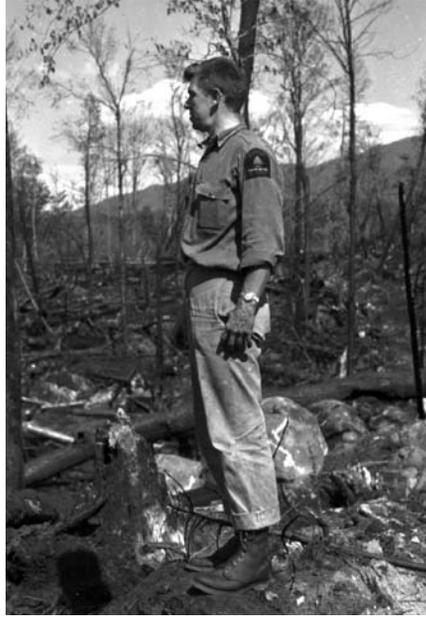


# New York State Forest Rangers:



## *Celebrating* **125** *Years* of Protecting New York's Forests

By Richard Totino

photos by DEC unless otherwise noted



Yesterday's forest rangers may have had different uniforms and equipment, but the commitment and dedication to New York's forests were as evident then as they are today. Above, a group of forest rangers pose with their fire control vehicles in 1926.

**H**istory is not a platform on which to rest and display our laurels; rather it is a palette of colors from the past, standing ready to help paint the future. It is from this point of view that I look upon a small and enormously dedicated group of people—those who have proudly served as forest rangers in New York State.

Before 1885, we didn't have a Forest Preserve in the Catskill and Adirondack Mountains. Today, we do.

In 1885, we didn't have four-wheel-drive trucks. Today, we do.

And in 1885, we didn't have snowmobiles or all-terrain vehicles or motorcycles. We didn't have public campsites so frequented by people that they often must be policed. Today, we do.

What we did have back then were vast areas of wilderness being logged without controls. We had rampant forest fires burning the slash created by this uncontrolled logging. We had a major city and future world financial center developing in our southern region that was increasingly dependent on the supply of water from the wilderness areas to its north.

Nine years later, in 1894, we had a constitutional convention and an electorate who, peering far into the future, recognized a need and had the strength of

character and the conviction to take the bold steps necessary to protect the lands and resources that were being abused. The results have benefited all of us to this very day in the creation of state-protected lands in the Catskill and Adirondack Mountains that we now call the Forest Preserve.

State legislators also understood the need to employ a force of men to protect this newly created Forest Preserve. First called "Fire Wardens" and then "Fire Patrolmen," today we know this proud force of men and women by their contemporary title of New York State Forest Rangers.

As a search-and-rescue volunteer, I have had the opportunity, and the honor, of working alongside many of these rangers. I can personally attest to the professionalism and dedication of every one of them with whom I've worked.

The forest rangers' mission is to protect and care for all state lands under the jurisdiction of the Department of Environmental Conservation, which today extend far beyond the initial lands set aside in 1885. From Montauk Point to the Niagara Frontier, from Lake Erie to Lake Champlain, from New York City to the St. Lawrence Valley, these rangers, dressed in their traditional green uniforms, patrol not only the six-million-acre

vastness of the Adirondacks, but also parcels as small as the two-hundred-acre, postage-stamp-sized park on Staten Island and all the many other state-owned lands in between.

Rangers can easily be confused with their equally important and dedicated parallel force of Environmental Conservation Officers (ECOs), who wear similar uniforms, but have a distinctly different mission. The difference is that ECOs are charged with the protection of our air, waters, fish and wildlife, while rangers are specifically charged with the protection of DEC-administered state lands, the people who use them, and the resources therein.

In 1885, the original force had a much narrower mission than do today's rangers. Their primary concerns were preventing and fighting forest fires, protecting the newly formed forest preserve from timber theft, and enforcing the law on the newly set-aside lands. And, hidden beneath this explicit mission was the need to protect New York City's water supply, which originated in the Catskill and Adirondack Mountains.

Creation of the ranger force is alluded to in the Conservation Commission report of 1911: "The value of the two great forest preserves is so great, not



A modern-day forest ranger participates in a controlled burn.



Forest rangers march in formation.

James Clayton

only commercially, but from the standpoint of protection to the watersheds, as a great playground, health resort, game refuge, and source of wood materials, in all of which the State is vitally interested...that the State necessarily commits itself to a policy of protecting these great resources. In order to accomplish this work properly, a permanent annual force, sufficiently large and of the most efficient men, should be provided." The report goes on to say, "The position of fire patrolman should be abolished and that of forest ranger created. The latter

should have all of the powers and duties of the present fire patrolman and have full police duties relative to protection of State lands." With that, the initial group of forest rangers was formed.

In 1885, the primary qualification for a fire patrolman was a man's ability to survive in the wilderness. Today's forest ranger must have these same skills, but is also highly educated, and may be a man or a woman. Rangers continue to be the first line of defense against forest fires, sometimes assist other states in firefighting efforts, and also manage search-and-

rescue efforts for lost or missing people. In addition, today's rangers routinely deal with a whole spectrum of problems unimaginable in 1885: DWI, domestic violence on state lands, and drug and alcohol abuse.

In 1885, the primary method of patrolling the vast back country was on foot, with the occasional aid of a horse or mule. Today's rangers must still be expert cross-country hikers, but more modern methods of transportation are also available and are employed when necessary. Trucks and SUVs are the most visible to the general public, however,



James Clayton

In the early days of New York State Forest Rangers, the primary requirement was survival skills. Today, forest rangers are trained in a wider array of skills, from rappelling down mountains, to flying in helicopters, to using GPS systems in search-and-rescue operations. Above: a 1928 Conservation Department fire control truck, and a 2008 model; rappelling in the 1970s and ice-climbing today.

boats, ATVs, snowmobiles, and state police helicopters and other aircraft are also used to support the rangers' mission.

The "old" method of finding one's way in the back country was with a compass or by "dead reckoning." Rangers still rely heavily on these basic, time-tested methods. Today's compass might appear more "high-tech," but it is still the same device used for hundreds of years. Its use must still be mastered by each new recruit, along with Global Positioning System (GPS) units, which complement but do not replace the compass. The contemporary ranger must also be skilled in the use of radio equipment for communication, direction and control.

Through my volunteer search-and-rescue work, I have spent many days with the men and women of today's ranger force. I have personally witnessed them organize, implement and direct the national Incident Command System. I have repeatedly seen them manage a public emergency, mobilize volunteers, place equipment and other resources where needed, and launch a search effort with the same precision as would be expected from a military unit.

Today's New York State Forest Rangers are highly trained natural resource professionals, wilderness first responders, public emergency managers, police officers and, oh yes, they are firefighters as well. I have seen them climb aboard a helicopter

loaded with modern gear strapped to their backs, chests and legs. And I have seen them strike off into the wilderness in search of a lost soul with nothing more than a small backpack, a couple bottles of water, a compass dangling from around their necks and a smile on their faces.

This is a professional force of men and women charged with a clear and distinct mission. They no longer trudge off into the back woods with wicker baskets strapped to their backs. Today's forest rangers are prepared to take on and complete their mission, asking only for the necessary



Though forest rangers still use transportation similar to that used in the 1920s, helicopters and other modes of transportation have been added thanks to advances in technology. Above: forest firefighters carry equipment off a float plane at High Point Mountain in October 1947; rangers depart a helicopter in 2006.

A pack basket was a common accessory for the first forest rangers, and today the equipment has expanded. Here Ranger Megan McCone gears up to help fight fires in California in 2008.

Susan L. Shafer

equipment and supplies, a chance to help, and maybe an occasional pat on the back from those they serve.

Prior to 1885, we didn't have the New York State Forest Ranger. Today, thankfully, we do.

Outdoor writer **Richard Totino** recently relocated from Saratoga Springs, NY to retire in South Carolina.

**Editor's note:** for further reading, see *The Forest Rangers: a history of the New York State forest ranger force* by Louis C. Curth, published in 1987 and available through a number of municipal and university library systems.

## Becoming a Forest Ranger

Forest rangers are hired from a civil service list generated from a written exam. To qualify for the position, candidates must meet certain educational requirements, pass a medical examination, a physical agility test, a thorough character investigation, and must possess a valid license to operate a motor vehicle in New York State. For more information on educational requirements, visit DEC's website ([www.dec.ny.gov](http://www.dec.ny.gov)) and search for "Forest Ranger 1."



Susan L. Shafer

Tools of the trade have changed since the top photo was taken in 1947, and duties have expanded, but backwoods skills and knowledge of the land remain just as important to today's forest rangers.

### Historical Note: 1885 or 1895; which is it?

The Forest Preserve was defined and created in statute on May 15, 1885 with the passage of Chapter 283 of the Laws of 1885 by the legislature. The definition included all state lands within specified Adirondack and Catskill region counties. The 1885 legislation also directed that the Forest Preserve be "forever kept as wild forest lands" and directed that the land couldn't be leased, sold, or taken by any public or private corporation.

Unfortunately, the commission that was charged with managing the Forest Preserve

continued to allow timber to be harvested from the preserve. In addition, theft of timber from the Forest Preserve was common, and enforcement was difficult because boundaries had not been surveyed.

Between 1885 and 1895, the definition of the Forest Preserve was amended to exclude land within villages and cities, and to include additional state land in other Adirondack and Catskill area counties. During this time, the Forest Preserve continued to be abused (clear-cut forests, erosion, and rampant forest fires caused by slash left by loggers), prompting

the 1894 constitutional convention to provide the Preserve with additional protection. The new constitution was approved by voters in November, 1894, and became effective January 1, 1895.

So, 2010 is the 125th anniversary of the creation of the Forest Preserve (by the 1885 statute) and the 115th anniversary of constitutional protection of the Forest Preserve (1895 being the effective date of the new constitution).

—Kenneth Hamm, DEC Senior Counsel