

## Foshay Tower Elevator

**T**HE GEE-WHIZ MOOD of this photo—the modern wonder elevator ready to whisk five visitors to the Foshay Tower’s observation deck—belies the building’s darker history.

Heralded as the West’s Washington Memorial when it opened in 1929, the tallest building west of the Mississippi was the realization of one man’s childhood dream to construct a monument to the nation’s first president.

Wilbur B. Foshay had arrived in Minneapolis fourteen years earlier, a young entrepreneur \$150,000 in arrears from an investment gone bad, but he quickly amassed a fortune in utility companies during the Roaring Twenties. He designed the twenty-seventh and twenty-eighth floors of the eponymous tower to be his office and living quarters, but he never got to inhabit them. A month after he elaborately toasted his new tower, the stock market crashed and Foshay’s \$29 million portfolio dissolved into bankruptcy.

Shortly after, the federal government charged Foshay with mail fraud, basically for running a Ponzi scheme that swindled his investors. The initial trial ended in a hung jury when the lone female juror, Genevieve Clark, refused to go along with the eleven men who believed Foshay and his six associates were guilty. Clark had failed to reveal during jury selection that her husband had done business with Foshay. Clark was found to be in contempt of court for withholding information and sentenced to six months in prison. The day before she was to surrender, she disappeared, along with her husband and their two



Five passengers wait to be whisked to the top of the Foshay Tower, the Twin Cities’ tallest building, in 1948. (MNHS COLLECTIONS)

boys, ages eleven and seven. Their bodies were discovered in the family car parked in a secluded area south of Minneapolis—all dead from carbon monoxide poisoning.

Foshay was convicted in a second trial on four charges, fined \$1,000, and sentenced to 15 years in prison. While he took up residence at the federal penitentiary in Leavenworth, Kansas, his friends—including some prominent businessmen and a US congressman—bombarded President Franklin D. Roosevelt with requests for a pardon. On January 23, 1937, Roosevelt commuted Foshay’s sentence to five years—equal to time served—and freed Foshay.

The former utilities baron reinvented himself out West, becoming a model citizen, running a granite company and later a trout farm in Colorado, and serving on the chamber of commerce for three communities in succession. President Harry Truman granted him a “full and unconditional” pardon in 1947.

A year later, these four ladies with their gentleman escort eagerly anticipated their thrill ride to the top of what was still the city’s tallest building.

—John Rosengren

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