

HISTORIAN'S CORNER

Autumn 2011

By: Bob Spear

"Saving the past for the future"

Reflections

Here, some four years have now passed since leaving Sterling Fire Tower as its active observer and benefactor. I have only re-visited the place but a few times in that period of years.....

I never actually thought I'd be writing such a "post description as this". Thinking I had found my "niche" at this venerable old place for so many years, it was inconceivable to me then, as it still is yet today, that events would transpire to change that peaceful existence I enjoyed on Rough Mountain - but indeed it did.

In reflection, I often think of my time spent on the mountaintop there, just as perhaps many other former occupiers of that place have since it was first erected back in 1922. My period of years, 1987 to 2007, were filled with many moments of happy times, and a few very tense moments, such as on September 11th, 2001, when the World Trade Center was attacked and destroyed in New York City, about fifty miles away. Other tense times were when I was snowed in on the mountaintop by late spring storms, and I had some truly anxious moments when thunderstorms with hail and lightning swept over that 1300-foot hilltop.

But my most reflective moments were meeting the many hundreds of visitors that each month, trekked up the two-mile long woods road from Sterling Lake or the main road. Others hiked the nearly eight miles up from the Sterling Ridge trailhead on the New Jersey end, or the over three miles "down ridge" from the Route 17A hiker lot. I have many memories of folks from actually all over the world, such as the young family from Venezuela that visited one day on their vacation.... the family group from Germany who came up trail with their grand-daughter from Sterling Pines.... the older gentleman who visited one day from New York City....

He explained he had just returned from Israel where he had been helping to build kibitzes in the settlement areas that are still so challenged today.... and was looking forward to a planned trip to climb one of the highest mountains in the Andes in South America....

In a "surprise visit" by a Korean-American hiking club from the city, some forty or so people came equipped with their cooking woks and tableware and a whole assortment of Korean-style foods which they prepared at the tables and invited me to join them. I remember my awkwardness at trying to manage "chop-sticks" and finally was rescued by a very nice lady who afforded me an

American-style knife and fork!

Others from the city visited and were "truly amazed" to find that such a place as a fire tower existed at all.... and then were educated in what it was for and how I spotted and reported fires in my area. Many were equally amazed that it was not the Fire Department that operated this place, but actually a "throw-back" to a much earlier method of forest fire protection started over a hundred years before.

I relished the opportunity to explain in brief, the history behind the state's, and indeed the nation's, heritage in places such as Sterling Fire Tower, the operation of the fire finder up in the cab, how I triangulated sightings with similar fire towers in northern New Jersey and how I relayed the information over radio to Park and State Forest Rangers, who then used my information to find and extinguish the fires.

With some 3600 visitors a year to the Sterling Fire Tower, there was seldom a dull moment, but those times when I was completely alone up there with only the wildlife of the surrounding forest were, I guess, some of my most cherished memories. Anyone who has operated a remote outpost such as this is aware of what I mean. I had chipmunks that would hop up on my knee to grab a peanut from my fingers, and one little gray squirrel in particular, among the twenty or so regulars that showed absolutely no fear at all of approaching to within inches to carefully take a peanut, and then sit nearly on my shoe to munch on it! Flocks of wild turkeys would make their rounds each morning, a family group of coyotes would prowl the perimeter of "my yard", and a pair of ravens, the most intelligent birds of all, would croak a raucous "Kerrrakk!" from up high as they circled above the sixty-foot top of the tower.

Up in the 7-foot by 7-foot cab, I was in the realm of the red-tailed hawks, sharp shinned, and harriers that kept a vigil on Rough Mountain. There were very rare sightings of an eagle as it swooped across Sterling Lake far below. One late fall day, I witnessed a most amazing sight while sitting reflectively on the upper platform steps. I spotted a fluttering Monarch butterfly - then another and another - soon within minutes, hundreds, perhaps even thousands, of these gaily-winged little beauties came fluttering through the tree tops, swept passed the tower's cab and continued south through the forest, their goal, a dense shelter of trees in Mexico. On another occasion, a swarm of perhaps twenty thousand honey bees came through, a great swarming mass of wing beats, and within minutes had disappeared as quickly as they had come.

(to be continued in next issue)

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The fire tower road c.2010 during an early spring hike to re-visit



On Station



The writer in the cab at Sterling Fire Tower, New York in a photo dated about 2003; the "plane table" (map board) is actually one being tried out on loan from Chief Ranger Sullivan of Bear Mountain; it had once been in the Jackie Jones fire tower. The binoculars in the left, vintage from U.S.Navy exchange store in Portsmouth, Virginia many years before, were his old stand-by's.

The wall map shows the "azimuth circles" for Jackie Jones, Sterling, and Ramapo fire towers in this unique bi-state area of the Highlands. Sterling fire tower was the "second" lookout visited in 1990 by the newly formed Forest Fire Lookout Association.