



# Mercury, Nevada

## Introduction

Mercury, Nevada, a town 65 miles northwest of Las Vegas, is the gateway to the Nevada Test Site (NTS). There is no evidence as to how Mercury was named, but legend says that an unknown miner worked in the Calico Hills in the 1850s mining mercury-bearing ore. His route of travel became known as the Mercury Road, and the area surrounding it became known as Mercury.



*The Mercury Post Office on opening day, October 1964.*

Almost one hundred years later the Atomic Energy Commission (AEC) built Mercury into a thriving area containing many of the facilities, services, and amenities as other small towns in the U.S., only without public access.

## Background

The amount of personnel needed to conduct the first series of nuclear tests, Operation Ranger, at the NTS in 1951 demonstrated a need to establish minimum camp facilities at Mercury. Temporary quarters, utilities, warehouses, mess halls, and administrative offices were constructed to meet the needs of the hundreds of workers present during subsequent test series.

## The early days

Located just five miles from Highway 95, Base Camp Mercury, as it was originally called, provided office space and living quarters for civilian and military test personnel. A \$6.7 million construction project was approved in 1951 to alleviate overcrowding and provide expanded facilities in Mercury.

By the mid 1950s, Mercury had a U.S. Postal Service location, changing it from Base Camp Mercury to the officially designated Mercury, Nye County, Nevada.

## Boom town

During the 1960s, the addition of the Plowshare Program and the Nuclear Rocket Development Station, activities involving the use of nuclear energy for peaceful purposes, led to the establishment of the NTS as year-round test site. The results of this increasing activity were evident in Mercury.

For the first 11 years, Mercury continued to be populated with mainly temporary structures. In 1962, a supplemental AEC appropriations bill included a \$15 million request for permanent NTS construction, including amenities for more than 10,000 employees working and living at the NTS. Building construction changed from temporary/semi-permanent structures to permanent facilities of reinforced concrete and steel frames, providing a feeling of permanence to the burgeoning desert town.

With construction funding approved, new facilities for both business and recreation sprang up across the town. A communications building; health, medicine and safety building; engineering and administrative building; maintenance shop; motor pool and repair shop; warehouses, and two new dormitories were among the new permanent structures added to the landscape. The Desert Rock Air Strip was completed to accommodate President Kennedy's tour of the Nuclear Rocket Development Station in 1963, and remains active to this day.



*The movie theater at Mercury played current features for a nominal admission.*



One of the larger, most anticipated construction projects was the Mercury Cafeteria and Steakhouse. Food facilities consultants studied the special feeding problems and overcrowding at Mercury mess halls and worked with the architect/engineer to design the new cafeteria's kitchen and serving areas. Trays used in the new cafeteria had a modified triangle shape so that four trays would fit on one table, a design that is still used in the cafeteria today. The cafeteria combined style with function: the perforated block wall was not used just for aesthetics - the wall assists in the heating and cooling of the cafeteria. Upon its completion, the new cafeteria had a total seating capacity of 800, and a steakhouse to provide a more elegant dining experience.



*The Olympic-size Mercury swimming pool opened for business in 1964.*

After a long shift, NTS workers could relax at a variety of new recreation facilities. A movie theater, established in a Quonset hut, showed current features such as *"The Longest Day," "Oklahoma,"* and *"West Side Story."* Mercury Bowl, the new eight-lane bowling alley opened on February 1, 1964 and contained a full-service snack bar. An Olympic-size swimming pool with bathroom and shower facilities opened that summer - season tickets were five dollars; daily admission was 50 cents. A recreation hall provided workers with areas for badminton, ping pong, square dancing classes, and bridge tournaments.



*Mercury Bowl was a popular retreat after a long shift.*

Sports were also a popular pastime in Mercury. In addition to newly established bowling leagues, workers enjoyed basketball, softball, volleyball, golf, tennis, and archery. A health center offered classes for women, and a hobby shop provided space for leisure pursuits.

A new 3,700 square foot chapel opened to accommodate Sunday worshippers of all faiths, with priests and chaplains officiating.

Other services available to workers living at the NTS included check cashing, laundry and dry cleaning, a lending library, barbershop, service station, bussing, housing, and a Western Union location.

### **Mercury today**

During the era of nuclear testing, from 1951 to 1992, Mercury bustled with activity. In the absence of nuclear testing, the amount of workers present at the NTS is a fraction of what it used to be, eliminating the need for recreational facilities such as the swimming pool, bowling alley, and movie theater. Today, many of the facilities used during testing have been demolished, and others are finding new purposes in support of the Nevada Test Site's changing role in national security.

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