

HISTORIAN'S CORNER

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By: Bob Spear

"Saving the past for the future"

Kittatinney Valley State Park N.J., 1998

The 1988 Winter Conference was held at the "mansion" in the new State Park midway between Andover and Lafayette, New Jersey. For most, their vision of what they expected northern New Jersey to look like was seriously challenged. Most had the impression our meeting would be surrounded by infrastructure, buzzing highways and an array of fast food restaurants amid four lane highways. Instead we were located at an out-of-the-way new state park, surrounded by forests and large grassy meadows, live oaks, gums, poplar, and sugar maples - a "farm-like" estate atmosphere within the new 956- acre Kittatinney Valley State Park. Toward the end of "the great limestone valley" in Sussex County, the topography is underlined with an aquifer that supplies the nearby towns with some of the best drinking water in the state. Jealously guarded by the New Jersey Forest Fire Service which had plans to construct their new Division headquarters along route 206 at the park's border, the neighboring hardwood forests comprise a good deal of the northern region of the Garden State. Nearly 40% of the state was still agricultural and state-protected lands a few years ago. New Jersey maintains one of the few wholly operational wildfire fighting departments in the east, operates twenty-one active fire towers and has a force of some 218 district firewardens who are part time and about 95 full time personnel from High Point to the tip of Cape May.

The northern region or "Division A" helped to host this meeting along with the Department of Parks who allowed us the use of this beautiful old home in the park. The State Forester and State Firewarden with other staff personnel from the Trenton office attended and welcomed all to North Jersey. Not missing an opportunity to show off their fire vehicles in their care, we had five power wagons and tanker A43 at the meeting.

After arrivals and setting up of an entire room full of displays, a business meeting was held at the mansion Friday evening. There were many topics discussed at the meeting, and it was a late night of "networking"; no one wanted to leave! Finally after 1 a.m. we secured the doors and those who had nearby motels made their way there while local folks drifted back home, ready to return again in the morning.

At the Saturday main part of the conference, we welcomed Bill and Iris Beard from New Hampshire, as well as Chris Haartz and Roy Schweiker also from the Granite State. Our usual cast of traveling lookout aficionados were also in attendance, Mark Haughwout from Vermont, Steve Cummings and Chuck Helms from Pennsylvania, and Keith Argow of Virginia. Larry Paul had arrived from Long Island and did a great slide show on lookouts and firefinders. Tim Sullivan was here from Chester, New York and Forest Ranger Greg Tyrrell from the NY DEC. Keith and Shirley Goodrich

had made the trip from Sanford, Maine. There were many others from our own New Jersey group and the Forest Fire Service as well. Ray Wexler had loaned his taxidermy game heads to add to the décor of the displays.

It was a full session Saturday; the entire day at the mansion was spent talking about projects about and discussing new avenues for the FFLA to follow. Election results were announced and Keith Argow became our third National Chairman. Sunday's fire tower touring options were discussed.

Sue Merics was one of the head honchos in kitchen preparations as Bob Wolff and his Section 2 crew provided a delicious home-cooked meal where everyone pitched in to peel spuds, make salad, set the tables and lay out the fare.

A rare Sunday discussion period continued the "talk-a-thon" we all seemed to enjoy. The mansion was such a relaxed atmosphere that our New Jersey contingent put forth the idea to hold a second winter meeting here in 1999 unless another came up for debate. On Sunday, one of the locations visited was the Air Attack hanger at the airport. Aeroflex Airport Manager John Flintz gave us the show-and-tell at the hanger where Delta 5, the state's Huey helicopter is kept. Later, we had groups visit Budd Lake, Culvers, Catfish, and Bearfort fire towers, and Sterling fire tower in New York. The long-distance folks departed on Sunday and those that remained retreated to the Andover Diner for dinner, just down the road on Route 206 - a familiar local stopping-off place for firefighters.

In memoriam to our friends Robert Wolff Sr., Bill Dahlymple, Caroline Parmenter and Shirley Goodrich

The Summer Conferences would be held in the Berkshire Mountains of Massachusetts, and at Big Bear, California.

Bob Spear, Historian FFLA