



A FLAGG OVER WEOGUFKA

By Cole Sikes, Alabama Forestry Commission

As the sun rises each day over the hills of Coosa County, it reveals an icon that marks the beginning of the Appalachian Mountain Range. Perched over 1,100 feet above sea level, Flagg Mountain contains a history-filled gentle giant made of stone with walls over two feet thick. In the past, Flagg Mountain fire tower served as one of many ‘all-seeing eyes’ in state forest management efforts. It stands today at the southernmost peak of the Appalachian Trail within Weogufka State Forest as a tribute not only to the young men who built it, but also to those who served by providing protection of Alabama’s beautiful forests.

During the Great Depression, job availability was miniscule. In efforts to create more jobs in the 1930s, President Franklin Delano Roosevelt established the Civilian Conservation Corps (CCC). The corps’s main objective was to operate as a construction organization, building housing, monuments, and what was necessary at the time. Composed of 216 men from New York and New Jersey, CCC Company #260 was instructed to build a state park in the community of Weogufka, Alabama. Aspirations for the park were high in the imaginations of Capt. Guy D. Field, company commander, and Roy E. Parke, park superintendent. Original plans for Weogufka State Park contained picnic areas, a beach beside Weogufka Creek, swimming pools, 11 cabins for housing, a caretaker’s home, and an observation tower where vis-

itors could see for endless miles in a 360-degree view. The tower was to be built using the very earth surrounding the mountain in Coosa County. Although the plans were expressed, the entire park was never completed. Construction ended in 1935, leaving the property abandoned. Within the next few years, the park and all its existing establishments were placed under the responsibilities of the Alabama Forestry Commission (AFC).

The AFC saw the lookout tower as a powerful tool that could be used for spotting wildfires. Flagg’s elevated views allowed someone to see across seven counties on a clear day. The tower had new purpose. For more than 40 years, its duties included extending communication from headquarters in Montgomery via radio antennas, and triangulating the source of forest fires by coordinating with other fire towers nearby.

To operate the radios, Weogufka resident Kate Prater stationed herself atop the tower. Employed by the AFC in 1950, she served as the sole radio relay for all north Alabama while keeping watch for forest fires. For 90 dollars a month, she dedicated her days to the protection of Alabama’s forests. As lookout, Prater often worked alongside Coosa County Forest Ranger L.D. Roberts. A Luverne native, Roberts served his beloved Weogufka turf for 25 years with the AFC. Each day on duty the duo operated as a well-oiled machine, using equipment and devoting themselves to Flagg Mountain and its surrounding area. Roberts’s forest ranger



[Above]: Kate Prater and L.D. Roberts working alongside each other in Coosa County



[Right]: Flagg Mountain's official certification on the National Historic Lookout Register

days were cut short in 1968 when he suffered a heart attack while fighting a wildfire at Stewartville nearby in Coosa County. He was one of few on-duty fatalities since the AFC's creation in 1924. Prater retired in 1989 after 39 years with the Commission.

Also in 1989, the tower was deemed obsolete when the AFC began utilizing aircraft to spot forest fires. The remaining cabins and fire tower was leased shortly after by the Coosa County Cooperators, a volunteer organization, to restore the properties to their near-original condition.

Since 1989, the 50-foot structure has rested in its original place, keeping watch over 240 acres in Weogufka State Forest. One decade after its decommissioning, Flagg was listed as number 250 of 1,000 towers on the National Historic Lookout Register in 1998 because of its aesthetics and former utilization by the Forestry Commission. It shares a spot on the register with only one other lookout location in Alabama.

Flagg Mountain also shares the beginning of the 335-mile Pinhoti Trail that runs from Weogufka to north Georgia, close to the Tennessee line. The Pinhoti is a section of the larger-in-scale Eastern Continental Trail beginning in Key West, Florida, and concluding in Newfoundland. To accommodate traffic through the trail, the Alabama Forestry Commission signed a memorandum of agreement with the Alabama Hiking Trail Society (AHTS) in 2003. This agreement gave the AHTS responsibility of maintaining the trails and remaining residential CCC cabins throughout the property.

Many hikers and visitors have documented their journey to the mountain in the 'guestbook' – a spiral notebook lying on a rustic table inside the stone structure connected to the base of the tower. Some stories date back decades. One entry mentions the writer's great grandfather work-



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ing with the crew of CCC Company #260. Others include hikers traveling through Flagg Mountain from states as far as Maine.

With restoration efforts in effect and more hikers adding the Pinhoti to their checklist, the AHTS coordinated with the AFC to appoint a property caretaker. Meredith 'Sunny' Eberhart is a long-distance hiker and current caretaker of Flagg Mountain as of January 2018. Being a retired Florida doctor of almost 30 years, Eberhart wanted a change from his usual scenery in examination rooms. Always having a passion for the outdoors, he began hiking after moving to Dahlonega, Georgia, in the early '80s on Nimblewill Creek. He has now completed all 11 National Scenic Trails, recently including Route 66 running from Chicago to Santa Monica, California, in 2017. These feats earned him the nickname 'Nimblewill Nomad.' His ability to work with others and notoriety in the AHTS made him the perfect candidate for Flagg Mountain. Eberhart is elated to have this honor bestowed upon him, and would like to see hikers use the mountain as a hostel on their journeys. After likely completing his own last long-distance hike, he calls Flagg home.

All grounds are open to the public while its caretaker is present, and visitors can even stay overnight in the cabins just as Flagg's predecessors did. Although the tower can't be ascended as of this article's publication, the AFC plans to reconstruct the tower staircase and establish a bathhouse to accommodate guests in the future.

A glimpse back in time is the goal for the mountain's restoration. One might say that time even travels slower while experiencing history and adoring Flagg's scenic views. Dedication from many agencies, organizations, and individuals demonstrate how much this property is loved. The contributions from our hard-working Americans, past and present, are why Weogufka State Forest remains beautiful, its trails still wind, and its Flagg still flies. 🏔️

