

Protesters hit 10 Missouri nuke sites

By TIM MCCARTHY
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Butler, Mo.

BATHED IN EARLY morning sun, on the edge of a drought-rocked soybean field, Betty Lewis, 61-year-old Chicago mother of seven, scaled the barbed fence surrounding Minuteman missile silo L-9 and dropped into the restricted, "deadly force" area below. She was one of 14 peace activists who entered 10 nuclear missile sites scattered across farmland in the Butler area Aug. 15.

Dubbed Missouri Peace Planting '88, the operation involved about 150 people from across the Midwest, in what organizers said was the biggest protest action of its kind ever launched. A coalition of peace and social justice groups, from Plowshares supporters to Catholic Workers and Nukewatch, based in Madison, Wis., worked together for six months to plan and organize the operation.

Air Force security personnel, dressed in full combat gear, apprehended the 14 protesters, along with four witnesses, and turned them over to civil authorities to face probable trespassing charges. All 18 were issued Air Force "ban and bar" letters and could be subject to \$500 fines and up to six months in jail if convicted of criminal trespass under federal law.

The scene at silo L-9 was typical. Traveling the 50 miles south from Kansas City through the predawn dark, Lewis arrived with a careful of supporters shortly after sunup. The car — driven by another Chicago woman who said she could not let a jail term put her teaching contract at risk — sped off, leaving Lewis and her two witnesses at the perimeter gate.

Pressing to meet the coordinated zero hour of 7 a.m., the three women hurried to the silo gate. They tied banners to the chain link fence, then Lewis flung a lavender bath mat over the barbed wire at the top of the gate. In a few seconds, she was up and over and dropping with a crunch onto the silo area gravel. She said later that her only fear was not being able to climb the fence. There was no need to worry. Everyone there admired the trim, white-haired woman's agility.

Buried in the silo behind her was a Minuteman II missile with a 1.2 megaton nuclear warhead, a hundred times more powerful than the Hiroshima bomb. There are 150 of those warheads in western Missouri underground silos alone.

Lewis hustled over to the silo hatch to make sure the electronic sensors would alert Air Force security of her presence. She had flowers with her — a rose to leave by the hatch and other flowers for "joy," as she put it. Back by the fence, she scattered bird seed and planted a fast-growing African tree as a symbol, she said, of the kind of development the

United States should be putting its missile money into.

One of the action's goals was ecological, a symbolic attempt to reclaim the land for wheat, corn and soybeans from the weapons of death and mass destruction lurking beneath the soil. "It's like razors in a loaf of bread," said Sam Day, codirector of Nukewatch, a protest organizer and one of those arrested. "The Air Force thinks it owns that land, but it doesn't. It belongs to all of us and we want to take it back."

Chores behind her, Lewis flipped the bath mat off the wire. "Cele," she said to Cecilia Wagner, one of her witnesses, "save your bath mat for next time." The action was called Missouri Peace Planting '88 in anticipation of even larger protests covering more silos in 1989 and beyond.

Now that she had little to do except wait to be arrested, did Lewis fear the consequences of her action? No, she said. "I would like to see everyone sitting on a silo and the consequence would be disarmament."

That said, Lewis went and sat in the lotus position on the silo hatch. As witnesses and reporters withdrew to the perimeter in anticipation of the Air Force's arrival, Lewis cut a lonely figure sitting on the concrete hatch in the immensity of the heartland, small and silent between the morning sky and the murderous thunder beneath her. Later, she spoke of the eerie paradox of hearing the summer dawn, the birds, the breeze brushing the grass, against the unceasing hum rising from the silo.

An hour passed. Impatient now, Wagner walked back up to the fence. The other witness, Connie Dover, 29, a "concerned citizen" from Kansas City, soon joined her. Lewis came over and they stood there bantering, gripping the wire

between them, trying to lighten the wait. "If I'd known it would take so long, I wouldn't have hurried," Lewis said with a smile.

Wagner laughed. She is 60, a big, unabashed woman who speaks her mind, a nurse who volunteers her services at the St. James soup kitchen in Kansas City (NCR, Jan. 23, 1987). "The first hour is back to nature," she said. "The second hour is back to the city, a bath and a Bloody Mary."

But beneath the blunt humor, Wagner's seriousness is deep as life. She resisted civil disobedience for a long while, but was finally compelled to get involved. "You have to bear witness for the young people," she said.

"You can't separate any aspect of social justice work," Wagner said. "It's all of a piece." Wagner's consistent-ethic attitude was shared by many of those involved in the protest.

Well into the second hour, a snoutish armored vehicle appeared. It sat up by the silo gate for a time, motor rumbling, no life visible behind the tinted windshield or viewing slits. Then two air-men wearing camouflage combat clothes, helmets and bulletproof vests, climbed out with their M-16 rifles. One kept to the vehicle while the other cautiously opened the gate, moved in a combat crouch around the inside of the fence until he was behind Lewis.

Suddenly, Lewis stood, raised her arms high above her head, then slowly backed off the silo. As she sidestepped her way toward the gate, onlookers could hear the soldier barking commands at her. He was crouching back along the fence, weapon at the ready, always directly behind Lewis.

When Lewis was finally outside the gate, the soldier ordered her to lean onto the wire. For five minutes or more, he body-searched her while his partner trained a rifle on her. Then she was handcuffed and stood under a sizzling sun for half an hour, until they allowed her to move into the shade of the armored truck.

Some while later, an officer and another enlisted man pulled up in a Ford Bronco. The officer ordered that Lewis be given some water, but the handcuffs were not removed until she was handed over to a Missouri state trooper more than three hours after the action began. Bates County and Wightman Air Force Base authorities were busy that morning.

During the long wait for the Highway Patrol, a reporter overheard this exchange between the officer and a sergeant: "What I want to know is how they got her on that site."

"I guess she climbed the fence," the sergeant said.

"No way that old lady could climb that fence."

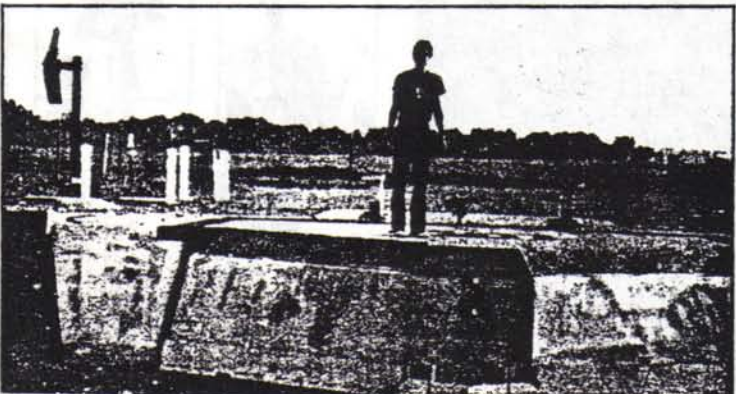
But she did. ■



Betty Lewis at L-9: up. . .



over. . .



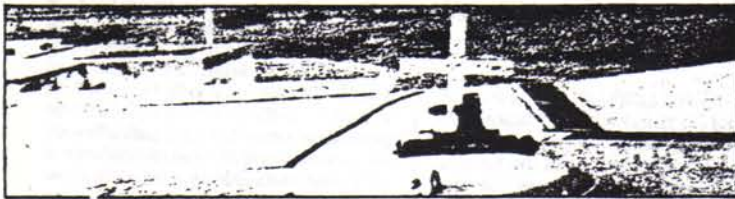
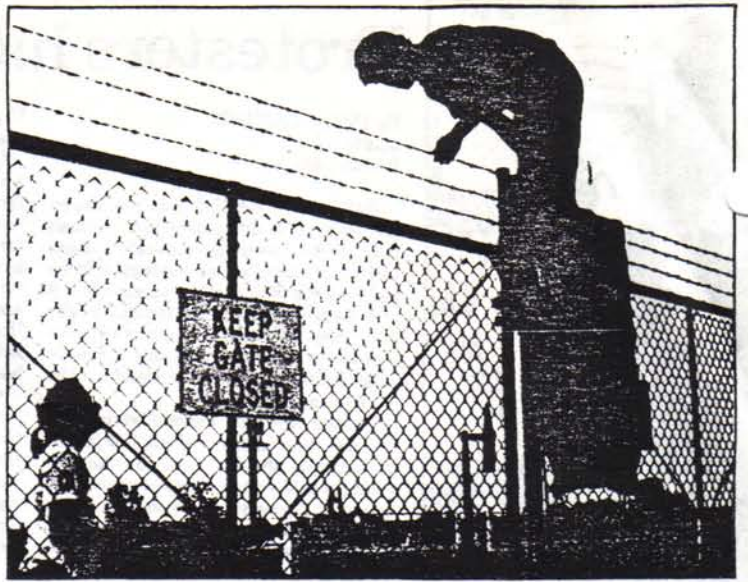
More silos occupied

Kansas City, Mo.

IN FOLLOW-UP actions Aug. 16 and 17, Missouri Peace Planting '88 activists occupied two additional nuclear missile silos in the Kansas City area. On both occasions, the protesters were issued Air Force "ban and bar" letters and released.

Most of the protesters involved had been arrested earlier, during the initial action Aug. 15. Chicago activist Betty Lewis, featured above, was one of nine protesters who occupied silo M-2 in Lafayette County Aug. 17. The group was specifically protesting that day's underground nuclear explosion at the Nevada test site.

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Photos bottom of page 4, from left to right:

Mark Stanek, Chicago, standing on silo lid of site K-11.
Ariel Glenn, Milwaukee, planting shrub inside site K-9.

Sam Day, in clown suit, with Katie Williams inside site K-8.

White cross commemorating victim of U.S. involvement in Central America, site K-5.

Katy Felt and Sam Guardino planting seeds inside site K-10.

Photos page 5, left to right from the top: Jerry Zawada, Milwaukee, and Duane Bean, Chicago, inside site G-11.

Banner inside site K-4.

Katy Felt, Chicago, watches as Sam Guardino, Chicago, climbs fence of site K-10.

Kathy Kelly, Chicago, prepares to plant corn inside site K-4.

Dorothy Eber, Villa Park, Ill., stands at fence inside site K-5.

Den McGuire, Chicago, climbs over the gate of site J-8.

Bonnie Urfer, left, and Gail Beyer, both Madison, Wis., inside site K-6.

(All photos courtesy Missouri Peace Planting '88)

