



**Forest Fire Lookout Association
New York State Chapter
January 2020**

As I began preparations for this newsletter, I was also preparing the end of year report for the Annual Meeting of the FFLA held in January each year. This is a great opportunity for all of the State Chapter Chairs and the governing body of the FFLA to get together and discuss the year just ended and the future. Collectively we have all had ups and downs, successes and failures over the course of 2019 and it is wonderful to share these commonalities with such a devoted group of people, every single one a volunteer! As I put together the report and looked at the numbers I was very proud of the New York State Chapter and its accomplishments. Our Chapter does not sport huge numbers but it sure does sport some really great accomplishments for a small group of volunteers! Let me share a few fun facts with you.

New York State ended the year with 89 members (66 in 2017, 78 in 2018). Of those, 22 are plus members. These numbers put NYS in the top 5 chapters in the US in terms of membership.

Our Chapter had a closing balance of \$740.01. Our expenses were mostly related to hosting the Northeastern Conference, and several fire tower projects, including everything from painting projects to more extensive work projects like were done at Blue Mt and Pillsbury. We strive to provide not only voluntary manpower for the projects, but also to provide reasonable refreshments for all the hard working volunteers. In 2019 we were fortunate to have housing generously provided for those projects by FFLA Member Ron Hart and by Owner Jeff van der Molen at Steamboat Landing in Blue Mountain Lake. We also worked with NYSDEC to purchase translation services so that fire tower brochures could be translated into French for the Lyon Mt Fire Tower.

One tower was added, the Upper Esopus Fire Tower bringing the total standing towers in NYS to 73.

I did 36 fire tower visits, some multiple times plus one lost lookout site. Visits were done for inspections, painting, restoration work, centennial events (Hurricane, Stillwater and Balsam Lake Fire Tower all celebrated same), and volunteering.

Major restoration projects occurred on Blue Mt and Pillsbury Fire Towers. Pillsbury work will be completed in 2020.

I attended a number of community meetings and attended several meetings to discuss new fire tower projects that are under consideration.

In June we hosted the Northeastern Conference of the FFLA. We had about 30 enthusiasts in attendance and cooperative weather! We enjoyed fabulous speakers, food, friends and visits to several fire towers.

There are currently 471 Members in our facebook group where we have lively discussions, great information sharing and many historical photos are shared. I am thinking we may give a one year membership to the FFLA to the 500th person to join!

Looking Ahead

In 2020 we hope to make some improvements to our Lighting Event, include some additions to our monthly newsletters and we promise, get the chapter web page up and running! We plan to purchase some new tools that we find we use often on work projects. We will continue our work with fire tower groups and the NYSDEC to restore and maintain fire towers under our VSA agreements. I really need to devote some time to updating our NYS Lost Lookouts and to be sure we have all of the eligible towers listed on the NHLR. I also must do some recruitment to obtain new members and to retain current members. We could always use more people to assist us in our work. Which part of this are you willing to step in and lend a hand with?



In The Beginning

How did this all get started in the first place? It was really very simple. Someone cared and someone took action. In the words of our first NYS Chapter Chair Fred Knauf, here is how it all began:

This month marks the 30th anniversary of the founding of the Forest Fire Lookout Association. At that time no one knew the organization's name or what was to happen, and hardly anyone present could see how far we've come. Yes, there have been some losses, but there have been far more gains.

You see, in January 1990, most States were still playing a type of "follow the leader", and that leader was the US Forest Service. Government spending on other parts of budgets was placing undue stress on the Forest Service and many State's Conservation Departments (CD) trying to squeeze any and every dollar that they could from those "more remote" organizations to fund increasing costs in social programs. The USFS was continuing following their plan of closing fire towers & fire lookouts in their National Forests, and State by State were following along. From my perspective, it was like everyone cancelling their life insurance policies because they had not died.

People concerned with these actions, primarily out of New Jersey and Pennsylvania where towers were still being actively used, reached out to State CD officials in the Fall of 1989 looking for interest in meeting to discuss these issues and see what might be done. I'm not sure who passed along my name, but I received a call-in early December from a NJ man named Joe Higgins. By that time, I had collected a lot of information on NYS fire towers and had been visiting as many as possible before they came down. Joe was a past observer, first in Mass. at Wellfleet, then in NJ at Ramapo. He was also a lawyer and seemed quite interested in stopping the tower demise. Many I had spoken to in the NYS DEC and those who had left that group were quite upset about the State's plan that closed down around 26 towers at the end of 1988 and rumor was that none would re-open in 1990.

So sets the stage for the tempo for that first meeting, held on January 14th, at the PA Forestry Headquarters in French Creek State Park in Pa., sight of the Hopewell Fire Tower. I was on my way down there from the Rochester area, but turned around due to a massive freezing rain-storm we were having. Others had better travel and made the journey with representatives of MA, NH, NJ, NY, PA and VT making the trip. The items discussed in the morning were the "how to's and what for's" of forming an organization. From this discussion came the agreement that each State should have a single representative who could gather information, stories on fire towers & locations, etc., and contact others to spread the word. Information would be sent to Joe Higgins to form a "Tower Newsletter", which was hoped to be issued in April. No formal name was given to the group then, but

each was asked to think of a suitable name, which would be formalized at a forthcoming meeting.

*The rest of the meeting was a general discussion about each State's use of towers as far as the participants knew, and what this group could do looking forward. Steve Cummings, Hopewell Fire Tower operator, led the meeting, and those attending made him the "temporary chairman". Steve's goals at the meeting were met: to have formal state representatives who people could contact about fire towers, rather than inundate the formal members of the State's Conservation Department and to set up a second meeting in the summer, where the group could meet and continue this formation, share their interests and then visit some towers. That meeting location was agreed upon by the large group of folks from New Jersey who volunteered to hold the meeting in early August in northern New Jersey. The organization, now known as the "Forest Fire Lookout Association", had begun.
Fred Knauf, First NY State Director, FFLA*

Thank you Fred for setting the stage on how our organization began and for taking on the role of Chapter Director! Fred creates a Throwback Thursday post on our Facebook page each week as his schedule allows. We appreciate the look back that this offers our social media friends and have asked Fred to be a guest columnist here every quarter. Thanks Fred!

Around the Nation and the World

Here is a wonderful piece about what it is like to spend time in a California Lookout:
<https://voicesofmontereybay.org/2020/01/02/they-look-out-for-us/>

The national news seems to like to sensationalize things a great deal, making it somewhat difficult to determine facts. When you look at the devastating fires happening in Australia it seems difficult to find simple facts. A bit of history is a great place to start. Did you know that Australia has been prone to burning for years? Did you know that there is an active fire tower spotting force in Australia? Did you know the FFLA has chapters there? This last one you most likely knew as our latest issue of the Lookout Network contained an entire article about the end of Season Get together for Observer's in Australia on page 14. That was before the latest, large and devastating fires. There have been over 20 lives lost to date and thousands of acres of wildland burned. I cannot imagine fighting the fires under the conditions they are experiencing with strong winds and severe drought. Our thoughts and prayers to all involved for safety and rain!

Our Friends at the San Diego-Riverside FFLA Chapter said it best: "As Southern Californians, the threat of wildfires are a common occurrence for us, so perhaps we can understand what people feel when fire rips through their communities in other countries. At this time I'd like to ask that we spare a moment to offer our thoughts and prayers to the people in Australia as they battle with the massive bush fires sweeping the country at this time. In Australia (like the US) a large majority of its fire fighting forces are volunteers. These men and women are away from their homes and families fighting these fires. Some of these firefighters are likely to have been involved in firefighting here in the US, answering the call to travel across the globe to help complete strangers in a foreign country.

To give you a little bit of perspective of the magnitude of what they are facing: According to CalFire, 5.27 million acres have burnt in California in the last five years. As of January 1st, 2020, 14.6 million acres have burnt in Australia's bush fires since September 2019. When it is your home or neighborhood, your family or friends threatened by fire, it matters little if it is 5 acres or 5000 acres, all that matters is that people are safe, heed the evacuation warnings, and have an evacuation plan. Property is replaceable, lives are not."

News from Around the State

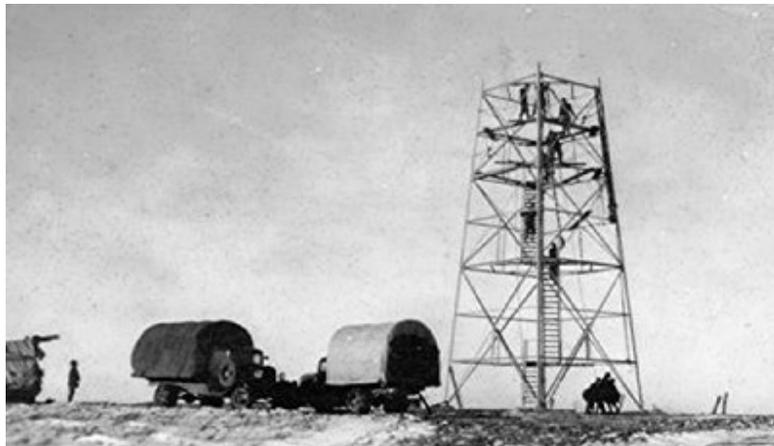
Donations: Jim S. says the Glens Falls Saratoga ADK Chapter held their annual meeting earlier this month and they voted to make some donations to fire towers.

Trivia for December: In 1941 a fire swept over what NYS tower site, destroying the Observer's cabin and burning the first three wooden landings and stairs? An FFLA centennial patch goes to the winner. I did get one right answer from Retired Forest Ranger Paul Hartman. The answer is the Chapin Hill Fire Tower!

Trivia question for January: Half of the tower at the Adirondack History Museum in Elizabethtown is made from the Hamilton Fire Tower. What other tower was used to make the complete tower you see today at the museum? Hint – some of it will celebrate a century in 2020. A Centennial Fire Tower Patch to the winner(s).

Bramley: Those of you who follow this newsletter regularly know that work has been going on for sometime behind the scenes to see the Bramley Mt. Fire Tower returned to its original location. This month, the Friends of Bramley Mt. group held their first organizational meeting. Perhaps you would like to consider getting involved? Details can be found here: <http://catskillmountainclub.org/>

Jersey Hill Fire Tower: On January 1st, Forest Ranger Justin Thaine organized and led a hike at Jersey Hill State Forest and the adjacent Karr Valley Creek State Forest in the town of Birdsall, Allegany County, as part of the First Day Hike program. The event was attended by 33 participants despite cold and windy conditions. The hike started and ended at the site of the former Jersey Hill fire tower. A short presentation was given before the walk, with Forest Ranger Thaine talking about Ranger duties, his role in state land protection, the history of the fire tower, and Civilian Conservation Corps work done at State Forests. DEC Forester Theresa Draves also answered questions about forest management on the parcels. Fire Warden/Town of Birdsall historian Howard Hann, a former observer in the fire tower, told the attendees about how the fire tower operated and how towers were used to detect wildfires. Forest Ranger Thaine then led a four-mile loop hike. I thank Ranger Thaine for doing this hike, it is greatly appreciated.



Centennial Towers in 2020: West and Red Hill fire towers will turn 100 years old in 2020. Gore was reconstructed in 1920 after blowing over in a hurricane in 1919.

Forest Ranger News: Our NYS Forest Rangers let their needs be known and most importantly it is for more of them, not more money.

<https://dailygazette.com/article/2020/01/04/forest-rangers-thanks-but-no-thanks-on-pay-raise>

Joining the FFLA: It is simple, easy, and fairly inexpensive to join the FFLA. For just \$15.00 a year you can join, receive our wonderful Lookout Network magazine, the newsletter of the FFLA. Your dues go to support the work of the organization. But you can also join us out in the field sometime. We have work projects that are simple, complex, easy to get to and remote. Each of these projects can always use someone who can help with refreshments, even with rides. So please consider joining us in more ways than one. <http://ffla.org/learn-more--join.html>

Plus Membership: Some people may not realize what a Plus Membership is. "Plus" members will also receive quarterly issues of National Woodlands magazine which includes updates on FFLA activities and news of the National Historic Lookout Register. I also subscribe free to Wednesday Woodland Word, an email newsletter that they send out that has a variety of forestry related topics. This week I found this one and one on winter tracking to be very interesting: <https://www.archdaily.com/928220/putting-wood-to-work-7-benefits-of-using-timber-in-commercial-and-industrial-design>

Please consider checking the plus membership box. It is well worth it!

Book of the month: This month we continue with part two of *Towerman*, by Chris Saunders, as our book of the month. From *Adirondack Life* May/June 1995 (Part 2)

Consider for instance the day I heard a heartfelt prayer from beneath the tower.

"Praise the Lord, we made it."

I looked down and saw a wide-eyed couple, immaculately dressed, with smiles stamped on their faces. Each carried a big, black, leather-bound Bible, and they immediately started in about their church.

"Are you a spiritual man, son?" the man asked.

"No I am a devout Episcopalian."

"That's amazing," he said. "I was an Episcopalian before I found Christ."

I'd heard the line before. My college newspaper reporting class had investigated a cult that spring, and its followers had often said similar things to get close to potential members.

"Where'd you find him?" I asked.

"In my van."

As I was about to ask him whether Christ had been a hitchhiker or a stowaway, something stopped me. Instead, I asked what church they belonged to.

"You probably never hear of it," he said. "We're a small congregation in Syracuse, used to be much bigger until students from the university investigated us and spread lies."

My heart stopped. There had been rumors of violence. What if they'd tracked me down?

"Are you a forestry major?" he asked.

"Uh, sure, I said, dropping my pencil and covering my notebook with my hat. He then rambled on about church for twenty minutes. I never said another word, just nodded my head, and when they left, I said my own prayer of thanks.

On another day I was entertaining an Austrian couple when three men appeared, covered in camouflage. Combat knives and pistols hung from their belts. I wasn't sure what to do, and neither were the Austrians.

The men climbed up the tower, the couple moved into a corner. I stood in the middle of the platform and asked the men if they had any questions. They did. One of them looked past me to the Austrians and asked where they were from. His mousy voice did little to calm me or the couple, and it took them several long seconds to answer. The man seemed pleased and asked if they were enjoying their visit. The pair nodded enthusiastically and decided they'd seen enough. They climbed back down; the survivalists stayed. I talked to them alone for twenty minutes, trying to keep my eyes off their guns and hoping they wouldn't notice that I couldn't. Then they thanked me politely and left.

Most tourists who found their way up my staircase were less frightening and just as friendly. I always found that surprising, given the fact that by the time they reached me they had completed a grueling two-mile hike with a vertical ascent equal to that of climbing the Empire State Building. All the work only to find there were no porta-potties, water fountains or, because of the frequent foul weather, not much of a view.

I often thought that food and food alone must have fueled their enthusiasm. The hikers always had plenty of candy and cookies and chips and sandwiches, and they usually offered me some, their generosity sparked to some degree by the thought of packing it back down the mountain. So, generally, I ate well, but never as well as during the Scott family reunion.

About twenty-five Scotts, representing several generations, trooped up the peak carrying wicker picnic baskets. They trickled in most of the morning, with the patriarch of the clan appearing last. Once he had arrived, (and stopped grumbling), they laid out a giant blanket and emptied their baskets. After filling up on their catered food and wine I am magnanimously offered to answer their questions.

To be continued...

Calendar

Saturday, January 25th: The First Day Hike to Mt. Arab has been rescheduled to this date. Meeting location: Mt. Arab Parking Area and Trailhead (44.213689°N, 74.596110°W Google Maps). For information and registration (required): 315-265-3090 (registration for provisions such as the hot chocolate estimation) Join DEC Forester Henry Dedrick, Aaron Graves and Friends of Mt Arab on this moderate 2-mile round trip hike. The 1-mile long trail begins on the Conifer-Emporium Conservation Easement and ascends over 700 feet to the summit of Mt. Arab.

Saturday, February 8, 2020: Try a Poke O Moonshine Back Country Ski Exploration. Meet at the Observer's trailhead at 9:30 to explore roads west of Poke-O. David will lead this trip for skiers with at least intermediate skills, to manage some steep, narrow terrain. Arduous, 3-4 hours. In cooperation with CATS: <http://champlainareatrails.com>

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New York State Chapter

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www.ffla.org



Bramley Mountain Fire Tower and Cabin, c. 1974