



The paved road that leads to the Cold War relic is full of potholes.

It only stretches about a mile across this remote area of Rice County, laid more than 50 years ago for military vehicles. On occasion, Jeff Flaningam says, a few partyers searching for his site that sits 174 feet deep below the prairie have come down the road too fast ramming through his locked iron gate.

It doesn't surprise him that such a site draws a bit of attention. This, after all, is a bizarre souvenir from the U.S. and Soviet nuclear arms race, he said. Site No. 6, which overlooks rolling pastures, was one of 12 Atlas F nuclear missile sites across central Kansas once operated by Schilling Air Force Base in the 1960s. Staffed 24-7, crews were prepared, if necessary, to fire up a nuclear warhead.

"This was an intercontinental ballistic missile," Flaningam said as he wandered through the old underground local control center, the institutional green paint chipping from the musty walls. He notes that back then, with the push of a button, it would take 40-some minutes for the missile to hit the former Soviet Union.

But by 1965, site No. 6 was outdated and decommissioned, along with the rest of the nation's Atlas sites. The government took out the missile and sold the site to a salvage company, which scrapped out all the metal before selling it off to someone else.

Then, for years, the silo sat abandoned, becoming a place for teen parties and other mischief. Graffiti lines the walls of the former command center and living quarters, along with mold and rust from the lack of maintenance.

Flaningam, however, sees past the dilapidated state.

He wants to "try to showcase the potential of the place," he said. Perhaps someday it will become luxury condominiums.

So, for the past four or five years, Flaningam travels from his Wisconsin home to the location near Lyons, spending two weeks at a time cleaning and repairing his property. He has hauled out truckloads of mud and scrap one wheelbarrow at a time and there is still tons more to remove.

For these few weeks in August, he and friend Dale Schramm worked on a new door sure to keep out the curious. He also rappelled into the silo, which is half-full of water, to fix some of his equipment.

Sure, it might seem like a crazy, daunting task, but Flaningam isn't the only one with underground dreams. With global uncertainty both economically and politically, others are eyeing missile silos, designed to withstand earthquakes and even nuclear attacks, as a protection from an eventual Domsday.

Flaningam admits he isn't really much of a "prepper," as these folks are called, despite an appearance on National Geographic's "Domsday Preppers" TV series last year.

"When I was a kid, I built forts," he said. "It's just probably ... the fort mentality of it knowing it's a Cold War relic, and the size and the strength of the place is fun to think about."

An altered world

After World War II, both the United States and Russia began building an arsenal of nuclear weapons. However, fears began to implode in 1957 when Russia's Sputnik began orbiting Earth.

"We knew that the Russians had missile technology we couldn't match yet," said Ed Peden, a former high school history teacher who turned his Atlas E missile silo near Eskridge into a home. "It was making people nervous because we also had nuclear weapons that could be lofted into space."

America wanted to make sure Russia knew "that they better not mess with us," Peden said. Construction began in 1959 on several hundred missile silos across America's Farm Belt.

"The splitting of the atom changed everything for humans on the planet," Peden said.

In Kansas, the government constructed 12 Atlas F sites and nine Atlas E sites. The Atlas F sites deep sites compared to Atlas E sites cost about \$14 million to \$18 million each.

Peden said someone from the Smithsonian toured his missile silo residence several years ago, telling him the Atlas sites were more dangerous to local populations than Russia. He himself knows of four sites that had explosions during the 1960s.

"They blew the top doors off, they blew off the hinges," Peden said of one of the explosions. "There was a nuclear warhead in there, but it did not detonate."

Government officials "were playing reckless with this terribly radioactive material," he said.

Still, the silos' purpose of staving off nuclear destruction seemingly worked, including during the Cuban Missile Crisis in 1962. Kansas' missile sites were on high alert during the 13-day confrontation the Soviets and Cuba on one side and the United States on the other.

Peden said it was the closest the world came during the Cold War to a nuclear conflict.

"There was a week there in October 1962 that was very dangerous," Peden said. "They had a double crew here, and they were serious about what was going to happen."

However, four or five years after operations began, the silos were abandoned. By 1965, all the Atlas sites had been decommissioned, replaced by newer Titan missile sites, of which Kansas had 18, Peden said.

Nowadays, lonesome Atlas E and F sites stretch from Texas to Nebraska. There are also abandoned Atlas silos in Nevada and New York, Flaningam said. Some have been transformed to residences, like the Peden complex. A school district near Topeka turned an Atlas E site into a school.

Peden began working on his property in 1983. He and his family moved in 10 years later.

"In some ways I'm a prepper," Peden said. "I am a historian and have a degree in history. I know all through history things happen and continue to happen. These structures offer all sorts of options they are some of the strongest around."

Site with potential

Aboveground, most would find Jeff Flaningam's property peculiar. There is a circular concrete pad, along with candy-cane-looking air devices and a concrete entrance point. Other concrete and piping appear above the weeds all left from the site's military days.

On this hot summer day, Flaningam walked down the stairs into his silo, where temperatures hit a cool 58 degrees. At one point, he noted, the entrance stairs were full of water, along with some of the walkways. He estimated the entrance door inside was opened sometime in the 1980s, which allowed trespassers to enter.

Not that they could do much damage. Most everything is gone stripped out by either the government or the salvage company. The strong blast doors still open and shut and there is a red box still hanging on the wall in the command center the box that contained the codes that would have launched the missile.

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“If it was hit by a nuclear strike, the floor would just barely sway,” he said.

Also, after years of little use, the structure is still strong, he said.

“This capsule has layer upon layer upon layer of one-inch rebar that is woven so tightly together during construction you couldn’t see light through them,” he said. “The walls here are many, many feet thick. The ceiling is over 6 feet thick.”

Walking a short distance through a corrugated tunnel, Flaningam showed off the silo itself. It once was seven stories, but it has been stripped to the structural walls. During the 1960s, it housed the 70-foot missile, which, on occasion, was lifted outside through two 90-ton overhead doors.

The doors, minus the hydraulic lifts, are still there, along with the white lamps that once lit up the silo.

Flaningam talks of the site lovingly noting he comes back two or three times a year – leaving his job up-fitting diesel trucks to clean it up. However,, knowing the task at hand is a lengthy and expensive one, he sometimes entertains offers from potential developers. Two years ago, he listed the silo on eBay and its roughly 20 acres of land for \$399,000 according to aa few national news sources.

Flaningam said he gave a tour to two interested brothers from Denver a few weeks ago. They, too, envision luxury living space, as well as, perhaps, underground rappelling.

But if such offers fall through, his work continues. Someday he hopes to have the launch control center refurbished to a point he might live in Kansas six months a year.

“It is an awesome conversation piece that doesn’t get old,” he said.

http://www.kansasagland.com/news/stateagnews/deep-into-the-past/article_033cb061-ca69-5ebf-a319-ae6e799b8d19.html





Photos by Sandra J. Milburn/The Hutchinson News

Jeff Flaningam talks about the condition of the first steel blast door to the underground launch command center of his Atlas F missile site Aug. 13 in Rice County.

SELLING MISSILE SILOS

Eskridge-area resident Ed Peden, who lives with his family in an Atlas E silo, operates 20th Century Castles, a company that helps people buy and sell old missile sites.

According to his website, his business has helped close on 57 sales of former missile sites and communication bunkers.

Peden said he has seen, firsthand, a wide variety of sites in various states of repair, offering expertise to potential buyers about the layout, development potential, value and structural longevity.

The market includes people looking for underground safety.

"Earth-contact hardened, nuclear-proof and engineered for the Department of Defense, they are some of the strongest buildings ever constructed. We consider them the 20th Century's counterpart of the fortified castles of Europe. Bringing new meaning to the word 'shelter,' they are built to stand the test of time, and offer privacy, security and functionality for generations to come," according to the site.

At present, Peden is currently trying to sell a missile silo near McPherson, which includes an upscale home and tennis court above the surface and the abandoned Atlas F nearby under the Earth.

Sage Ranch is for sale for \$645,000. Meanwhile, an unrenovated Atlas E site near Osage City is listed for \$265,000.

"Some of the strongest, well-built structures in the world and country are these old missile bases that are supposed to withstand a nuclear blast," Peden said.

And, it seems, business these days is booming. In north-central Kansas, developer Larry Hall has turned an Atlas F into a survival condo, renting space to high-end clients that include an NFL football player.

He has one completed and is working on another site, he said. The site includes living areas, a pool and spa, store, exercise area, classrooms and an agriculture production area, according to Hall's website, www.survivalcondo.com.

"There is a huge market, it is high-end, it is expensive," Hall said, noting he is the only one who has finished out an entire Atlas F silo.

Hall's site looked similar to Jeff Flaningam's in Rice County before he began to work on it, he said. He said he has put more than \$20 million into the renovations, he said.

– Amy Bickel
The News

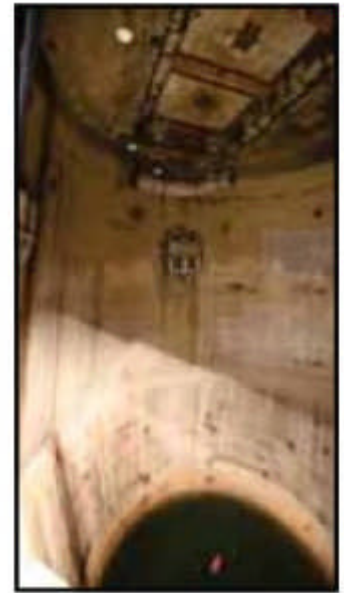
SILO FACTS

The United States had 72 Atlas F missile silos from 1959 to 1965. Twelve sites were in Kansas and were operated by Schilling Air Force Base in Salina.

According to missile silo owner Ed Peden, Eskridge, the cost of an Atlas F ranged from \$14-18 million in 1960s dollars; in today's equivalent, that is at least \$100 million.

An Atlas E site, which stored the missile in a 120-foot-long tunnel, cost about \$3.3 million, Peden said.

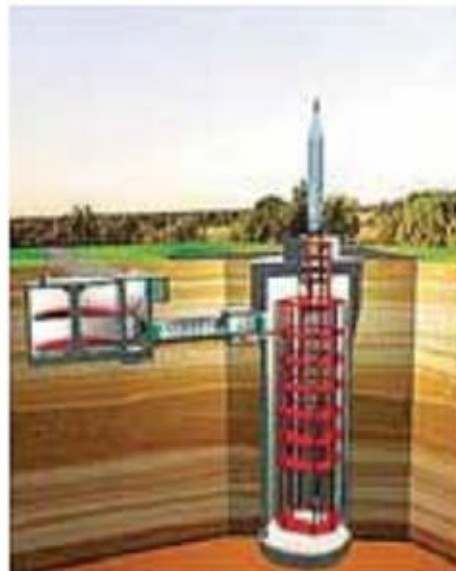
According to the Brookings Institution, as of September 2013, the U.S. had 4,804 nuclear weapons – active warheads in an "operational, ready-for-use configuration" and inactive warheads maintained in "non-operational status."



Stairs lead up from the launch control center.



Top: Jeff Flaningam walks through the tunnel connecting the missile silo to the command center. Left: Three images were merged to be able to see the inside of the top of the silo down to the water. Above: Seen is an Atlas F missile at Willow, Okla., which was Site 11 of the 577th SMS based at Altus Air Force Base.



A drawing shows the cutaway design of an Atlas F missile silo with a launch command center, left, missile silo, right, and a tunnel connecting the two.

Courtesy of 20th Century Castles LL