

Remembering R.J. Sikora Suwannee Chapter



As we each choose our paths from summer into fall, towards the rest of our lives, the Suwannee Chapter members reflect on the unexpected passing of R.J. Sikora on July 4, of this year, 2022.

We proceed many miles, and as Carl Dunnam often asserted, by "refreshing our memories," retelling colorful stories about R.J.'s meaningful contributions. Without question he and his wife, Stephanie Sikora gave more of their bodies, minds and hearts to the FTA's Suwannee Chapter and side trail maintenance or operations than any members in recent history.

R.J. brought extensive skill sets from decades of working in the automotive unions tumult, avid biking, bow hunting, and general camping excursions to the Suwannee Chapter. After suffering a catastrophic motorcycle accident he began an early retirement as a rebuilt bionic man. Considering location options of where to move, Suwannee County was selected by the criteria to maximize financial resources.

With these experiences acquired, Suwannee natives noticed he had something else, a kind of sure-footedness which comes to a feller who has learned to paddle his own canoe. The Sikoras rode mountain bikes to expedite the trail condition assessment for maintenance activities. They targeted times for applying equipment and membership efforts predicated on avoiding known hazards of heat and hunting seasons. R.J. held a strong sense of accomplishment in applying mechanical know-how to keep specialized equipment, like mowers, operational.

Over many years R.J. diligently held chapter offices as Trailmaster, Section Leader,

Trail Coordinator, and most recently Chapter Chair. With a workman-like functional outcome his focused attitude was undaunted by natural or bureaucratic obstacles. Achieving a usable trail was consistently his highest priority.

"R.J. was one who just 'did it', then asked for permission or forgiveness. He stepped on some toes in the process. One cannot argue with those excellent trail improvements." - Sam Bigbie

Over those years R.J. contributed to the following major projects:

- ◆ The 40 mile highway re-route from the Econfina to Mill Creek North
- ◆ The Ellaville reroute under I-10 continuing to the Black Tract which removed a road walk
- ◆ The Ellaville re-route from Cooper's Bluff to the Withlacoochee River. This enabled passing under US 90 and the CSX Railroad bridge allowing viewing Ellaville ruins and creating a Blue Spur Trail to the Suwannee Spring
- ◆ Significant contributing input with the Suwannee River State Park (SRSP) land purchase to open the Big Oak Trail
- ◆ SRSP reroute moving the trail closer to the Suwannee towards SR 141 boat ramp
- ◆ Trail reroute from the Alapaha River to the SRSP property thus removing road walk
- ◆ The Memorial Bench at the confluence of the Suwannee and Withlacoochee Rivers

honoring members who have hiked further down this trail was the idea of the Sikoras.

Additionally, RJ participated in frequent Chapter Volunteer Work Parties. The Sikoras were integral in keeping our section of the Florida Trail in excellent condition. Some hikers might have approached their work in progress. They could easily know it was R.J. with the air peppered with "blue words," if not saturated, particularly post hurricane entanglements. Routinely the heavy sweat and grime of intense labor was observed. Periodically lacerated flesh leaking blood into the mix revealed the steel of his deep commitment.

There were also often good humored monthly membership events: breakfasts, lunches, or Trail Magic, extended camping events, caravans to paddles or special historical locations, along with annual Holiday Gatherings.

Today, as hikers walk this uniquely scenic section of the Florida Trail, the footprints of R.J. have vanished with the seasonal weather, much like the ashes of Governor George Franklin Drew's Mansion and the Ghost Town of Ellaville. Realizing R.J. has moved a little further up the trail, his caring handprints are forever everywhere.

"I can't imagine the Suwannee section of the Florida Trail without R.J.'s presence., Hhe and Stephanie have done so much hard work in maintaining this area over the years."

- Adam Fryska

Respectfully,
Norm McDonald
Past FTA Suwannee Chapter Chairperson