

# All Along the WATCHTOWER

by Mike Berry

Photos by T.J. Waller

*Chuluota's abandoned fire tower is a landmark of local history, and its proximity to the Flagler Trail makes for a delightful duet of old-Florida charm*

*From this tower, lookouts used to watch for wildfires in the woods of mid-century Chuluota and the surrounding area. It's now one of only two fire towers left in Central Florida, making it something of a historical landmark.*

As an action photographer, T.J. Waller of Winter Springs makes numerous forays around Seminole County.

Those excursions led T.J. to take notice of the abandoned fire tower near the Flagler Trail in Chuluota. Then, he got curious about it. Curious enough to fire up his drone and capture several haunting aerial photos of the tower and its surroundings. But, strangely enough, T.J. could find virtually no information on the history of the tower itself.

It turns out that some limited history does exist, and the fate of the imposing tower is intriguingly linked to the history of our community. Furthermore, there is a network of fire-tower aficionados across the nation who share a deep affection for these gangly structures, including some adventure travelers who even camp in them overnight.

As T.J. explains it, "I just like old stuff."

Retiring Oviedo Fire Chief Lars White is very familiar with the tower, which is owned by the state's Forest Service. He remembers doing repelling exercises off the tower as a district commander back in the early 1990s because it was one of the tallest structures in Seminole County.

As Chief White explains it, the tower was useful for spotting fires when the Chuluota area was sparsely populated. But, as the community grew, it became easier for someone to see, and report, any wildfires without having to climb up a tower.

When exactly the tower was built and abandoned is a little murky. But Chuluota historian Karen Jacobs, who graduated from Oviedo High School in 1965, remembers the tower vividly from her youth.

The population growth that eventually helped render the tower obsolete, she says, was largely due to the growth of Cape Kennedy (now Cape Canaveral) during the glory years of the space program leading up to the 1969 moon landing. And then, of course, along came Disney.

While some transplants to Central Florida flocked to cities, others were drawn to the more rustic vibe of Chuluota, says Karen, who has just finished writing a book about the history of the area.

"They liked the more rural feel," Karen says. "There was still lots of woods, and you could still go hunting and fishing. Nobody would mess with you. It was a great place to grow up."

So sparsely populated was Chuluota that the community did not have its own volunteer fire department until the 1970s, says Bennett Lloyd, coordinator for the Museum of Seminole County History.

"Even then, it was a very small department, with a secondhand truck that didn't actually work," Bennett laughs.

The first recorded forest fire watchtower in U.S. history dates back to 1905 Maine. During their peak in the 1940s, some 4,000 towers dotted the country, but only about 900 still stand today. According to the Forest Fire Lookout Association, Beat

Generation novelist Jack Kerouac served as a tower lookout before publishing his breakout book, *On the Road*.

While new technologies such as satellite surveillance have rendered even the most remote fire towers largely unnecessary, volunteers work hard to preserve decommissioned towers, and some towers can be booked for overnight stays, the association says.

That is not likely to happen with the tower in Chuluota. Much of its floor has given way, says T.J., an FAA-certified drone photographer. And while the tower is gated, vandals have recently managed to make their way to the top and leave graffiti on its walls.

"It kind of makes me sad that someone would deface it," T.J. says. "It's such a cool landmark."



*The tower overlooks the now-busy intersection of Snow Hill Road and County Road 419. The southernmost trailhead of the Flagler Trail is less than a mile away, across the street from Walker Elementary School.*

Sean Gallagher, district manager for the Florida Fire Service, agrees. The tower is one of only two left standing in the four-county Central Florida district, he says. And for that reason, he would like to see at least the top of it preserved.

Sean hopes the Forest Service might partner with a historical organization to move the tower to a place where the public can enjoy it.

"It's kind of a relic," Sean says. "But I would like to save it."

## A GATEWAY TO ADVENTURE

Given its proximity to the Snow Hill Road Trailhead of the Flagler Trail, the abandoned fire tower can serve as a southern-end landmark for hikers, bikers, and horse-riders who want to experience some old-Florida beauty. There are a number of things to enjoy about the rugged, super-shaded Flagler Trail, which the Rails-to-Trails Conservancy describes as "a bit wild and off the beaten path."

The 10-mile trail runs along an old railroad bed from the Lake Harney Wilderness Area down to the Orange County border near Chuluota, with one gap near Geneva Elementary School.

Most of the trail is unpaved and thickly forested, according to the Rails-to-Trails Conservancy, a nonprofit agency dedicated to creating a nationwide network of trails from former rail lines.

In this case, the rail line, operated by the Florida East Coast Railway, was abandoned by the 1950s, and the

corridor was never used as a road.

"Open for pedestrians, equestrians, and any bikes that can handle the uneven surface, the Flagler Trail offers a unique chance for a rustic escape into the Florida wilderness," reads the Conservancy's preview of the trail.

Stretches of untouched land create great opportunities to observe Florida wildlife and foliage. One of the trail's highlights is its pedestrian bridge over the Econlockhatchee River. The bridge has been closed due to damage from Hurricane Matthew, but is expected to reopen in early spring, says Jim Duby of Seminole County's natural lands program.

Jim generally agrees with the conservancy's take on the trail. For example, he says, it is certainly accessible by bike.

"But," he notes, "it would have to be a mountain bike."

