

Conferees debate future of fire towers

by Lee Manchester, Lake Placid News, October 29, 2004

SILVER BAY — A conference last weekend looked at the history — and the future — of the Adirondack fire tower.

The conference, organized by Adirondack Architectural Heritage, brought together about 30 of the people most interested in the policies that dictate which fire towers will be saved, and which will not.

The all-day conference was held in Morse Hall at the Silver Bay Association YMCA Conference Center, on Lake George.

Fire towers, standing lonesome and proud above the forest canopy on dozens of Adirondack mountaintops, have always drawn the interest of a certain kind of hiker. Even more interest has been generated recently by something called “The Fire Tower Challenge” and an accompanying book, “View from on High: Fire Tower Trails in the Adirondacks and Catskills,” published three years ago by the Adirondack Mountain Club.

The Fire Tower Challenge, created by the ADK’s Glens Falls-Saratoga Chapter, awards a patch — kind of like the famous “46er” patch — to those who climb 18 of the 23 Adirondack fire-tower peaks and all five of the Catskill tower mountains.

Until just this year, five of the remaining 23 Adirondack fire towers were considered endangered. One of those, Mount Adams, now looks like it will be saved; two more are on International Paper property recently slated for conservation easements, making preservation a possibility; only two now appear to be in serious danger.

THE FIRST THREE speakers at Saturday’s conference were responsible for much of the research and publishing that has told the story of New

York’s fire towers: Wesley H. Haynes, Martin Podskoch and John P. Freeman.

Wes Haynes is probably best known in preservation circles for his writing on Adirondack Great Camps, and especially Camp Santanoni in the town of Newcomb. On Saturday, however, it was his research on the history of Adirondack and Catskill

fire towers that was put to the test. In 1998 and 1999, Haynes wrote a thematic nomination recommending that the fire towers, as a group, be listed on the National Register of Historic Places.

“I have not always liked fire towers,” Haynes admitted. “The first time I saw one I said, ‘What is that thing doing up there?’ It was like this



Mount Adams fire tower

piece of metal stuck up on top of something, and I just didn't get it.

"Fast forward a bit to 1992, to that spring morning when I opened up my [Glens Falls] Post-Star and saw that the tower on top of Pharaoh [Mountain] had been toppled by some unknown vandal.

"I was outraged.

"And that was some sort of an epiphany for me," Haynes said. "I went from not understanding these things to feeling real outrage."

According to fire-tower historian Bill Starr, "two individuals from an environmentalist group took it upon themselves to vandalize the tower in such a way that in high winds the tower blew over onto the ground." It was then removed from the mountain by a DEC chopper.

Haynes then told the story of how the fire towers were first built. Demand for Adirondack softwoods soared when newspapers discovered how to mass-produce newsprint in the 1880s. Logging practices of the time cut off the branches of these pulpwoods, piling the "slash" on the ground to dry as if for tinder — which is exactly what it became when smokestack sparks from passing trains fell on them.

Combined with a nearly two-decade drought that started in 1890, and the influx into the Adirondacks of inexperienced campers, these circumstances set the stage for the great Adirondack firestorms of the early 20th century.

In 1909, the first prototype fire observation stations were created in New York state. By 1920, there were 50 of the now-familiar steel-frame towers in place, and a system of manning the towers, locating fires and communicating between them was perfected. That system was used until the 1970s, when aerial fire surveillance made the towers and their resident observers obsolete.

If you want to read more of Haynes' history of the fire towers,



The conference was held in Morse Hall on the campus of the Silver Bay Association YMCA Conference Center.

pick up the ADK's "Views from on High." An essay by Haynes, "A Room with a View," tells the history of the towers in some detail.

FOLLOWING HAYNES with his documentary research was Marty Podskoch with another kind of history: the lore of the fire observers, painstakingly gathered from scores of interviews conducted all over northern New York. Tower enthusiasts have received his oral histories of fire towers in the Catskills and southern Adirondacks with much affection.

The third speaker of the morning, Jack Freeman, is best known in fire-tower circles for his 2001 trail guide to the fire-tower mountains, "Views from on High."

Like Haynes, Freeman confessed, "I never much liked fire towers. I thought they were a blight on the forest. ... They were there because they were needed, and that was about it."

But then came the report of the Governor's Commission on the Adirondacks in the 21st Century, issued in 1993. Its far-reaching vision led some to fear that the state was planning to buy out or condemn all

the private land and tear down all the buildings in the Adirondacks, leaving a devastation of wilderness.

"And when the fire towers were closed," Freeman said, "there was the perception that the state just didn't care about the Adirondacks."

That's when the Adirondack Mountain Club, for which Freeman worked as associate conservation director, began to involve itself in the plight of the fire towers.

"We found out, by asking our members, that lots of them liked hiking up to the fire towers," Freeman said.

As Freeman relates in "Views from on High," in 1993 ADK picked the fire tower on Blue Mountain to draw attention to the potential for restoring towers throughout the Forest Preserve. In the process, through trial and error, they developed the process that has been used for most fire-tower preservation projects since: methods for organizing support groups, for working on the towers themselves, for clearing trails, for documenting the natural environment of the towers and for staffing them with interpreters.

“In the end, we’d come up with two principles for choosing which projects to get involved with,” Freeman said. “First, the towers had to be permitted — that is, they had to be in Wild Forest areas in the Forest Preserve, or on privately owned land.

“Second, we only worked on summits where there wouldn’t be a view without a tower.”

Those two criteria played a critical role in discussions later in the day.

VARIOUS SUCCESS stories of fire tower restoration were recounted:

- Mount Arab, one of only two surviving towers in St. Lawrence County, restored in 1998 and 1999;
- Poke-O-Moonshine, south of Keeseville off the Northway, the subject of continuing ministrations by a “friends” group organized through AARCH;
- Azure, north of Paul Smiths, scheduled for demolition in 2001 as a safety hazard but rescued when a “friends” group was organized;
- Vanderwhacker, in Minerva township just over the border from Newcomb, restored in 2002;
- Snowy Mountain, near Indian Lake, in 2001, and
- the remarkable organizing effort, starting in 1997, that led to the restoration of the five surviving Catskill towers.



Erin Crotty

To some, however, the most remarkable fire-tower preservation news was delivered by state Environment Commissioner Erin Crotty, the conference’s lunchtime speaker.

Conservation easements recently granted by International Paper would finally give access, Crotty said, to fire towers at Stillwater (Herkimer County) and Loon Lake (Franklin County).

Happy as that made some of the tower enthusiasts, the big news concerned the fire tower atop Mount Adams and the fire observer’s cabins still standing at the foot of that mountain. Both were part of the mammoth Tahawus tract, just south of the central High Peaks, purchased from the National Lead Company last year by the Open Space Institute for transfer to state ownership.

Fire-tower enthusiasts had feared that the transfer would mean the end of the both the tower and the cabins, because manmade structures are not allowed to stand in Wilderness-designated areas of the Forest Preserve, which is what much of the Tahawus tract will become once the property’s ownership is transferred from OSI to the state.

OSI announced earlier this year that it had decided to hold onto the half-acre surrounding the tower at the peak of Mount Adams, thereby saving the tower. The fate of the observer’s cabins was left in question, however — and one of the Mount Adams cabins was the very last surviving example of the very first generation of standard-design fire-observer’s cabins built by the state, the first of which was constructed in 1922. According to OSI, those interested in saving the Model 1922 Mount Adams cabin had better be prepared to sled it out to the road come wintertime, or it might be demolished as a “nonconforming structure.”

Crotty announced Saturday, however, that the state had decided to

allow for the preservation of the Model 1922 cabin in place.

“OSI and the Department [of Environmental Conservation] were both committed to affirm the preservation of Adams Mountain fire tower and the observer cabin in the town of Newcomb,” Crotty said.

“Department work crews have already brushed out the trail to the fire tower. We have repaired the steps and the landings as well as the concrete footings of the tower. Materials are in place to replace the remaining steps and landings as well as the cab floor in the spring, once the snow melts, and we’re purchasing a new roof to replace the damaged panels, and new guidewires will be installed,” she said.

A \$10,000 Environmental Protection Fund grant to the DEC for fire tower restoration had been divvied up between Vanderwhacker and Adams.

THE ONLY POINT of conflict in the conference was over the future of the fire towers atop St. Regis and Hurricane mountains. The St. Regis tower is in the St. Regis Canoe Area, near Paul Smiths. The Hurricane Mountain tower, in Elizabethtown township, is in a Primitive area; the only thing keeping that area from being designated as Wilderness is the



Peter Bauer

existence of the tower.

Both the St. Regis and Hurricane fire towers are considered “nonconforming uses” and thus are likely to be removed from their current sites — but not demolished. Current plans call for the Hurricane tower to be taken apart and rebuilt on the Washington County Fairgrounds; the St. Regis tower would be reconstructed at the Paul Smiths Visitors Interpretive Center, much as the Whiteface Mountain tower was removed and rebuilt at the Adirondack Museum.

Both Jack Freeman, of the Adirondack Mountain Club, and Peter Bauer, executive director of the Residents Committee to Protect the Adirondacks, participated in the discussion panel that ended the AARCH Fire Tower Conference. Both Freeman and Bauer voiced their support for fire towers in general, but hailed back to the two criteria for tower preservation elucidated earlier by Freeman: they must be “permitted uses,” and the sites must be summits where there is no view without a fire tower.

And, according to Freeman and Bauer, neither St. Regis nor Hurricane meet either criterion.

David Petrelli, a St. Regis advocate, spoke for those who see a more enduring value in the two endangered fire towers. They are local landmarks, he said, and symbols of local culture.

Podskoch spoke in a similar vein. When Freeman noted with sorrow that half the fire towers in the Adirondacks had been removed, but rejoiced that half were still standing, Podskoch said, “Tell that to the people of Schroon Lake,” referring to the vandalism of the Pharaoh Mountain Fire Tower.

In the end, it was a new staff member of the Adirondack Park Agency, Rick Weber, who brought a note of moderation to the discussion.

“We think of the park as huge,” Weber said, “but it isn’t. It’s very lim-

ited.

“And within those limits, we have to respect the different viewpoints of those who love it.”

Heads shook in quiet agreement, both among the panelists and throughout the audience, with the sentiment of the new APA regional planning supervisor.

And that was the note upon which this extraordinary conference concluded.

FOR MORE information about fire towers, check out these books:

- “Views from on High: Fire Tower Trails in the Adirondacks and Catskills,” by John P. Freeman with Wesley H. Haynes (Lake George,

NY: Adirondack Mountain Club, 2001). Paperback, 155 pages. SRP \$12.95.

- “Fire Towers of the Catskills: Their History and Lore,” by Martin Podskoch (Fleischmanns, NY: Purple Mountain Press, 2000). Paperback, 120 pages. SRP \$20.

- “Adirondack Fire Towers: Their History and Lore, the Southern Districts,” by Martin Podskoch (Fleischmanns, NY: Purple Mountain Press, 2003). Paperback, 256 pages. SRP \$20.

- “Fire Observation Towers of New York State: Survivors that Still Stand Guard,” by Paul Laskey (Ballston Spa, NY: MKL Publishing, 2003). Paperback, 130 pages. SRP \$19.95.



Belfry Mountain fire tower