

Olcott Park Electric Fountain and Rock Garden, Virginia, Minnesota



NORTHERN MINNESOTA'S best light show short of the aurora borealis is back.

Thanks to a successful community campaign, the city of Virginia rededicated and relit its magnificent, 82-year-old Olcott Park Electric Fountain in June 2019, to the delight of all who have viewed its amazing displays of shooting water highlighted by ever-changing patterns of multi-colored lights.

In 1937, Virginia received help from the federal Works Progress Administration (WPA) to install a Novalux electric fountain from General Electric in a sunken garden bordered by a stone observation deck in Olcott Park. The fountain's 65 waterjets and seven powerful lamps produced 300 different water formations and color combinations every hour, drawing so many visitors that police had to control the crowds.

The installation of this elaborate water feature came during Olcott Park's heyday in the first half of the twentieth century. When the public park was created in 1905, Virginia used tax revenue from mining to lease a 40-acre parcel on the city's north side from the Oliver Mining Company, naming the green space after company official William J. Olcott, who became Oliver's president in 1909. The city hired Morell and Nichols, prestigious Minneapolis landscape architects, as designers and then built stone entrance gates, roads and walkways, massive flower beds, a band shell, playgrounds, a refectory building, and "comfort stations."



The restored Olcott Park fountain, 2019. (PAUL PLUSKWIK PHOTOGRAPHY)

Over time the city added a zoo, with moose, wolves, mountain sheep, exotic birds, and a much-loved monkey island. In 1921, a greenhouse was added to support the park's elaborate flower beds. Later the greenhouse was enlarged and converted into a year-round tropical conservatory. Although the zoo closed in the 1960s, the conservatory remains open. The fountain was a popular civic attraction until 2013, when a leaky pool and unavailable replacement parts put it out of commission.

In 2016, the Olcott Park Fountain Restoration Committee began an ultimately successful effort to place the fountain on the National Register of

Historic Places and to raise funds to restore its water jets, lights, pool, rock garden, and landscaping. In three years, the group raised more than \$1 million, with 60 percent coming from 1,400 individual donors. Thanks to the committee's hard work, backed by the community's love and imagination, Olcott Park's crowning glory is back and better than ever.

—Greg Gaut and Marsha Neff

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