

A Crystal Clear Legacy

I love a nice glass of cool, fresh Winnetka water – straight out of the tap. Such a simple thing, but . . .

In the early 1890s, villagers got their water from wells and backyard cisterns or directly from the lake. Yet as Winnetka's population forged over 2,000, it was time for a public water supply system.

So in 1893 the village built a pumping station on the beach with a 12-inch cast-iron intake extending about 2,000 feet out into the lake. On the bluff above the station a 119-foot octagonal water tower was constructed at the end of what we now call "Tower Road." This most visible and recognizable Winnetka landmark housed a 46,000-gallon storage tank that provided pressure to the water distribution system.

Both the beautiful water tower and the well-run water utility were sources of pride to residents. As Winnetka grew, demand for water grew and the plant operations expanded. In 1913, the Village of Glencoe contracted with Winnetka's Water Department to furnish its water supply.

Water Quality

Yet concerns about polluted lake water were growing more serious each year. Sewage from a myriad of sources routinely drained to the lake. The newly formed North Shore Sanitary District recognized that addressing the sewage problems would take decades.

Residents were warned to boil water, use filters or purchase bottled water. Health concerns ranged from digestive disorders to an outbreak of typhoid. A 1907 report on Winnetka's water quality declared, "... the present supply is, at best, dangerous or detrimental to health." The City of Evanston installed a modern high-capacity filtration plant. Unfortunately, North Chicago's referendum on its plant was defeated just before its community was struck by an outbreak of typhoid.

A Filtration Plant for Winnetka

In 1916, Winnetka's Village Council unveiled plans for a new filtration plant that was applauded in most quarters. But opposition, claiming that the \$90,000 cost would bankrupt the village, succeeded in postponing the referendum past the spring election. Then, with entry into World War I looming ahead, the issue was shelved.

As the war ended in late 1918, America's soldiers returned home and a patriotic cry went out to push forward with public improvement projects and provide jobs for this wave of job seekers. Winnetka's Village Council had a stack of projects at the ready.

This time the case for the filtration plant was made with great care. Two jugs of water were set near the entrance to Village Hall: one with sparkling water from Evanston's filtered water system, the other with dull, turbid tap water from Winnetka's unfiltered system. A card above asked, "Which do you prefer?" Public meetings and news articles emphasized the health benefits of water filtration and explained how the cost would be recovered through water fees paid by both Winnetka and Glencoe residents.

In April 1919 a referendum authorizing the filtration plant passed with overwhelming support. Still, delays with the purchase of land pushed completion of the project to 1922.

A Strategic Asset

Since then the plant has been modernized and expanded. In 1973 the obsolete, 80-year-old water tower was removed.

Today Winnetka's water plant has a net capacity of 12,000,000 gallons of filtered water per day and its distribution system has about 71 miles of mains and 650 hydrants. The water contract with Glencoe ended once they completed their own water plant in 1928, but was quickly replaced with the current contract to provide water to the Village of Northfield.

Looking to the future, as cities without water rights struggle to provide their citizens with quality water at good rates, we can recognize the strategic value of Winnetka's village-owned water facilities. Next time you drive down Tower Road, give a word of thanks for the wise investments made by generations before.

Caption for Photo of Water Tower.



The "Tower" of Tower Road: For 80 years this 119-foot water tower loomed over the lake and countryside. As Winnetka's most visible and recognizable landmark, it attracted tourists who climbed its staircase to enjoy panoramic views. PHOTO COURTESY WINNETKA HISTORICAL SOCIETY.