

HISTORIAN'S CORNER

Summer 2012

By: Bob Spear

"Saving the past for the future"

Reflections

(Part 4, concluded from last issue)

Weather was always a significant aspect of time at Sterling Fire Tower. Spring peepers in the rhododendron warrens would provide a raucous chorus of chirps and clicks; chipmunks would suddenly set up their "forest telegraph" as I called it. For no particular reason, these little "firecrackers" would begin chirping, each answered by another, then another, and another, until the entire woods came alive with a cacophony of their chirps and clicks. This usually meant a period of very dry weather was at hand. In mid-June, the big, fat, clumsy "June bugs" would arrive; their almost drunken stupor of flying as they crashed against things was offset by the rapid supersonic flights of the "carpenter bees". Humming birds, always a treat, were regular users of the five or six feeders I would suspend from tree limbs on strings. Occasionally, an entire civilization of ants would captivate my uninhibited concentration as I followed their progress from their underground burrow by Rattler Rock, across the rock in front of the cabin, and around the corner down to some choice "harvesting round" where their scouts had apparently discovered something of value. With an unending determination, each colony member would carry a tiny piece of the material back to the underground complex, a distance of perhaps three hundred feet.

I remember one time when two so-called "experts" from the Albany office arrived with pry bars. In a matter of minutes they ran about the fire tower grounds, turning over rocks that had not seen the light of day in perhaps eighteen thousand years. Their explanation was that they were "taking a survey" of rare insects so a study could be done to better protect the forest ecology. However, in disturbing the very critters they were "studying", they most likely unknowingly wiped out entire civilizations of them. When they left, I carefully went around and replaced the rocks and logs as well as I could, repairing their careless "research" as best possible. If this was saving the ecology, what would all-out war be like, I thought?

Iron ore was discovered in this region in 1735 by Timothy Ward and Cornelius Board. The industry flourished here and provided, among other things, links for the great iron chain that kept British warships from capturing West Point during the American Revolution. At one time, the valley below rang with the sound of forge hammers and the roar of blast furnaces. An entire village sprang up at the foot of the mountain, complete with company stores, a church, a school, and the many industrial buildings that supported the iron mines that were carved under Sterling Lake to a depth of some eleven hundred feet and thirty-eight hundred feet out under the lake floor. Visitors to the fire tower saw my old maps of the area, and other accouterments of what it was like to operate a remote ranger station. I regaled at explaining the history of Sterling Forest,

and often hosted organized hikes by the Park Naturalist from the Visitor Center. VIP's would occasionally visit from the State Office in Albany, even a Senator and the Governor's wife arrived one day with her entourage of bodyguards and other officials. All picnicked at the tables below the old fire tower's ever-present gaze of the Highlands.

In the loft of the old cabin many years before, my friend and I had discovered several hundred old 1936 to 1940 vintage newspapers that I guess were to have been used for insulation materials but never were. These contained a wealth of newspaper headlines of pre-World War Two eras, and a 1937 NY Fire warden's directory booklet.

So ... in the end, what is the charm of such a place as this? It is no different from that found in many other similar "out of the way" places where lookouts tend to be. Whether you find them here in New York State, the deep woods of northern Maine, the rugged Appalachian Mountains from Pennsylvania to North Carolina, or the boundless beauty of Colorado, Montana, Idaho, or Washington, Oregon, California, Arizona, New Mexico and many others, all contain these places. Anyone who has spent time here or in similar places has that "connection" with the land, history, and heritage.

In the final years of my term of time at Sterling Fire Tower, the number of annual hikers slowly increased as the "word" of the new state park spread. As often happens with any job, outside pressure and conflicting issues began to take its toll on how the place could be staffed and operated. It was no longer just my own "little world" on Rough Mountain's ridge summit that seemed to take over the ability to continue. This all came to a screeching halt in the autumn of 2007, nearly as quickly as a train slams on its brakes.

Inexplicably, the normal routine at the place ended and never returned. Since then, it's been more difficult each year to again climb that two-mile trail to where the old fire tower still stands. But the memories there still linger and photos cast shadowy images of how it once was. I've read accounts of others, of their own remembrances of similar places, and now these are mine.

I wrote a story once, titled "Last of the Lookouts", about Sterling Fire Tower, centered in 1990, long before the new state park had even been established; I'm only happy I was able to have kept that alive an additional seventeen years.

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Sterling Fire Tower, NY



This undated photo shows the old green roof tiles yet on the ground cabin and the ventilator that was put in. The American flag is flying from the cabin; later a flagpole was built. The fire tower was painted by volunteers in the red-white pattern like New Jersey fire towers after 1990 when New York State shut down its fire tower program. The large rock in front is called "Rattler Rock", self-descriptive of its meaning! The high-gain radio antenna on the tower afforded radio contact with both the NJ Forest Fire Service and the NYS Forest Rangers. Listed on the National Historic Lookout Register, it is also included in the National Register of Historic Places.

Abandoned front porch, 2009

