Standpipe once towered over Twin Cities

For 36 years, from 1876 to 1912, the tallest structure in the Twin Cities wasn't a downtown Bloomington office building. No, towering above all else was a 200-foot-tall standpipe or water tower at the Bloomington waterworks, located on the north side of Division Street just west of what is now the Union Pacific Railroad / Amtrak line.

To put 200 feet in perspective, the old standpipe was roughly two-thirds the height of Watterson Towers, the residence hall on the Illinois State University campus opened in 1969.

Since the standpipe dominated the local skyline, it was a familiar sight for those traveling by rail between Chicago and St. Louis. For many passengers, Bloomington was simply known as the city with the remarkably tall standpipe (though it was far from the world's tallest, as the local press was fond of boasting!)

Like today's much-larger, bulbous water towers, standpipes were designed, by way of height and gravity, to provide sufficient pressure to move water through underground mains to everything from fire hydrants to kitchen faucets. A common misconception is that standpipes were built to store water when pressure was usually the sole function.

In its early decades, Bloomington suffered from the lack of a dependable municipal water supply. Landlocked with no sizable body of surface water nearby (Lake Bloomington wasn't built until 1929-1930), residents relied on a patchwork system of public and private cisterns and wells. In times of drought, many wells ran dry, and cisterns were inadequate for fighting fires. In addition, wells could be contaminated from backyard privies, leading to periodic but deadly outbreaks of waterborne ailments such as dysentery and typhoid.

In 1868, though, good news arrived in the form of a failed coal mine on Bloomington's north side near Mason Street Investors abandoned the project because they had struck a rich "vein" of water and couldn't pump it out fast enough to reach the coal.

A heretofore unknown supply of water could now be tapped for municipal use, but it took the bone dry summer of 1874 to spur city officials into action, and soon thereafter they sunk a well in the same area as the abandoned mine shaft.

This water could be pumped and impounded, but Bloomington lacked means to create pressure to move this water into homes, shops and factories. Accordingly, in August 1875, the city awarded the standpipe contract to A. V. Cool & Co. for $26,700 (or nearly $600,000 today, adjusted for inflation). Subcontractors for the project included Napoleon Heafer and James H. McGregor for brick masonry, and boilermakers William B. Maitland & Co. for the wrought-iron work.

Local builders had never undertaken a project of this height and difficulty, and they were no doubt aware of botched attempts to erect standpipes in South Bend, Ind., Toledo, Ohio and elsewhere.

The standpipe consisted of wrought-iron pipe housed in an octagonal tower and shaft of brick masonry. The wrought iron was “puddled, rolled and punched” by Heathcote & Co. of Williamsport, Penn., and the curved panels (three joined together would make one section of pipe) shipped by rail to Bloomington.

It took William B. Maitland three months—mid-October 1875 to mid-January 1876—to assemble the panels and complete the entire length of the eight-foot diameter pipe. The iron sheeting became thinner the higher up it went—the first 20 feet were five-eighths of an inch thick with the seams double-riveted, for instance, while the top 52 feet were only three-sixteenth of an inch thick with single rivets.

When completed, the standpipe held 34,092 gallons of water. To put that in perspective, the Town of Normal's water tower south of University High School—the one featuring Illinois State University’s Reggie Redbird—holds 500,000 gallons.

Yet at 200 feet (or 201 feet—accounts vary!), the Bloomington structure was plenty high to generate enough water pressure for a modest-size city in the buckle of the Corn Belt. In fact, the local standpipe was significantly taller the iconic Chicago Water Tower, which famously survived the Great Fire of 1871. That Michigan Avenue beauty stands 154 feet tall, with the standpipe inside running 138 feet. And the historic Normal water tower or standpipe at Fell Park, which dates to 1898, reached 80 feet in height. It used to be topped by a 52-foot-high steel tank, but that came down in the mid-1970s.

One of the more remarkable things about the Bloomington standpipe was that the city often allowed residents to visit the open-air viewing platform at the very top. Bordered by nothing more than a railing, it must’ve been a vertigo-inducing experience, especially on windy days. Not surprisingly, it was a tradition of sorts for residents, especially young folk, to carve their initials on the platform.

To ascend the 200 feet to the top one had to tramp up the circular staircase of cast-iron risers and oak steps sandwiched between the brick masonry and the massive iron pipe. The main shaft included nine windows, each five feet high, so those making their way up or down the staircase could enjoy a variety of views.

In February 1912, the city council acted upon a recommendation by Seth Noble, superintendent of the city water works, to demolish the old standpipe. After 36 years of service, it was worn-out and in disrepair, proving inadequate to serve the city needs.

In March, the council awarded the demolition project to John Gray and his low bid of $3,100. “When it comes down,” The Pantagraph observed at the time, “people who have for years been accustomed to look for it when coming near to Bloomington will feel lost without it.”

City officials, though, made sure Gray salvaged as much as possible from the razed structure for public need, and it was said some of the brickwork was used in a sewer line through O'Neil Park.

James Hart, a longtime area versifier, titled one of his folksy poems "The Standpipe," in which he recalled local residents asking Superintendant Noble for the key to get inside the tower so they could climb to the top. Hart wrote of those lucky enough to find themselves on the sky-high platform, gazing at the wider world around and underneath them:

> Sometimes their voices were wafted faintly,
> Or maybe someone's hat came drifting down;
> We all believed an oft-repeated tale—
> Of a boy who once walked on the outer rail.

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