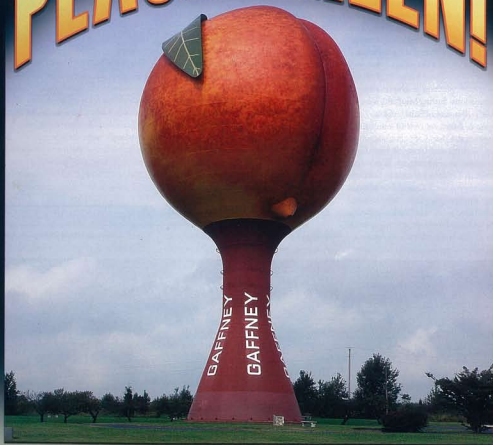


PEACHY KEEN!



Airline pilots on approach to Atlanta's Hartsfield-Jackson International have radar and coordinates from the control tower to help them vector in. But the story goes that some flight crews like a little extra help, which is why they keep an eye peeled for a 150-foot tall welded-steel landmark just outside of Gaffney, South Carolina. It tells them they're crossing latitude N35 05.75, longitude W81 41.17. It tells them Atlanta's runways are 180 miles due southwest. It tells them they've just flown over a gigantic peach.

by ROBERT KLARA

Specifically, the Peachoid—a ten-million-pound concrete pedestal holding up an enormous piece of fruit that the South Carolina tourism people will tell you is the most photographed water tank in America. They would, of course, get an argument from the citizens of Collinsville, Illinois (home of the World's Largest Cansup Bottle water tower) and from workers at the Dole plant in Honolulu (whose water tower is shaped like an enormous pineapple)—but let's remember our southern manners, shall we?

Sitting astride Interstate 85 between exits 90 and 92, the Peachoid is a fully functional municipal reservoir with a million-gallon capacity. But nobody cares about that. A stunning nimbus of oranges, yellow, and magenta that hovers over the tree line like some moon that has strayed from its orbit, the Peachoid is incredibly surreal. It's also incredibly real, botanically accurate down to a green leaf (which is 60 feet long and weighs 7 tons), a cleft (which passing truckers have specifically likened to the posterior of a portly woman bending over a tub), and a 12-foot stem on top that functions as an air vent.

That such a peachy landmark stuns millions of motorists bound for Georgia is an accident. Faced with the need for a water-storage tank back in 1980, the Gaffney Board of Public Works was also ripe for building anything that would tell the world that, in point of fact, South Carolina produced more peaches each year than did Georgia, which nonetheless insists on calling itself "The Peach State."

The actual idea for turning a water tower into a peach is credited to Jack Millwood, who chaired the Board of Public Works at the time and is now retired. "Originally," he recalled recently from the den of his Gaffney home, "we were talking about just a round tank with a big peach on top of it. But after you get into it, well, one thing leads to another."

Here's how one thing led to another: Originally, the board had secured a million dollars in government funding for the tank—a regular, round tank. But when the low bid from the Chicago Bridge &

Iron Company came in at \$40,000 below that, Gaffney suddenly found itself with the cash for something a bit more fancy. Hence, the Peachoid. Nobody around today seems to recall where the name Peachoid came from, but as for creating it, macro-artist Peter Freudenberg remembers all too well.

"I painted it with an 80-ton hydraulic crane that could take me all the way up, and we put boat fenders on the basket so if it bumped into the peach, it wouldn't leave a mark," says the environmental artist, who's currently retired and living in Florida. "We were there for almost a month before we got it done."

That was after the construction crew had taken five of its own months to assemble the Peachoid out of molded steel plates trucked up from Birmingham, then fused together with one and a half miles of welds. CBS's true handiwork was the Peachoid's cleft, though, which welders created with false-work steel plating to fashion a ridge running the entire height of the sphere.

Meanwhile, Freudenberg had assembled some locals down at the Sunny Slope Orchard and asked all present to pick what they considered to be the perfect peach. Freudenberg held a vote, then spirited the winning peach back to his studio where he took photos, made a model, then devised a grid pattern to serve as the template for applying the correct blending of colors. "Remember, this is back in the days before computers," he says. "You had to do things by hand."

Up in his crane bucket, Freudenberg wore a fire-retardant suit while he mixed some twenty colors, feeding the paint directly to a compressor, his spray nozzle coating the raw steel with swaths of yellow and orange. Periodically, the crane operator would sweep the bucket far back into the sky so Freudenberg could get a long-distance look at his work. "It only took four days, actually," he says. "But it took us a month to get four good days. Humidity's a factor. The wind was the biggest problem." In all, it took fifty gallons of paint to turn the steel orb into a proper South Carolina peach.



FRUIT FIGHT: The peach water tank in Canton, Alabama, is a smaller—if not quite bite-sized—version of the Peachoid.



The Peachoid has been repainted once since 1980, about fifteen years ago. (Freudenberg returned to do that job, too, assisted by fellow artist Hugh Luck.) These days, a utility crew pays periodic visits to touch up the paint and make sure the clear coat of sealant is still intact. After all, the Peachoid's famous—right down to its celebrity impersonators. In 1992 the town of Clanton, Alabama, hired CB&I to create its own peach water tower. (Located along Interstate 65 about fifty miles south of Birmingham, it's only half the size of the original.) The Peachoid made an appearance in the 1985 film *Lost in America*, has countless fan sites on the Web, and has, in the view of locals, put Gaffney on the map.

Which is exactly what it was supposed to do. "It's big and it's bright and it's unexpected. It comes into view from several miles away. At night, there must be a million watts of light on it," marvels Luck.

"The Peachoid has become forever intertwined with the city," adds Cherokee County History and Arts Museum Director Billy Pennington. "Around the world, people know our town because of the beautiful water tower."

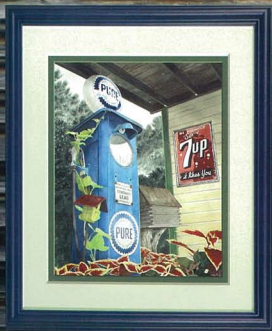
Although some peach orchards remain, it's the local BMW plant that "drives" most of the local economy now—but those lucky enough to be motoring down Interstate 85 past Gaffney in mid-July can pull off and spend a few hours at the annual South Carolina Peach Festival. Word is the peaches there are as sweet as they come—and just off the interstate they've got one as large as they come, too.

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