

Backfill

New Life for an Old Bottle

by Kevin Serr

When it was built for the owner of a local dairy company in 1935, the Benewah Milk Bottle in Spokane, Wash., was a good example of literalism in advertising: It looked like what was sold inside. In September of 2011, the historic structure — along with the attached restaurant — was damaged by fire. The owners hired my company, Compass Construction, to repair the damage.

The project called for some creative thinking. The 38-foot-tall by 15-foot-wide bottle had a 2x4 stick frame with an overlay of lath and stucco; two-thirds of the frame's weight was supported by a steel I-beam that ran diagonally across the outer walls. The engineering report dictated that we find a way to stabilize the 33,000-pound bottle while we replaced the single existing beam with a more robust welded assembly. After much discussion we decided to do this with temporary beams and an array of pole jacks. Once the new steel was in place, the rest of the job was relatively straightforward.

The result is a big improvement over the pre-fire structure. In addition to upgrading the ventilation and other mechanicals, we restored the ceiling to its original 15-foot height and created an overhead rotunda ornamented with neon lighting and four custom milk-bottle-shaped lamps.

The day before the restaurant's official reopening in May, the owners hosted a thank-you party for our crew and the Spokane firefighters, with plenty of burgers and — you guessed it — milkshakes.

Kevin Serr is a remodeler and restoration specialist in Spokane, Wash.



A. To temporarily bear the weight of the stuccoed bottle, a pair of 2x10s supported by pole jacks was bolted to each 16-inch on-center stud (note the curved bottom plate below the temporary 2x10s).

B. New steel beams were passed in through an opening in the outside wall (visible at lower left), raised into position, and welded together.

C. Clearing away the forest of temporary jacks left an open, unobstructed work space.



D. The restored interior was finished with drywall on steel studs. The circular opening that extends upward toward the bottle's neck is visible at rear.

E. Structurally reinforced and freshly painted, the landmark bottle is once again open for business.

