



# WAVING HANDS REVIEW

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EDITOR Joe Wiley

PRODUCTION/DESIGN Jeff Stoddard

COPY EDITOR Lee Stanley

*Waving Hands Review*, the literature and arts magazine of Colorado Northwestern Community College, seeks to publish exemplary works by emerging and established writers and artists of Northwest Colorado.

This special edition of *Waving Hands Review* is excerpted from Volume 7, Issue 7. The featured story unveils the unique musical story behind a steel water tank in Rangely, Colorado...

*“Rather than return with the regular cadence of echoes, sound waves in the 60-foot, steel-capped cylinder ‘race in circles like atoms in a supercollider. Twist away like a whirlpool, like a benign Charybdis. Expand and pulse up and up and up.”*

For more information on *Waving Hands Review*, or on the “Tank,” please contact the editor Joe Wiley at [joe.wiley@cncc.edu](mailto:joe.wiley@cncc.edu).

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# From Steam Age to World Music Stage

## *The History of Rangely's "Tank"*

BY HEATHER ZADRA

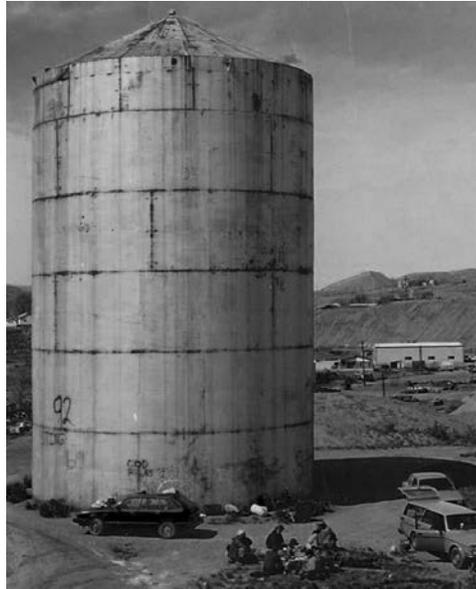
In her 2013 Grand Junction *Daily Sentinel* article about a 1930s-era railroad water treatment tank turned sonic sound space, journalist Rachel Sauer noted that reverberations in “the Tank” are hardly predictable.

Rather than return with the regular cadence of echoes, sound waves in the 60-foot, steel-capped cylinder “race in circles like atoms in a supercollider. Twist away like a whirlpool, like a benign Charybdis. Expand and pulse up and up and up.”<sup>1</sup>

Sound’s curious behavior in the Tank is not unlike the story of the Tank itself. Its tidy beginning, hijacked by chance, morphs into a series of improbable events, repurposing the Tank far from its intended use. No part of the story predicts the next.

Recently, conversations about the Tank have focused largely on its resurrection. After years of sitting empty on a hillside north of Rangely, seemingly devoid of purpose, it was “saved” by friends nobody knew had loved it for more than three decades.

In March 2013, the “Friends of the Tank”—dubbing themselves “an eclectic group of artists, sonic explorers and practical minds bound by a common experience”<sup>2</sup>—emerged from a group of musicians and sound-lovers who had been experimenting



*In this 1991 image of Rangely’s iconic Tank, a group of musicians share a meal before preparing for the day’s recording session.*

with Tank sounds since the late 1970s.

To prevent the Tank’s being dismantled for scrap metal, the Friends launched a Kickstarter crowdsourcing campaign that, in three weeks, unveiled the Tank to the public imagination, prompted 800 supporters worldwide to donate more than \$46,000, and rechristened the Tank with an unlikely title indeed: Center for Sonic Arts.

The vision to create a space for community engagement, education, performance, and recording continues to evolve. Since the campaign, the Friends of the Tank have earned nonprofit status and acquired a building permit to adapt the space for assembly purposes. In September, college students, a handful of local businesses and residents, and others committed to repurposing the Tank installed lighting, fencing, ventilation, and access points. Architectural design company Rhino Cubed is nearly finished with a state-of-the-art sound studio container that will live next to the Tank for sound recording and production.

But as storytellers, musicians, and other Tank faithful have passed on oral and written stories of the Tank’s salvation, its origins have taken on near-mythic qualities.

For instance, in popular lore, the Tank never held liquid (and it didn’t—at least, not since it was hauled in pieces to Rangely and reconstructed there in the mid-1960s). It was purported to have come from Loma or perhaps the Arkansas Valley in southeastern Colorado. A March 2013 article in Denver’s *Westword* stated the Tank was “originally intended for a railroad project that was never completed.”<sup>3</sup>

Colorado railroad scholar William Reich, however, believes the Tank did serve a purpose before it arrived in Rangely. Water treatment tanks like this one were essential to the railroad industry in the first half of the 20th century, until diesel engines replaced steam power in the late 1950s.

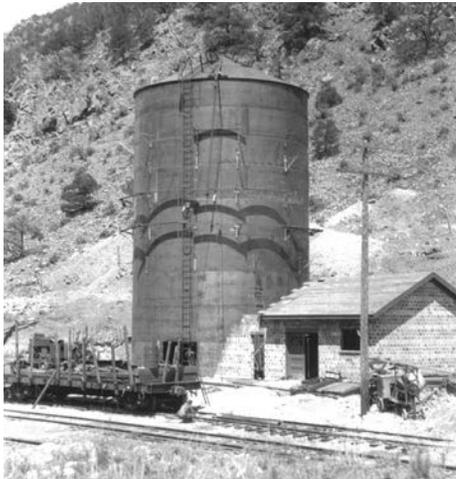
Although the Denver and Rio Grande Western Railroad (D&RGW), to which the Tank once belonged, didn’t treat water until the mid- to late-1930s thanks to higher-quality water sources from the mountains, other railroad companies used water-softening technology beginning late in the 19th century.

“The whole idea was to use soft water in the steam engines so that they would have to be cleaned less often,” Reich said. “Boiler tube cleaning was a laborious and expensive task... Hard untreated water treated with a

combination of lime water (calcium oxide) and soda ash precipitated out the carbonates that foul boiler tubes.”

To start the process, railroad companies sent out water samples for testing, and then received a custom-made recipe of soda ash and lime for individual locations. An operator entered a mixing shed attached to the treatment tank to combine the mixture before inserting it into the bottom of a two- to four-

foot-wide center pipe. Raw water was then pushed up through the chemicals, leaving the harsh salts and hard carbonates in the tank’s bottom, along with the soda ash and lime. As chemistry progressed throughout the steam era, other additives completed additional



*A mixing shed like the one attached to this water treatment tank in Parkdale, CO (above) was once connected to Rangely’s Tank, as evidenced by the silhouette on its west side. (right) (Parkdale photograph courtesy of the Colorado Railroad Museum, Richardson Library; Tank photograph by the author)*

tasks, such as “scaveng[ing] free oxygen ions to minimize carbon embrittlement of the steels being used in the boilers.”

Next, softened water moved to a large storage tank from the smaller treatment tank. Water was transferred either via pipe or by overflowing directly into the tank that held both the smaller tank and storage water. Rangely’s Tank, Reich believes, was likely this latter “combination” model. From the

storage tank, softened water then moved to the locomotive tenders through a spout on the tank or through a water column near the tracks. Workers periodically flushed the inner pipe of impurities before inserting new chemicals and starting the process again.

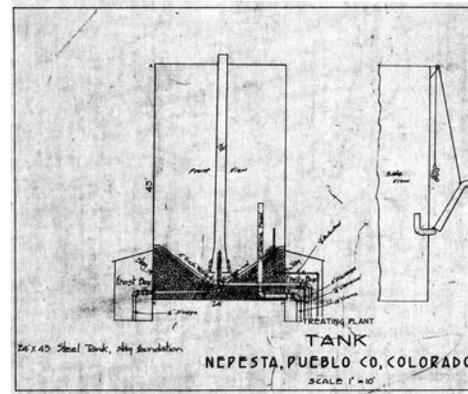
Despite local history’s placing the Tank in Loma or Mack, Colorado, the D&RGW did not have water stations, where the softening process would have occurred, in these locations. Though the Uintah Railway had a wooden and, later, a steel storage tank in Mack for locomotives and town water, and the D&RGW had a wooden tank in Fruita, Rangely’s Tank was likely built for water stations in Rifle or Grand Valley (near modern-day Parachute) or even, perhaps, a nearby station in Utah. Constructed between 1937 and 1941, the Tank would have been relevant to the industry until 1957 or 1958. Once it was no longer useful, it may have been sold for as little as \$1, providing the buyer moved the structure.<sup>4</sup>

How the Moon Lake Electric Association (MLEA) acquired the Tank in 1963 or 1964, under what conditions and at what price is a mystery contained in some long-buried accounting record, many of which still sit in railroad

boxcars. We do know that a sale made sense for a railroad company upgrading to diesel technology and an electric company still producing its own power. The Tank’s potential lay just beneath the surface of things, its form as yet unrealized.

In 1951, just a couple of years after MLEA decided to offer service to the rapidly-burgeoning oilfield industry, it purchased the Rangely Power and Light Company, including a steam- and natural gas-fired generating plant. Over the next several years, Moon Lake updated and expanded the plant to run on natural gas and diesel fuel, with additional buildings and generating units in place by 1959.<sup>5</sup>

By the early 1960s, Moon Lake



*This cross-section of an Atchison, Topeka and Santa Fe Railway water treatment tank shows how chemicals were inserted through a small center pipe and mixed with raw water to filter out hard carbonates and salts. (Photo courtesy of the Railroad and Heritage Museum, Temple, Texas; Fred M. and Dale M. Springer Archives/SFRH&MS Temple Collection)*

hoped to lower insurance costs by adding a fire suppression system to draw water to the plant quickly during an emergency. Without town water lines to tie into, however, Moon Lake needed other options. The company already processed its own water and had plenty to spare. Why not purchase a water treatment tank a railroad station nearby no longer needed, use it for water storage, and lower insurance costs in one go?<sup>6</sup>

By the time the Tank arrived in Rangely in 1963 or 1964, Claude White had been Moon Lake's Superintendent of Generation for four or five years. He, wife Arlene, and their three children lived in a small house just northwest of the plant on Moon Lake property.

The youngest of the Whites' three children, Kelvin, was approximately ten years old when he saw trucks turning off of Highway 64 carrying pieces of the Tank.

"I remember standing in the yard, watching them weld that thing together," he said. "As a little kid, I wanted to go over and do it with them. I'm sure I was told, 'You leave the yard, you're dead meat.' They cut it in the biggest sections they could to put it on trucks and get it here, so it went up pretty fast."<sup>7</sup>

White and other locals who remember the Tank's reconstruction said it was pieced together in little more than a week using a crane and welding tools. Six-inch rods of steel pipe intended to transport the water to hydrants were laid near the plant. In the town proper, most residents took little notice of Rangely's new "skyline."

Moon Lake, however, would soon need to contend with the repercussions of their well-intentioned plan. Despite his coming to the company several years after the Tank did, Ken Winder, a Moon Lake electrical engineer from 1972 to 1981 and MLEA's engineering department manager until his retirement in



*The Blue Oyster Cult portal: Longtime Friend of the Tank Mark McCain looks through the Tank's portal between recording sessions for Odland's LEAVING EDEN in 1985. (photograph courtesy of Bruce Odland)*

2013, knows as much as anyone about why the Tank never again held water.

"The Tank's position had to be near and above the plant so that we'd have water pressure," Winder said. "But after it was placed, there were questions about the adequacy of the foundation. It wasn't properly done; from an engineering standpoint, you have tons of water to support, and it's not a very good hillside to begin with. There were a lot of issues concerning to me, even though the Tank was already in place."

Longtime MLEA employee Dave Justus recalled that town officials had concerns the hill itself wouldn't have supported the 1,170 tons of water weight the Tank could potentially hold. The plan that had dismantled and transported a massive tower of metal across county and perhaps even state lines ended here.

Soon enough, hopes to electrify the country via a federally-governed power plan would render the Tank's strategic hilltop perch purposeless. The shift would also launch the Tank into its next unlikely role.

In 1958, MLEA won the bid to supply power for the construction of the Flaming Gorge Dam, and by the time the project was completed in 1963, Moon Lake had begun purchasing power from the Dam. The next year, MLEA began receiving substantial power and energy allocations via the Federal Hydro Power System. The allotment increased upon the completion of the Colorado River Storage Projects (CRSP) in the late 1960s.

As the nation moved toward establishing a Federal Power Grid and Moon Lake increasingly relied on hydroelectric power, natural gas supplies in northwestern Colorado and California became sporadic, driving up local power production costs. Rangely's power plant scaled back production, running its generators only during the daytime.<sup>8</sup>

Interestingly, though, by the time Ken Winder arrived at Moon Lake in 1972, planners were still considering options for plant fire suppression.

"We purchased about two acres of land...to the south and west of the plant and created an area for a pond ditch there," he said. "It wasn't going to be a very deep pond, but it was another alternative being explored that was much less expensive than trying to remedy the foundation issues. And then we determined we wouldn't continue generating power at that location."<sup>9</sup>

By 1975, Moon Lake administrators had decided the local power plant was no longer earning its keep and shut it down for good. While the company sold the generators and other plant equipment, nobody seemed to want the Tank, although local tradition holds that Moon Lake eventually offered it up for as little as \$1.

Perhaps it's no wonder that the Tank held little value in most people's eyes. It must have seemed forlorn and abandoned, a modern-day Tower of Babel. But even as the Tank's purpose for Moon Lake evaporated, its emptiness became the very thing that drew native speakers to it.

The first group to discover the way Tank sounds dipped, climbed and meandered was comprised of the usual suspects: partygoers, love-smitten and lovelorn teenagers, oilfield workers, and graduates echoing the last strains of their school years before heading out into the world. Locals recollect customs: spray-painting graduation years on the Tank; modifying car stereo systems with speaker cords of sufficient length to grace the tank with music; and experimenting with the range of reverberations made when a beer bottle smashed against the Tank's metallic jacket. While not as popular a party spot as other nearby hangouts, the Tank was positively a draw for its novelty. There was something about the way it transformed whoops, whispers, and hollers into something nearly reverent, perhaps other-worldly.

In 1976, a second group of Tank inhabitants sprang from a random encounter between visiting artists and Rangely natives. One of the most fortuitous moments of "sonic thinker" and composer Bruce Odland's life happened during the last stop of the Colorado Council on the Arts and Humanities' Chautauqua Tour, a traveling arts festival which found Odland rambling around town gathering sounds for an event installation. Two roughnecks, still unidentified after nearly 40 years, sent him into the Tank along with his recording equipment, striking the outside of the structure with two-by-fours and rocks.<sup>10</sup>

That night, the Tank drew Odland back, this time with instruments and a friend from the Tour. Though he left Rangely the next day, New York-based Odland could never stay away for long. He felt an almost visceral need to plumb the ways the Tank spoke to him. Wanting it to be explored by



*Tank "founder" Bruce Odland illuminates the Tank in 1981, long before Tank visitors borrowed, bought, or installed electricity. (photograph by Elton Norwood)*

different creative minds, he brought musician friends, recording equipment, and instruments from around the world to test the sonic waters of the Tank. For more than two decades, artists made albums whose titles echoed their experiences in the structure: *The Soaring Bird*, *Leaving Eden*, and *Ray of Life* among them.

With two disparate groups virtually unknown to each other regularly visiting the hilltop sanctuary, it's a mystery they never really crossed paths again.

"There were occasions while we were recording that a dirt bike sound would echo into the Tank, followed by a visored-helmet, head-poking-through-the-portal spaceman," Odland recalled. "I think that, given the music and instruments collected inside, this passed for interplanetary communication in both directions, however brief."<sup>11</sup>

While each group felt a sense of belonging to the Tank, neither gave much thought to who actually owned it. Local oral history holds that in the early 1980s, Moon Lake finally sold the structure to the Town of Rangely. Town planners apparently hoped the community might yet find an official use for the empty space, but longtime MLEA lineman Don Wade recalled that it wasn't long before Moon Lake owned the Tank, however unwillingly, once again.<sup>12</sup>

County records show that by 1989, Moon Lake had found somebody else willing to take it on. A quitclaim deed issued in February documented Moon Lake selling the Tank and the nine acres surrounding it to Jude Hacking, owner of the Ouray Brine Corporation.<sup>13</sup> Hacking, who is skeptical that the Tank was never filled because of foundation issues, planned to fill the Tank with 10-pound brine water, but when a major contract with the Chevron Corporation fell through, he abandoned the plan. In the mid-1990s, he tried to sell it to the Town of Rangely, which was initially interested in a sale to use the Tank for city water. The lead paint in the Tank's interior, however, soon killed any potential deal.<sup>14</sup>

In the meantime, Tank devotees continued to make regular pilgrimages to their Mecca. In 1999, Michael Stanwood, a musician and longtime friend of Odland's who visited the Tank regularly for the better part of two decades, arrived with sound artist Jeremiah Moore to find the Tank's portal welded shut, and its exterior ladder cut off. Hacking, who was concerned about liability as the party crowds made more regular visits to the Tank, didn't hesitate to sell it and five of the original nine acres to Stanwood for a mere \$10.

Soon after acquiring the property, Stanwood started a small organization called the “Order of the Tank,” through which a dozen or so loyal Tank friends made small annual donations to help with taxes. Though Stanwood’s own liability was covered by another property he owned, he too soon learned the unusual routine of Tank guardianship.

“I had to be pretty conscious every time I went out to put ‘Private Property’ signs back up that had been torn down,” Stanwood said. “I usually ended up getting a new padlock, which had been broken or cut off in the time between my coming out there again. It was a challenge, but I was not aware of it as much as the man who passed it on to me.”

Another decade and a half trickled by, with an eclectic, evolving group of international musicians and artists making journeys to rest, record, and explore the Tank’s soundscape. In 2005, Stanwood recorded his album *Portal*, christening the Tank “a vessel where serendipity is always alive, patience is rewarded, trust is sustained, and surrender can at times give way to a sense of grace.”<sup>15</sup>

But as years passed, Stanwood and others began to feel that their exploration of the Tank’s secrets was coming to a close. When somebody offered to buy the Tank, even talking about parting it out for scrap metal, Stanwood reached out to the people who loved it most before making a decision.

“I had this feeling I had done my thing at the Tank,” he said. “I’d said everything I had to say....Most people agreed I should go ahead and let it go, that they didn’t need to go back out.”<sup>16</sup>

Bruce Odland was one of the first people Stanwood called. As Odland



*Tank group photo: A group of Tank Friends starts cleaning up the Tank after a successful 2013 Kickstarter campaign. From left: John Cottrill, Mark McCoin, Lois LaFond, Dick LaFond, Sammi Moon Wade, Bruce Odland, Jeremiah Moore, and Galen Clarke. (photograph by Galen Clarke)*

contemplated a future without the Tank, he sought input from good friend David Shoemaker, who had produced Odland’s Tank album *Leaving Eden*.

“Since none of us had been there for awhile, the first idea was to get the old gang together and have one last recording session out in Rangely,” Odland said. “When I called David...he said, ‘No, I’m not going to a funeral! Have you ever in 30 years of traveling the world for sound found a better sounding place?’”

Odland had to admit he hadn’t.

“Then we have to save it somehow,” Shoemaker said.

A few days later, as Odland and his friends celebrated his 60th birthday, a group of Tank faithful sat up late into the night, making plans to do just that. Though Stanwood returned to the Friends of the Tank double what the Order of the Tank had contributed for his stewardship for 14 years, they little understood what would be involved in the permitting process.

Now, two years in, they credit town and county officials in particular for helping guide them toward making the Center a reality.

“[W]e really did not know a thing about conditional use permits or building permits or international codes, so it is a continuous learning curve,” Odland said. “But now enough people are joining in that we feel it will really have a future there in Rangely as something. Nobody has ever before heard of a Center for Sonic Arts.”<sup>17</sup>

Odland is right. Even as an international community of musicians and artists awaits opportunities to travel to, learn from, and record in the Tank, few people in Rangely have experienced the Tank in the ways the Friends envision—through education, personal engagement, and mutual interaction. There is curiosity, but not yet passion; there is wary acceptance, but not yet welcoming. The tenor of the note is still uncertain; the Friends have released it, but only the Tank will decide how it plays out.

However, if Friend of the Tank and multimedia artist Max Bernstein is right, there’s cause enough for hope, even expectancy, in the Tank’s future.

“The mission of THE FRIENDS OF THE TANK to both protect and share the TANK with the world is a noble and significant one, which begins to fill an underrepresented niche in our culture,” he wrote. “While much of the over 35+ years of documentation of this space is currently being digitized, categorized, and codified, the true potential of this place is just now beginning to surface. The Point of Maximum Potential; a boulder at the peak of a hill the moment before physics takes hold and forces it into a kinetic state. This is the moment we are at with the TANK.”<sup>18</sup>

## Notes

1. Rachel Sauer, "Group Rallies Around Rangely Tank and Its Unique Sound," *The Daily Sentinel*, April 7, 2013, Dec. 12, 2014. For articles and interviews about the Tank's story during and since the March 2013 Kickstarter crowdsourcing campaign that raised more than \$46,000 to save it, click on the "Media/In The Press" link on the *Tanksounds* website.
2. "Friends of the Tank," *Tanksounds*, Jan. 18, 2015.
3. Alan Prendergast, "Save the Tank: Musicians Unite to Preserve an Acoustic Marvel in Northwestern Colorado," *Westword*, March 13, 2013, Dec. 12, 2014.
4. William Reich, series of email communications between Feb. 10 and March 3, 2015. For detailed, site-by-site information about Colorado railroad water tanks and their uses, see his book *Colorado Railroad Water Tanks* (Golden, CO: Colorado Railroad Historical Foundation, 2013).
5. John D. Barton, *A Remarkable Past and a Bright Future: A History of Moon Lake Electric Association, Inc., 1938-2013* (Virginia Beach, VA: Donning Co., 2013) 48.
6. Ken Winder, series of phone interviews between Jan. 28 and March 3, 2015. In Barton's history of the Moon Lake Electric Association, the author notes that "Kenneth Winder has been the principal engineer for almost half of Moon Lake's existence" (51).
7. Kelvin White, Facebook communication, Jan. 21, 2015 and personal interview, Feb. 3, 2015.
8. Barton, 62-65.
9. Winder, phone interview, Jan. 28, 2015.
10. Bruce Odland has spoken of this experience in various interviews and publications, including a March 2013 interview with Colorado Public Radio. For links, go to "Media/In The Press" on *Tanksounds*.
11. Odland, email communication, Feb. 27, 2015.
12. Cecil Lollar, phone interview, Jan. 24, 2015. Don Wade, personal interview, March 2, 2015.
13. Quit-Claim Deed issued between grantor Moon Lake Electric Association and grantee Ouray Brine Corporation on Feb. 2, 1989. Online archive idocmarket.com, which contains documents from 1983 to present, tracks the property's 1999 sale between Ouray Brine Corporation owner Jude Hacking and Tank musician Michael Stanwood, and between Stanwood and the Friends of the Tank in 2013.
14. Jude Hacking, personal interview, March 3, 2015.
15. Michael Stanwood, jacket cover, *Portal* (Pansy Productions, 2005).
16. Stanwood, phone interview, Feb. 4, 2015.
17. Odland, email communication, Feb. 21, 2015.
18. "Friends of the Tank," *Tanksounds*, Feb. 16, 2015.

## Acknowledgments

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