

St. Regis tower gets 100th birthday party

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From left, Friends of St. Regis Mountain Fire Tower co-Chairs Doug Fitzgerald and David Petrelli accept a commemoration for their efforts from Tom Martin, natural resources supervisor for the state Department of Environmental Conservation's Region 5, at a fire tower centennial celebration Sunday, Aug. 5 at the Lake Clear Lodge and Retreat. (Enterprise photo — Peter Crowley)

LAKE CLEAR — The fire tower atop St. Regis Mountain is 100 years old, and several dozen people gathered Sunday at the Lake Clear Lodge and Retreat to celebrate and reminisce.

The original tower, built in 1918, has been largely rebuilt over the last three years by the Friends of St. Regis Mountain Fire Tower, which put on Sunday's event. The group reopened the tower in 2016 but is still working on it. Cross braces, essential to its stability, are supposed to be replaced before this winter, interpretive panels will be installed soon, and the structure also needs painting, according to group co-Chairman Doug Fitzgerald.

"There's still a lot of work to do, still a lot of projects, but we're feeling pretty good about it," he said in a speech Sunday that covered the tower's history, early and recent.

Other speakers included Ernest Hohmeyer, owner of the Lake Clear Lodge; state Assemblyman Billy Jones, D-Chateaugay; Tom Martin, natural resources supervisor for the state Department of Environmental Conservation's Region 5; DEC forest ranger Lt. Julie Harjung; retired forest ranger Joe Rupp, whose beat included St. Regis Mountain; and Laurie Rankin, who grew up on a mountain as daughter of a fire observer and now heads the Forest Fire Lookout Association for New York.

Massive forest fires in the Adirondacks in the early 20th century prompted the state to post observers on mountaintops. Flames ravaged more than 460,000 acres in the Adirondacks in 1903, and another 360,000 acres in 1908 — rare devastation for the eastern U.S. By comparison, this year in northern California the Mendocino Complex Fire had burned nearly 300,000 acres as of Wednesday.



Laurie Rankin, who heads the Forest Fire Lookout Association for New York, speaks at a centennial celebration for the St. Regis Mountain fire tower Sunday at the Lake Clear Lodge and Retreat. Rankin grew up on a mountain as daughter of a fire tower observer. (Enterprise photo — Peter Crowley)

The 1908 fires included the summit of St. Regis, so with the trees burned off and the erosion that followed, no tower was deemed necessary when the first observer was posted there in 1910. The mountain would have a fire watcher for the next 80 years, making it the longest continuously staffed fire observation post in state history.

In 1971, Martin said, the state had 102 active fire towers, but by that time it had started using aerial surveillance to spot fires and started closing mountaintop towers shortly afterward. The DEC closed its last five active towers, including St. Regis, in 1990.

The next 20 years were a time of indecision about what to do with the towers. Those that hadn't been torn down deteriorated, sometimes to the point of being unsafe to climb. In some cases, including St. Regis, the state took out stairs so hikers couldn't climb them.

Meanwhile, the St. Regis and Hurricane Mountain towers stood in danger of being removed since the Adirondack Park State Land Master Plan said they did not conform with the classification of the surrounding state land. The issue came to a head in 2010, when the DEC recommended to the state Adirondack Park Agency that the two structures be removed.

“It looked like the fire towers on St. Regis and Hurricane would go away,” Fitzgerald said.



Retired forest ranger Joe Rupp speaks at a centennial celebration for the St. Regis Mountain fire tower Sunday at the Lake Clear Lodge and Retreat. Rupp’s beat included St. Regis when the tower was still actively staffed with a fire observer. (Enterprise photo — Peter Crowley)

But instead, the APA heeded the outcry of fire tower supporters at public hearings and reclassified the patches of land under the towers as historic. That set the stage for volunteers to restore the structures.

The Friends of St. Regis Mountain Fire Tower formed in 2013 and, once the DEC approved the restoration plan, began work in 2015. Fitzgerald said the big day came on Sept. 1, 2016, when *“we took the closed sign down and put the ‘Maximum of six occupancy’ sign up.”*

It’s been a summer of celebrations for Adirondack fire towers. One centennial event took place on July 29 for the tower atop Azure Mountain, northwest of St. Regis, and another 100th birthday party will be held Saturday for the tower on Mount Arab, near Piercefield. That one takes place from 9 a.m. to 2 p.m. at the mountain. Members of the Friends of Mount Arab will be stationed at both the trailhead and the summit.

Also, the tallest fire tower in the Adirondacks, a 70-footer atop Wakely Mountain in Indian Lake, was repaired and reopened this summer after being closed for nearly two years due to wind damage.

The Friends of St. Regis Mountain Fire Tower are now looking forward to Sept. 1, the Saturday of Labor Day weekend, when their tower — and perhaps others as well — will be lit up like a beacon at 9 p.m. Whereas observers once used the tower to scan for lights on the landscape, now light from the tower itself will be visible for miles around.