



Citrus Tower, Clermont, Florida

Believe it or not, Clermont's Citrus Tower was Florida's first major tourist attraction. And why not, it was Florida's orange capital.

Lake County and Clermont's Beginnings

Lake County

Lake County is in the geographical center of the state between the Florida cities of Orlando and Ocala. The county contains over 1,000 lakes and 202 square miles of water. Lake County's terrain is very different from the rest of Florida, which is mostly flat. Averaging 184' above sea level, it contains some of the highest elevations in the state.

"Lake County is some of the oldest inhabited land in Florida. Thousands of years ago the mild weather, excellent growing conditions, and abundance of fish and game, drew the Timucuan Indians to call this region their home. Evidence of their presence is throughout Lake County. In fact, there are more than 1000 identified archeological sites in Lake County. In 1562 a French Huguenot colony was established at the present site of Astor on the St. Johns River. The entire colony was wiped out by the Spanish in 1566. During the late 1560's the Spanish established a system of missions throughout the Lake County area with the goal of converting the Indians to Catholicism. What they accomplished instead was to massacre uncooperative villages and spread European diseases to the rest.

When the Civil War started in 1861, there were several large plantations and many small farms in Lake County. Florida became one of the states to secede from the Union. In July 1887, Lake County became a county. It was carved from Orange and Sumter counties. Early industry consisted of reliance on the land: farming, citrus growing, lumber, and turpentine." <judykelley.com>

Clermont

Clermont was founded in 1884. It was named after A.F. Wrotnoski, one of the French founder's birthplace Clermont-Ferrand, France. Wrotnoski's purpose for being there was for land development. His company was called the Clermont Improvement Company. It was incorporated in New Jersey. Clermont was incorporated in 1916.

Like the rest of Florida, railroads brought people to the state. In 1922, a developer created a company, purchased 1000 acres and began planting orange trees.

As it turned out, oranges were ideal to grow in this part of the state and within the 16 square miles making up Clermont. The orange business grew. Individuals managed 10 to 30 acres and juice companies began buying up land.

The main highways in the Clermont area are US-27 (a major north-south highway), and State Road 50. Clermont is approximately 20 miles from Orlando, Florida.

Orange Growing in Florida

"Early Spanish explorers (most likely Ponce de Leon) planted the first orange trees near St. Augustine, Florida in the 1500s. Commercial production began nearly 300 years later – after the Civil War – when the development of the railroad allowed citrus growers to ship their products across the country. In 1894 and 1895, freezes destroyed much of Florida's citrus crops. Not to be defeated, many citrus growers moved south and began growing again. The industry rallied within 15 years and by 1950, more than 100 million boxes of citrus were picked. That number reached 200 million in 1970. Most citrus is now grown in the southern two-thirds of the Florida peninsula, where probability of freezing temperatures is lowest, although Polk County in Central Florida remains the top citrus producing county in the state." <florida-backroads-travel.com>

Weather, canker disease, and citrus greening have had negative effects on orange growing, processing, and marketing in Florida. A FoodandWine.com article is about a U.S. Department of Agriculture Florida's current and future business citrus development. [Cold weather and the potential for frost](#) has been an ongoing issue for citrus growers. Freezing temperatures can kill trees or damage the fruit. Frost can cause the interior of the fruit to dry



out and hollow. Citrus greening has become a recent problem and will continue unless the Asian insect can be combatted from devastating both the tree and fruit.

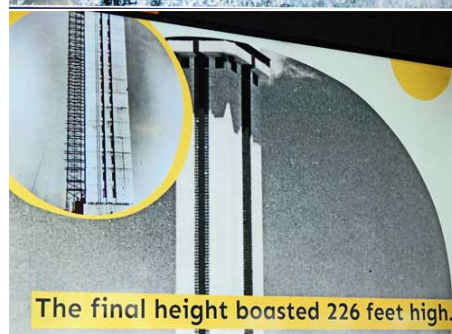
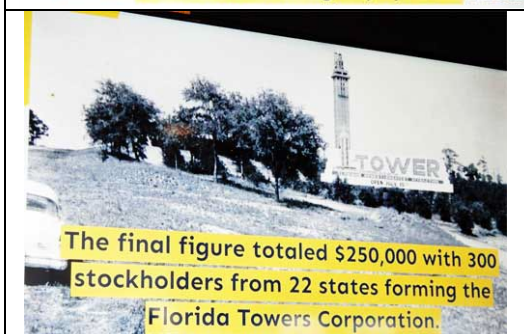
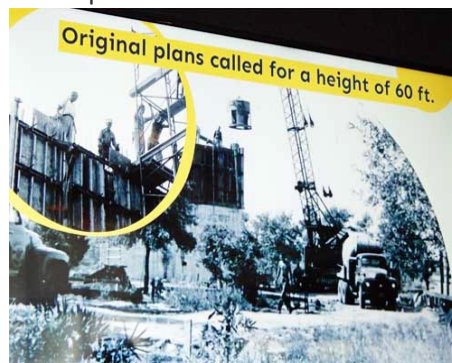
"Citrus greening is a bacterial disease carried and spread by an Asian insect that kills both fruit and trees, dealing Florida's signature crop a devastating blow. Researchers and citrus growers hoping to at least slow widespread crop losses are striving to develop insecticides, treatments, and resistant strains of trees, according to the Florida Department of Citrus." <floridaphoenix.com>

The Citrus Tower (Photos with content are from a visual presentation in Tower's base.)



The idea of building a tower in Clermont came in the early 1950s when the construction of US Highway 27 was underway through the citrus groves. The Citrus Tower was begun before Disney World and other big-tourist attractions in Central Florida. During the 1950s Gatorland in Kissimmee and Winter Haven's Cypress Garden acrobatic water-skiers were the only attractions. The man credited with the tower project was [Al Thacker](#) a retired man from Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania. He built a motel along U.S. Highway 27. "In September 1953, Thacker partnered to form the Florida Towers Corp. with Jack Toole, who later built the House of Presidents Wax Museum. They purchased 14 acres on the top of the hill and began looking for ways to pay for the tower." <dailycommercial.com>

When completed in 1955, the Tower was equivalent to 22 stories.

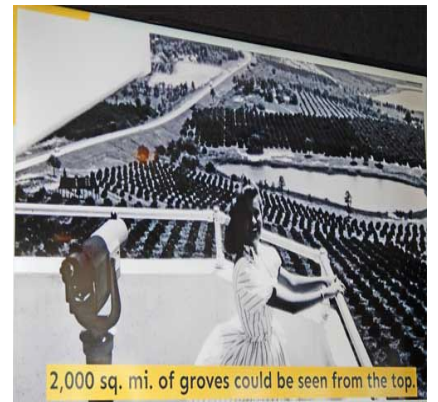




Admission in the 1950s was 93¢ for Adults and 52¢ for Children.



Representatives from Cypress Gardens & Silver Springs helped celebrate the Grand Opening.



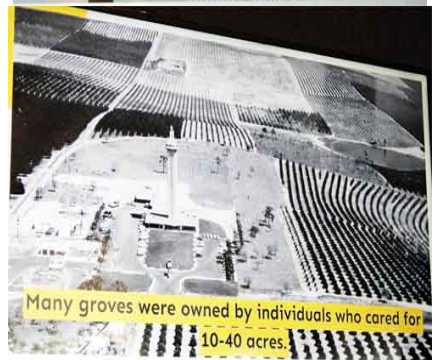
2,000 sq. mi. of groves could be seen from the top.



Upon the opening in 1956, visitors could view one-third of Florida's annual 300 million dollar citrus industry.



Groves were valued from \$3,000-\$6,000 per acre.



Many groves were owned by individuals who cared for 10-40 acres.



17,000,000 citrus trees could be seen from the top.



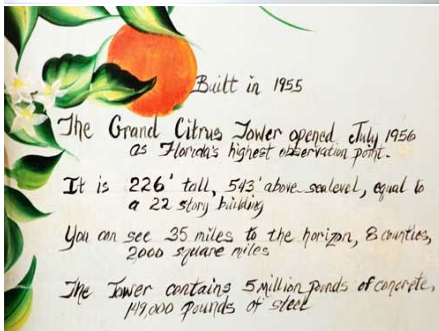
Welcome to the Florida Citrus Tower!



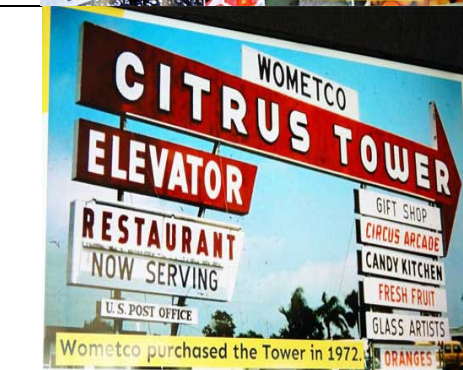
Big corporations like Libby, McNeill and Libby, Fosgate and Minute Maid owned thousands of acres.



Guests could visit the packing house, watch the fruit get processed and take a bag home as a souvenir.



Built in 1955
The Grand Citrus Tower opened July 1956 as Florida's highest observation point.
It is 226' tall, 543' above sea level, equal to a 22 story building.
You can see 35 miles to the horizon, 8 counties, 2000 square miles.
The Tower contains 5 million pounds of concrete, 149,000 pounds of steel.



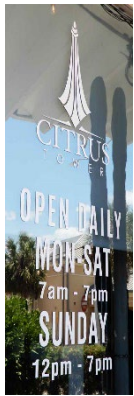
Wometco purchased the Tower in 1972.



New Ownership 1995
Greg Homan & Bob Thompson



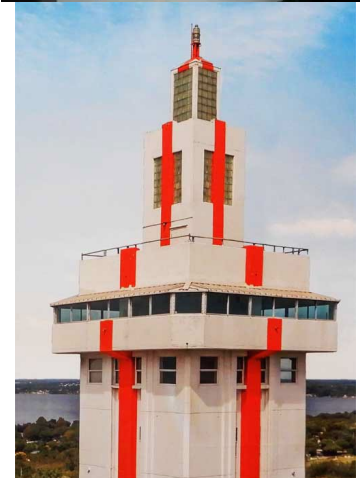
In 2015, the tower received a fresh coat of paint and the original orange stripe returned.



Entrance, Lobby, Memorabilia, Café
Elevator ride to the Tower
And Views



Jade serving special beverages



NORTH
LAKE APOPKA
FLORIDA'S LARGEST
SPRING FED LAKE
(5 MI.)
OVER 17,000,000
CITRUS TREES ARE
WITHIN THE 2,000
SQ. MI. AREA SEEN
FROM THE TOWER

EAST
WINTER GARDEN
(10 MI.)
LAKE APOPKA
(7 MI.)
TURN PIKE
(7 MI.)

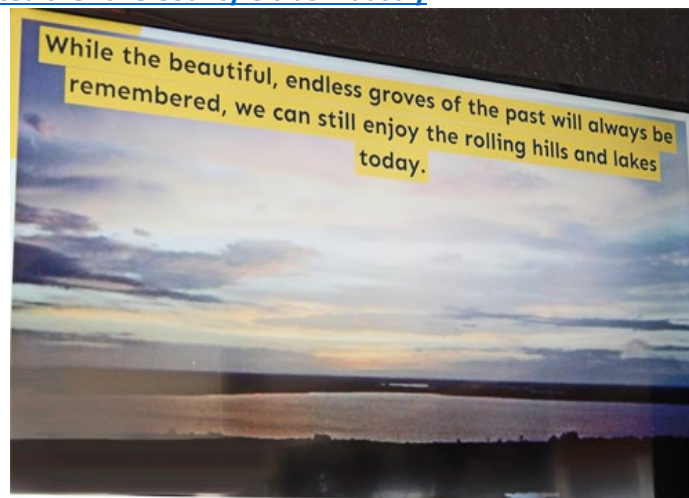


SOUTH
DISNEY WORLD
(15 MI.)
14 4 2 NATURAL
LAKES IN LAKE
COUNTY
OVER 30,000
IN FLORIDA.

WEST
CLERMONT (1 MI.)
"GEM OF THE HILLS"
U.S. 301 I-75 (27 MI.)
WEEKI WACHEE
(55 MILES)
GULF OF MEXICO
(60 MILES)



The 3 historical freezes that affected the Lake County Citrus Industry



Sources: <https://citrustower.com/>, <https://citrustower.com/freezes/>, <https://www.florida-backroads-travel.com/clermont-florida.html>, <https://www.floridacitrus.org/oj/facts/what-is-the-history-of-citrus/>, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Clermont,_Florida, <http://www.lakefrontflorida.com/lake-county-florida.html>, <http://www.judykelley.com/lake-county-florida-history.html>, <https://www.sun-sentinel.com/sfl-citrustower-story.html>, <https://www.foodandwine.com/news/florida-orange-crop-2022>, <https://www.wptv.com/news/treasure-coast/region-indian-river-county/florida-orange-growers-survive-cold-weather-combat-other-problems>, <https://floridaphoenix.com/blog/citrus-greening-killing-groves-in-central-and-south-florida-found-in-north-florida/>, https://aggie-horticulture.tamu.edu/newsletters/hortupdate/2011/mar/citrus_freeze.html, https://aggie-horticulture.tamu.edu/newsletters/hortupdate/2011/mar/citrus_freeze.html, <https://www.treehelp.com/freeze-damage-of-citrus-trees/>, and <https://citrusindustry.net/2020/11/18/cold-acclimation-and-freeze-protection-for-florida-citrus/>,

acuri.net John R. Vincenti Florida's Citrus Tower