

# Minnesota Towers on the National Register of Historic Places

*The National Register of Historic Places is the nation's official registry of more than 60,000 listings—some 800,000 individual properties—currently recognized as worthy of preservation and protection. Historic districts, sites, buildings, structures, geographical features, landscapes, and objects are listed because of their association with significant persons and events, because of their architectural, cultural, or engineering significance, or because they contain important information about our history or prehistory. The State Historic Preservation Office at the Minnesota Historical Society documents and nominates properties to the National Register. Most are at least fifty years old.*

*Minnesota's National Register listings include such diverse properties as Paul Bunyan and Babe the Blue Ox, Bemidji; Savanna Portage, Aitkin County; Rabi-deau Civilian Conservation Corps Camp, Beltrami County; White Castle No. 8, Minneapolis; Nett Lake Petroglyphs, Koochiching County; Tugboat Edna G., Two Harbors; Sugar Loaf (limestone outcropping), Winona; and Lundring Service Station, Canby.*

*Kasson's ornamental limestone water tower, built in 1895 and in use nearly a century later*

Marilyn Ziebarth



Among the state's 1,417 National Register listings (totaling 5,500 individual properties) are only eleven water towers, nominated to the list because of their engineering, public-works, architectural, and community-planning significance.<sup>1</sup> None of the several dozen towers that A. E. Spreng's crews erected throughout Minnesota between 1946 and 1980 have yet made the list. Riveted- and welded-steel tanks and towers of this vintage are simply too commonplace in the countryside.

The Kasson water tower (Dodge County) is an unusual example of the elevated water tank erected during the late nineteenth-century era of municipal development in Minnesota. Unique in design and materials, the Kasson tower was constructed in 1895 by local contractor E. E. Huelster for \$6,000. A 50,000-gallon steel tank rests on an 86-foot ornamental tower of gray limestone, unmodified and in use today.

Five Cuyuna Iron Range water towers (Crow Wing County) are listed on the National Register for their engineering, public-works, and community-planning significance. The municipally owned towers in Cuyuna, Deerwood, and Trommald (each 50,000 gallons), Ironton (75,000 gallons), and Crosby (100,000 gallons) typify the basic cylindrical iron-tank-and-tower design common from about 1890 until 1945. These landmarks also serve as material reminders of the towns' once-prosperous mining economies. Cuyuna, Ironton, and Trommald are now almost ghost towns.

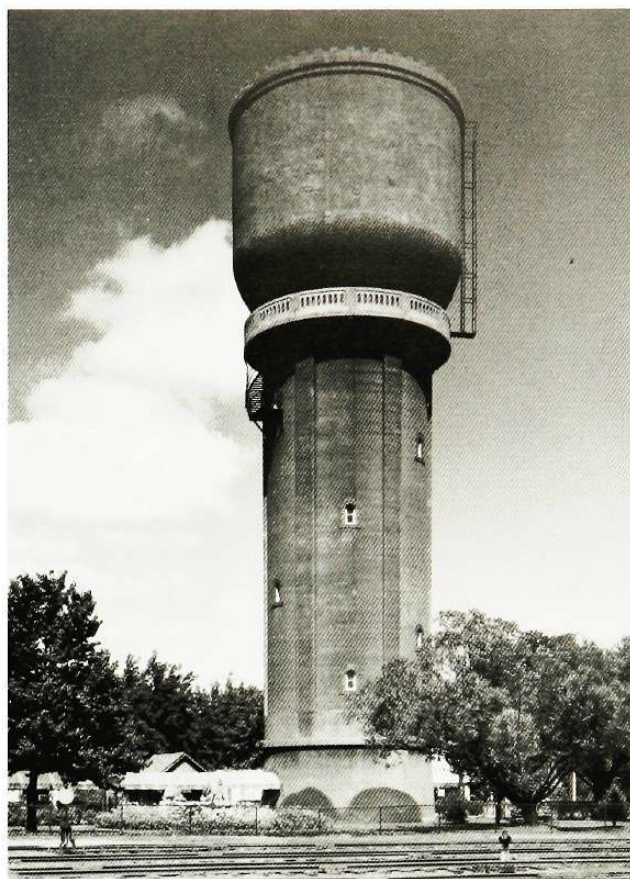
Between 1910 and the mid-1920s, Iron Range communities benefited tremendously from *ad valorem* taxes on mining properties. These taxes, established before the mining boom, later resulted in huge amounts of unforeseen local revenue. Historian Theodore C. Blegen observed, "A singular aspect of range-town life was the blossoming of schools, community buildings, parks, splendid streets, and other public improvements built generously, not to say lavishly. They set standards far beyond those of most Minnesota cities at the time."<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup>A twelfth water tower, an example of the elevated wooden water tanks and steel towers that once dotted the landscape, was demolished in 1989. Elysian's 50,000-gallon tank and 75-foot trestle tower, erected in 1895 at a cost of \$5,000, remained in use until it deteriorated beyond repair and had to be replaced. A handful of other towns in LeSueur County constructed similar containers and municipal water systems during the last years of the nineteenth century.

Information about the water towers is from the National Register of Historic Places Inventory, Nomination Forms, State Historic Preservation Office, Minnesota Historical Society, St. Paul; *The National Register of Historic Places—Minnesota Checklist* (St. Paul: State Historic Preservation Office, [1991]).

For more information on the National Register of Historic Places in Minnesota, call 612-296-5434.

<sup>2</sup>Theodore C. Blegen, *Minnesota: A History of the State* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1963), 377.



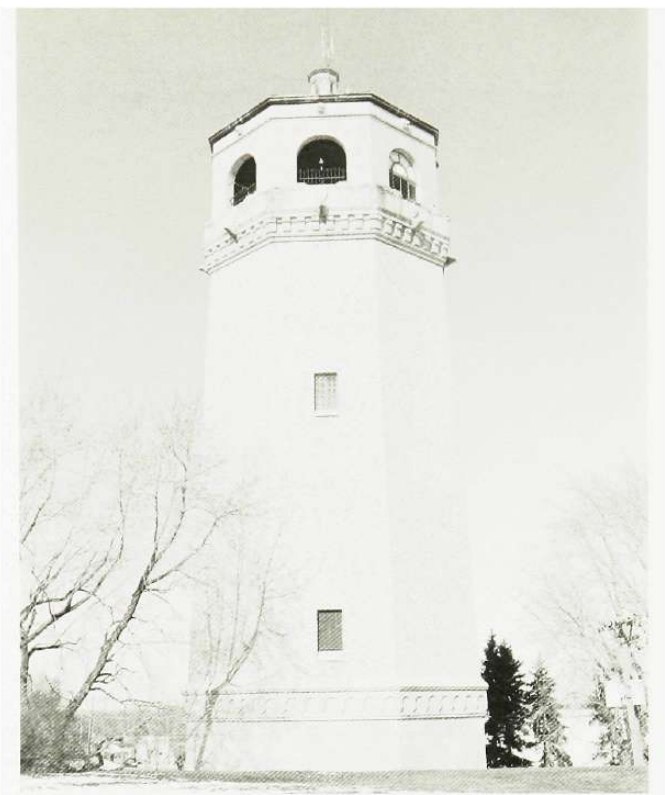
*Brainerd's tower, erected after World War I and one of the first constructed with poured-in-place concrete*

Among the many improvements these revenues funded were municipal water systems, including the elevated tanks necessary to build pressure and carry water to individual homes and businesses. Minneapolis Steel and Machinery Company constructed the towers in Cuyuna (1912), Ironton (1913), and Trommald (1918), and Des Moines Bridge and Iron Company erected the one in Deerwood (1914). The company that raised Crosby's tower has been obscured by the passage of time.

Four Minnesota water towers of poured concrete are also included on the National Register. Ogilvie's, in Kanabec County, is one of the state's first reinforced-concrete towers, constructed in 1918 by the Circular Concrete Company of Minneapolis. Its crenelated parapet and simple lines, 80-foot-tall concrete stand, and 50,000-gallon concrete tank contrast markedly with the familiar metal style of the period. Along with the tower, Ogilvie installed an improved village water system, providing the impetus to organize the town's volunteer fire department. Because early concrete models

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*St. Paul's Highland Park tower, a 1928 octagonal design by black architect Clarence W. Wigington*

tended to leak at the junction of the tank and tower, most such towers have been razed, but the sturdy one at Ogilvie remains in use.

Brainerd's water tower (Crow Wing County), reportedly one of the nation's first poured-in-place concrete water towers, was built to the design specifications of St. Paul engineer L. P. Wolff between 1918 and 1921. The 141-foot, 300,000-gallon edifice, erected next to the Northern Pacific Railroad tracks in conjunction with a new water-pumping station and wells, made Brainerd's system one of the most modern and efficient of its time. Major leaks in the tank necessitated repairs, but it served continuously until 1958. The tower is a familiar landmark in north-central Minnesota, and a drawing of it appears on the city's letterhead stationery and checks.

Pipestone's water tower is a near twin of Brainerd's. Constructed in 1920 and designed by the same engineer, the structure has a capacity of 150,000 gallons. The 140-foot tower with its spiraling windows served continuously until 1973, and it remains an important feature of the town skyline.

Three men collaborated on the poured-concrete water tower in Minneapolis's Washburn Park. Architect Harry Wild Jones, who worked on several notable Minneapolis projects, including the Butler Brothers Build-

ing, designed the tower. John K. Daniels created the tower's enigmatic concrete sculptures—18-foot guardians of health and 8-foot eagles. Consulting engineer William S. Hewitt invented the widely used system of prestressed, reinforced-concrete construction, which utilizes an inner concrete shell strengthened by adjustable steel bands. Erected in 1931–32, the tower resembles a medieval fortress, sheltered within its forestlike setting in southwest Minneapolis. With a holding capacity of 1.35 million gallons, it is the city's only surviving water tower still used to store water.<sup>3</sup>

The final Minnesota example on the National Register is St. Paul's Highland Park tower, built in 1928. Sited in a park at the second-highest point in the city, it provides a dramatic, panoramic view of the surrounding area. As the city's only architecturally significant water tower, it was designated an American Water Landmark by the American Water Works Association in 1981. In addition, the Highland Park tower is historically significant as an important design by one of St. Paul's few known black architects, Clarence W. Wigington.

Wigington worked in the Department of Parks, Playgrounds, and Public Buildings from 1915 until the 1950s. Like many architects serving under the official city architect, he received little credit for his creations. In 1976, however, a public ceremony at the Highland Park water tower honored Wigington for his excellence in design.

The octagonal, 134-foot Highland Park tower has a Kasota limestone base, a pressed-brick shaft with several windows, and a lookout area of Bedford limestone. Inside the fawn-colored tower is a 200,000-gallon steel tank ringed by a circular staircase. Its 151 steps lead to an observation platform with arched openings and a tile roof topped by a small cupola. The tower, which cost \$69,000, was constructed by Feyen Construction Company and contractor William Selby of St. Paul. Wilcox Cut Stone Company, St. Paul, furnished the stone, and St. Paul Foundry Company supplied the steel tank. An 18-million-gallon covered concrete reservoir built in 1923, another underground reservoir, and two adjacent steel water tanks store purified water from the city's system before it is pumped into the tower. Gravity carries water from the tower to thousands of homes in the service area.

As a group, Minnesota's National Register water towers demonstrate historical changes in architectural and engineering design. They also serve as visual reminders of the municipal infrastructure that we usually take for granted.

<sup>3</sup>See Thomas W. Balcom, "A Tale of Two Towers: Washburn Park and Its Water Supply," *Minnesota History* 49(Spring 1984):19–28. Kenwood and Prospect Park, the other extant water towers, are city landmarks.

*All photographs are from the State Historic Preservation Office, MHS.*



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