

# *New Britain Dispatch*



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# Daytona Beach's Unaesthetic Sightseeing Tower (1963-1983)

by Randy Jaye

Many say that beauty is in the eye of the beholder. That was certainly the case with Daytona Beach's once iconic 125-foot tall Sightseeing Tower (also informally known as the Lookout Tower). The structure stood near the boardwalk (sometimes called the Broadwalk) between the band shell and the coquina clock tower for twenty years, from 1963 to 1983. Throughout its brief lifetime some considered it to be an important local landmark and others considered it to be a public eyesore.



*Sightseeing Tower, Pier and Boardwalk in Daytona Beach. Postcard ca. 1970s. Author's collection.*

Long-time local resident, editor, reporter and columnist for the *Daytona Beach News-Journal*, Mark Lane, remembers the Sightseeing Tower as, "Positioned between the Boardwalk's magnificent Bandshell and its cool and quirky stone clock tower, the sheet-metal Sightseeing Tower stuck out like a sore thumb. That was one ugly stretched-out garden shed of a structure."

The Sightseeing Tower was built in 1963 by Smith Steel Construction Co., from Jacksonville. It was owned by Tona-Rama Inc. In 1963, the city of Daytona Beach leased a 30 by 35-foot piece of land, where the structure was built, to Tona-Rama Inc. for 10 years. The lease payment was \$600 per year plus five percent of the attraction's gross income over \$25,000.

The top observation deck of the Sightseeing Tower was accessed by an elevator. A spiral stairway inside the structure was only used in case the elevator malfunctioned or was being serviced. The tower's business and ticket office was housed on the ground floor.



*Daytona Beach's Space Needle. Postcard ca. 1970. Author's collection. Note: In 2012, it was demolished after becoming structurally hazardous and deemed an eyesore.*

The Sightseeing Tower operated with no real competition until 1969 when the Space Needle was built adjacent to the nearby pier. The Space Needle was 176-foot tall and had an ascending and descending 25-passenger circular gondola which rotated slowly while in motion. Obviously, this newer, taller and more modern attraction was going to be challenging for the Sightseeing Tower to compete with.

A lawsuit was filed by the owners of the Sightseeing Tower which claimed the permit to build the Space Needle was illegal because the structure was too close to the high water mark on the beach, and the part of the beach around the pier had become public property and was interfering with public access to the beach.



*Ocean Front Park - Coquina Clock Tower, Balconies, Bandshell and the Sightseeing Tower - Daytona Beach, Fla. Postcard ca. 1970. Author's collection.*

appeals were forwarded to the Florida Supreme Court. Harry Doan, owner of the Space Needle, pleaded to the Supreme Court to reverse the lower court's decision because he said he would be "robbed" of a \$125,000 investment.

The lawsuit became a significant state-wide argument as it had the potential to establish a precedent to determine if beaches were legally public property in Florida. During the three years the lawsuit worked its way through the courts the Space Needle was open for business.

On August 31, 1972, the First District Court of Appeal stated, "the Space Needle built on the soft sand area of the beach should have never been constructed, and the city of Daytona Beach erred in awarding the owners a building permit." The court issued orders to take the Space Needle down in 90 days.

Appeals were quickly filed by attorneys for both the city of Daytona Beach and the attraction's owners. The

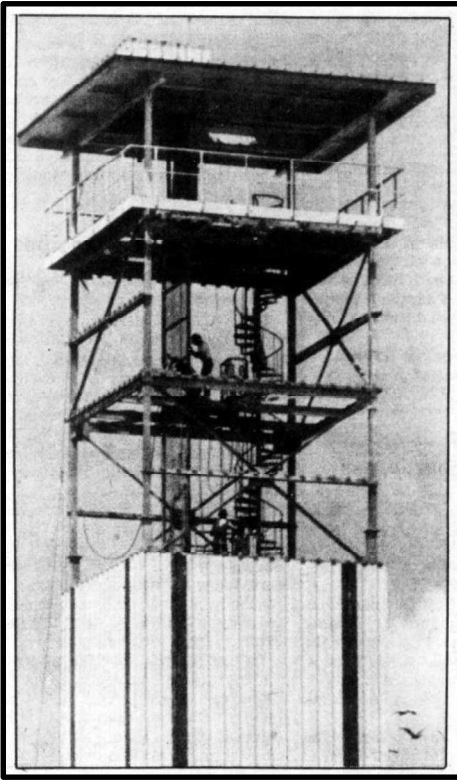


*Sightseeing Tower and Clock Tower view from beneath a coquina balcony in Ocean Front Park, Daytona Beach, Fla. - Postcard ca. 1970s. Author's collection.*

On March 25, 1974, the Florida Supreme Court ruled in favor of allowing the Space Needle to stand where it was. Chief Justice James C. Adkins said, "the Space Needle does not substantially interfere with public access to the surf...the erection of the sky-tower was consistent with recreational use of the land by the public." This case, *Daytona Beach v. Tona-Rama*, provided a landmark decision regarding the public's right to access the dry-sand part of beaches throughout the state of Florida.

By 1977, the Sightseeing Tower was attracting about 10,000 visitors per year (about 80 per cent were between the Daytona Speed weeks and Easter, and June through August). At this time, the price to enter the Sightseeing Tower was fifty cents per person. The telescope on the observation deck cost twenty-five cents.

Harry Halliday, owner of the Sightseeing Tower and its gift shop from 1971 to 1983, visited its observation deck many times and claimed he was always impressed with the way the ocean changed from day to day, sometimes from hour to hour. Halliday said "The sun changes its color. When we get an offshore wind, it's like a lake. It's almost that still. Then we get a north-eastern breeze and the waves run out almost parallel to the beach."



*Sightseeing Tower Coming Down. The Orlando Sentinel, October 4, 1983.*

During the early 1980s, the popularity of the Sightseeing Tower declined. There was also public outcry claiming the Sightseeing Tower was an eyesore and should be removed from Daytona Beach's beautiful Oceanfront Park. There were also plans to build a luxury hotel east of Atlantic Avenue and the 125-foot tall Sightseeing Tower would obstruct its guest's view of the ocean. Daytona Beach officials told the *Orlando Sentinel* on July 6, 1983 that the Sightseeing Tower will not remain. "It's just too unsightly."

The city of Daytona Beach denied the owners of the Sightseeing Tower an extension of their lease and announced the tower will be torn down. The city commissioners of Daytona Beach agreed to allocate \$5000 to assist in the removal of Sightseeing Tower.

In October 1983, after a twenty-year run, the Sightseeing Tower was disassembled and all of its pieces were removed from Daytona Beach's Oceanfront Park.

By the way, the removal of the Sightseeing Tower coupled with the enticement of potential investors and contractors by the city of Daytona Beach and county of Volusia did lead to the construction of a new luxury hotel next to Oceanfront Park, which was completed in 1989. The \$47 million 402-room oceanfront Marriott Resort immediately became notable for its shape, color and ocean views.



*The Marriott Resort on Atlantic Avenue in Daytona Beach. The eye-catching stepped pyramid themed architecture with a pink and turquoise color scheme dominates the skyline. Originally, it also featured pastel-themed rooms and a lobby which was adorned with pink marble and brass. Postcard ca. 1989. Author's collection.*



*"World's Most Famous Beach," Daytona Beach, Fla.*  
**Ocean Front Park - featuring the Coquina Clock Tower and the Sightseeing Tower - Daytona Beach, Fla. Postcard ca. 1970s. Author's collection.**



**Looking North on the World Famous Daytona Beach showing the new Sightseeing Tower. Postcard ca. 1968. Author's collection.**

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