

Beacon of the North

The quest to save Brainerd's historic water tower

Photo by Dan Vang, Pierz, MN, a 2016 LCJ Photo Contest Entrant

WRITTEN BY JODIE TWEED | PHOTOGRAPHS COURTESY OF CARL FAUST AND CROW WING COUNTY HISTORICAL SOCIETY

SOME CALL IT “PAUL BUNYAN’S FLASHLIGHT.” Others think it resembles a castle. Brainerd’s historic water tower has been a city landmark since it was constructed nearly 100 years ago. You knew that you had made it “Up North” when you saw the iconic structure on the corner of South Sixth and Washington streets.

But the water tower, which was retired in 1959-60, is in need of repair. Pieces of stucco are flaking off the large upper bowl. It’s becoming a safety hazard.

Unfortunately, it’s going to be a costly fix, with renovations estimated up to \$3 million. Tearing it down would cost about \$300,000.

The city has taken efforts to stabilize the structure to buy time. If the water tower is torn down, the city loses its landmark and a piece of history. The water tower, designed by L.P. Wolff, was built between 1919-20 when the city constructed a new water system.

The Brainerd water tower is one of three concrete water towers designed by Wolff that remain standing—its twin tower is in Pipestone, Minnesota, and another can be found in the Historic Pill Hill neighborhood in Rochester. Brainerd’s tower was the first poured-in-place concrete water tower used for municipal water storage in the United States, a notable distinction that could help save the structure, which was added to the National Registry of Historic Places in 1974.

Efforts to save the water tower more than forty years ago may have contributed to its current state. In 1968, the first campaign to save the water tower began. Brainerd residents voted in a referendum in

Brainerd Water Tower — By the Numbers

- The first concrete was poured on July 12, 1919, and the bowl, 40 feet in diameter, was filled on September 30, 1920.
- Construction of the water tower took 14 months, 18 days.
- Water added 2 million pounds to the concrete structure.
- Brainerd’s water system, including its new water tower with the capacity to hold 300,000 gallons of water, was launched on October 21, 1922.
- The historic water tower was retired in 1959-60.
- The water tower is located at the site where the original Northern Pacific Passenger Depot was lost to fire on February 5, 1917.
- The water tower is 129 feet and one-inch high today, a decrease from its original height, which excludes its foundation, of 134 feet, one inch. The tower lost five feet when the domed roof was removed in 1974.



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1973 to restore the water tower. But during the restoration process, a decision was made to remove the roof over the large bowl at the top of the tower. Dave Badeaux, a Brainerd City Council member who serves as council liaison to the water tower committee, says years of the bowl's interior being exposed to the elements has taken its toll. There isn't structural damage yet to water tower, but there will be if something isn't done.

Badeaux says Brainerd can't lose its historic water tower, a "beacon of the north."

"People who are from here are very connected to it," says Badeaux. "It hasn't functioned as a water tower for fifty years. But it's far greater than a water tower. It's a symbol of the generations who've lived here and the history of our area. We were a railroad town, then we had the paper mill, and as those industries moved on, the water tower has become the symbol of our resilience. It's our lighted symbol you can see anywhere in town."

Carl Faust, a local historian who has researched the history and engineering behind the water tower, says the community has lost many of its historic buildings. He says \$3 million may be a tough sell, but the water tower is worth fighting for.

"I don't think we can afford to lose any icons. The water tower is all we've got," says Faust.



Photo courtesy of Calvin Wallin



Learn More

Visit the Crow Wing County Historical Society Museum and Research Library to view photographs that illustrate the construction of the Historic Brainerd Water Tower. The exhibit includes an original tower door. The museum, located at 320 Laurel Street in Brainerd, is open 10 a.m. to 3 p.m. Tuesday through Saturday. A donation of \$3 per adult is requested.

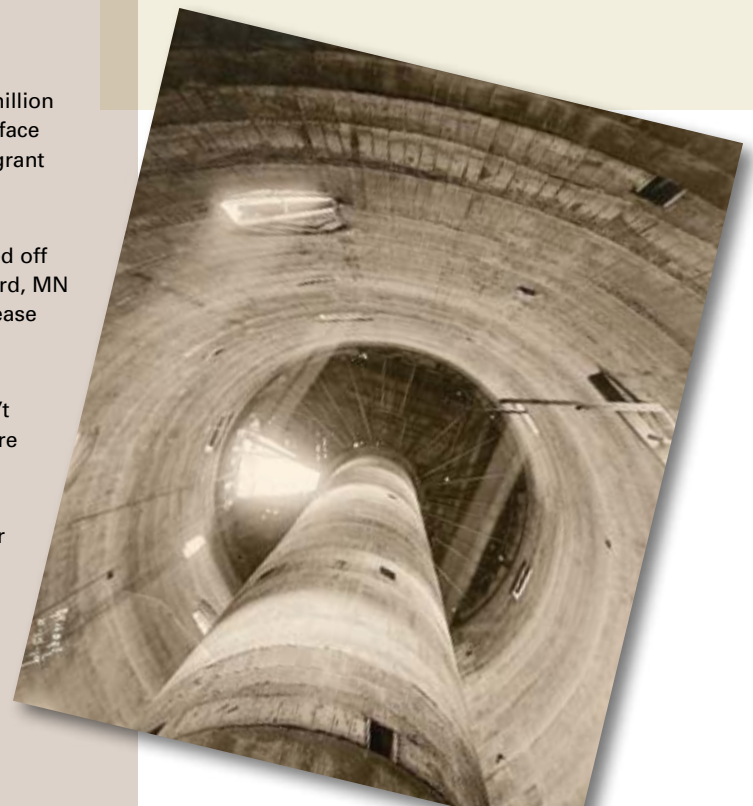
How to Help

A citizen's group has banded together to raise funds to restore the historic water tower. The committee's goal is to raise at least \$1.6 million toward renovations by October 2020, the city council's deadline, or face possible demolition. The water tower committee is also looking at grant opportunities through the Minnesota Historical Society to offset the estimated \$3 million in needed repairs.

If you'd like to help save the water tower, donations may be dropped off or mailed to Brainerd Community Action, 213 S. Fifth Street, Brainerd, MN 56401. Checks may be made out to Brainerd Community Action. Please note the donation is to save the water tower.

Donations may also be dropped off at Brainerd City Hall, noting the donation is for the water tower. If the amount of money needed isn't raised by the October 2020 deadline, those who donate \$250 or more will be eligible for refunds. The remaining funds will go toward Brainerd Restoration.

For more information, visit the website, brainerdwatertower.com, or the Facebook page: Save the Historic Brainerd Water Tower.



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