

Whatever Happened to ... Fallout Shelters

By Beth Hoad
Palmyra Historian

The "September 11 attacks" and curiosity have prompted this study on public fallout shelters within our community. There were several buildings in Palmyra that were designated shelters, but first let's discuss the why's and wherefores.

The first public shelters appeared as a result of the passage of the Defense Emergency Act of 1951. The act defined a shelter as "a building, structure or other real property, or an area or portion thereof, so constructed, altered or improved as to provide protection against harmful radiation resulting from radioactive fallout." That feared radioactive fallout would have been the residue after any possible atomic bombing that may have come as part of the Cold War in which our country was involved with the U.S.S.R. (Communist Russia.)

The northeastern United States was considered a prime target because of many large cities and a concentration of heavy industry. New York City was the "primest of all" targets. Therefore, fallout shelters, both public and private, were set up in that section of the country first. In addition, a nationwide network of air defenses was created. That network included long-range radar sites to detect the approach of Soviet bombers, interceptor aircraft, antiaircraft gun batteries and surface-to-air missile sites.

Even American culture centered on shelters. Movies such as "Fail Safe" and "Dr. Strangelove" were two examples of those movies. Many popular songs were written about the possible destruction, but they began to fade after the Nuclear Test Ban Treaty of 1963.

Fallout shelters were filled with emergency food supplies, much of which was government issued, and sealed containers of water, medical and sanitary supplies. Cots, bedding, collapsible litters and body bags were also provided. Many people built special structures in or near their homes and stocked them with survival items thinking that they could provide sufficient or, or better, shelters for themselves and their families. For many citizens the idea of hiding in basements for a week or two or more after a nuclear attack was a very frightening thought, but after a while, the fear subsided and life went on. Ironically, others felt the real effect of fallout shelters was the heightening of fear and anxiety about nuclear war and its aftereffects.

Various survival groups offered emergency shelter plans for shelter not only from nuclear fallout, but also natural occurrences such as tornados. Plans for both above and below ground shelters and home basement renovations could be found. There were even plans for homemade fallout meters available.

At the federal level, the Federal Civil Defense Administration (FDCA) and the Office for Emergency Management (OEM) coordinated program activities. Some of the programs included fallout shelters, chemical, biological and radiological warfare defense, emergency communications and warning systems, post attack assistance and damage assessment, preparedness planning and government continuity. In July 1979, the FCDA was succeeded by the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA), which now coordinates and manages emergency management.

In checking local records, the following undated memo from Edward G. Swartele, Director of Wayne County Civil Defense regarding shelter status in the local community was found.

It reads in part:

"In the past three years the Wayne County Office of Civil Defense has been locating, marking, and stocking existing shelter facilities in this county. Updating has been accomplished with the assistance of the Corps of Engineers.

Letters of recommendations have been sent to school officials urging shielding in new school construction and other public facilities.

This shelter program has sharply pointed out the deficiency we have in Wayne County as to the number of spaces available to the population of Wayne County.

The Federal Government has embarked on a Community Shelter Planning Program (CSP) on a Nation wide basis. This program will be conducted from Federal, State and County levels and is expected to reach this county within the next two years or less.

...Urban renewal planning for future construction of new facilities within a community should cooperate in the planning for all future public facilities within the county, giving serious consideration for shielding against fallout radiation.

...In the Community Shelter Planning Program traffic control and the movement of people to shelters will be a community responsibility requiring the use of both regular and auxiliary police, fire departments and other community services and resources.

Qualified persons must be trained as shelter managers to man these facilities in time of an emergency resulting from a nuclear attack, should one occur. ..."

Some Village of Palmyra documents dated 1961 state that part of the cellar of the Community Center could be converted into an air raid shelter. "Not much work needs to be done," were the words used to describe the condition of the facility. There was also a reference to the Village Hall cellar and using the old (jail) cells.

Garlock, Inc. was a key player in our local planning since, according to some 1966 records, the Garlock facility could accommodate 2700 people. The plant would be marked and stocked with food, sanitation and medical supplies, radiation detection instruments and water drums. It would be designated as a shelter complex with one unit designated as the shelter headquarters. Ideally, three trained shelter managers per location and trained personnel for radiation equipment would also be present. The entire shelter program was based on the continuation of management and production in the industrial plant and within the local government.

On August 2, 1967, the basement of the Palmyra-Macedon Senior High School was designated as the office of local government in the event of a Civil Defense emergency or federally directed Civil Defense exercise. It was directed that the Village Trustees, Village Clerk, Chief of Police, Fire Chief, Superintendent of Streets, Superintendent of Water and Sewer Department and the Village Police Justice would report immediately upon notification to this location. To be sure, many of us remember the air raid drills held at school where we were instructed to sit along the hallways with our heads down, or else under our desks, again with our heads down.

Some area residents who would have been around at that time, may remember the following locations were also designated shelters: Village Hall with a capacity of 100 people, the Davis building next to the Village Hall, the former Town Hall building corner Main and William Sts., The Sexton Building, also known as the Health Center with room for 100, Attorney Foley's building, the building now occupied by Wooden's Custom Upholstery, and the Palmyra-Macedon Elementary and High School buildings.

According to Wayne County Emergency Management Office Director Thelma Wideman, in 1985, the order came down to "decommission" or remove supplies and equipment from all shelters within the county. She said that suitable non-perishable items were distributed to various county facilities and hospitals. Some items had to be disposed of or destroyed, and any food items that were still sealed and therefore fit for consumption, were passed out as well. On the lighter side, she said that her office staff ate Fallout Shelter candy for a long time, and she believes they still have some paper products on hand in their storage rooms to this day.

Many of the buildings throughout the county and state that were once thought to be suitable to protect citizens from the ravages of a nuclear attack have been demolished or stand vacant and rotting. In Palmyra, however, most of the yellow and black Fallout Shelter markers, however faded, are still posted on the several Palmyra buildings that were proudly displayed as a sign of our past emergency preparedness.

(Captions) Fallout shelter signs are still displayed on the Village Hall...

...the Davis Building ...

...inside the Health Center at the top of the basement stairs...

...the former Town Hall ...

...Attorney Foley's office...

...Wooden's Custom Upholstery .