

# Plant that Burned Natural Gas Now Distant Memory

ADAM VOGEL, Casper Star-Tribune

MIDWEST, Wyo. (AP) — The plant sits in a valley near Ship Rock, empty, broken and forgotten.

Sixty years have not been kind to this building.

The walls were once a solid, concrete gray. Fifty-four high school classes have come through Midwest since the plant's closure, and members of most of them left their names behind in white and red spray paint.

Of the 5,400 window panes once part of the plant, maybe 1,000 remain untouched. The rest have been shattered by shotgun blasts, well-aimed rocks and hunks of concrete. Wind constantly blows through, making the plant no better a wind shelter than a piece of cheesecloth. The hum of a still-active substation a few hundred feet down the hill is the only other noise present, aside from the glass that crunches underfoot.

This building once provided electricity for an oil field and as many as seven Natrona County towns and cities. It supplied work for as many as 20, their families living in an array of houses constructed in the building's shadow.

But for five decades, it's been little more than a teenage hangout, a graffiti canvas and an occasional shelter for livestock.

The plant, shut down more than 50 years ago, burned natural gas to generate electricity, an increasingly popular generation technique these days.

The building serves as a window to the past, but could also be a glimpse into the future of power generation.

Midwest was an oil town long before the electric plant was built. The area was home to the Salt Creek Oil Field, a field that once contained 4,000 wells. With each oil well came natural gas, an unwelcome product most had no use for.

At one point, much of that gas was flared — burned through a tall stack rising from the ground. It projected a flame some say was 100 feet long and could be seen from Casper.

Stories vary on what happened to the flare. Some say it burned a woman to death. Others say a group of people were burnt near the tower. All stories end with it being taken down and replaced by a smaller unit designed to be safer.

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By 1923, most wells were run with pumps, compounding the need to get rid of gas with the need for a constant supply of power. Midwest Refining Company soon decided to build an electric plant just north of the field on the banks of Shannon Lake, a body of water created by the damming of Salt Creek.

Information that follows about the plant, its construction and operation is gleaned from interviews with current and former Midwest residents, archival newspaper articles and information obtained at the Salt Creek Museum in Midwest.

Building such a structure was no small feat. In 1923, the arc welder hadn't been invented. Most materials were transported by teams of horses. Steel beams were riveted together.

All told, the building took more than 30,000 sacks of concrete and 350 tons of steel to build.

More than 2,000 men worked to build the plant. They also constructed the array of houses for plant workers and their families, nicknamed Electric Plant Camp, soon after.

Construction on the outside of the building came to a close in October 1924. The plant began operation the next January.

The steel and concrete structure housed four boilers, two Allis-Chalmers turbines capable of generating 25 megawatts of electricity and two circulating pumps. Four smokestacks, 12 feet in diameter and 50 feet tall, protruded through holes in the plant's ceiling. In the 1940s, one of the stacks would be removed and installed in a warship.

Natural gas was piped in on a seven-mile line, transported directly from the field's gas processing plant. Sometimes, to keep the line from freezing, workers added a barrel of alcohol to the pipe.

The four enormous boilers were lined with fire brick. The boilers burned the gas, which heated water from the lake, creating steam to spin the turbine. It was the first natural gas-fired plant in Wyoming, and possibly one of the first in the world.

The plant made Salt Creek Field one of the first electrified oil fields in the world. The electricity was also used to light the first fully-lit football game in the country in 1925.

The Midwest Electric Plant hasn't generated electricity in 60 years, but it's still alive to Orin Young.

Young grew up in Electric Plant Camp. His father, Norman, worked at the plant as an engineer. Every day, Orin brought lunch to his father. He still remembers much of the plant the way he experienced it as a boy.

"It was clean and quiet," he said during an early December tour of the empty

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building. "There were big fires."

Norman worked a desk in the back corner of the building, checking electric meters to make sure the plant's output was constant.

Norman manned the plant with three crews of five workers and a small maintenance staff. Workers at the plant kept one of the two generators running at all times, with a third, a much smaller turbine constantly running, ready to replace any failing units.

In the rare times they ran out of natural gas, the plant burned crude oil, sending a cloud of black smoke into the Salt Creek Field air.

The plant closed for good in 1958, about a year after Norman retired.

Pacific Light and Power moved to the area and bought the transmission lines but not the building, which started as a Midwest Refining Company property and changed hands more times than most with secondhand knowledge of the plant can track.

"They didn't have anybody who knew how to run this plant," Orin said.

As Orin — a 1951 Midwest High School graduate — remembers it, people in Midwest didn't worry about the plant closure.

"It was just, 'Oh well,'" he said.

Most who'd lived in Electric Plant Camp picked up and moved seven miles south into Midwest proper and started over.

What happens to the old plant next remains to be seen.

There are stacks of hay and feed in what used to be the boiler room and a loading dock.

Parts of the main floor are sinking in. The lowest level of the building — once the pump room — is now completely flooded, likely by groundwater. Stairs that led from the generator room to a room some 20 feet below have since fallen to the ground, leaving only a long drop down.

Orin has salvaged as much as possible from the plant since its closure — a boiler nameplate here, a drill press there — and donated much of it to the Salt Creek Museum.

The man's love for the building is evident. Now retired, he's still willing to climb into his beat-up silver Volvo and drive the nearly 100 miles from his home in Story to give a tour of the plant and relive old memories.

"I'm proud of the old place," he said. "Not that I had much to do with it."

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Young said that he's considered requesting some sort of historic designation for the structure, but wouldn't know where to start.

And the building's value may also eclipse the historic. With natural gas prices waning and impending Environmental Protection Agency regulations that would make it even more expensive to burn coal, natural gas is becoming a popular fuel for power plants.

Young said he's not sure what it would take to renovate the plant, but it may not be necessary.

"It's lasted this long," he said. "If it only lasted another 100 years ...."

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