

# HIGH PROFILE

**OUR ENDURING  
FASCINATION  
with ADIRONDACK  
FIRE TOWERS** *by Annie Stoltie*

ST. REGIS MOUNTAIN FIRE TOWER PHOTOGRAPH BY JOHNATHAN ESPER

# WHAT IF A MILLION ACRES OF ADIRONDACK FORESTLAND CAUGHT FIRE?

That's about the size of Franklin County and more square miles than three Lake Champlains. Consider the devastation to our landscape and its wild inhabitants, the ashes blanketing our little Adirondack settlements, the thick smoke clogging the sky, settling in a mustard haze as far away as Boston, Washington DC and Philadelphia.

In the beginning of the 20th century that's what happened here. Sloppy, widespread logging was partly to blame. Piles of debris were easily ignited by spark-spitting steam-powered locomotives. In some cases little fires that sprang up along the tracks joined together, leaving giant swaths of charred mess. Add in 72 days of drought, like in 1903; that year more than 600,000 acres burned. In the Adirondack Museum's archives there's a 1908 photograph of a firefighter, pack basket on his back, surrounded by a black-and-white wasteland, bony shards of trees poking haphazardly from the earth. The bare Nehasane Park backdrop—part of today's William C. Whitney Wilderness Area—is unrecognizable.

It's hard to grasp just how much we lost during those infernos, but today it's easier to see what we gained. Our landscape is mostly healed, healthy mature forest replacing burned-over terrain. Logging practices have changed. Most railroad activity is confined to the park's edges and short excursion trains; the remaining tracks that pierced remote woods are destined to become a trail for bikers, hikers and snowmobilers. And then there are the fire towers. Thirty-two of these steel structures remain on summits within the Blue Line. Though they're no longer used to spot fires—and, some might say, as obsolete as our region's covered bridges and empty missile silos—they tell the story of our landscape and its keepers, they deliver us even closer to the clouds and, for some Adirondack-

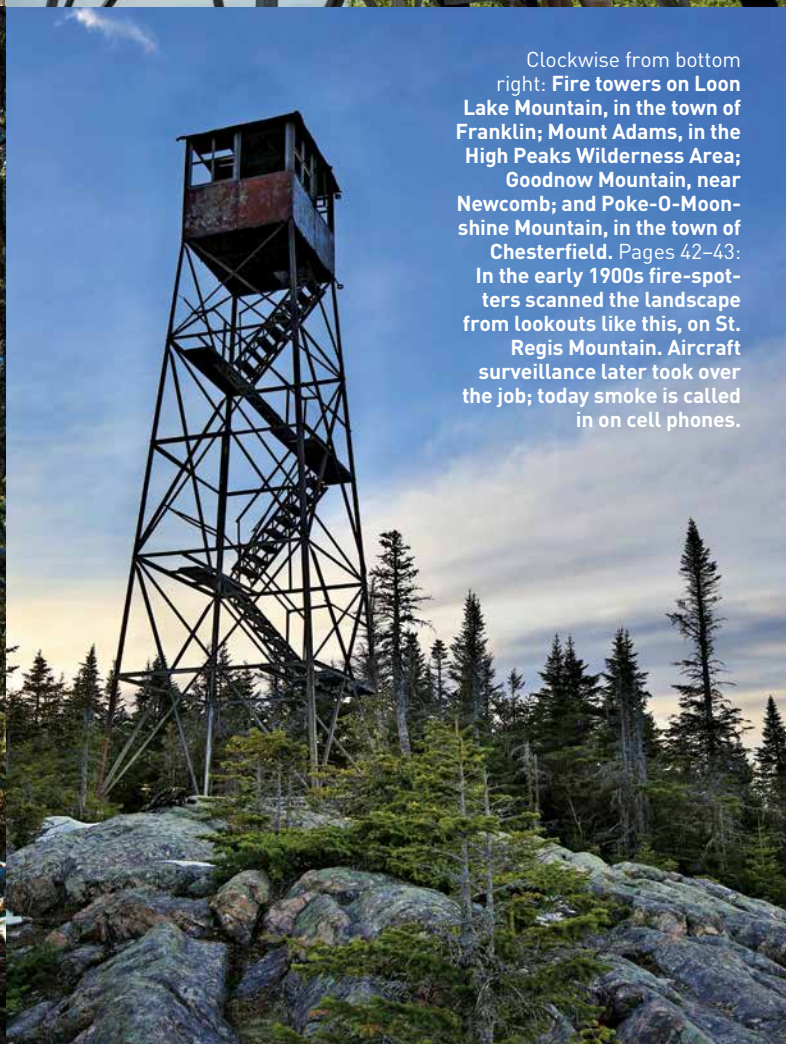
ers, trigger a passionate connection to a place worth caring about.

**IF YOU'VE NEVER** been up Hurricane Mountain, it's worth the trip. Hikers in reasonable shape can plan on a four-hour-or-so commitment along a recently restored trail through wetlands and woods and over boulders. At 3,678 feet, Hurricane isn't among the Adirondacks' 46 highest peaks, but it rises into a skyscape that delivers 360 degrees of stunning views—Vermont's Green Mountains and an endless layering of Adirondack peaks, their staggered contours going on and on. If that's not enough, on the very top of the mountain there's a 35-foot fire tower that'll take you even higher.

In 1919 this tower was dragged to the summit in pieces by horse and man before it was assembled on a bald patch of rock. It was among what would total 57 other steel lookouts that, following those great fires of the early 1900s, were strategically placed throughout the park so the first puff of smoke could be spotted, pinpointed, reported through a crude radio or hand-cranked telephone and then extinguished.

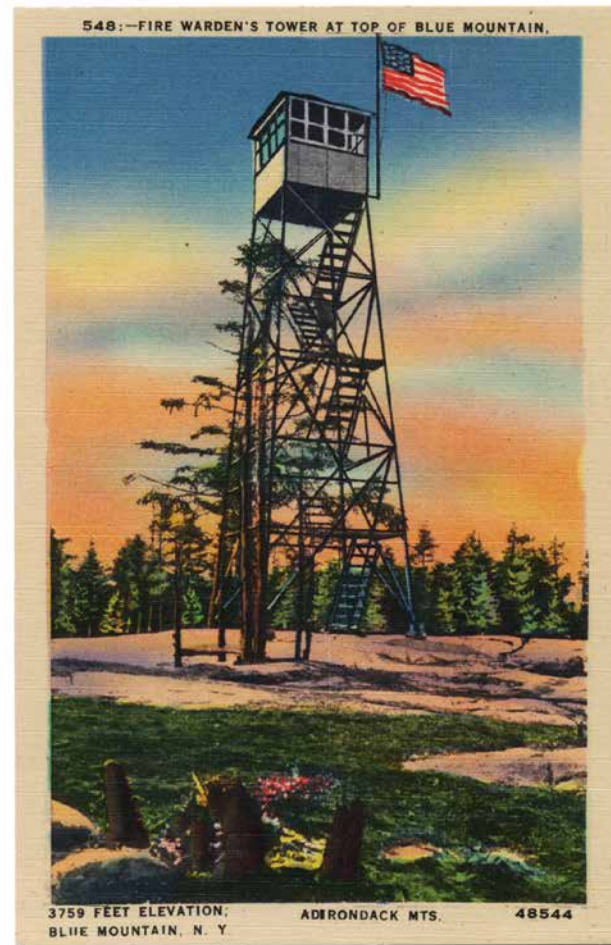
Fire-spotting was a necessity, and it worked. The park was littered with loggers' slash and crisscrossed by all those trains, but runaway blazes were also caused by farmers clearing fields or by hunters smoking out game. Sometimes lightning struck. Careless campers or smokers accidentally set fires; those seeking revenge did it on purpose. Arson, according to Karl Jacoby in *Crimes Against Nature: Squatters, Poachers, Thieves, and the Hidden History of American Conservation*, was rampant in the Adirondacks, in response to new hunting laws, the uprooting of squatters and prosecution of timber thieves. "Asked years later about the region's frequent forest fires," writes Jacoby, "one longtime inhabi-

GOODNOW AND ADAMS PHOTOGRAPHS BY NANGIE BATTAGLIA (2), POKE-O-MOONSHINE PHOTOGRAPH BY LISA J. GODFREY, LOON LAKE PHOTOGRAPH BY JOHNATHAN ESPER



Clockwise from bottom right: Fire towers on Loon Lake Mountain, in the town of Franklin; Mount Adams, in the High Peaks Wilderness Area; Goodnow Mountain, near Newcomb; and Poke-O-Moonshine Mountain, in the town of Chesterfield. Pages 42–43: In the early 1900s fire-spotters scanned the landscape from lookouts like this, on St. Regis Mountain. Aircraft surveillance later took over the job; today smoke is called in on cell phones.

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tant recalled, ‘Hell, we had to wait for droughts to get even. I remember my father cursing the rain that seemed to be always falling in the Adirondacks. We didn’t get much chances, but we took them when we got them.’

No wonder so much of the park was going up in smoke.

Back on Hurricane, five flights up into the cab of the tower—an elevator-sized box that bears the patina of

high-altitude wear—you might try to see the landscape as the early spotters did. When this lookout went up in the midst of the Suffragists’ victory and an influenza pandemic that wiped out entire families (many in nearby Keene), the forest-fire observer stood here from dawn to dusk, March until November, watching and waiting. Even now, you can lose yourself from this room in the sky. What spreads before you, like an earth-toned carpet, erases the noisy, chaotic world that rolls beyond.

The view from lookouts like this—and respect for what must have been precarious, lonely work—helps explain why so many people are fascinated by these simple steel structures. But so do enduring memories of, say, a visit to Blue Mountain’s tower. Or a long-ago

chat with the smoke-spotter—and, more recently, summit guide—on Hadley. Some fire-tower lovers, according to Martin Podskoch, author of the two-volume *Adirondack Fire Towers: Their History and Lore*, see lookouts as an important part of the permanent scenery, as familiar and beloved as Marcy’s profile or the scratches on Giant’s face. A handful of years ago in Elizabethtown, during one of his fire-tower talks, Podskoch recalls a little boy in the audience who said, “Whenever I wait for the bus I’m so glad to look up there and see the tower on top of Hurricane Mountain.”

That was about the time Hurricane’s tower was almost toppled.

**BY THE 1970s** most Adirondack fire observers had been replaced by aircraft patrols, a safer, cheaper and more efficient mode of smoke spotting. Many towers fell into disrepair, making loose stairs and rotting cabs a liability. Those on Forest Preserve that hadn’t taken on double duty as communication antennas, or that qualified as nonconforming structures according to the 1972 Adirondack Park State Land Master Plan, were removed, lookout by lookout, by the Department of Environmental Conservation.

Ampersand, Cat, Crane, Debar and Moosehead were dismantled. The 50-foot lookouts with ladders at Fort Noble and T Lake, in the West Canada Lakes Wilderness, came down. So did Boreas, Hamilton and Beaver Lake. Portions of Kempshall’s and West’s towers went to the Adirondack History Center Museum, in Elizabethtown; Whiteface’s to the Adirondack Museum, in Blue Mountain Lake; and Tooley Pond’s to the Ranger School at Wanakena. The



The Adirondacks’ first fire towers, built following devastating wildfires in the early 1900s, were wooden lookouts like this one, shown in 1902, on Mount Marcy. Most were replaced by sturdier steel structures. Facing page: Postcard of the fire tower on Blue Mountain, 1919. Blue’s tower was the first in the park to be restored, in the early 1990s.

MOUNT MARCY PHOTOGRAPH FROM THE ADIRONDACK MUSEUM. BLUE MOUNTAIN LAKE FIRE TOWER POSTCARD COURTESY OF JAY SCOTT

60-foot tower on Mount Electra—built by the Webb family to protect their vast Nehasane Park property—was pushed over. Pharaoh Mountain’s tower, slated for removal despite the local community’s opposition, fell after its stabilizing cables were cut—the eco-movement EarthFirst! claimed responsibility for the vandalism.

The Hurricane tower, on Primitive forestland, was next. The Friends of Hurricane Mountain, a grassroots group—like numerous other organizations across the park that rallied to save and maintain their towers—petitioned local government and the Adirondack Park Agency for a reprieve. There was a long, contentious debate. Eventually, in 2010, the lookout on Hurricane, as well as the one on St. Regis Mountain—also ready for removal because of its St. Regis Canoe Area location—were spared when the state reclassified half an acre of land at the towers’ bases as historic. Even now, anti-tower sentiment lingers: supporters of the state’s recommendation to take down Hurricane and St. Regis, as outlined in its 390-page 2010 *Fire Tower Study for the Adirondack Park*, see fire towers as vertical scrap heaps.

“People who say they’re useless pieces of junk don’t see their history or what ties them to the present,” says David Thomas-Train, an educator, editor of several Adirondack Mountain Club guidebooks and a member of the Friends of Poke-O-Moonshine Mountain. “The early state land master plan called for removing fire towers as nonconforming structures,” he says, “but to me they’re ultimately conforming—they’re part of the story of the Forest Preserve.”

As for the argument that these are a blight on what should be restored to pristine wilderness, Thomas-Train says, “This has never been a wilderness. It was logged, that’s how fire towers came to be. They were the first stewardship initiative. And they continue to inform the narrative of land protection. To me, they enrich it.”

Fire towers, he explains, “are a way to hook people to the landscape.” Thomas-Train often leads school groups through a fire-tower slide show and exhibit at Elizabethtown’s Adirondack History Center Museum, followed by a hike up 2,180-foot Poke-O-Moonshine Mountain, in the town of Chesterfield, stopping along an interpretive trail he helped design.



At Poke-O's tower he tells the students about the fires that once lit up this landscape, and relays true tales of that time, including the harrowing evacuation of the people of what's now Sabattis, who barely escaped as flames enveloped their getaway train. And he directs them to the interpretive panels in the tower's cab that prompt them to speculate about how this land will look in 100 years—and how they'd like it to look. The reason? He says, "We're trying to tie them in to that narrative so they have a stake" in this place.

Thomas-Train, who lives in Keene Valley, is a third-generation Adirondacker. As a kid he heard about valley residents who, in fire season, submerged their silver in brooks to keep it from melting. In the 1950s his parents and older brother spotted a fire near Jay from Hurricane's summit.

Now, on an early morning hike up Poke-O-Moonshine, Thomas-Train—with the peak's fire-tower steward Kyle Pendell, a State University of New York at Potsdam environmental studies major who is four days into his new summer job—points out the tireless call of a red-eyed vireo, a bird that'll repeat itself 20,000 times in a single day. At the remains of the fire-observer's cabin, Thomas-Train shows what was the porch and how the lazy pitch of an apple core resulted in a nearby apple tree. At the summit, Thomas-Train and Pendell discuss ways to deter hikers who ignore the "fragile plants" signs, trampling puddles of vegetation.

David Vana, of the fire-tower restoration company Davana LLC, replaces footers on Mount Arab's 98-year-old tower in Piercefild. From his 50-acre Bloomingdale property, below, Vana sells historic fire towers, but also custom, live-in lookouts based on 1935 U.S. Forest Service plans. Facing page: The autumnal view from Hurricane Mountain's fire tower.



DAVID VANA AND HURRICANE PHOTOGRAPHS BY NANCIE BATTAGLIA (3)



At 3,678 feet, Hurricane isn't among the Adirondacks' highest peaks, but it rises into a stunning skyscape. The mountain's fire tower was built in 1919; today its restoration is almost complete.



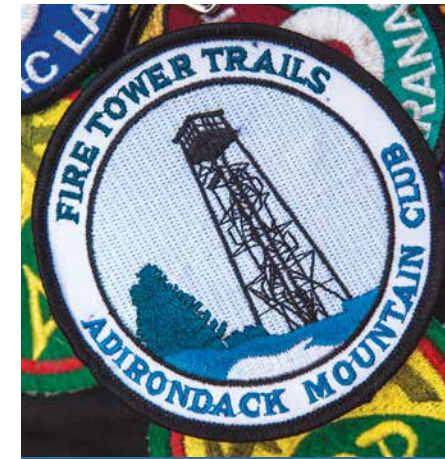
HURRICANE MOUNTAIN FIRE-TOWER CAB PHOTOGRAPH BY LISA J. GODFREY

Pendell's still blown away by the view from his office. As Poke-O's tower steward he's charged with answering questions about the distant peaks and sharing information about the resident peregrine falcons as well as the mountain's first recorded ascent, by an abolitionist preacher, in 1850—and, of course, why there's a steel lookout on top.

Friends of Poke-O-Moonshine Mountain is one of many groups that use towers as tools to educate and add to visitors' enjoyment and appreciation of the Adirondack Park. Rehabbing a tower is a big job, as is maintaining one. That's why there are also support groups for Azure, Bald (Rondaxe), Blue, Hadley, Pillsbury, Owls Head, Vanderwhacker, Kane, Snowy, and the list goes on. The DEC, Student Conservation Association, Adirondack Architectural Heritage and other organizations contribute in a variety of ways; money from the state Environmental Protection Fund and old-fashioned envelope-licking fundraising are essential.

Recently, on Spruce Mountain, in Corinth, a renovated 73-foot fire tower with a fresh trail to the summit was opened to the public. Almost a decade after work began on its lookout, Lyon Mountain's is open. Hurricane is having its roof repaired. In July the Friends of Stillwater Fire Tower held a ribbon-cutting for their newly restored lookout that anchors the southwestern lobe of Stillwater Reservoir. Such work, and a revival of interest in these structures, validates what the Glens Falls-Saratoga Chapter of the Adirondack Mountain Club, creator of the 28-mountain Fire Tower Challenge, calls "fire tower fever."

**THIRTY-FIVE FEET IN THE AIR.** on a staircase attached to a cab-less lookout, David Vana—of Davana LLC, the go-to for all things fire tower—leans against a railing and surveys his 50-acre Bloomingdale property. At night the only light you can see from here is the one on Whiteface's summit. This former potato farm has what's probably the greatest concentration of fire towers in the East, all for sale. There's a 120-foot tower from Alabama, a 100-foot tower from North Carolina, a 40-foot tower from Moosehead Mountain that was put up near Tupper Lake in 1916—"I want to keep that one local," says Vana—and several more, all dismantled, resting in heaps. The centerpiece of his place, however, is a partially constructed fire-tower prototype based on 1935 U.S. Forest Service plans for a live-in lookout with Thermo-pane windows and a three-foot balcony. Vana's about to market this model; each will be customized, broken down, put on a semi and shipped anywhere in the world.



The Adirondack Mountain Club's **Fire Tower Challenge** includes 23 Adirondack summits and five Catskill Park summits. See [www.adk-gfs.org](http://www.adk-gfs.org) for a list of the fire towers and rules of the challenge.

Fire towers have a devoted fan base in the Adirondacks, but they're also a big deal across the country. Out West, in particular, they're still used to spot fires—Vana just finished a tower with fire-observer cabin on a sprawling Oregon ranch. He's worked on towers in Texas, Vermont, Minnesota, Florida and places in between. He inspects, repairs, restores, dismantles and assembles them for public as well as private clients. Some want a tower for bragging rights; others are so moved by the lookouts' legacy that owning one is a dream come true.

In the Adirondacks Vana has rehabbed several fire towers: this summer he's replacing the roof on St. Regis's cab; last October he rebuilt the footers on Mount Arab's lookout in Piercefild. It's work that requires accuracy "within a thousandth of an inch," he says.

Vana's been focusing on fire towers for 15 years, since he abandoned woodwork for metalwork. "I'm a seat-of-the-pants engineer," he says. The 69-year-old is also a retired luger who came to Lake Placid to race in the 1970s—that career ended when he landed in a hospital in Germany to have his "ankle put back together."

He climbed his first fire towers at age seven on a trip from his home in Chicago to Wisconsin and, from then on, has been drawn to them. For him it's never been about bagging lookouts or making pilgrimages to the sites where they once stood, as some people do. He admires what it took for those early towers to rise, sometimes 140 feet up, connected one piece of steel at a time with ropes and pulleys, assembled with instructions from one page of drawings. It's remarkable, he says, to think that almost a century ago that's how Azure, Arab, St. Regis, Lyon and many others were put together, and that they've "been standing sentinel" over the Adirondacks ever since.

It says something, too, that on just about every one of Vana's fire-tower jobs, whether it's inside or outside the Blue Line, "people will come and say, 'My grandparent helped put it up,' or they'll share stories or bring photos—they'll want to show me. Those memories matter."

At least that's his view from the top. 🌿

**The New York State Chapter of the Forest Fire Lookout Association hosts its annual Northeastern Conference, September 17-18, at the Keene Fire Department. Among the presenters are David Thomas-Train, David Vana and representatives from the Stillwater, St. Regis and Hurricane Mountain restoration groups. Learn more at [www.firelookout.org](http://www.firelookout.org).**