

# Doomed but forever noble and iconic

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Water towers facing same sad fate as grain elevators  
— disappearing but still stirring emotions



Jason Heistad, an Innisfail town councillor who works at Olds College, stands under the restored water tower at the college. In 2006, he unsuccessfully fought to preserve Innisfail's water tower.

At last Michael Dawe believes Red Deer's grand old "Green Onion" has been given hope for a long-term future.

The gigantic 132-ft. tall municipal water tower, also known as the "Mushroom," is no longer essential to the needs of local citizens, except functioning to supply pressure within the city's water system.

For many years it sat in Red Deer's Mountview subdivision rusting away because it desperately needed a new coat of paint. Last month the city finally announced tenders were going out to do just that, with a cost that will likely be tens of thousands of dollars.

The initiative to give the water tower a face lift is good news for taxpayers because to demolish the half century-old Green Onion, which was the largest water spheroid in the

world when opened in 1959, would cost Red Deer "millions," said Dawe, the city's leading historian. But just as importantly, added Dawe, there is a deep emotional attachment to the relic.

"It has been a symbol of Red Deer for more than 50 years. People can see it for miles, especially when you come into the city from the north," said Dawe. "Ninety per cent of all the grain elevators are gone now. And water towers are not used anymore. They are disappearing."

There were once hundreds and hundreds of municipal water towers dotting the western Canadian landscape. For much of the 20th century they were the sole source of water for countless prairie communities.

Like the pioneer elevator they marked the location of human habitation. Water towers displayed the names and logos of towns and villages. Added to the



This unique water tower at Girvin, Saskatchewan has been designated as a municipal heritage property near the railway tracks. It was built in 1906 to provide water for laundering and for horses that hauled grain.



The rare wooden water tower at the former Lacombe Home site in Calgary, now property of St. Mary's College, was saved in 2005 following a restoration grant from the provincial government.

variety of architectural styles, from Red Deer's distinct spheroids, to standpipes (cylindrical water storage tanks), as well as X and V-braced steel or wood towers built with either platformed, enclosed or roofed tops. Others were constructed with unique ornate bottle shaped tops, or built with lighthouse designs.

Hundreds of uniquely designed octagonal water towers — usually red in colour — once adorned western Canadian railway stops to provide water for steam-powered trains. These structures today are considered the rarest of pioneer water tower relics, with only 25 still standing in western Canada.

Over the past 40 years municipal water towers lost their relevance due to the

implementation of modern regional water lines. Ultimately these structures, standing noble and proud, became redundant.

For many they became eyesores and safety hazards as they rusted and rotted away. One by one they were toppled. Today there are fewer than 40 municipal water towers remaining in Alberta.

And like the rapid disappearance of pioneer grain elevators in the past quarter century, the wholesale demolition of municipal water towers across the prairies has also triggered emotional controversies in many communities.

In 2007, following months of passionate debate, the Central Alberta town of Innisfail demolished its 67-year-old water tower, a deteriorating structure that sat unused for years. Town council was told the previous year it would cost up to \$60,000 for structural assessment and another \$500,000 for restoration.

Jason Heistad, an Innisfail town councillor, fought hard to preserve the water tower. He noted when the last grain elevators in town had been demolished a few years earlier the landscape of the community had changed forever. He felt the toppling of the water tower would only add to the loss.

"I felt it was a piece of history you can't replace," said Heistad. He noted a use could have been found for the tower, perhaps as a cell phone or internet transmission receiver or a convenient locale to install security or scientific cameras. However, council was not prepared to invest funds and the tower was demolished.

"I had hoped I could save it. There were some options. I thought we could have done a lot of good with it," said Heistad. "You go to Wetaskiwin and what they have done is amazing."

Perhaps. But it was not easy. If the water tower debate was deemed simply emotional in Innisfail it was over the top in the City of Wetaskiwin, located 70 kilometres south of Edmonton.

The Wetaskiwin water tower was built in 1907. At 150-ft. tall it is the oldest functioning municipal water tower in Canada.

With developers eyeing the property at the tower's site the structure faced demolition in 2003. Some locals immediately came to the rescue, proposing the tower could be renovated and saved at a cost of between \$1.22 and \$1.38 million.

Many community citizens felt at the time there were better uses for that amount of money.



The preserved water tower at Airdrie. Its elevation makes it the highest city in Canada with a water tower.

City of Wetaskiwin officials managed to reduce the projections to \$748,000 but estimates climbed again. The debate became so passionate a civic referendum was even considered. The restoration ultimately went ahead without a referendum but the final bill came in at more than \$1.9 million, a controversial figure that still haunts the community today.

"That project is still close to my heart. There is not one second of regret. It was worth every minute of it," said retired Wetaskiwin businessman Terry Hoffman, who was the chairman of the Wetaskiwin Memorial Fund Society, a group that lobbied aggressively and raised tens of thousands of dollars to save the water tower. "I still get people come up to me and say it was the best thing we ever did."

Despite the huge cost overruns to preserve and restore the relic Hoffman quickly counters there were no tax increases for community citizens. And best of all, he added, the city has retained its character, an important component of the community's identity.

"You can have all that concrete, development and pavement but they will always remember the water tower," said Hoffman. "It's all about character and Wetaskiwin has character."

Over the past decade there have been other western Canadian communities that have rallied to save their water towers, despite limited or no provincial or federal government financial help.

In Humboldt, Saskatchewan the community not only saved its nearly 100-year-old unique lighthouse-style water tower it also received this year the province's prestigious Heritage Architecture Excellence Award.

In 2009, a 99-year-old Canadian National Railway water tower was saved and restored in Kenaston, Saskatchewan. The Kenaston railway water tower is the oldest of the province's five remaining structures (there was once 400 built in Saskatchewan) and is the only "tapered" tower still standing, giving it added architectural significance.



The Kerrobert water tower, built in the style of a lighthouse in 1911, is one of only four left in Saskatchewan. The others are in Weyburn, Kamsack, and Humboldt.



The preserved and restored water tower at Wetaskiwin is the oldest functioning municipal water tower in Canada.

There are success stories in Alberta as well. In Airdrie, city council voted in 2003 not to tear down its water tower, which had been a landmark since it was constructed in 1959. Today at the base of the tower a plaque proudly commemorates the tower and the city's decision to save it.

And in Gleichen, 90 kilometres east of Calgary, local residents recently convinced Wheatland County officials not to tear down the community's 100-year-old water tower. It has now been restored and will continue to be honoured by Gleichen residents and those in the nearby Blackfoot Reserve (Siksiká First Nation).

Meanwhile, Red Deer's Michael Dawe is pleased there is finally some action being done locally to preserve the

city's iconic "Mushroom" water tower. And even if there is some movement in the future by developers that the site would be better served with something else he believes the city's 91,000 citizens would never allow the landmark to be destroyed.

"There would be a big controversy if it was demolished," said Dawe. "The public works people I have talked to have a genuine fondness for it."

As a noble sentinel of yesterday the old tower, recently given its reprieve, stands proudly like a familiar friend from both the past and present.

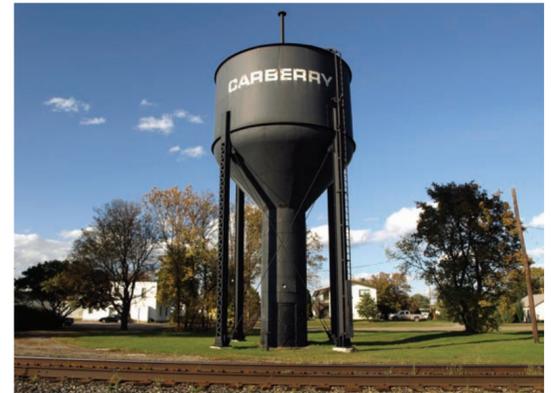
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The water tower at the historic coal mining ghost town of Nordegg was built in the early 1920s to supply all residents and commercial buildings.



A wooden CPR water tower in Cranbrook, B.C. It was built in 1946 and decommissioned in the late 1950s.



A rare old steel CPR water tank at Carberry, Manitoba that served trains in the steam era.



Red Deer historian Michael Dawe said the city's massive and historic Green Onion water tower, once the largest of its kind in the world, has become an iconic symbol of the past for all of Central Alberta.