

Winter 2024

Volume 42

Number 2

# Halifax Herald



RIDGEWOOD AVENUE, DAYTONA, FLA.

*A Journal of the  
Halifax Historical Society  
Daytona Beach, Florida*



Halifax  
Historical  
Museum

Preservation. Advocacy. Education.

# Daytona Beach's Once Iconic and Controversial Space Needle

by Randy Jaye\*

When someone mentions "Space Needle," what most likely comes to mind is Seattle, Washington's world famous and iconic landmark observation tower, aptly called the Space Needle. However, Daytona Beach was once home to its own iconic Space Needle attraction.

Built in 1969 by McMillan and Wright Inc. at a cost of \$125,000, Daytona Beach's Space Needle was located at the foot of the Main Street Pier. The company's president Harry Doan<sup>1</sup> had been a well-known military pilot, was a vintage warbird collector, and owned Doan's Helicopter Service. He also owned the Main Street Pier and several restaurants. Daytona's Space Needle was 176-feet tall and had an ascending and descending 25-passenger circular gondola which rotated slowly while in motion.

The attraction opened to the public in April 1970, but it stirred public controversy from the time construction began. A lawsuit was filed on behalf of the public by Tona-Rama, Inc. (owner of the Sightseeing Tower<sup>2</sup> on the Boardwalk) and State Attorney Stephen Boyles. The argument centered around the ownership of the beach property where the Space Needle stood. The lawsuit claimed it was on public property while Doan's attorneys claimed it was on private property and did not interfere with public access to the beach.

The dispute was of state-wide importance because it would likely establish a precedent determining whether beaches were public property in Florida.

Despite the legal battles, the Space Needle remained in operation and many people rode to the top while enjoying scenic views of the Daytona Beach area and the Atlantic Ocean.

On August 31, 1972, the First District Court of Appeal ruled that "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 ordered the Space Needle to be taken down within 90 days.

Attorneys for both the City of Daytona Beach and the attraction's owners appealed the decision to the Florida Supreme Court. Harry Doan pleaded for a reversal of the lower court's decision, claiming that dismantling the Space Needle would "rob" him of a \$125,000 investment.



On March 25, 1974, the Florida Supreme Court ruled in Doan's favor. Chief Justice James C. Adkins<sup>3</sup> said: "The Space Needle does not substantially interfere with public access to the surf [and] the erection of the sky-tower was consistent with recreational use of the land by the public." This case, *Daytona Beach v. Tona-Rama*, affirmed the public's right to access the dry-sand part of beaches throughout the state of Florida.

In 2005, several passengers aboard the Space Needle's gondola were stranded at the top for an hour and a half due to mechanical problems. The attraction, at the time owned by the city of Daytona Beach, was then closed due to safety and maintenance concerns.

As the attraction sat idle for several years the cost to repair or restore it soared. In 2012, the estimates reached



\$130,000 for restoration and \$80,000 for demolition and repairs to the pier once it was removed. Some city officials wanted to restore and reopen the Space Needle while others envisioned it serving as a giant signpost. Joe's Crab Shack Restaurant contemplated hanging a 55-foot-tall sign on the structure and paying the city an undetermined amount of money to do so. Residents debated whether the attraction was a historical landmark worthy of restoration or a rusting eyesore that belonged in the scrap heap.

As Daytona Beach city commissioners pondered over a decision, the forty-plus-year-old attraction decided its own fate. On September 9, 2012, a piece of rusted metal jarred loose and fell about 170 feet from the underside of the gondola and smashed onto the pier. Although no one was injured it was obvious the structure was beginning to fall apart and was now a public safety hazard.

Daytona Beach Mayor Glenn Ritchey said, "After closer examination of the condition of the Space Needle, it was determined that the best course of action is to take it down."

Soon after the mayor's pronouncement, the city hired Bryson Crane Rental Service to demolish the Space Needle attraction and haul away the debris. Motivated by public safety concerns, the company worked late nights to complete the job. By the middle of September 2012, all that remained of the once popular attraction was its concrete slab base.

When an iconic structure is demolished, there are usually mixed opinions as to whether it should have somehow been saved. However, the Space Needle's advanced state of disrepair and the health hazard it posed made demolition the only viable option. 🍷

*\*Randy Jaye has had a life-long interest and passion for history. He has done extensive travel visiting, researching, and*



*Daytona Beach, Florida Space Needle & Pier.  
Postcard circa 1980s (Author's collection)*

*photographing historic sites, museums, and historical societies. He believes that studying history helps people understand how past events have shaped the present. He is also a firm believer that understanding the lessons of history can prevent undesirable events in our past from occurring again. He recently researched and nominated 4 properties that have been successfully added onto the National Register of Historic Places. He is the author of three recent history books, and writes articles for historical journals, local newspapers, magazines, and has appeared on several radio shows and PBS documentaries. His latest book Florida Prohibition: Corruption, Defiance and Tragedy is being published by The History Press and is due on the shelves in February 2024. He earned both a master's degree and a bachelor's degree from California State University.*

#### NOTES:

1. Harry Sterner Doan was born on August 9, 1929. He was tragically killed on April 4, 1992, at the age of 62, when he misjudged a runway causing his restored Douglas AD-4 Skyraider to flip and crash at the TiCo Warbird Airshow in Titusville.
2. The Sightseeing Tower was built in 1964 next to Daytona Beach's



*Sightseeing Tower (not to be confused with the Space Needle) was in the heart of Daytona Beach's Broadwalk and Amusement area. Postcard circa 1970. Author's collection. (This structure was built in 1964 and demolished in 1983).*

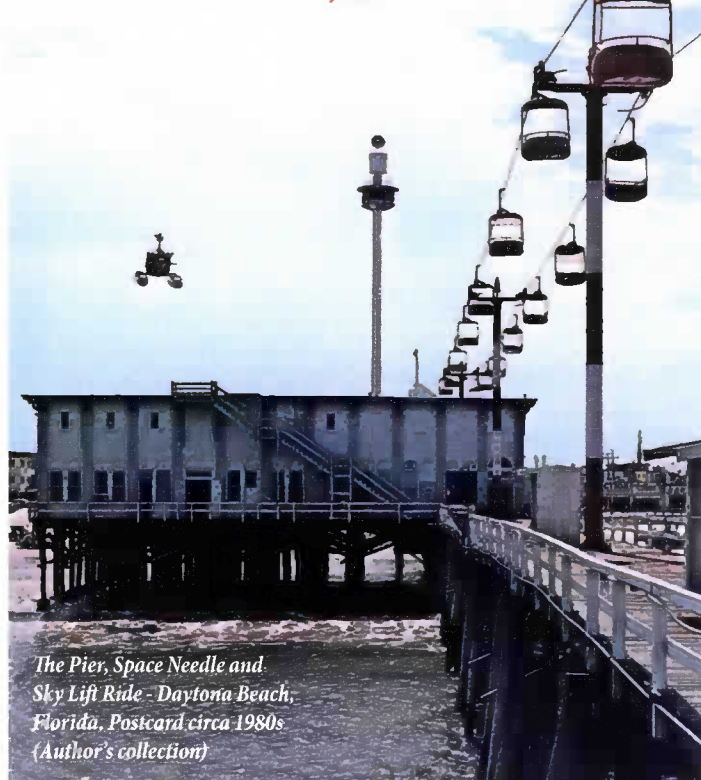
Boardwalk. It was claimed you could see 30 miles on a clear day from its top observation area. After business fell off, and the structure was deemed a public eyesore, it was demolished in 1983. The city of Daytona Beach even contributed \$5000 towards its demolition.

3. James Calhoun Adkins Jr. (1915-1994) was born in Gainesville, Florida. In 1938, he graduated from the University of Florida College of Law and was a member of Florida Blue Key (the student leadership honor society at the University of Florida, founded in 1923). Adkins served on the Florida Supreme Court from 1969 to 1987. He was chief justice from 1974 to 1976. He died in Tallahassee at the age of 79.

#### BIBLIOGRAPHY:

- "Court Orders Space Needle Taken Down." *The Tampa Tribune*. September 1, 1972, 69.
- "Daytona Beach Allowed to Keep Space Needle." *The Palm Beach Post*. March 26, 1974, 22.
- "Daytona Space Needle May Stay, Court Says." *The Miami Herald*. March 26, 1974, 21.
- Easterbrook, Sam. "Big Needle Still Stuck in Red Tape." *The Orlando Sentinel*. February 24, 1974, 33.
- "Florida Files Suit to Remove Tower from Daytona Beach." *The Tampa Tribune*. May 1, 1973, 24.
- Lane, Mark. "Monument to beach's legal battles." *Daytona Beach News-Journal*, March 9, 2012, 01C.
- McIntosh, Ron. "Skytower Case -- Are Beaches Public Property?" *The Orlando Sentinel*. April 30, 1972, 27.
- Motes, Andy. "Needle Lawsuit Still Pending at Daytona." *The Orlando Sentinel*. June 2, 1970, 34.
- Motes, Andy. "Needle Opening Near; Revels to Air Suit." *The Orlando Sentinel*. April 17, 1970, 17.
- Rowe, Scott. "Pilot [Harry Doan] Dies in Air Show Crash." *Florida Today*. April 5, 1992, 1.
- "Section of Daytona Beach Space Needle crashes onto pier." *Daytona Beach News-Journal*. September 11, 2012. (accessed October 9, 2023).
- "Space Needle Precedent Threatens 3 Developers." *Fort Lauderdale News*. September 10, 1972, 21.
- Zaffiro-Kean, Eileen. "Daytona commissioners consider fate of iconic Space Needle." *Daytona Beach News-Journal*. March 9, 2012. <https://eu.news-journalonline.com/story/news/2012/03/09/daytona-commissioners-consider-fate-of-iconic-space-needle/30579063007/> (accessed October 9, 2023).
- Zaffiro-Kean, Eileen. "Space Needle is now only a hole in the sand." *Daytona Beach News-Journal*. September 15, 2012. <https://eu.news-journalonline.com/story/news/2012/09/15/space-needle-is-now-only-a-hole-in-the-sand/30594183007/> (accessed October 9, 2023).

### *The Pier - Daytona Beach, Fla.*



*The Pier, Space Needle and Sky Lift Ride - Daytona Beach, Florida, Postcard circa 1980s (Author's collection)*



*The Pier in Daytona Beach, Florida with a side view of the Space Needle and Sky Lift Ride. Postcard circa 1970s (Author's collection)*

*Daytona Beach, Florida*