



Margaret Hadsell:
Vestal Town
Historian

Town Historian Margaret Hadsell investigates the remains of fallout shelters in the Vestal community. Pictured above is one such shelter: the entry into the small room is on the left, bunks are attached to the wall on the right.

Photo courtesy of Margaret Hadsell

Abandoned Remnants of the Cold War

by Margaret Hadsell
Community contributor

If you were in school during the 1950s you probably remember the Cold War Civil Defense “Duck and Cover” drills. As school children, we practiced crouching under our desks or against hallway walls with eyes closed and arms covering our heads for protection against a nuclear attack. Thankfully, we never needed to use this technique against the obliterating effects of an atomic bomb.

Confusion and controversy reigned as scientists debated whether fallout shelters would afford protection from radiation. Schools studied whether to add them to new buildings, while existing public buildings setup community fallout shelters where groups participated in shelter training and testing.

IBM considered constructing a fallout shelter under their million-dollar cafeteria at the corner of North Street and

McKinley Avenue.

Fallout shelters in Vestal

One newspaper article reported that between August and the end of October 1961, more than 200 shelters had been built or were under construction in the Southern Tier. In 1962, the state Legislature endorsed the Rockefeller fallout school program which set aside \$1 million; \$15,000 of which was earmarked for state buildings, with the remainder to assist schools in constructing fallout shelters.

The Maine-Endwell and Vestal school districts were the only two schools in Broome County who investigated the feasibility of using the fund.

Vestal had become the “bedroom community” for workers from numerous local manufacturers, especially IBM, which had large facilities in three local areas: the Glendale section of Union, Endicott and Owego.

IBM’s announcement in fall 1961 of a \$13 million program to help local employees build and equip a family fallout shelter on their property led to a construction boom for local masons. Set up as an interest-free loan of up to \$1000, repayable over a three-year period through payroll deductions, the loan would provide the \$300 to \$700 cost of a typical home shelter.

Residents throughout the Triple Cities, many of them IBM employees, built concrete shelters accessible from the basement of their homes, with some choosing the less common above ground style.

One neighborhood in central Vestal has several home shelters, the result of a former IBM weapons systems engineer, who encouraged his neighbors to use the program to protect their families. Shelters were considered selling features in real estate ads of the early 1960s.

Definitely not for the claustrophobic, the height of the corridor and stairwell leading to the shelter forces you to stoop as you descend to the room.

Constructed from 60 tons of concrete, the 11-by-11-by-6.5-foot room was said to be capable of housing up to 10 people for three to four weeks. The room and small corridor at the bottom of the steps are sealed off by a thick concrete door hinged at the top and released from the inside. One wall of the room is fitted with built-in bunks, a second with shelving for supplies. Although built with running water and electricity, neither would likely be available after an attack. A hand-cranked fan connected to a ventilation pipe was used for air exchanges. In the shelter shown here, a pipe was retrofitted to keep the concrete door permanently open.

What remains today

More than 50 years later, some shelters remain unused while others have become storage areas or, in one case, a photographic dark room. A resident of that Vestal neighborhood recalls that one home owner, who worked the night shift at IBM, used his shelter to ensure quiet, uninterrupted sleep during the day.

Today’s students no longer have civil defense drills but there are areas of the country where a similar drill is practiced as a form of self-protection during a tornado. The total devastation by recent category F3-F5 tornadoes demonstrates the protective inadequacy of a school desk.

Ducking under school desks and fallout shelters may not



A hand-cranked fan was used to provide air from a vent pipe behind the house with a wall spigot for water.

Photo courtesy of Margaret Hadsell



The entrance to a fallout shelter is down a flight of steps beyond a concrete door in the basement wall. A pipe, retrofitted after the end of the Cold War, holds the concrete door permanently open.

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have protected us against the horrors of a nuclear attack, but they did give us a plan, and most of all, they gave us hope of surviving.

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