



University Heights Historical Society

UNIVERSITY HEIGHTS WATER TOWER AND RESERVOIR

Claimed to be the largest municipal elevated water tower in the United States on its completion in 1924, the University Heights Water Tower is a community landmark which was instrumental in the development of the surrounding neighborhood.

As the community now known as University Heights began developing early in the past century, water had to be pumped up to the University Heights area from wells in Mission Valley. Because it was under extremely low pressure by the time it reached the top of the mesa, an elevated steel water tank was built at the corner of Howard Avenue and Idaho Street by the city of San Diego in 1910, along with a collecting reservoir below it. Water was pumped from the reservoir into the tank, where it was then allowed to drop down through a pipe, thus increasing the pressure by gravity. This technology allowed enough water pressure to supply the needs of the growing community.

However due to the further development of the area in the 1920's, a greater water demand was placed on the facility and a newer, larger tank was needed. Work on the new all-steel tower and tank began in 1923 by the Pittsburg-Des Moines Steel Company and was completed in 1924. The entire 52-foot-3-inch tank is supported by twelve steel piers, each resting upon a concrete foundation set 9 feet into the hardpan. The lower hemisphere of the tower is 50 feet above ground level. The apex of the tower, over 125 feet above ground level, is capped by a cast iron finial atop its conical 3/16-inch-thick steel cap (now crowned with several lightning rods).

To augment the older 1910 reservoir an additional 18-million-gallon receiving reservoir was built south of Howard Avenue in 1923. Water from Mission Valley was then pumped up into this reservoir and filtered through large sand-filled redwood tubs to remove iron sediments. After being stored in the smaller 1910 reservoir it was pumped up into the 1,202,000-gallon capacity tank for distribution below.

The filtration center originally was designed to be a temporary facility until the El Capitan Dam and Reservoir system was built. However, due to legal problems, the El Capitan project was held up for over ten years. Therefore, the University Heights filtration Plant was modified not only to remove iron, but also suspended matter and sediment as well.

Finally, in 1948 the Alvarado Filtration was completed at Lake Murray, thus making the University Heights Filtration Plan obsolete. The redwood tubs were then removed and tennis courts are now on top of the 1910 collection reservoir's roof. The entire 18-million-gallon reservoir south of Howard Avenue has been demolished and covered with grass.

The tower is still standing near the corner of Howard and Idaho Streets, but now is a relic of San Diego's complex water history.

(Excerpted from articles by Alexander D. Bevil)