



LOOK

Safety

Evergreen Tower, Autauga County

out Tower

By Thomas Kaufmann, Architectural Historian and Preservationist

You are hiking in the woods, or possibly, driving in your car on an old dirt road, when suddenly, ahead in the distance you see it – a real lookout tower – standing in the middle of nowhere, all alone, and so beautiful in its forest setting. It dominates and commands the terrain in every way, and is irresistible to stay away from, especially to climb. No one is around . . . you draw nearer to it, hoping, wondering, if just by chance you might be able to . . .

Sound familiar? It is a very familiar scenario to me, because I have done it – way back in 1980 or '81, and yes, the 'NO TRESPASSING' signs were in place, and the driveway-gate to the tower was closed, barred, and locked. Yet I still did it in good company, climbing all the way to the top of the tower frame under the ranger's observation cab – and scared to death! Well, for a few minutes anyway.

A few years ago, I had the opportunity to speak with the Forest Ranger of that post, now retired, and confess to him that I had climbed the tower. He was very gracious, and I believe I did receive pardon from him for my 'transgression,' but before I said anything else, I had to tell him the most honest truth from my heart – "that I did not regret doing it."

I believe I will go to my grave still feeling the same way; that will never change. I think what I 'did not regret' was having an adventure; however, upon later reflection, I would rather have done it when it was permissible, not harming anyone in the process, especially if something went wrong. Years of experience in working with and learning from architects, structural engineers, preservation specialists, and general contractors has served me well in knowing how to do my research and documentation on

historic structures, including lookouts. At times, climbing up into difficult and hard-to-reach places involves making judgment calls – and I can tell you that I don't take unnecessary risks. It's not worth it.

My advice? If you want to climb a tower, find those that you can climb – as often and as much as you like! There are lookouts which have been restored for climbing . . . Smith Mountain Tower on Lake Martin is one, www.cherokeeridgealpinetrail.org/trails.htm, operated by the Cherokee Ridge Alpine Trail Association and the AU Rural Studio Birding Tower at Perry Lakes Park perrylakes.org/perrylakes/tower.htm near Marion, Alabama, is another. The Alabama Forestry Commission's Butler County Office gives tours of their Chapman Tower (by appointment), and also, the prospect of the Wharton Tower at Ruffner Mountain Nature Preserve ruffnermountain.org/ in Birmingham as a future climbing tower looks to be very promising.

Still, whenever you come upon an Alabama Forestry Commission (AFC) tower or a US Forest Service tower in the woods, admire it, take photographs of it, and appreciate the tower as a most important artifact of forest service history. Feel free to inquire from the AFC or Forest Service about the tower if you like. But do resist the temptation to climb the tower, for your own safety's sake, and also for the sake of honoring our treasured and valued forest personnel and policy.



Supulga Tower, Conecuh County

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