been "exclusive" since its beginning. Avid golfers showed up requesting "greens fees". The facility grew and flourished with the new members.

Our visitor had questions to answer about the destruction of original Langdon business buildings, fairly obvious today, and much of the demolition began with fires. We have some very attractive buildings today side by side with others who may not survive as the decades pass. Where do people buy clothing or shoes? Even a visitor from a large city would notice those missing items. Currently it is simpler to shop in a larger town with multiple options. Some order what they want by internet. The cost either way is higher, but you adjust to changing needs and find ways to fill them. We can expect more of this story when Mr. Grover finishes his research and his book.