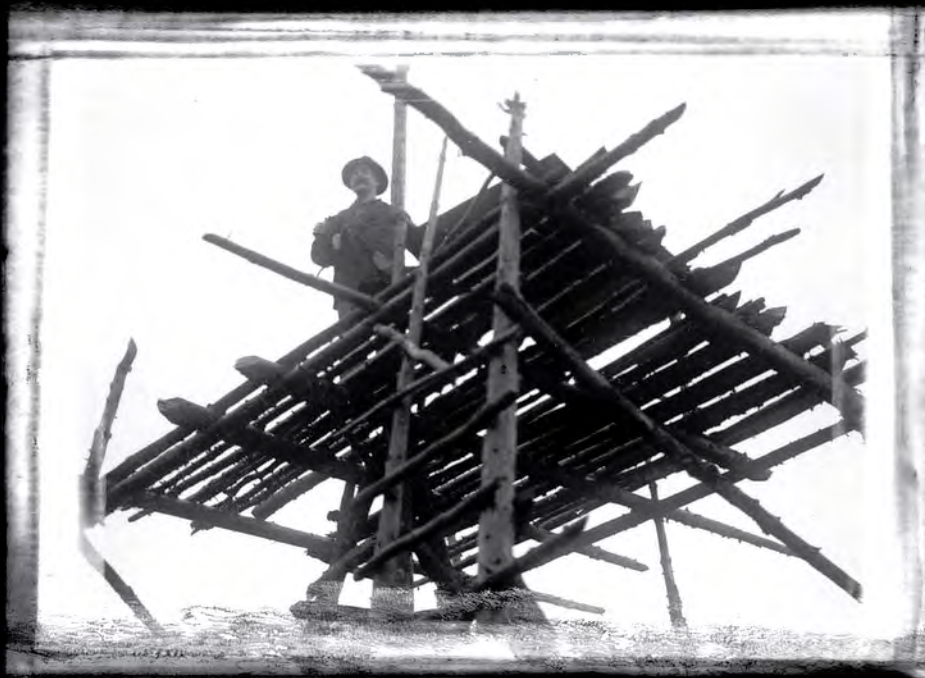


Standing

DEC photo



Courtesy Forest Fire Lookout Association of NY



**FOR 100 YEARS,
FIRE TOWERS HAVE
STOOD GUARD
OVER OUR FORESTS**

New York's first fire towers were made of wood logs; most had an open platform on top.



TALL

BY MARTY PODSKOCH

Gazing at the peaks ablaze with color from my vantage point atop the fire tower on Hadley Mountain, I concluded that the trek was well worth the effort. I was high above the tree line, and the 360° vista afforded me spectacular views of the Green Mountains of Vermont, the Berkshires in Massachusetts, and the Adirondack High Peaks.

Peering over the edge, I marvel when I think of how long this tower has stood here. I think of all the people who have stood here before me, and can't help wonder what it must have been like to be a fire tower observer—spending hours in this tiny cab, on guard for the first hint of smoke that might signal a fire.

I've always been fascinated by fire towers and their history. In fact, it was exactly 100 years ago this year that New York built the first fire towers in the state; a response to too many deadly fires left undetected.

Fires posed a significant danger during the early 1900s when numerous blazes raged across New York's forests. Strong winds carried smoke and ash that darkened Albany's skies. Flames surrounded many towns, threatening homes and businesses, and forcing families to flee, clutching

whatever valuables they could carry. Fire wardens couldn't keep up with the battle and called on every able-bodied man to help fight the fires.

**THE WORST FIRES
OCCURRED IN 1903
AND 1908, WHEN
HUNDREDS OF
THOUSANDS OF ACRES
OF LAND WERE
DESTROYED AND MANY
ANIMALS PERISHED.**

The worst fires occurred in 1903 and 1908, when hundreds of thousands of acres of land were destroyed and many animals perished. Bushels of fish died in the streams from intense heat and from the lye (created from water mixing with ash) that leached into the water. Stands of valuable timber were destroyed, and in some areas the soil was so badly scorched that no new vegetation could grow.

Art Jennings, a surviving witness to one of the 1908 fires, recounted how a single spark from a Mohawk & Malone locomotive ignited the dry kindling along the tracks near his home in Long Lake West (now Sabattis). Approximately 150 men dug miles of trenches to finally contain the fire, but their efforts did not last long. Only a few weeks later, strong winds drove the lingering fire around the firebreak and it roared towards town. The railroad agent

In the early twentieth century, New York forests were ravaged by fires, and the public demanded something be done. In response, the state began building fire towers in the Adirondack and Catskill forests.



DEC photo



Dec photo

By 1916, New York State began building fire towers out of steel, which was more durable. Here a group of men, with the aid of horses, work to erect the tower on Mount Adams.

telegraphed Tupper Lake (19 miles north), who sent a rescue train.

Art recalled, “There were about 100 people in the town then, most of them lumberjacks. When the rescue train arrived, the women boarded first. My mother carried me on. The train plowed through smoke and flames that blistered the cars. There was a tremendous blast when a building containing four tons of dynamite exploded. It was a scary time.”

Trains caused many of the fires at this time. Burning embers from a locomotive’s stack, or live coals that fell from the ash pans onto the tinder-strewn right-of-way, would cause the dry wood

to blaze. Other fires occurred from burning brush for agricultural purposes, or fishermen, hunters, and campers who left campfires unattended.

The damage from all these fires resulted in public outcry. New Yorkers wanted protection from forest fires, and the state responded by creating a rigorous fire prevention and control program that included building fire towers to spot fires early, hopefully before they grew out of control.

So in 1909, New York State began constructing fire towers in the Adirondack and Catskill forests. Soon, fire towers adorned Mount Morris,

Whiteface Mountain, Gore Mountain, West Mountain, Snowy Mountain and Hamilton Mountain in the Adirondacks, as well as Hunter Mountain, Belleayre Mountain, and on Balsam Lake in the Catskills.

The first towers were made of wood—built on trees or from logs—and most had an open platform on top. In 1916, however, many of these were replaced with steel towers that had an enclosed cab on top. Steel was more durable and the cab provided protection from the weather.

Each tower was manned by a fire tower observer, and outfitted with a telephone, maps and binoculars. At the first sign of smoke, the observer called in the location to a forest ranger. It was an effective early warning system that greatly reduced the number of acres destroyed by fires.

Being a fire tower observer was a challenging and sometimes lonely job. Observers worked six days a week (seven during dry periods), manning the tower from April till it snowed in October or November. Since most towers were located in remote areas, observers would live in a cabin near the tower and trek to town for supplies when the fire threat was low.

Hikers, who used the observer trails to reach the mountain summit, would often provide company to fire tower observers. The hikers enjoyed the panoramic view from the top of the tower—20’ to 80’ high and towering over the trees—as well as the informative, and sometimes entertaining, stories the observers told about the plants and animals in the area.

One of New York’s earliest fire observers was Sam Cheetham (1886-1953). Born in Hartford, Connecticut, Sam grew up in Dublin, Ireland, and spent many years as a sailor. After contracting tuberculosis, he traveled to Saranac Lake in the Adirondacks to be cured. Only able to climb stairs on his hands and knees, he could see Whiteface Mountain from his room and vowed to climb its peak

some day. So he devoted his energies into walking and working outside, and was healed. In 1915, Sam became the fire observer on Whiteface Mountain, climbing the 6½-mile trail to the summit carrying a heavy pack. Initially, Sam just had a tent and wood stove on the summit, but in 1919 a 22-foot, steel tower with a cab replaced the tent. Sam worked as observer until 1919, and then again from 1934-42.

Harriet Rega was one of the state's first women fire observers. Like Sam, Harriet came to the Adirondacks to improve her health. Her earliest stint as a fire tower observer was on a private estate, where she worked for six years. In 1930, she began working at the state fire tower on Rondaxe (Bald) Mountain. Harriet was an expert outdoorswoman, and knew the woods so well that she rarely carried a compass. Thousands of tourists visited

BY THE EARLY 1960s, MORE THAN 100 FIRE TOWERS DOTTED NEW YORK'S LANDSCAPE.

her tower, where they learned the names of nearby mountains and lakes and heard about her hunting and trapping adventures. In 1934, Harriet told an Associated Press reporter, "I love the woods and get more fun wandering alone through the forest than going to the movies."

By the early 1960s, more than 100 fire towers dotted New York's landscape. However, in the early 1970s the state began using air surveillance, which was more economical, making manned fire towers obsolete. And so, one by one the state began closing its fire towers.

The last of New York's fire towers

(four in the Adirondacks and one in the Catskills) shut down around 1990. While 52 of the towers were removed, many were left in place and began to deteriorate due to lack of maintenance. Hearing that the state might remove their local tower, several communities and groups raised money to restore the towers as historic places for the public to visit. Standing on one of those restored towers, I am pleased that they did.

As I carefully make my way down the Hadley tower, I am grateful that people had the foresight to restore these towers. While the advent of new technology may have rendered them no longer necessary for fire detection, it's nice to know they can provide another type of public service. Having climbed a number of these towers, I think it's great that those willing to make the trek get to sample a unique piece of history, and are also rewarded with incredible views.

Being a fire tower observer was a hard and sometimes lonely job. Observers spent many hours in the small tower cab, armed with binoculars, maps, and a telephone or radio. Their dedication to this early warning system greatly reduced the acres of forest destroyed by fires.



DEC photo



New York's fire towers are no longer staffed, but some, like the one on Goodnow Mountain pictured here, have been restored and repurposed as an enjoyable destination for families, hikers, backpackers and school children alike.

Entering the tree line, I glance back at the tower—a steel sentinel outlined against the cloudless, deep blue sky. Reflecting on what a great day it's been, I start thinking about next weekend. Perhaps I'll climb the Goodnow Mountain fire tower.

Marty Podskoch is a retired teacher and author of three books on NYS fire towers. He also writes the weekly column, "Adirondack Stories," published in five Adirondack area newspapers. Marty became interested in fire towers after climbing Hunter Mountain in 1987. You can e-mail him at podskoch@comcast.net



Climb a FIRE TOWER



Although no longer manned or used for detecting fires, some of New York's remaining historic fire towers are being restored and repurposed as a destination for hikers, families and school children alike. The towers are a valuable piece of state history, and from the top visitors get a 360-degree panoramic view of the surrounding forests, lakes, mountains and valleys.

If you are interested in climbing one of the state's fire towers, the following have been restored in the Adirondacks: Mount Arab, Blue Mountain, Hadley Mountain, Goodnow Mountain, Kane Mountain, Azure Mountain, Vanderhacker Mountain, Rondaxe (Bald) Mountain, Owl's Head Mountain, Poke-O-Moonshine Mountain, Mount Adams, and Snowy Mountain.

In the Catskills, five fire towers have been restored: Hunter Mountain, Mount Tremper, Red Hill, Balsam Lake, and Overlook Mountain. In addition, the fire tower on Mount Utsayantha just outside the Catskill Park (in Stamford) has also been restored.

For more information on New York's fire towers, visit www.beebehill.info/towers.