

# The Naval Ammunition Depot



View short clip of the "NAD in Hastings"

View short clip of "Building Bombs on the Plains"

Hastings was buzzing with excitement on June 10, 1942, six months after Pearl Harbor, when Senator George Norris and Congressman Carl Curtis announced that the Navy had authorized the establishment of a \$45,000,000 Naval Ammunition Depot southeast of Hastings. The Hastings area was chosen because of its abundance of electrical power from the Tri-County project, its location equidistant from both coasts and the availability of railroads. The government immediately began the process of taking 48,753 acres of farmland, located mostly in Clay County, from 232 owners.

Construction began July 14, 1942 with Maxon Construction Company as the prime contractor. The initial construction lasted 18 months and employed over 5,000. To relieve a critical housing shortage, the Navy established a 20-acre trailer court at 14th and Burlington, site of the Adams County fairgrounds, and constructed Spencer Park in southeast Hastings.

The first Marine guards arrived in December 1942 and a year later the Coast Guards K-9 patrol dogs arrived. The Navy began to hire men and women for the manufacture and storage of ammunition in January 1943. The NAD was commissioned on February 22, 1943, with Captain D.F. Patterson as commander. The first test run of projectile loading was made July 1, 1943 and three days later on July Fourth, the first loaded ammunition came off the production lines ready for the fleet. Employment and production reached their maximum in June and July 1945, when the Depot was manned by 125 officers, 1,800 enlisted men, and 6,692 civilians. An additional 2,000 civilians were still working for construction companies. In 1945 a special train of ammunition left Hastings for the West Coast and eventual use by the Pacific fleet. Among the types of ammunition produced at the Hastings NAD during the war years were bombs, mines, rockets, 40mm shells and 16-inch projectiles. One of the ingredients used on some loading lines was "Yellow-D" a powder which left a residue of yellow on workers' skin.

Pay for line workers started at 74 cents an hour for a 60-hour week. A typical sales clerk in Hastings was being paid 25 cents an hour at the time. The need for workers was so great that almost everyone who applied was hired. The depot operated 24 hours a day seven days a week during the war years.

The NAD maintained a good safety record, which is remarkable considering the vast amounts of ammunition manufactured and the speed with which it was produced. But there were occasional explosions. The official Navy history of the NAD lists only two explosions, but four occurred, all in 1944. The first was on January 27, when a six-inch shell which was being gauged exploded in the black powder room. Three men of the Negro Ordnance Battalion were killed: Adolph Johnson, Jesse Wilson, and J. C. Miles. Three streets in the depot were named for them.

Four months later during the early morning hours of April 6, a second explosion occurred in the bomb and mine loading area. One hundred thousand pounds of explosives blew up in a dual blast that occurred first in a boxcar being loaded and then in a cooling shed filled with mines and depth charges. Bodies of three persons were identified - Chester Arthur Curtis, Norris Elmer Frey, and Lida Sarah Mitchell - and buried along with the ashes of five others - Lois Lillian Nevins Adams, Vera E. Conant, Mary E. McQuaid, Keith Clark Mathiasen, and LaVerne L. Tompkins - in a little cemetery on the depot land, south of Inland. Their monument erected by fellow employees reads "They gave their lives that liberty might not perish." Streets in the depot were named after these people also. This blast was felt as far away as Omaha and south into Kansas. Eyewitnesses said a blinding sheet of flame lighted up the entire sky. Glenvil, the town closest to the

explosion was badly damaged. Every house in the village seemed to rock on its foundation. Downtown store fronts were shattered. Other nearby towns - Harvard, Fairfield and Clay Center - suffered considerable damage.

A small explosion on June 10, 1944 killed one man when a detonator in the 60mm building went off, decapitating Walter Michaelsen, a civilian employee.

The largest explosion occurred at 9:15 a.m. on September 15, 1944, when the south transfer depot of the railroad line blew up, leaving a crater 550 feet long, 220 feet wide, and 50 feet deep. Reportedly, nine servicemen were killed and fifty-three injured. Those killed were Coast Guard S1/C Bert E. Hugen, and Navy S1/C Leslie Williams, S1/C Freeman Lorenzo Tull, S1/C Willie Williams, S2/C Daniel Casey, S2/C Frank William David, S2/C Samuel Burns, S2/C Clarence Randolph, and S2/C Ulysses Cole, Jr. There is still speculation that the number of dead and injured was higher. The blast was felt as far away as Kansas and Iowa. There was damage in all the towns around. A portion of the roof at the Harvard school caved in, injuring ten children. The earthen barricades in front of the storage igloos loaded with explosives held, preventing an even greater loss of life and property. Newspaper accounts of all the explosions are limited due to the wartime security issues involved. A complete study of Navy records is yet to be done.

Eventually the NAD consisted of more than 2,200 buildings, warehouses and bunkers with a value of 71 million dollars. The Hastings NAD was the largest of four inland Navy ammunition depots, the others being located in Oklahoma, Indiana and Nevada. In April 1945 the work week was reduced from 60 to 54 hours, and in August it was reduced to 40 hours and the number of employees was reduced to 3,000. By 1949 personnel numbered 1,189.

The outbreak of the Korean War brought about reactivation of the depot in August 1950. Peak employment during the Korean War occurred in January 1954 when 2,946 civilians were employed. The depot was placed on maintenance status in April 1957 and in December 1958 disestablishment was ordered, to be completed no later than June 30, 1966.

In September 1964, 10,236 acres near Clay Center were transferred to the U.S. Department of Agriculture for the Meat Animal Research Center. The administrative headquarters, comprising 640 acres and 28 buildings were transferred to Central Community College in 1966. During 1966 and 1967 surplus land at the NAD was sold to various business and industrial firms who comprise what is now known as Hastings Industrial Park East.

In its lifetime the NAD produced and stored vast quantities of ammunition. From its lines came a constant flow of ammunition from 40mm shells to 16 inch projectiles, plus rockets, bombs, depth charges, mines and torpedoes. At one time during World War II, the depot supplied 40 percent of the Navy's ammunition needs.

In August 1992 the Adams County Historical Society erected a historical marker at the entrance to Central Community College. The marker text reads as follows:

The U.S. Naval Ammunition Depot, known locally as "The NAD" was the largest of the Navy's WWII inland munitions plants, covering almost 49,000 acres of Adams and Clay County farmland. Ordnance was loaded, assembled and stored from groundbreaking in July 1942 to final closing in June 1966. By VJ Day in 1945, the NAD employed 10,000 military and civilian workers. At one point in WWII the site produced nearly 40% of the Navy's ordnance, including 16 inch shells. Built at a cost of \$71 million, the NAD had 207 miles of railroad track, 274 miles of roads and 2200 buildings, including 10 miles of distinctive "igloo" storage bunkers. The plant embittered farmers whose land was taken by the government but also produced an economic boom for the region as Hastings' population jumped from 15,200 to 23,000 in 1943. In September 1944 a bomb loading accident killed 9, injured 54 and produced a crater 550 feet long. The blast was felt 100 miles away and shattered windows for miles around.

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