While working and traveling through Minnesota, I get to see some really unique things. Many things get a second look or a quick photo, but this time was much different. The city of Millville is a small town situated in the southeast part of the state. Millville is somewhat known for the Spring Creek Motocross Park where the professional and amateur motocross and hill climb events are held, but Millville caught my attention in a much different way.

In our industry, we all pay attention to things driving though communities that many people do not: manholes, fire hydrants, gate valves, curb boxes, treatment plants, locator paint marks and water towers. Driving through Millville, you will not notice a water tower.

In December of 1903, the city council approved the purchase of some land that included a limestone cliff. The council had a plan to cut out a water storage “tank” inside the cliff. In January of 1904, the council approved Allan Black Company of St. Paul to build them a community water system for a total of $1,967. Construction began on the system, but it is unclear as to who actually cut the water storage into the side of the cliff. The local hardware store (Sliker Hardware) was approved to order the dynamite to aid in the construction.

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I was in awe of the whole system.
Millville’s licensed operations specialist, Todd Cutting, is also the mayor and he gladly offered to take me on a hike up to see the ingenious design. Todd warned me the hike was steep and that they have seen many timber rattlesnakes on the way up, but I assured him I was up to the challenge, after I put on heavy pants, bug spray, and a sweatshirt! We grabbed a few tools to encourage the lock if need be and a flashlight and cellphone to begin the climb. Climbing from one tree root base to another, and using brush as handholds, we made it to the entrance. Near the entrance there was a 2 x 10 inch wood plank that held a sliding steel “target”. The target was attached to a rope that went into the top of the cistern via pulleys that had a beer keg attached to the end. The beer keg floated on the top of the water and when the cistern was getting low, the keg would be high on the plank. The people of Millville would check the water storage elevation for fullness with binoculars to know when to turn on the wells to fill the cistern! The original well pumps were operated by stem and coal at the well house which had to be stocked frequently.

The cistern was chipped and blasted out of the hillside approximately 150 feet up the cliff. Every piece was thrown out of a small 4-foot square hole, one piece at a time, until they had storage of approximately 26,000 gallons. The mining spoils were right below the cliff. It appeared to be about 18 feet deep and across and was cut in a perfect circle. The reservoir riser pipe must have been drilled through the limestone and sealed in the bottom. The wells pump up chlorine and fluoride treated water just like many water tower systems of today. The water in the cistern was crystal clear with a tint of blue. I could see a metal water handle on the bottom some 25 feet below me! The entrance door had a heavy duty mesh screen to prevent a vacuum in case of rapid water loss. I was in awe of the whole system. I know many communities that have to paint and repair their water towers nearly annually. Well, not in Millville!

Special thanks to Mayor Todd Cutting for all the info he dug up from their council records and for the effort and time it took to get up that cliff to see the most unique water supply I’ve yet seen!