

The Minuteman Missile Train

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The Cold War prompted changes in the U.S. military to a degree far greater than any “hot war” had ever done previously. Nikita Khrushchev’s boast that, “the Soviet Union was turning out nuclear bombs like sausages” made many uneasy. In retrospect those sausages were mostly bologna and never existed but for a few.

One of our defense strategies in October 1959 was to create 20 to 30 minuteman missile trains, which would be armed with intercontinental ballistic missiles. The idea was to keep them moving constantly over different railroads in the Midwest making them elusive. The DM&IR Railway lobbied hard to get the support base built on the Iron Range and offered to provide the maintenance of the train cars and engines at their Proctor shops. Oliver Iron Mining officials were aghast when the railroad president suggested the Air Force could hide some of the nuclear warheads on mining company property. They countered by saying that maybe they should put them in the Proctor roundhouse instead. This effectively ended those unofficial negotiations abruptly.

There were some advantages to having a support facility here and I will mention just a few. At the time this process was taking place in 1961, the Bomarc Missile Base was being built on the Bergquist Road (*Ed: the water tower site*). The Bomarc was a surface to air (SAM) interceptor missile with a range of roughly 400 miles. It was primarily meant as a defense against incoming bombers. The “bomber gap” of this period, where the Russians were supposed to have many more than us, was just another case of Soviet bologna. The 343rd Fighter Squadron was based in Duluth at the time and the 756th Radar Squadron’s Finland Radar Base, built back in 1951, kept a close watch on the sky to the north. All three were linked to the SAGE (*Semi Automatic Ground Environment*) building in Duluth, which served as the nerve center (*Ed: now NRRRI by the airport on Hwy 53*). All would have provided protection for the Minuteman Support Base if it had become a reality. For unknown reasons the area was dropped from the list of potential sites. Today the SAGE building, the Finland Radar Base, and the Bomarc Missile Base are all long gone and are now just a reminder of when we lived in fear of Russian bologna.

Behind the story... The reason the DM&IR was so interested is because shipping iron ore had dropped from a high of over 49 million tons in 1953 to just over 18 million tons in 1961. While Reserve Mining and Erie Mining were established in the taconite process, U.S. Steel, and thus DM&IR, were not until 1967. They held out until the Taconite Tax Amendment was passed before getting involved. In the mean time the natural ore was running out and mines were shutting down. For this reason there was less work hauling ore or maintaining diesels and rolling stock. Getting the support base would give a boost to the economy of the area as well as the railroad.

There were eleven areas selected as possible sites for the support base around the U.S. This area had a lot of assets including the military ones of which the Bomarc base played a role. We were close to the Canadian Border and any attack by Russia would come from over the North

Pole since it is the shortest route. This includes both missiles and aircraft. Our land-based ICBM's are all in the Midwest as far away from the edges of the country as they can get. This way any attacking force would have to cross a considerable amount of our territory to get to them. The problem is that these missile silos are stationary and thus can be specifically targeted. A missile train is hard to pinpoint and harder to target. It was estimated an enemy would have to expend around 10,000 warheads to have any hope of destroying the trains. At any rate, Ogden, Utah seemed to be favored in the end even though it is 400 miles farther south of the Canadian border than the Iron Range. Northeast Minnesota was dropped from consideration and on January 18th, 1963, the railroad shops in Two Harbors closed in what is known as "*Black Friday*". Tonnage had dropped to 16.5 million tons.

Fred Voss was the president of the railroad who was attempting to get the support base here. It was no doubt an effort to save the jobs of some employees and help the region. Unfortunately, Mr. Voss died suddenly from a heart attack shortly before *Black Friday*. He had come up through the ranks of the railroad to finally be president and knew many of the employees on a personal basis. I believe the stress may have contributed to his untimely death. The next president was brought in from out east to handle the layoffs since he knew nobody here. One has to wonder how different things may have been if the support base had become a reality. We'll never know.