

The birth of a city landmark

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Some people call it Paul Bunyan's flashlight.

Built with horse power and by hand during a four-year period from 1919 to 1922, the landmark water tower slowly took shape in the Brainerd skyline.

Erected to a height of 134 feet, it had a capacity of 300,000 gallons. Builders constructed their own elevators out of wood and used them to hoist tools skyward as the tower rose in height. A replacement water tower took over the duties in 1959.



The water tower reservoir begins to take shape in 1919 as crews work. Note the skyline beyond the tower and the absence of other structures as far as the eye can see.

But some movements start slowly. Mrs. Elizabeth Hoffman Fawcett, who had a summer home on Gull Lake, sent \$50 in hopes to start a fund to preserve the tower. Larry Lopp, of the Paul Bunyan Center, organized a meeting that drew 40 people. High school senior Dave Runberg gathered hundreds of student signatures. A seven-member committee was appointed by the citizen gathering that included George Bedard.

"I felt it was some thing different -- some thing Brainerd," Bedard said.

At the time a consultant said a stiff wind would blow the tower down, Bedard said. In the end, the committee won a 60-day postponement of bid letting for tower demolition. Committee member Dick Dean climbed to the top of the bowl, taking samples along the way.



Just a skeleton version of the finished project, the water tower bowl begins to take shape. A worker appears precariously poised on the far right and a wooden open air elevator brings building supplies to the tower's final stages on Oct. 3, 1919.



Water tower was saved from destruction



The samples were sent to the University of Minnesota. Bedard said the results found the concrete was actually stronger than the day it was built. Thought doomed from the start, the effort to save the tower proved successful. Now more than 30 years later, it may be hard for area residents to think of the city without the tower, which stands out illuminated by white light each night.

Bedard said: "It's a keepsake."

Light streams through the small windows on Oct. 15, 1919, providing an interior view of the water tower during a series of photographs that chronicle its construction that summer and fall.
