

Closing the circle

Martin Podskoch publishes the third and final volume in his mammoth study of New York fire tower history and the stories of those who manned them

By LEE MANCHESTER, Lake Placid News, December 23, 2005

Marty Podskoch got the fire-tower bug a long time ago.

Hiking up Hunter Mountain with a buddy late one autumn, Podskoch visited the fire observer in his cabin at the summit. Listening to the observer's stories about his life on top of the world, Podskoch got hooked.

That was in the fall of 1988.

Thirteen years later, in June 2000, the Delhi middle school teacher's first book came out, "Fire Towers of the Catskills: Their History and Lore."

"I thought of writing another book on Adirondack fire towers," Podskoch wrote in the preface he used for both of his studies of places within the Blue Line. "It was daunting because of the immense area I would have to cover. ...

"I wondered how I could research 57 towers (there were 23 in the Catskills). I talked with my publisher, and we decided to do two volumes instead of one large book."

Podskoch spent many, many days driving around the Adirondacks, talking with historians, fire tower preservationists, community leaders, and former fire observers and their descendants. He listened, he lectured, and he learned.

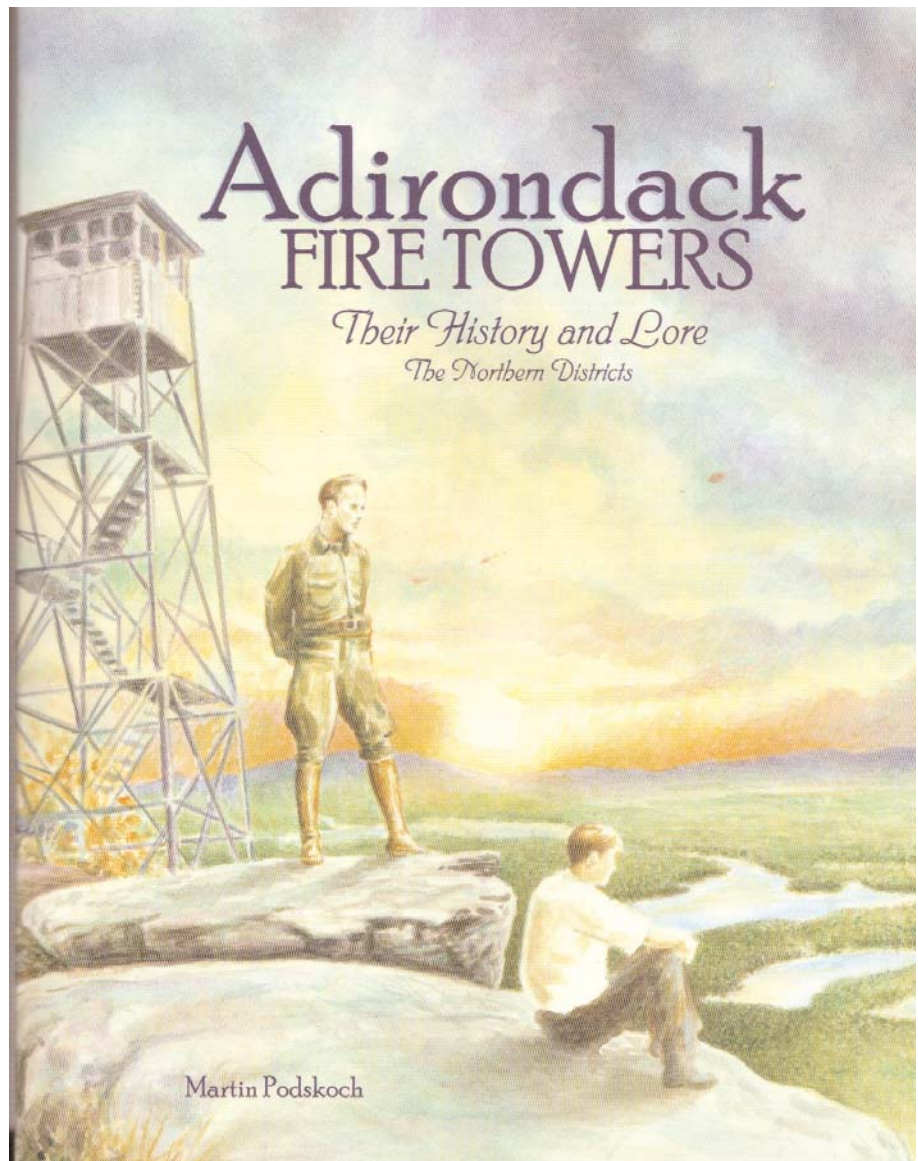
Podskoch's first volume on Adirondack fire towers, covering the southern portion of the park, came out in June 2003.

He continued traveling and researching the fire towers in Essex,

Franklin, Clinton and St. Lawrence counties well into 2005, just months before the final book's publication last month.

With the November release of "Fire Towers of the Northern Adirondacks," Essex County fire tower hikers, historians and preser-

vationists finally have access to the stories about *our* fire towers: Whiteface, Palmer Hill, Belfry, Poke-O-Moonshine, Hurricane, Vanderwhacker, Adams, Goodnow — and the two that no longer stand, Makomis and Pharaoh.



Features

Marty Podskoch's new book has many features to recommend it.

- "Adirondack Fire Towers: The Northern Districts" contains a wealth of historic photographs, some unavailable anywhere else. Many were loaned to him by local historians, former fire observers and family members — a testament

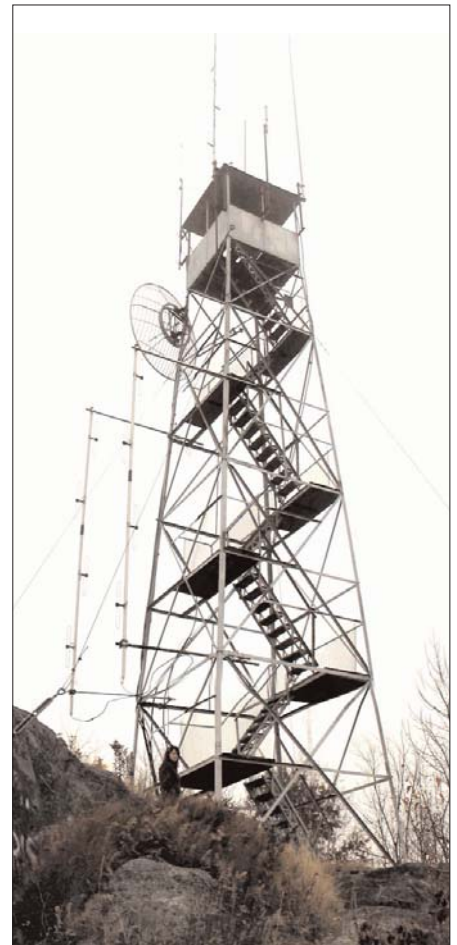
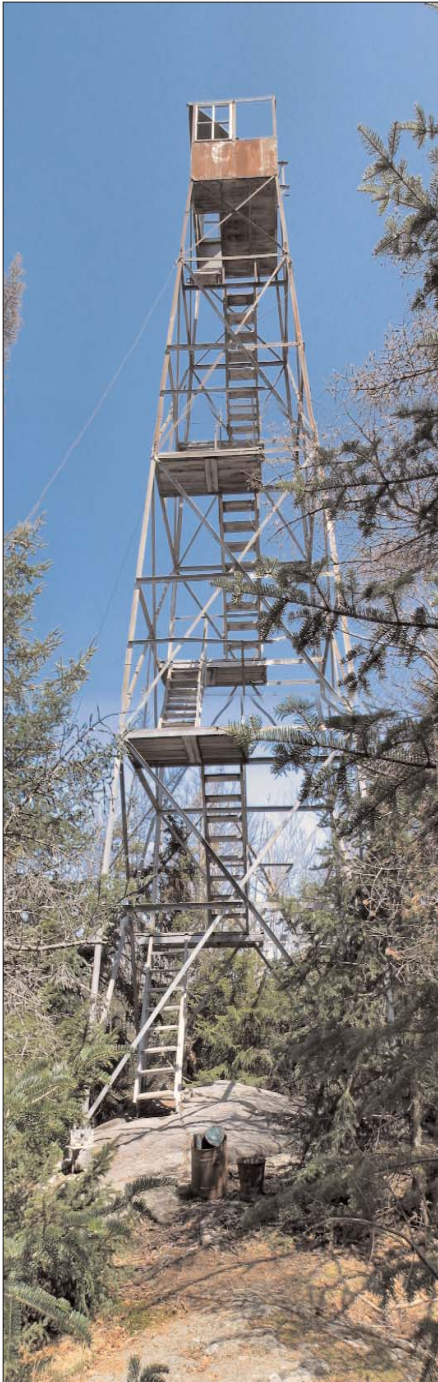
to the trust Podskoch has earned from those who care about fire towers.

- The book gives equal time to ALL the fire towers that once stood over the northern Adirondacks, including those no longer surviving. For the first time, readers can get the whole story of what really happened to the fire tower on Pharaoh Mountain, in Schroon township, in 1990 and 1991. Podskoch also tells the tales of the lesser known towers, like the one that used to guard the Underwood Club in North Hudson.

- Locals may be surprised to find out about how many of their neighbors were associated with the fire towers in their townships. In

Wilmington, for instance, Councilman Fran Lawrence's father worked for several years in the Forties as an observer on the Whiteface tower. Councilman Russ Mulvey's grandfather also worked on the tower one summer in the Sixties. Podskoch's book has many other stories about the many men who kept watch from the Whiteface Mountain top, and many other mountaintops throughout the region.

- You'll find a number of surprising stories about fire observers in "Adirondack Fire Towers." For instance, you may not have guessed that many families went to live in the remote fire observers' cabins with their husbands and fathers, unwilling to bear the long separations — but Podskoch has compiled



Three Essex County fire towers: left, Mount Adams; center, Vanderwhacker Mountain; right, Mount Belfry

the stories of several fire tower families. Other surprising tales involve lightning strikes (a too common occurrence), snakes sunning themselves on the trails to and from some fire towers, and a visit one night by Bigfoot.

Thoughts for hikers

Hikers preparing for an outing will want to keep a couple of facts about Podskoch's books in mind.

First, remember that Marty has covered ALL the region's fire tower mountains, not just those where towers currently stand. Those mountains now without fire towers, such as Pharaoh, may be less interesting hikes because of that. Before you set out for a former fire tower summit, take a look at the Adirondack Mountain Club trail guide for that area.

Second, Podskoch's books give

basic driving directions to trail heads for all the fire tower mountains, and very rudimentary trail descriptions. Most readers, however, will probably feel better prepared for their hikes after also reading the more detailed trail descriptions contained in the ADK fire tower book, "Views from on High," or one of the ADK trail guides.

Overall recommendation

The final installment in Martin Podskoch's three-volume fire tower series makes an important contribution to the regional literature on fire towers. Its collection of the histories of individual towers is probably the best in print so far. The hundreds of oral histories collected from fire observers at every tower are of immense value.

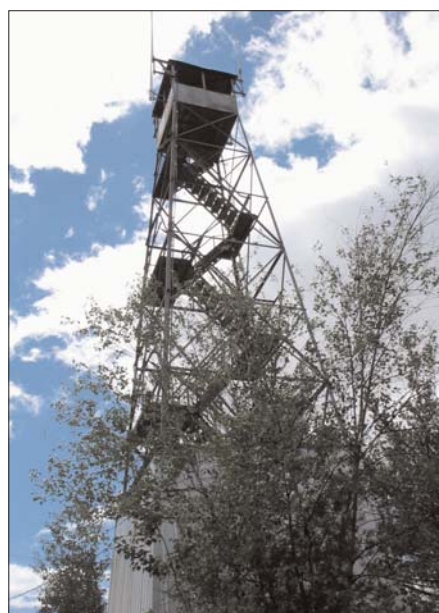
This is probably *not* a book you will want to sit down and read straight through. However, if you've ever wondered about the history of a tower that used to stand nearby, or if you're planning a hike up one soon, take in what Marty Podskoch has collected here. When you stand on that summit, or when you see it from your home, let the

stories of that tower resonate within you. You'll have a richer experience for it, and a greater appreciation of what the towers meant — and still mean — to the Adirondack communities they once protected.

More reading on fire towers

Next spring, the Lake Placid News will be publishing a special section of stories on all the surviving fire towers of Essex County. In the meantime, there's plenty of additional material to read by the fireplace this winter in preparation for the 2006 fire-tower hiking season:

- "Fire Towers of the Catskills: Their History and Lore," by Martin Podskoch (Fleischmanns: Purple Mountain Press), paperback, 120 pages, published June 2000, SRP \$20. The first in Podskoch's mammoth three-volume series on the history of New York fire towers and the observers who manned them.
- "Views from on High: Fire Tower Trails in the Adirondacks and Catskills," by John P. Freeman (Lake George: Adirondack Mountain Club), paperback, 155 pp., published April 2001, SRP



Three Essex County fire towers: left, Hurricane Mountain; center, Mount Goodnow; right, Palmer Hill

\$12.95. Despite the fact that this book was published nearly a year after Podskoch's first volume, it was "Views from on High" that seems to have really started the fire tower stampede. Jack Freeman's book not only provides ADK-quality trail descriptions and maps for 28 fire towers, it includes information about the ADK Fire Tower Challenge — kind of like a "49ers" distinction, but just for fire tower enthusiasts. The book also contains Wes Haynes' historical essay on Empire State fire towers, "A Room With a View," probably the best thumbnail history of fire towers in print today.

- "Nehasane Fire Observer: An Adirondack Woman's Summer of '42," by Frances Boone Seaman (Utica: Nicholas K. Burns), paperback, 128 pp., published August 2002, SRP \$13.95. This short book

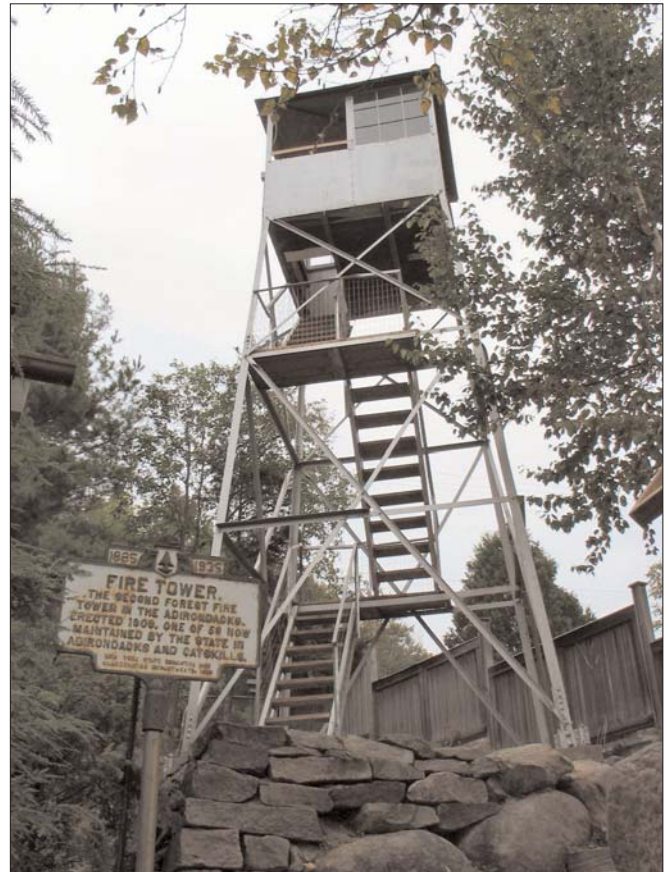
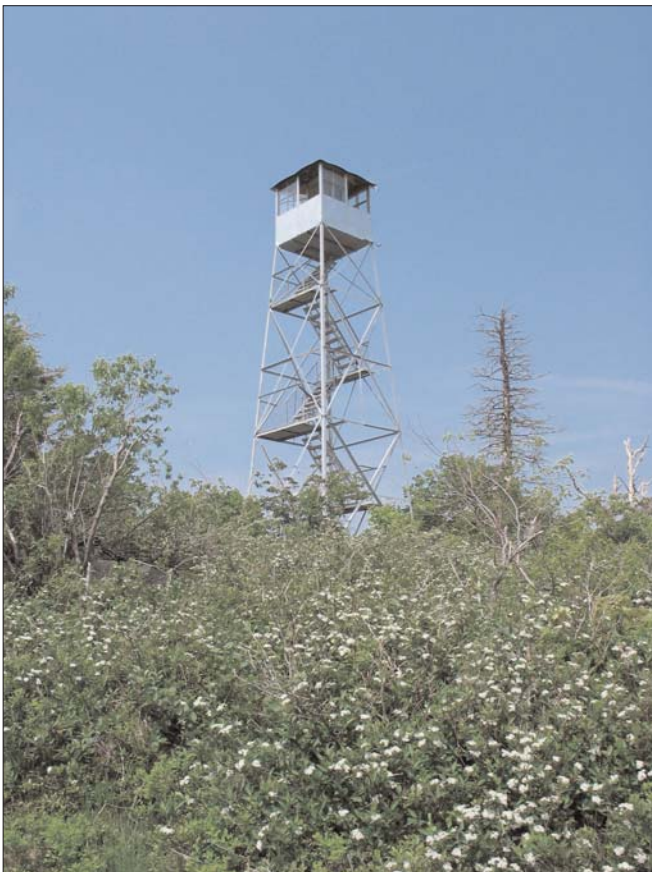
is an engaging memoir of the summer the author spent as a young woman during World War II as a fire observer on a remote Adirondack fire tower.

- "Adirondack Fire Towers, Their History and Lore: The Southern Districts," by Martin Podskoch (Fleischmanns: Purple Mountain Press), paperback, 256 pp., published June 2003, SRP \$20. The second book in Podskoch's three-volume fire tower series.

- "The Fire Observation Towers of New York State: Survivors that Still Stand Guard," by Paul Laskey (Ballston Spa: MKL Publishing), paperback, 130 pp., published December 2003, SRP \$19.95. This book's key advantage is that, in one volume, it provides current photos, basic historical data, location information and rudimentary trail

descriptions for every fire tower still standing in New York state.

- "The Future of Adirondack Fire Towers," by Peter Bauer, Sarah Collins and Todd Thomas (North Creek: Residents' Committee to Protect the Adirondacks), spiral-bound paperback, 68 pp., published December 2004. This report from one of the "Green Giants" of the Adirondack environmental movement charts a middle course between the hard-core wilderness advocates and the land-rights nativists. It describes 31 fire towers, including summit and trail conditions, notes on the views available from each summit and tower, environmental management issues, and recommendations for the future of each tower. Available *free* as a PDF download from the publisher's Web site, www.rcpa.org.



Two Essex County fire towers: left, Poke-O-Moonshine; right, tower from Whiteface Mountain, now a museum display