A bird's-eye view of Alexandria area from 'the world's tallest fire tower'

Don Feduccia, state forest complex manager, in cab atop 175-foot Woodworth Fire Tower, right.

By FREDAR YARBROUGH

It happens just above the treeline. A nauseous, uncontrollable feeling takes hold, while legs and thighs tremble at the sight of heights yet to come: a palpable fear, a taste of bile in the throat. But don't look down, there's only tree tops — swaying slightly, bending gently with the breeze.

And wait, don't reach out, because the stair railing is the only lifeline. The girders are too far away to give the feeling of a comfortable, closed-in structure, no protective womb of steel.

Only the fear of taking that embarrassing walk down the first 100 feet without reaching the goal keeps eyes glued to the small (and faraway at this point) cubicle perched so solidly at the top. So, keep climbing, one step at a time, hands sliding along the railing, never completely releasing the rail until finally, long moments later, you are at the top of what has come to be known as the world's tallest fire tower — 175 feet above the ground.

The Woodworth Fire Tower is in the state's only designated state forest, Alexander State Forest, about 20 minutes outside of Alexandria and in the midst of the state's prodigious forestry industry. It is without question the tallest fire tower in Louisiana, and, according to Anna Burns' History of the Louisiana Forestry Commission, it's the tallest in the world (as in height of structure, not height above sea level). Most fire towers hover around 100 feet, over tree tops and high enough to spot fires (though planes and helicopters are used now most commonly) in the surrounding parish. Originally built at 100 feet, the tower was extended when the tree line reached "hover around 100 feet, over tree tops and high enough to spot fires (though planes are used now most commonly) in the surrounding parish."

Feduccia made the climb to the top along with a photographer and John Gormley, spokesman for the Louisiana Forestry Association. Gormley and I crept slowly up the tower, vainly looking to each other for support, cracking macabre jokes about who would fall on whom. They really weren't that funny, and we really weren't laughing. Gallows humor, you know. Anything to keep our knees from locking up.

Much to our dismay, Feduccia and the photographer quite literally bounced up the steps, Feduccia presenting a running commentary on forestry and forest fires all the way up. I swear I was listening, but I was not about to release my hand and dig into my pocket for my notebook until we reached the top. Once there, sweat mingled with notes on high as only very mild breezes stirred the dust in the old tower.

The state began acquiring forest lands in the 1920s, and the main building was constructed in the '30s by the Civilian Conservation Corps and is on the National Historical Register. The distinctive cabin structure that predominates among CCC buildings is instantly recognizable. Every federal park and many state ones have similar cabins and main buildings, lending a comfortable uniformity to the woodland structures.

It was also at Alexander State Forest that the seedling nursery for the state was started.

Forestry plays a predominant role in Central Louisiana because the state's main agricultural crop is trees, providing 19 percent of Louisiana's 1987 gross farm income, worth an estimated $521 million at the mill level, according to a report by Alden Main, forestry specialist with the Louisiana Cooperative Extension Service. And Louisiana's nearly 14 million acres of forests cover almost 49 percent of the state's land.

Gazing from the windows of the cab, which was built to watch for fires, and most of those set by arsonists, provides a marvelous panoramic view of Rapides Parish. To the west is Indian Creek Recreation Area, a popular spot for area residents. Farther west is England Air Force Base, hard to see, but quickly evidenced by the fly-by of two jets, zipping over the tower on a training run. They were a bit disconcerting, but not close enough to make the cab occupants feel imperiled.

At the peak of tower usage, the state had 113 crews of four men each, one in the tower, two on the ground and one off duty. Now planes do most of the spotting, with most of the towers used only intermittently, according to Feduccia.

To the east is Alexandria, in the center of Louisiana, a crossroads for North Louisianians coming south to see relatives and vice versa. However, to call Alexandria only a crossroads is a great injustice. It's a warm, friendly city originally settled on the Red River and

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exploding outward (not a town by any means any more) and doing as well as any municipality could during this depression that has gripped Louisiana.

The soul of the city compares easily to Baton Rouge and Monroe, other cities that used to be towns, that want to be metropolises, yet desire the close-knit feeling of a smaller town. They’re all in a transition era, maybe eventually to pass through the phase to become cities that feel big, maybe to remain as they are.

The mall, on a weekday, was filled with shoppers who from the looks of things were having no problems separating themselves from their money. Mothers’ arms were attached to shopping bags on one side, children on the other. A light, airy, happy feeling despite the ominous, ever-present threat of further cuts.

Additional governmental budget cuts would, in a parish in which the state, federal and municipal government employs one-fourth of the area workers according to the 1988 Annual Report on Alexandria published by the Alexandria Daily Town Talk, hurt retailers as well as the individual workers and services provided.

However, the thing that Louisianians know most about Alexandria is that in order to get from here to there, travelers have to go through the “circle.”

You know what I mean. If you’re reading this and you don’t know, you’re from New York. Right? Let’s face it, the first true test of a Louisianan’s driving prowess is going on a trip with the folks and properly navigating the lanes of the circle pointed either at Shreveport or Monroe. Wherever you’re going in between means you still aim toward those destinations.

Sadly, when Interstate 49 is completed in mid-1993, according to Department of Transportation and Development projections, one of Louisiana’s greatest rites of passage will fade into obscurity or at least much less use.

Across the Red River from Alexandria is the city of Pineville, created in the early 1800s more as a high ground for burial, with just a few families living in the area all year.

Since Alexandria is on the flood plain of the Red River, standing water and fogs were always a problem in the early years. Pineville stood on the high ground or piney woods and provided a respite from swampy areas.

Crossing the bridge to Pineville from downtown Alexandria puts a visitor right onto the main street, which passes by Mount Olivet Chapel and Cemetery.

The lime green gothic chapel, the oldest structure in Pineville, is framed by trees and surrounded on three sides by graves dating to 1824. Diane White, receptionist at the church, which is now the office of the Episcopal Diocese of Western Louisiana, said a youngster going through the cemetery recently found a grave dating to 1811.

It was in Pineville that William Tecumseh Sherman, the first president of the school, taught military matters such as marching, that he eventually put to use during the Civil War in Georgia.

The school was destroyed by fire during the Civil War and re-established in Baton Rouge as Louisiana State University after the conflict.

Perhaps what Pineville is most known for today is Louisiana College, established in 1906 after Alexandria leaders made an offer of land and $30,000 to the Louisiana Baptist Convention to establish the college. Monroe and Shreveport also offered sites, but it was the high, dry land of Pineville opposite Alexandria that won the day.

In Rapides Parish, An Illustrated History by Sue Eakin, it was the meeting of 19 male students and three faculty members on Oct. 3, 1906, that “marked the beginning of a four-year college, but at that time the level of education was not defined to include exclusively post-secondary school work, but encompassed all grades. On the new campus were first constructed two box-shaped buildings 40-by-60 feet in size.”

The college now boasts many more. A total of 1,003 enrolled for spring classes, with 381 during summer school. Louisiana College’s registrar’s office expects fall enrollment to top 1,000 again. Not a sleepy little town. In fact, quite the opposite.