

# HISTORIAN'S CORNER

Winter 2011  
By: Bob Spear

*"Saving the past for the future"*

## **Reflections**

(Part 2, continued from last issue)

Each spring from the cabin porch, I would hear the high-up rhythmic sounds of Canada Geese in V-formation headed north to their Arctic "summering" grounds, cruising high above the cabin roof, I'd wave to them in their passing and call up, "see ya in the fall guys, on your way back!!"

An occasional visitor would be my four hundred pound black brute of a bear, who would be seen ripping apart an old fallen log looking for grubs, and his slightly smaller two hundred fifty pound sow, who if I wasn't alert, would tear down my white pine bird feeder and steal the seed from it, occasionally even grabbing a low hanging hummingbird feeder I mistakenly suspended in a not-too-strategic location. But some of my most harrowing, if not dangerous, critters would be the many good-sized Timber Rattlers that inhabited Rough Mountain. Sometimes, taking me utterly by surprise, a good size fellow would, without warning, suddenly become very apparent by buzzing his tail at me and saying, "stay back!"

My "tomato cold frame" I had made along the side of the cabin's outer platform provided me with many of these delicious "cabin-grown" veggies I used for salads and sandwiches, and fried green tomatoes for breakfast meals with my bacon and eggs or mountaintop flapjacks. My "culinary" woods cooking was tuned to a fine art, as impromptu guest hikers would at times arrive just at breakfast time, and would settle in for a very unexpected treat on Rough Mountain. In the colder months of the years, a venison stew with all the trimmings, cast its "savory smells" across the hilltop as it simmered on the potbelly stove. Yes, above all else perhaps, I treasure memories the most of breakfast and dinner times at Sterling Fire Tower!

Fire danger.... always a preeminent threat here in this area of the Northeast, can build slowly at times, but with increased lowering humidity and lack of rainfall, at times would grow to acute propositions. This was after all, the primary reason for places like Sterling Fire Tower. This situation could happen at any time of the year, but the early spring would be what would "kick-off" the season. Once, after being snowed in by a freakish twenty-inch snowfall in late April, I had awakened to find the mountaintop covered in a giant white marshmallow of new snow. The road blocked by drifts, my planned "two-day off" time when I would head for home, some thirty-five miles away in New Jersey, was delayed. No matter; I was perfectly happy to spend the extra time right here and by week's end, the snow had mostly gone and the first fast running field fire of the season was spotted some twelve miles away at the "Elk

Pen" in Harriman State Park.

In other years, a boiling mass of smoke could be seen far to the north near Ellenville, New York, some forty miles away toward the Catskill Mountains. The thick woods along Cherrytown Road yet today continues to be most flammable at times. But perhaps the most breath-taking views would be the many large wildfires that occurred regularly in Harriman State Park's sixty thousand plus acres. With only the Perkins Memorial stone tower on Bear Mountains' summit and the last remaining steel fire tower in the Park's eastern area, Jackie Jones Fire Tower, and Sterling, to survey this entire area, I also relied on the New Jersey fire towers to help locate exact coordinates on smokes.

The "sounds" of things that "go bump in the night" at times remained unexplained. Visitors would ask me, "Aren't you afraid to be up here in the woods all by yourself?" I would answer, "not at all, there's nothing in these woods to be fearful of unless you let your own imagination get the best of you", and to be sure of that, I would point to my fully functional antique 1873 Winchester 44-40 on its pegs above the table. Truthfully though, the thick foreboding woods of Sterling Forest is not the place one wanders around in after nightfall. It is an almost primitive place, where a full moon's eerie glow casts mysterious shadows like long menacing fingers among the rocky crags and deep hollows. I seldom ventured from the relative security of the cabin's ridge top "yard" after dark, and even to go refill the generator fuel tank, "Oliver", as I called the '73 Winchester, always accompanied me. (to be continued in next issue)

### **Bob Spear, Historian FFLA**

#### **Winter woods**

Cold weather would sometimes come swift and hard on Rough Mountain. Early winter snow or late spring storms could dump much more snow on this higher elevation than surrounding areas. When it got down to zero, no amount of heat from the wood stove could keep the cabin's interior comfortable. It was time then to get off the mountain!



### **Class 5 day at Sterling Fire Tower**

Occasionally, extreme fire weather would affect the Highlands. A heightened sense of awareness and increased vigilance became the important duties. On those days, as many as eighteen fire towers could be heard on the radios. A large fire could “explode” literally at any moment in the dry woods of the region. Providing warnings of distant thunderstorms bringing heavy lightning to the beach areas in Harriman State Park was also a task performed. On September 11th 2001, an entirely new meaning to daily life was inflicted by the attacks on the World Trade Center that I witnessed firsthand from the fire tower’s observation cab, the Pentagon, and Flight 93 in a Pennsylvania field.

