

# HISTORIAN'S CORNER

Spring 2012  
By: Bob Spear

*"Saving the past for the future"*

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Reflections (Part 3, continued from last issue)

One day, my visiting friend was rummaging about the rocky cliff below the cabin's summit. I had cautioned Bill to watch out for rattlers and "don't go sticking your hands in between the rocks without a careful look-see first!" The enjoying of my coffee, while in my customary chair on the cabin porch, was suddenly interrupted by his yelling. At once, I thought the worst and could picture myself transporting Bill's lifeless body down the mountain with a rattlesnake bite inflicted.... but no, it seems in his exploring, he had found an old gallon paint can stuffed way back under a rock overhang. Protected from the elements for some sixty-five years, it contained a sheaf of old faded letters from a former fire tower observer from 1937! Talk about a time capsule! I won't divulge the name of the gentleman in question out of respect for any family that may yet remain, but leave it to say, he was quite a "ladies man", it seems, on his lonely mountaintop here! The letters were to several of his lady-friends and one in particular; who it seems had the misfortune to also be married to another. Her initials are found yet in the concrete footing of the fire tower next to his. He also stated that he had secured a job with the State Conservation Department to operate this fire tower at the pay of \$80.00 a month, which I guess wasn't too bad in 1937.

The wildlife that abounds in Sterling Forest was always its most unique feature. This heavily forested area had always been protected because of its previous private ownership before the State succeeding in purchasing it. There are "critters" found here that are extremely rare, and some that are to this day "unexplained". One in particular was "the howler" as I called it. Coyotes are known to run here in family groups that can be heard yipping and yapping, chasing prey along the ridge tops, but these guys would suddenly be called up short when a single mournful moan from a solitary animal stopped them in their tracks. It would often be heard south of the fire tower along the Sterling Ridge Trail's near vertical descent into a dark hollow. The low, pitiful, "whoooooooo" would be answered by the coyotes farther away, as they could be heard giving it a wide berth. The distinct canine tracks of a large animal were often found in the mud in the deepest recesses of the forest on my weekly patrol hikes. One particular late winter walk down the mountain, a cold drizzle and a gray late afternoon light brought an uncomfortable chill to the hair on the back of my neck as it was beginning to stand out. I could feel the penetrating eyes of something that was watching me as I stopped several times to vainly determine what it was. I can honestly say I was very happy to reach the paved road at the lake on that occasion.

Bobcats were a rare sight; the tracks of one particular large fellow were often seen in the deep snow along the lower road as he loped through the woods in pursuit of a

terrified rabbit. In all my years there, I never actually caught sight of one. Others did, but not I, but their telltale tracks were frequent. Pileated woodpeckers were a fairly regular sight; these largest members of that family would attack a dead tree like a construction worker with a "jack-hammer", chips of wood flying in all directions. Some truly rare and amazing instances, and ones even to this day I find difficult to convince people of, come to mind. Now, common ordinary black snakes are not supposed to get any bigger than perhaps three feet in length, but some, perhaps nearly five, are found. But on one occasion while weed whacking high grass along the tower road, I happened upon what I perceived to be a large stick that must have fallen across the road. Approaching closer, I could see that the "stick" was moving! Now, the road at that point is at least nine feet wide, on the ground was the largest black snake I'd ever seen in my life ... its head, which was a brownish color that could only be perceived as its ancient age, was in the laurel on one side of the road and its tail end was over the road's edge at the other. It was in no great hurry to move; perhaps really it couldn't very fast. I watched, mesmerized by this "discovery", as he very slowly crawled away through the underbrush. Later I asked a friend, "How big do black snakes really get?" His answer, perhaps made the most sense, "Well, if nothing kills 'em, they just keep getting bigger and bigger." This fellow apparently had been very successful at evading enemies, for he truly was one of Sterling Forest's unexplained "finds".

(to be continued in next issue)

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**Sterling aerial**

*One of the few aerial photos of Sterling Fire Tower, this was taken by a Coast Guard reservist on a helicopter training flight one day after he had hiked to the fire tower on the trail. Set amidst the thick woods of Sterling Forest State Park, the fire tower, erected in 1922 was still standing as of this year eighty-nine years later.*



### **New Year's Day 2006**

*I had spent New Year's eve at the cabin, a most peaceful night I recall, as a winter storm began to build high above Rough Mountain. In the morning, New Year's Day, I awoke to an overcast gray snowy world and about 9 a.m. I snapped this photo as I made plans to escape this wintry landscape and head for home thirty-seven miles away in New Jersey. It would be two months before the woods road was clear again from winter snow drifts to return to the fire tower summit.*



*A warm summer day circa 2006*

