

END OF AN ERA

Fort Wingate water tower toppled

By Vida Volkert

Staff writer

FORT WINGATE — It is the end of an era. The water tower fell to the ground before a handful of witnesses. They gathered at the Fort Wingate Army Depot to watch the historical landmark come down Tuesday morning.

"I'm a little sad about it," Tamara Billie, a senior archeologist with the Navajo Nation Historic Preservation Department, said minutes before the tower disappeared from the silhouette of the Fort Wingate landscape. "When you were on the road and saw the tower, you knew you were getting closer to home."

The 132-foot-high tower stood for more than five decades as a landmark for those returning from the east to the Gallup area. Workers with the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers set up explosives on its legs and set them off Tuesday, a few seconds past 9 a.m. The blast caused a rumble, and those witnessing the event watched in awe as the red colored giant fell on its legs. It landed on the ground with the head pointing to the north.

The 21,000 square-acre Ft. Wingate Army Depot is divided in about 25 parcels.

About 5,854 acres have already been transferred to the Department of the Interior.

The property will eventually be returned to both the Navajo Nation and the Pueblo of Zuni after all legal procedures and an environmental cleanup are completed, according to depot records.



Photos by Cable Hoover/Independent

At left, explosive charges remove sections from two of the legs of the Fort Wingate water tower, it begins to topple and finally falls during its demolition Tuesday.



Photo by Cable Hoover/Independent

A lone spectator shades herself with an umbrella as she watches a crew prepare to demolish the old water tower at the Fort Wingate army depot Tuesday.

"It went off perfect," Eric Kirwan, project manager for the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, said. "It landed right where we wanted it."

The water tower was built in 1955 to supply the Army Depot with water that was collected from an adjacent artesian well. It used to hold 250,000 gallons of water, according to depot records.

But since the tower went out of commission about 10 years ago, it had to be demolished in preparation for the return of the Army Depot property to the U.S. Department of the Interior, Kirwan said.

The tower was "not up to any code — environmentally speaking," Kirwan said, adding that to bring it up to code it would have been "a large expense."

"This tower was a source of life to this community," Navajo Nation Council Delegate Mel Begay said minutes after the blast. "As I think back ... I think of the importance this place had, not only for the community, but the United States. ... People that worked here had a significant role in World War II and other conflicts that America had encountered. Our own people had a role, Navajo, Zuni, and the people of Gallup."

The Fort Wingate Army Depot was active between 1940 and 1993, according to depot records. The depot contains 732 earth covered magazines or igloos, some which are visible from the highway.

The igloos are empty, Kirwan said, but during the time the depot was active they were used to store munitions, including bombs, that were used by the U.S. Military.

Most of the munitions that came out of the Fort Wingate Depot went to support the U.S. forces during the Vietnam War, he added.

Generations of Gallupians and people from the surrounding communities were employed at the depot as truck drivers, packers, mechanics, explosive operators, carpenters and maintenance workers.

Mel Begay's grandfather, Chischili Begay, worked packing ammunition at the depot in the 1950s, he said.

"A lot of Gallup was employed at Wingate," Lura "Micki" Gonzales, the Depot records keeper, said. "Everybody was out here at one time."

Two of Gonzales' in-laws also worked at the depot — her father-in-law drove trucks in the 1940s and her brother-in-law unloaded ammunition from the trains and transported them to the igloos for storage, she said.

Fort Wingate Depot Activity BRAC Site Manager Richard Cruz said about 1,550 Army personnel and 13 officers were stationed at the depot during its peak. This was in 1944.

When the tower was built in 1955, about five officers and 300 Army personnel were stationed at the depot, he said. The depot was deactivated in 1993. When Cruz arrived in 1999, the depot with several dozen buildings resembled a ghost town.

Today, only four people are employed at the depot, including Cruz and Gonzales.

Those familiar with the red tower will most likely wonder what happened to it when they drive by the depot and notice its absence from the hill, Gonzales said.

"It will be dearly missed," she said.



Photo by Cable Hoover/Independent

Fort Wingate depot manager Richard Cruz, left, stands with U.S. Army Corps of Engineers members Justin Reale, Matt Masten and David Henry to watch the demolition of the old water tower at the Fort Wingate Army Depot Tuesday.

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