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AdirondackPEEKS

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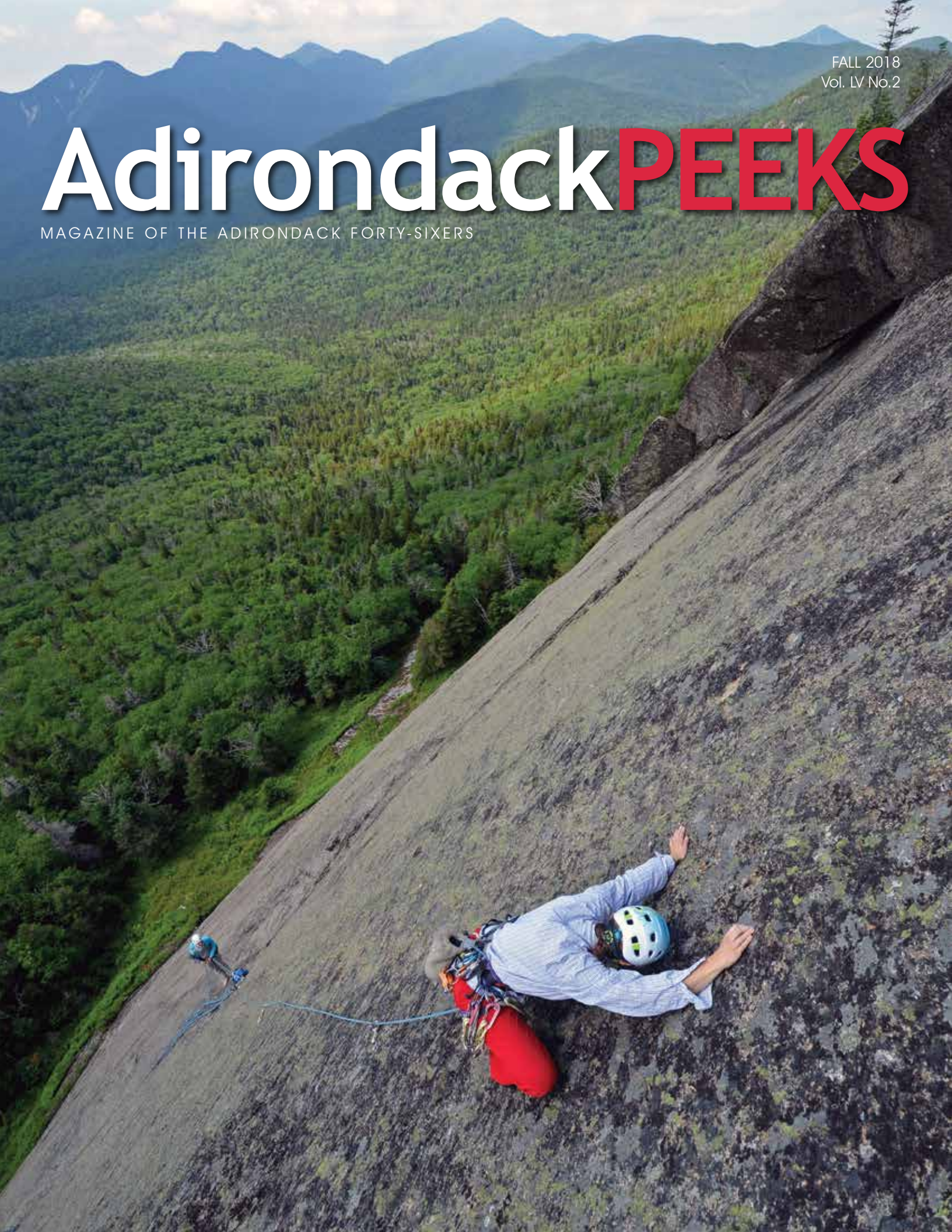


Contents

Front Cover: Laura Duncan leads *Freudian Slip* (5.9 Yosemite Decimal System) on the monster slide of Big Slide Mountain. Brent Elliott on belay. Photo credit: Kevin MacKenzie #5430W

Inside Cover: Wright Peak from Marcy Dam. Photo credit: Justine Mosher #7207W

Musings on a Disappearing Adirondack Artifact

By Chuck Schwerin #942

Goodnow Mountain fire tower in Newcomb silhouetted against the Milky Way. Photo credit: Tim Behuniak #8072 © www.timothybehuniak.com

Once upon a time there were 69 fire observation posts dotting the Adirondack and Catskill mountains. Now there are 30, of which 25 are in the more northern of the two wilderness areas. The history of these iconic structures is concisely told in the second edition of *Views From On High: Fire Tower Trails in the Adirondacks and Catskills* (Freeman & Schneider, 2017), an Adirondack Mountain Club "trail guide" which offers much more than simply describing routes.

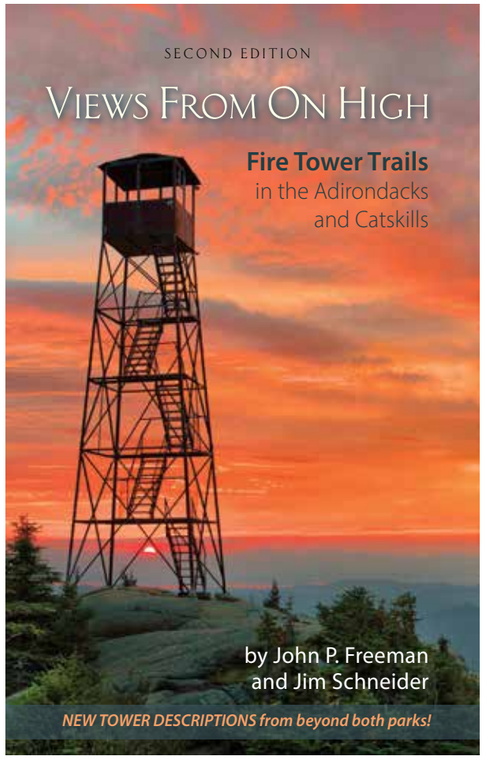
At its core it provides hikers eager to avoid the increasing crush of fellow travellers in the High Peaks comprehensive information about each of the remaining fire tower mountains. Each section includes interesting historical tidbits, guidance on winter travel, where to locate the trailhead, and parking information. Every entry includes round trip distance, elevation gain, summit elevation, hiking difficulty rank (1-to-4), tower height, GPS coordinates, which USGS maps cover the peak, plus a hand-drawn map of the area.

This edition looks beyond the Blue Line to cover all of the mountains in Upstate New York whose summits still boast fire observation structures. Fire tower mountains offer a wide variety of challenges to the day hiker. Some are short jaunts while others rival the High Peaks in terms of effort. Snowy, at 3,899 feet, is the highest; ascending its trail requires a 2,106 foot elevation gain (Cascade's trail rises a mere 1,940 feet); the most elevation gain (2,560 feet) is on Gore in the Catskills.

The section on the history of the towers by Wesley H. Haynes, also updated from the first edition, provides a fascinating discourse on how these towers came to be. Thanks to unregulated clear-cutting, which left highly flammable slash in the woods, and the ever-present risk of sparks from passing locomotives that used to troll the wilderness lowlands, forest fires posed serious challenges to upstate communities.

For 38 years, until 1908, rudimentary wooden platforms atop rough-hewn poles were the extent to which the Forest Commission established a network of observation stations. Prior to that, the only summit towers were to support the early efforts of Verplanck Colvin to survey the wilderness.

According to the Smithsonian Museum of American History, a 1865 United States Coast Survey stated that the plane table with telescopic alidade was the "principal instrument for mapping the topographical features of the country." The alidade enabled observers to precisely identify the location of a burgeoning fire from their observation posts and to report the coordinates to fire fighters in the area via telephone and, subsequently, radio.



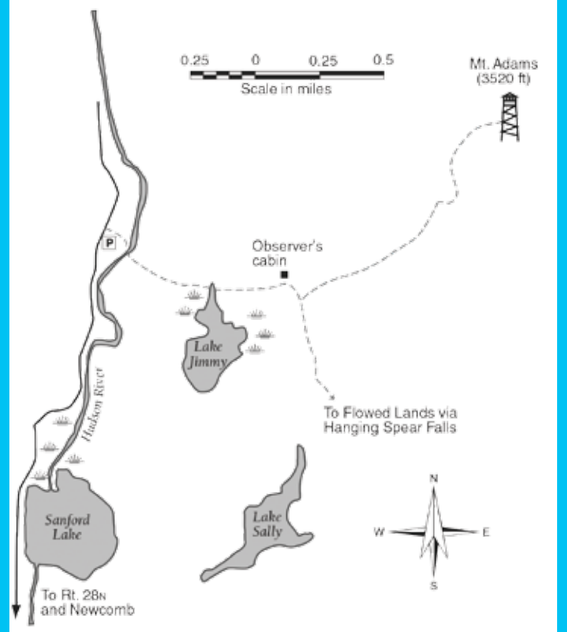
At the turn of the nineteenth century, about one-third of the Adirondacks were privately held and those landowners kept vigilant watch for fires on their land. In the unusually dry summer of 1899, 322 fires were fought across New York State, but not one occurred on those private holdings. The State had yet to assume control over fire detection and extinction; it was up to each local community to deal with the problem.

In the early 1900s even the private lands suffered substantial losses to fire, including the Henry van Hoevenberg domicile on the site of what is now the Adirondak Loj.

The problem came to a head in 1908 when fire and smoke blanketed the North Country for weeks, subsiding only when heavy rains descended in late September. That prompted the State to finally act, shifting responsibility for fire detection and prevention away from locals and placing it under the jurisdiction of the Forest, Fish and Game Commission, the earliest incarnation of what is today the Department of Environmental Conservation.

Wooden platforms gave way to metal towers when the Aerometer Company was tapped to supply the more permanent (and taller) posts commonly seen today. The last observer left New York State fire towers in 1990, to be replaced by fly-overs that were deemed more cost-effective.

With the promulgation of a Unit Management Plan, the DEC scrutinized fire towers on private land and determined that five were deemed to be non-conforming to the Plan and designated them for removal. These included the popular destinations of Mt. Adams and Hurricane. The accompanying essay in this issue (originally published in the *Tupper Lake Free Press* in 2003) by Bill Frenette #216, long-time Tupper Lake resident and former President of the 46ers, describes the state of affairs for fire towers in more recent times. Frenette, resigned to the fact that Mt. Adams, for one, was about to lose its tower and sink back into the sea of viewless anonymity, resolves to visit its unique position in the heart of the High Peaks one time before the deed is done. As it later turned out, local community action galvanized efforts to persuade the DEC to reconsider its decision, resulting in renovation, rather than removal, of the towers on those peaks. ■



Views From On High: Fire Tower Trails in the Adirondacks and Catskills, (c) 2017 by Adirondack Mountain Club, Inc. Reprinted with permission.

WHAT IS AN ALIDADE?

The Oxford dictionary defines it as "a sighting device or pointer for determining directions or measuring angles, used in surveying and (formerly) astronomy." In 1865 the United States Coast Survey stated that the plane table with telescopic alidade was the "principal instrument for mapping the topographical features of the country."
– Smithsonian Museum of American History

Alidade in use on Balsam Lake Mountain Fire Tower.
Photo credit: Laurie Rankin #5525W

WIND, WATER, and FIRE

Prefabricated steel towers were introduced on a large scale to the American public in the 1890s at expositions and state fairs. Their original purpose was to carry windmills used to pump water from wells, and they became common features in the parched West on farmsteads and at railroad fueling stations. The windmill towers of the Aeromotor Company adapted easily to use as fire observation posts in the large forest of the northeast United States. The upper tapered stages that supported the windmill were replaced by an enclosed steel cab approximately 7 feet square. Heights were adjusted by adding increasingly larger standard truss sections to the bottom. In a three-stage tower, the most common type used in New York State, the floor of the cab was 33 feet above the ground. Fourth, fifth, and sixth stages extended cab height to 45 feet 9 inches, 59 feet 3 inches, and 79 feet 6 inches, respectively.

Models with varying gauges of steel and special connections were tailored to different wind and ground conditions. At the base, angle-iron legs were held by patented foot clamps. These were anchored directly to the exposed ledge by countersunk rods, where possible, and most often leveled by raised concrete piers. Many towers were further anchored with guys. The structures ordered in 1916 were designed for use without stairs; later towers incorporated heavier members to accommodate the added weight of steel staircases with wood treads.

Hefting several tons of steel components to the summits was difficult. In most cases it could not be accomplished by motorized vehicles alone. At Mount Adams in Essex County, for example, the components were brought partway from the base of the mountain over a corduroy road. At road's end they were off-loaded and skidded some distance by a team of horses, then carried by hand up the final pitch by rangers, foresters, and observers.

Although the towers were designed either to be assembled on the ground and then raised, or constructed in place piece by piece, the ledge and rugged terrain at the summits precluded the former method. Typically, the foot clamps were set in anchor holes drilled into the granite or into poured-in-place concrete pads. The leg, stair, and strut sections were then lifted and bolted in place, and the observation cab assembled on top. ■

Origin of the Fire Towers As We Know Them Today

An excerpt from *Views From On High: Fire Tower Trails in the Adirondacks and Catskills*

Fire Towers – A Symbol Of The Adirondacks

By Bill Frenette #216

Editor's Note: This essay originally appeared in the Tupper Lake Free Press *(August 27, 2003), reprinted with permission. It is also contained in* Transitions, *a collection of works by Bill Frenette, a past president of the Adirondack 46ers.*

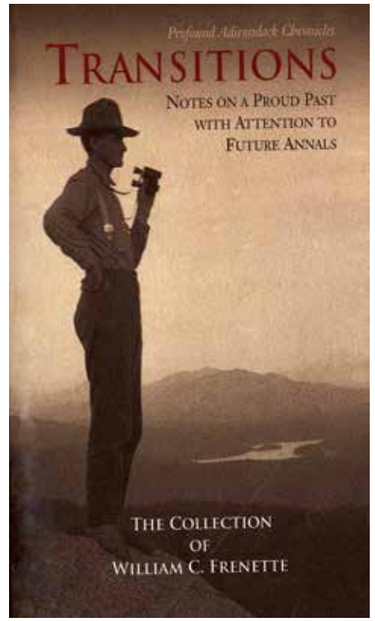
"CLIMB THE MOUNTAINS and get their good tidings." – John Muir

According to all reports, lots of people, visitor and resident alike, did just that this summer. Climbing mountains with fire towers remaining on their summits was especially popular as an outdoor activity. Perhaps the following brief fire tower historical overview will be of interest to readers.

Let's begin with the late 1960s when a decision was made in Albany that fire towers were obsolete, and starting in early 1970 the state began to close them. On the surface, it was a valid decision. Experiments with air surveillance, for example, had proven not only effective but also less costly. It was quickly determined that one flight pattern could cover an area that formerly required four or five towers to view the same area. In addition, the plane would need to be hired only on extreme hazard days, further reducing the cost of fire detection, a savings that was estimated by DEC officials to approach $250,000.

Thus in 1971, the DEC made out contracts for 22 flights that would cover the Adirondack region. Pilots like Herb Helms of Long Lake, Tom Duflo of New Bremen, Bud Bird of Sixth Lake, and Jim Payne of Seventh Lake were hired to fly some of the routes using mostly Cessna seaplanes like the 206, 185, and 172 models. The same year that the air contracts were let, 61 fire towers were closed. Some of the towers of local interest and the year they were closed follow: Ampersand in 1970, Adams (Tahawus), Kempshall (Long Lake), Tooley Pond (Cranberry Lake), and Mount Morris in 1971; Azure (Santa Clara), Whiteface, Goodnow (Newcomb) in 1979; Arab Mountain in 1988. Two of the last to be closed were Blue Mountain and St. Regis in 1990. (List compiled by Marty Podskach, *Adirondack Fire Towers*, 2003.)

Other towers that were not abandoned were removed. Some were reassembled and relocated on museum sites and DEC demonstration areas. Others cited for removal were simply dynamited or cut down with chainsaws equipped with carbide blades. Some of the latter, such as Catamount, Moosehead, and Electra, were left practically where they were dropped. Today, years later, they are only slowly being obscured—their steel components surrendering to the succession of forest cover. Or, as in the case of the Ampersand tower, the remains are lying among the rocks of that mountain's north side. The helicopter assigned to remove it lost its sling load. I would hasten to point out that other towers, particularly those that were relocated, were treated more kindly (and legally). Various DEC personnel spent long, hard, and dangerous hours in taking down the towers, some 76 feet high, bolt by bolt.



Looking back at the history of the fire towers, it is clear that the early DEC position was to close the fire towers, and in terms of cost effectiveness at least, it could be considered a prudent decision. In a 1989 study, only 4 percent, or 99, of the 2,383 fires statewide were reported by fire tower observers. That program cost $225,000 a year. Closing the towers became an easy determination—a slam-dunk, as today's youth would describe it. Except—hold on—what part of the equation was overlooked? Yep, you guessed it. Public indignation!

Few at the state level recognized that people had such a strong feeling for "their" fire tower. Here were childhood memories—a legacy of a romantic part of our history when the observer in his puttee-clad leggings and forest-green uniform would give you a card certifying "you have climbed xyz mountain." And the memory of peanut butter and jam sandwiches, comradeship, mountain spring water, stellar views, carefree youth and uncles, aunts, cousins, and parents, now gone but not forgotten, who helped you climb that first mountain.

The plea to save some of the fire towers and not let them be lost as an important legacy of our past was loud and clear: STOP! That was the message and the DEC, sensitive to such concentrated and local objections, responded. They have been a valuable partner in the restoration efforts carried on by groups such as the Friends of Mt. Arab, the Azure Mountain Friends, and current effort of people like these who want to save Owl's Head tower in Long Lake, etc.

Still remaining for inclusion in the history books is the chapter on which fire towers will remain. The access to Loon Lake's mountain near Onchiota is across private lands. Lyon Mountain is also private with little support to save the tower.

The fate of these towers is questionable. Hurricane, near Keene Valley, already has its lower stairs removed—it will most likely be taken down. St. Regis is on the list, but its removal is controversial

as many people want it saved. The tower on Mt. Adams seems almost certain to be removed. *[Editor's note: these were the expectations at the time.]* It is located on lands formerly owned by the National Lead Company. Purchased recently by the Open Space Institute with a potential transfer to ownership by New York State, it will become nonconforming under wilderness classification guidelines. I've looked at that mountain's severely steep profile many times over the years while driving along the old Tahawus Club road on the way to the various trailheads at the Upper Works. Yet, I had never climbed to its summit at near 4,000 feet elevation. With the tower's remain a certainty, I decided I'd better hit the trail.

As mentioned, the tower and the trail leading to it had been abandoned in 1971. Thirty-two years of neglect and

View from Mt. Adams as morning glow emerges behind Mt. Marcy during a winter sunrise. Photo credit: Tim Behuniak #8072 © www.timothybehuniak.com

poundings from windstorms had made this a trailless peak in the best definition of that term. It starts out easy on the trail to Hanging Spears Falls. It soon crosses the fast-flowing Opalescent River on a cabled suspension bridge and then quickly shifts to the swampy outlet of Lake Jimmy on a floating bridge of corduroy logs. What a challenge it must have been to log this place.

The point where my map showed the old Adams trail bearing off to the NE was only a bulldozed log landing, the trail completely lost in an overgrowth of second-growth and berry bushes laden with ripe fruit.

Taking a bearing from the map, I plunged through the heavy cover, every so often discovering the imprints of an old skid road heading in the right direction until it turned on an old haul road that ran along a contour at right angles to my bearing. The route now went straight up, 1,800 vertical feet in less than two miles' distance. Jumbled masses of fallen logs forced me onto the ledge drop-off of a steep mountain stream. Gone were the several ladders described in an early guidebook. The ascent became an unrelenting struggle that only ended when I came out on the narrow flat of dwarfed balsam that was steadily closing in on the summit, soon to engulf it completely.

There is no view from Adams unless you climb the tower. Therefore, I carefully ascended the stairs until finally, just before the trap door leading to the ruined tower cap, I discovered that the entire stair landing was missing, which halted my progress. The protective grids of wire along the stairs were also gone, which only added to my feeling of insecurity as the tower swayed in the wind. Holding tight to a steep support, I looked out at the view. It was pure magic—a wild, almost savage, scene of surrounding peaks rising straight to the sky like inverted ice cream cones.

Vaporous mist, not unlike the steam from a sugarhouse evaporator, rose from the forest basin below and was wisped away by the strong wind currents. It was as wild and memorable a scene as could be imagined.

The tower on Adams has stood strong and noble since 1918. For almost 100 years, it has resisted gale-force winds, snow and ice, its structural integrity a tribute to its builder, the Aeromotor Windmill Company. However, it will soon disappear, the victim of both neglect and changing times. The mountain will continue to be seldom visited and will represent a true symbol, a sentinel of all that is really wild in the Adirondacks. A lonely place that will become once again a place "when silence was and not a word." ■

Five Fire Tower Peaks in a Day

By Jim Pugh #320

In 1971 the so-called "Camp Treetops Idiot Trip", an annual end-of-summer reward for the most avid hikers, offered an unusual route. I hit upon the idea of doing five fire tower mountains in a day: Hurricane, Makomis, Boreas, Adams, and Ampersand. The eight 12- and 13-year-old campers on the trip received one of the best geography lessons imaginable about the High Peaks.

We left camp at 6:00 a.m. and tackled Hurricane via the short and steep ranger trail. Next, we drove to Hudson for the easy one-mile trail up Makomis, which had a public trail at the time and whose summit had a magnificent view of the Dix Range. Then, on to Boreas, which had a fire tower and public trail off Elk Lake Road in 1971. After climbing the three and one-half mile trail we were offered unique views of the Boreas Ponds and the Upper Great Range.

As part of the "idiocy" of the trip we never stopped to eat while climbing; we snacked in the van during the drive to the next mountain. The next leg was to Tahawus for the steep climb up Adams, boasting, in my opinion, the best view in the Adirondacks. By now, the kids were a bit jaded by one beautiful view after another. Then we drove the longest leg of our 200-mile loop, through Long Lake and Tupper Lake to the Ampersand trailhead off Route 3. Nearing the end of daylight but well-rested, we started up the trail. I had promised the camp director we would complete the Fire Tower Five in daylight. I reminded the campers of this as a prod to hike at a healthy pace. As darkness set in, we began to stumble over rocks and roots. Dramatically, we reached the bare rock summit zone under a full moon, lights from motor boats clearly visible on Middle Saranac Lake. The distant High Peaks were easy to identify in the moonlight; the 360° view unforgettable.

We turned on flashlights for the descent (I had promised not to climb with them). Back in the van, one wiseguy camper suggested we should drive to Whiteface and make it six fire towers in one day. The rest of the group, including me, cordially declined. By 9:30 p.m. we were back at camp, ready for the memories of a beautiful day to dance in our dreams.

Author's note: I first met Bill Frenette #216 (see companion article) in 1975 on the rugged trail of the Canadian Ski Marathon (CSM). We chatted about skiing and hiking for a half hour as we skied into the next check point. A year later, Bill became the first American to achieve the Gold Coureur de Bois award in the CSM. This is earned by skiing 100 miles over two days, carrying a full overnight pack, and camping out in the snow during the night. ■

Former fire tower on Poke-O-Moonshine Mountain.
Photo credit: By Rosie De Lise from Eugene, OR, USA. Cropped and color-corrected by Daniel Case prior to upload - Tower on Poke-O-Moonshine, CC BY 2.0, https://commons.wikimedia.org/w/index.php?curid=24536435.