

Poke-O tower is worth the climb

Words and pictures by Lee Manchester, Lake Placid News, June 17, 2005

Rock climbers come to Poke-O-Moonshine, outside Keeseville, for the challenge of the mountain's high, broad, sheer granite face.

But the two dozens visitors gathered at the mountain's base last Saturday were here for a different reason: They had come to mark the end of their long restoration job on the fire tower atop Poke-O-Moonshine.

The tower on Poke-O-Moonshine was "deactivated" in 1988 when the state decided that aerial spotting was more effective than the towers at controlling forest fires.

Following a 1993 report from the Governor's Commission on the Adirondacks in the 21st Century, the state put the Poke-O-Moonshine fire tower on "The List" — a schedule of fire towers to be taken down and removed from the Forest Preserve.

It was "The List" that prompted preservationists to create Friends of Poke-O-Moonshine, a group that coordinates restoration activities on the fire tower. Among the founding Friends were participants from the state Department of Environmental Conservation, Adirondack Architectural Heritage and the Adirondack Mountain Club.

ONE OF THOSE founding Friends was Gary Friedrich. Until his recent promotion to lieutenant, Friedrich was the DEC ranger for the Poke-O-Moonshine area.

"In 1994, I started my career as a ranger right here in Keeseville," Friedrich reminisced on Saturday, "and right from the start, I was under

pressure to start the process of removing the tower.

"I didn't want to do that — and I had a lot of support from my lieutenant at the time.

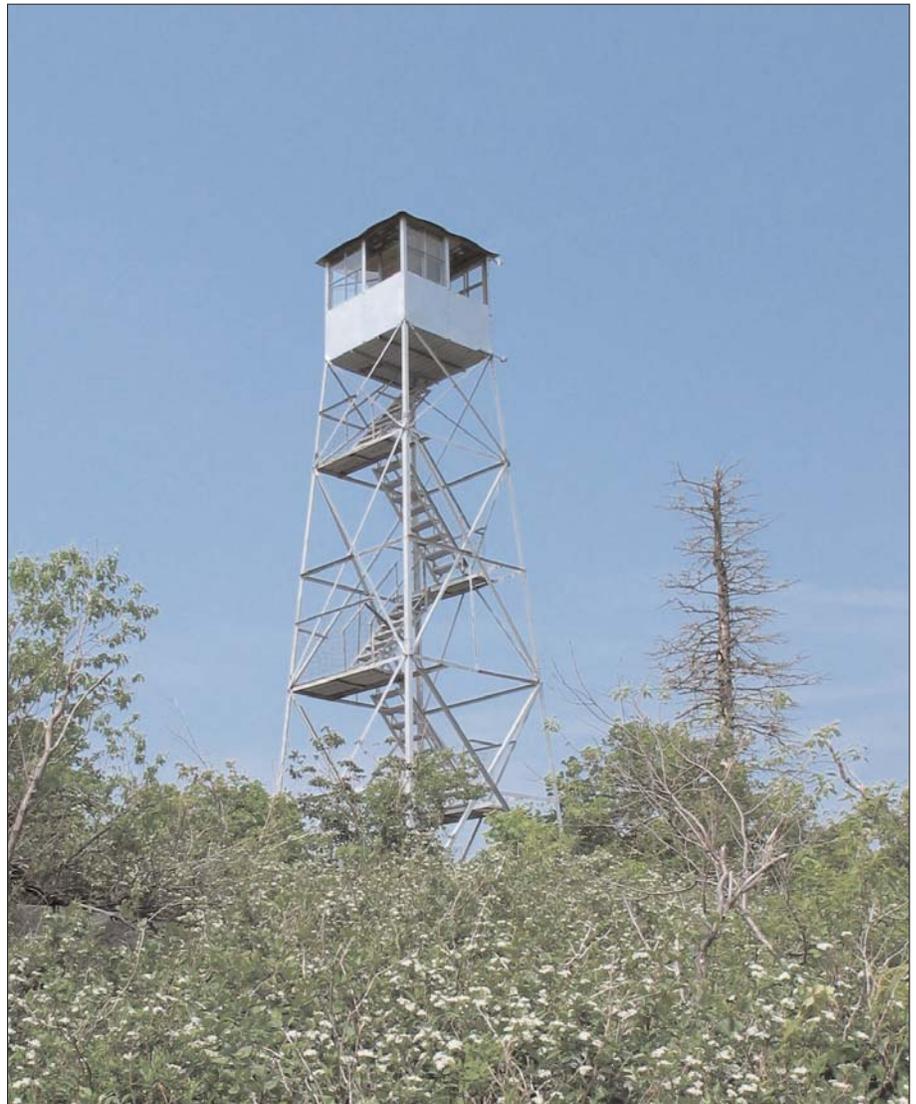
"When we found out that the tower was listed on the National Register of Historic Places, that gave

us a little more leverage in protecting it," he said.

Friedrich took a hike up Poke-O with DEC historic preservationist Chuck Vandrei and ADK associate conservation director Jack Freeman. (Freeman later authored "Views from on High: Fire Tower Trails in the Adirondacks and Catskills," ADK's benchmark guide to fire towers in the Empire State.)

"We all agreed that it should be saved," Friedrich recalled.

A flurry of letters passed between the various parties interested in preserving the fire tower atop Poke-O-Moonshine, ultimately resulting in the 1997 meeting in Keeseville that created the Friends of Poke-O-Moonshine.



“THERE HAVE been 11 fire towers restored so far,” Friends leader David Thomas-Train said at Saturday’s gathering, “and I think Poke-O has the distinction of being the one that’s taken the longest.

“Azure Mountain took just 1 or 2 years, but we’ve been plugging along since 1997, and we only finished last summer.”

Friedrich walked Saturday’s audience through a few of the extraordinary steps the Poke-O tower’s restoration had required.

“One of the major things that needed to be restored on the tower were all the diagonals,” said the ranger, referring to the three pairs of “X” bars on each side of the tower, which link and stabilize the 35-foot structure’s four legs. “They had twisted over the years.

“That was what made this project take the longest among all the fire tower restorations — this was the first one that had to have those diagonals replaced.”

The tower’s manufacturer had gone out of business long ago, so the diagonals — the shortest one was 10 feet, the longest 16 feet — had to be custom fabricated. Once they were ready, the diagonals were shipped up to Keeseville, where the DEC arranged for the loan of a state police helicopter to fly them to the summit of Poke-O-Moonshine.

“As he lifted off,” Friedrich recalled, “he started getting a ‘pendulum’ on the load. By the time he got to the other end of Augur [Lake], he was in fear of the diagonals swinging up and hitting the rotor blades — so he punched the load.”

Using the GPS coordinates taken by the pilot when he dumped the diagonals on the edge of Augur Lake, Friedrich went exploring the following fall.

“It was a swampy area, and I had poked around for 2 or 3 hours with no luck,” Friedrich said. “Finally, I see one of the straps from the sling load draped over a tree, and there in the



Intern Brendan Wiltse in his "office": the cab of Poke-O's 1917 fire tower.

swamp beneath it are my diagonals. The top part was about 1 foot down in the muck; the other end was 3 feet deep.”

Friedrich arranged to come in the next day with a canoe and a “come along.”

“That night, we had the first hard frost of the fall,” the ranger said.

Friedrich had to dig through the fresh Augur Lake ice in order to winch the diagonals out, stow them on his canoe and haul them away. They were installed on the fire tower the following spring.

As vivid as his memory of the

diagonals was, the episode Friedrich remembered most fondly was his final restoration job on the Poke-O tower, which he completed last summer.

“I probably had the most fun of my career last year when a ranger from Lewis and myself painted the fire tower roof,” Friedrich said. “There was no better feeling than standing out on that little 10-inch plank, tied into a rope, painting that tower and just feeling the completion of the project.

“Driving past Poke-O-Moonshine the next morning, the sun was coming

up and hitting that new, silver roof just right. It looked like a lighthouse up on top of the mountain.”

ANOTHER SPEAKER at Saturday’s get-together, DEC Regional Forester Tom Martin, told the group that he had worked over the summer of 1983 as a fire observer on the tower at Pharaoh Mountain, outside Schroon Lake. Because of that summertime employment experience, Martin said, “I have a near and dear place in my heart for fire towers.”

Pharaoh Mountain is notorious

among fire tower enthusiasts. The fire observer’s station there was decommissioned in 1987. Five years later, one night in 1992, vandals cut the tower’s support cables; it wasn’t long before a stiff wind knocked it right over. “Ecoterrorists,” afraid that the tower might win a reprieve from Governor Mario Cuomo, were suspected in the incident.

Martin said on Saturday that, to his way of thinking, the most important aspect today of the Adirondack fire tower is the man or woman staffing it.

“When I worked on Pharaoh, I found it was incredibly easy to educate visitors about the Forest Preserve once you got people in the tower,” he said. “You close the trap door, you stand on it, and you have a captive audience. They are going to listen to you until you are done.”

Brendan Wiltse staffs the Poke-O summit for the Friends of Poke-O-Moonshine. A graduate of Hudson Valley Community College, this is Wiltse’s second summer on the mountaintop. This fall he will enroll in the ecology and field biology program at Paul Smith’s College.

We climbed the fire tower’s 45-step staircase to talk with Wiltse in his “office” about being the Poke-O-Moonshine intern, a position he characterized as “a summer job with a great view.”

“The first thing I tell people who come up here is the basic history of the tower,” he said. “This tower was built in 1917. The original tower was wooden, and it was built in 1912.

“Then I tell them a little about the daily routine of the fire observer. They would spend the day up here in the tower the whole time, watching for fires.”

A closed-circuit telephone system linked the fire towers together, Wiltse said.

“They would spot a fire, get a compass bearing, and call another tower. The fire warden would have a master map for the whole area, with little strings on it. Where they bisected was where the fire was,” said Wiltse. “You could do it with two reports, but three was better.”

THOSE ATTENDING Saturday’s ceremonies were clearly united in their support of the Adirondacks’ historic fire towers in general, and of the Poke-O-Moonshine tower in particular.

“Some communities lose sight of the value of their historic and natural wonders,” said Gerald Morrow, supervisor of Poke-O-Moonshine’s



Hikers from Lansdale and West Chester, Pennsylvania, stopped to lunch at the remains of the Poke-O fire observer’s cabin. From left: Kieu Manes, Jeanne Hwang, Mike Manes and Bill Eddy. It was Bill’s 8th time up Poke-O-Moonshine, but the first trip for the others.

home township of Chesterfield. "I've never lost sight of this."

Assemblywoman Teresa Sayward sounded off on the importance of "preserving historic reminders like this of how, in a different time, we protected this great wilderness area from forest fire."

Sayward also spoke up for the preservation of another Essex County fire tower: the one on Hurricane Mountain, between Keene and Elizabethtown. That tower is still on "The List," but supporters have gathered thousands of signatures on a petition asking the state to let it be.

"I'm going to take a tip from Tom [Martin]," Sayward said, tongue in cheek. "We're going to try to get the governor up on Hurricane and into that little box. We're going to close that trap door, and we're not going to let him out until he decides that's another one that needs to be preserved."

How good are her chances of success? Not bad, according to Steven Engelhart, executive director of Adirondack Architectural Heritage.

"Things look very good for fire towers all across the region," Engelhart said in closing Saturday's program. "The DEC has realized the level of public interest and has re-committed itself to the preservation of most of the fire towers in the region.

"They have been great partners all the way along through this."

A final word:

Climbing Poke-O-Moonshine

The Poke-O-Moonshine trailhead starts at the state campground on Route 9, about 3 miles south of Exit 32 on the Northway (I-87). There is a small fee for parking at the campground, and parking on Route 9 is prohibited.

It's not far — just 1.2 miles — from the base of Poke-O-Moonshine to the rocky, barren summit, 2,180 feet above sea level, where the fire tower stands.

But the first eight-tenths of a mile



Signs cordially warn hikers away from the sparse alpine vegetation at Poke-O's summit, some of it reseeded by the Friends of Poke-O-Moonshine.

are pretty steep for some pretty long stretches. Until the trail levels off at the summit ridge, the average grade is 30 percent.

If it's hot and/or humid, or if you're not in the best of shape, take it slowly and drink plenty of water; the hike might take you longer than you would have thought, but you *will* make it.

Take along one of the pamphlets available at the trailhead. The pamphlet describes the Poke-O-Moonshine naturalists' trail, with 11

stops featuring different aspects of the mountain's flora, fauna and geology. Take heart when you reach Stop #11: You've made it to the summit ridge.

The trail levels off in front of the stone remains of the fire observer's cabin, built in 1932 and torched by vandals several years ago. A branch to the left leads to an old lean-to, about 65 yards away. The main trail, ending in 0.4 miles at the fire tower, turns to the right at the cabin remains.

The elevation change from the base to the summit is 1,280 feet.