

Fire Tower

Breezing north along Highway 441 in southern Georgia on a muggy Sunday morning in July, I saw the fire tower above the pine trees stretching for miles, row after planted row. I've always longed to climb a fire tower and experience the view. I slowed as I passed this one expecting the typical "No Trespassing" sign or at least a chain locked across the base of the steps. I saw neither so I braked suddenly and turned around. Rolling up into the grassy clearing at the base of the unattended tower, there was no sign of activity except for the fresh cardboard remains of a case of beer and a few scattered empty cans glinting blue and silver in the sun. I rechecked for any indications that forbade access and, finding none, excitedly stuffed a camera into a fanny pack, scribbled in my notebook and left it in the passenger seat. With pounding heart I approached the stairs, thick slabs of wood made slippery by algae and the morning dew. Grasping the galvanized angle iron handrail, I determined not to look down as I made my ascent, noting that all my senses seemed highly alert in contrast to that of the forest ranger who would routinely plod up these stairs expecting endless hours of boredom in the sapping summer heat.

I dared not look past the steps and handrail. At the end of each flight a small landing of a few planks lead to the next upward span. Since the base of the tower was considerably wider than the top, the flights became shorter and the landings tinier the farther up I climbed. Thinking after this many steps I must be nearing the top, I paused to look up only to be disheartened that so many more flights remained. Glancing beyond the metalwork, I realized that I was just above the tops of these towering pines. Already I began to dread the descent on these stairs.

Climbing lighthouses along the Atlantic coast, the towers of medieval churches in Utrecht and monasteries outside Arles, I've always felt somewhat claustrophobic yet secure when surrounded by thick stone walls. In Brunelleschi's dome of the Florence Cathedral or the dome of St. Peter's in Rome, I've squeezed past other tourists along the spiraling stairs in the dim light. At the end of each of these ascents, I've emerged squinting into the bright light and breeze to a fantastic view of each city. Not so on a fire tower where every step is visible and vulnerable and exposed, with ever shrinking strands of crimped metal providing the only support.

Near the top, the guardrails surrounding each landing were eliminated. I found myself tightly gripping the handrails on which now seemed flimsy and insubstantial. Stopping again to check my progress, I saw that only a few more flights remained and those I climbed with fast-beating heart until finally I arrived at a hatch in the floor of the cabin. With great relief I saw the hatch had been propped open so that I could enter the workspace of the ranger. To leave the stairs and transfer to the floor of the cabin required an awkward maneuver where no handrail existed for support. Having come this far, I took the risk and wiggled on hands and knees over to the floor which was littered with broken glass. Taking a second to catch my breath, I slowly stood up, feeling only slightly more secure in this cubicle enclosed by a thin sheet of plywood. Nervous at this height, I found myself crouching slightly, like a surfer hoping to keep his balance. Trying to relax, I noticed the only furnishing in the cubicle: a round plywood table with weathered layers peeling and separating. Every window had been shattered. The view of the pine plantations sprawled to the horizon in every direction, the green diluted in the humid stagnant atmosphere. Several blacktops and an unpaved road converged at the base of the tower.

I snapped a few pictures mainly as proof that I had climbed a fire tower, still feeling giddy from the height and not fully trusting the structure to support my weight. I tried to distract myself, thinking about who might have broken the windows and why? Perhaps the vandals enjoyed the sound of breaking glass, and the few seconds that followed while shards tinkled down the legs of the tower, careening off metal, their landing muffled by the wet grass. Like their lives, brief and mostly unwitnessed and unremembered, leaving little evidence of their existence. How wasteful and foolish, to break glass, some shards of which would come to rest on the very steps that must be traversed to return to earth. People often create circumstances that make their futures more treacherous than necessary.

In the wood, Eric had painstakingly professed his love for Theresa with a pocketknife. Numerous other carvings documented that lovers had experienced exhilaration here, as if smooching at ground level wasn't thrilling enough. I wondered what happened to Eric and Theresa. Maybe Eric loves Wanda now. Maybe poor Eric had climbed this tower alone and had spent an hour carving his message, all the time thinking how much more satisfying it would be to spend that hour in Theresa's arms, who at that very moment was applying lipstick that she

hoped Walter would remove later when they were supposed to be watching a movie. Perhaps Theresa was never aware of Eric's crush. Perhaps it had been Theresa and Walter who had made this tower sway in the night. All we can say for sure is that Eric loved Theresa. Does he love her now? Did Theresa ever love Eric?

With no place to sit, I lingered only a few minutes in the ranger's cubicle, supremely satisfied that I had accomplished something I've always aspired to do.

Now I contemplated the descent, thankful that neither my wife nor our children were traveling with me. Had they been present, my wife would have nixed this attempt which would have been far too dangerous for the kids.

On the descent, the steps seemed smaller and steeper, the wood black and slimy like catfish skin. The landings appeared miniscule and their lack of a railing tempted disaster. Recalling my unreliable right knee which sometimes under less dramatic conditions has bent laterally instead of hinging backward, I worried that it would give way on these slippery steps with fatal consequences, causing me to tumble and slide off a landing, my body launched into a jagged trajectory that would bounce off metal braces during the plummet to the ground, each encounter breaking another bone and sending me flailing downward into the next metal bar until finally a dull thud would herald my penultimate encounter with the earth.

The coroner, with beads of sweat glistening on his bald head and chubby jowls would mutter "What a waste," as medical personnel attempted to transfer my mangled body to a gurney, parts dangling from fractured bones forming bulges beneath the bluing skin. Was he referring to my life, or simply lamenting being summoned to this muggy venue from his air-conditioned den where NASCAR announcers in high pitched voices described the removal of a spring rubber during Dale Jr's green-flag pit stop. Would he quickly determine that yet another foolhardy outsider got what he deserved, linking my death to the empty beer cans and not bothering with a blood-alcohol test. Would he then hurry back home to catch the conclusion of the race. Or would he seek among the multiple fractures the ultimate origin of my demise, and discover it to be a lethal combination of adventurous curiosity and a right knee with loose ligaments that tend to swivel when they should only hinge?

The coroner's investigation would have lead him to my car where he would find my notebook in which I had chronicled my trip thus far that day:

7:01 am leave Alachua, Florida hotel. Full of gas.

Stop for photo of mobile home with Confederate Flag as a door north of Lake City, Florida.

8:20 FL/GA border, unremarkable. Droopy ivy and Spanish moss in roadside trees bathed in the morning mist. No cars. No churches.

8:31 Hwy 441 entrance to Okefenokee Swamp near Fargo, GA.

8:36 Stopped at Suwanee River. Slow, black flow swirling, hiding swampy secrets. Dangerous. Tempting. I want to drift it, steering a canoe into the cypress shade, see sleepy snakes sunning on overhangs, and flow in the blood of this swamp as it returns in its vein to the great heart, the ocean.

9:00 N of Fargo, GA. Stopped to photograph vultures with outstretched wings sunning from the metalwork of a communications tower.

9:11 Stopped at a fire tower. S of Homerville, GA.

But thankfully my knee hinged properly, especially since I bore most of my weight on the railings, tensely lowering myself inch by inch as if I were in physical therapy and becoming reaccustomed to using my legs. As the ground drew nearer, my heart slowed until finally my sandals encountered the sandy soil. Even with a wide-angle lens, I had to retreat some distance from the base of the tower to make it fit into the photograph. Once back in the car, I added to my notebook:

9:24 Back in after climbing fire tower. Another check on my life list of things to do. Scary but fun. Did Theresa ever love Eric? Wonder what's next!

G.R. Davis, Jr.

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