

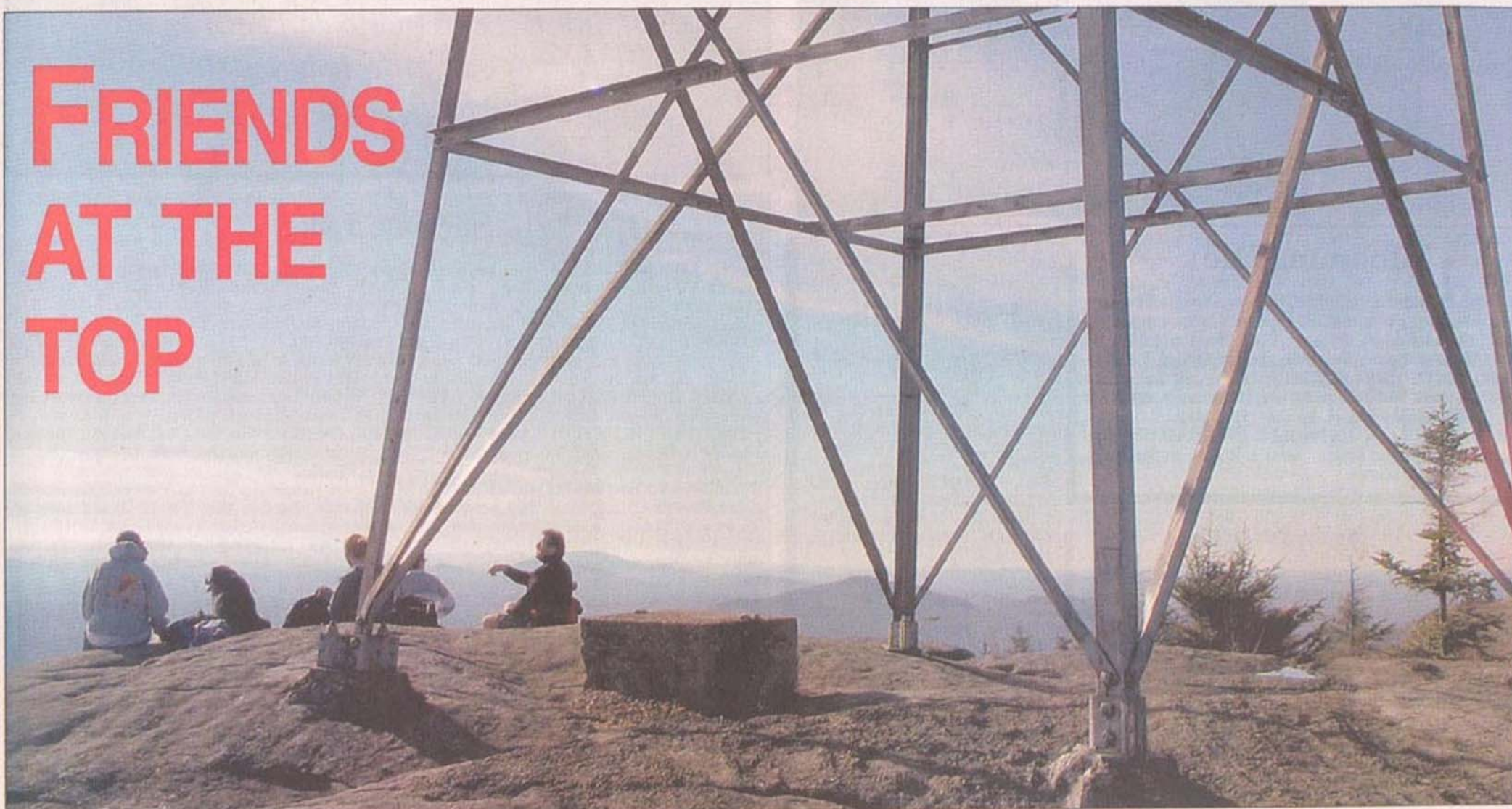
Adirondack Daily Enterprise

North Country Living

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December 6, 2003

ST. REGIS CANOE AREA
TRAIL TO
ST. REGIS MT. 3.3 MI.
(ascent 1260')

FRIENDS AT THE TOP



POPULAR SPOT — The base of the St. Regis Mountain fire tower provides a place to rest, eat lunch and enjoy the view.

(Enterprise photos — Laurie Besanc

Supporters rally to save St. Regis Mt. fire tower

By LAURIE BESANCEY
Enterprise Staff Writer

SANTA CLARA — The 35-foot fire observation tower on St. Regis Mountain, which was erected by the state in 1910 as a wooden structure and then replaced in 1918 with steel, is facing an uncertain future.

The Adirondack Park Agency has slated this tower for removal because it lies in a tract classified as a canoe area, according to Department of Environmental Conservation spokesman David Winchell. Through the APA's Adirondack Park State Land Master Plan, approved in November 1987 and updated in 2001, fire towers in wilderness, primitive and canoe areas are deemed nonconforming and must be removed.

The plan states that the St. Regis Mountain fire tower "be retained as long as retention is considered essential by the DEC pending ultimate removal upon final implementation of the aerial surveillance program and modernization of the Department of Environmental Conservation's communication system."

Winchell said a unit management plan that is being developed for the St. Regis Canoe Area (including St. Regis Mountain in the north) must be in compliance with the state land master plan. The St. Regis Canoe Area UMP will ultimately decide the fate of the tower.

Winchell added that after the UMP review — which includes public comment — is complete, the tower will not be destroyed even if it must be removed from the mountain. The tower, he said, would be re-assembled at a location accessible to the public such as the Visitor Interpretive Center in Paul Smiths.

Seemingly, the fire tower's time could be limited.

But David Petrelli of Malone, who is heading up a campaign to save the tower, said he would love to see it restored to its original splendor for public use on top of the mountain. He said the tower needs a "historical" designation so that it can remain on the mountain. He is circulating petitions around the area in support of a new designation for the tower.

The petition, for which Petrelli has already collected more than 350 signatures, states:

"We are in support of this tower remaining in its

'We are convinced that there is sufficient public interest in preserving and maintaining this station and in using it for public education purposes that this undertaking is feasible and practical.'

**STEVEN ENGELHART
EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR
ADIRONDACK
ARCHITECTURAL HERITAGE**

current location on the summit of St. Regis. Since this historic structure was erected in 1918 it has been a significant asset to the area for aesthetic, recreational and historical reasons. We request that the tower's current 'nonconforming' status be removed so that this tower can be saved and restored for future generations."

Petrelli said 200 signatures make a statement, but he aims to collect 500. Then he will send a letter explaining his position to the DEC.

Petrelli said the mountain simply will not be the same without the fire tower. As it is now, the tower's first two sets of stairs have been removed so people cannot reach the top, but Petrelli said there are fire towers in far worse shape than the one on St. Regis Mountain.

"The structure itself is in very sound condition," he said, adding that it is firm and there is no rust on the structure but that it could use a new coat of paint. "It's very much standing, very sturdy."

It would be an incredible loss, he said, if the tower were removed. Another mountain, Hurricane, whose tower is also slated to be removed, is held as even



AT THE TOP — U.S. Bobsled/Skeleton Marketing Director Dmitry Feld, left with dog Corona, led some friends up St. Regis Mountain to take in the views and see the tower on a beautiful day in late November. With him are, from left, Nancy Mayers

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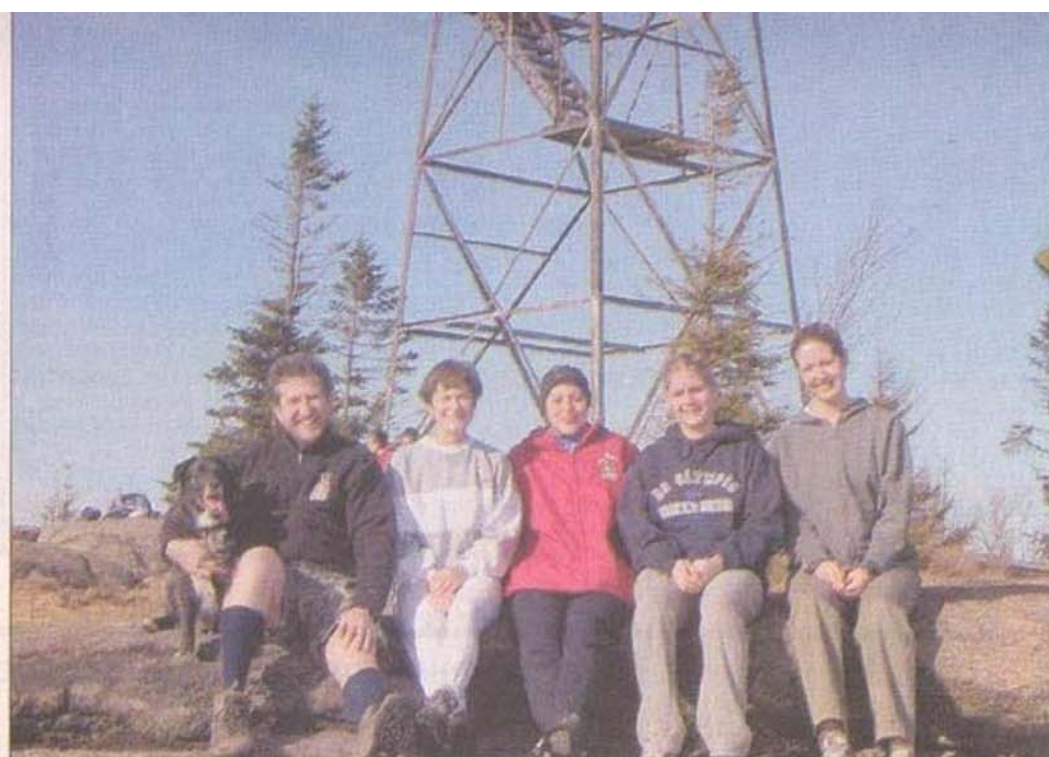
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It would be an incredible loss, he said, if the tower were removed. Another mountain, Hurricane, whose tower is also slated to be removed, is bald, so even without a tower, there is still a 360-degree view. Without the tower on St. Regis, Petrelli said, hikers will lose 90 degrees of the view because of trees.

Martin Podskoch has authored "Adirondack Fire Towers: Their History and Lore, the Southern Districts" and "Fire Towers of the Catskills: Their History and Lore" and is writing another book about the 25 northern district Adirondack fire towers. He is also a strong advocate of keeping the St. Regis fire tower on the mountain.

Podskoch argues that since buildings like the ones at the Santanoni Preserve on the edge of the High Peaks Wilderness Area were saved when their classification was changed to "historic," the same can be done to fire towers in the Adirondacks. The fire towers teach of days gone by when observers spent summers atop the mountains on the lookout for fires. These observers warned the state Conservation Department of the threat of fires before they could wipe out hundreds of acres, he said. Podskoch added that the towers are architectural artifacts and have proven themselves as popular attractions, especially for families.

"It's a family tradition in many cases," Podskoch said of climbing St. Regis Mountain to see the tower.



AT THE TOP — U.S. Bobsled/Skeleton Marketing Director Dmitry Feld, left with his dog Corona, led some friends up St. Regis Mountain to take in the views and see the fire tower on a beautiful day in late November. With him are, from left, Nancy Mayers of Pleasantville; Rachel Duckham, a sports science intern at the Olympic Training Center from England who goes to school in Georgia; Kristy Haukap, an operations intern for the OTC from Iowa State University; and Kimberly Kivi of Lake Placid. In this view, it is clear the tower has seen better days.

As a retired school teacher who has taken his students to fire towers in the Catskills, Podskoch said that hiking mountains to see the views from fire towers and the fire towers themselves is something children never forget.

The Adirondack Architectural Heritage, whose mission is to promote better public understanding, appreciation and stewardship of the region's architecture, historic sites and communities, is also making an effort to save the St. Regis Mountain tower. Recently, Executive Director Steven Engelhart wrote a letter to DEC Forest Preserve Planner Steven Guglielmi expressing the organization's support for the retention of the tower.

In the letter, Engelhart states: "The fire tower on St. Regis Mountain can continue to have an important public recreation and educational value. Like the preserved fire towers on Poke-O-Moonshine, Goodnow, Blue, Hadley, Cathedral Rocks, Snowy, Mount Arab, Kane and others, a restored St. Regis fire tower can be used to interpret the natural and cul-

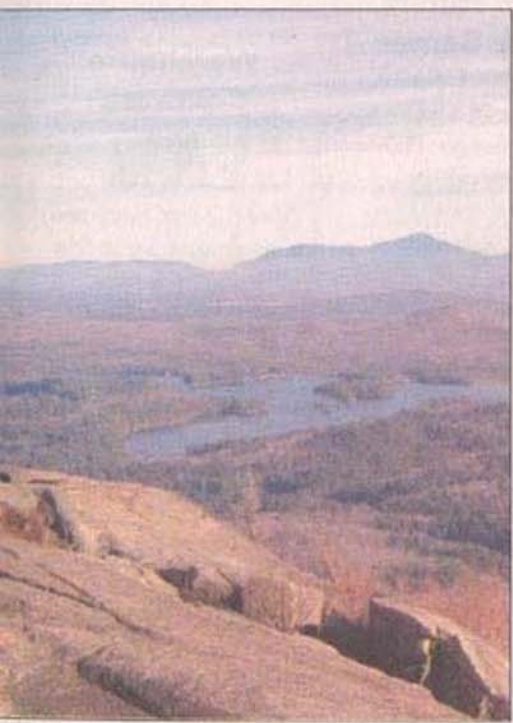
tural history of the forest preserve to visitors of the mountain ... We are convinced that there is sufficient public interest in preserving and maintaining this station and in using it for public education purposes that this undertaking is feasible and practical."

Engelhart said he believes the retention and preservation of the tower can be accomplished within the framework of the New York State Land Master Plan by reclassifying the land that the tower sits upon as a historic landmark.

Politicians are also getting into the effort to save the tower. The towns of Santa Clara and Brighton have both signed resolutions opposing the removal of the fire tower on St. Regis.

Brighton's resolution No. 104-2001 states: "The Town of Brighton considers the fire tower on St. Regis Mountain to be of significant local value: as a historic landmark, as an important orienting beacon and as a factor in the aesthetic quality of a large por-

(Continued on Page B3)



ON A CLEAR DAY — You can see all the way to the High Peaks from the summit of St. Regis Mountain.

Support sought to keep St. Regis Mt. fire tower

(Continued from Page B1)

tion of the town." The resolution also states that the board members would enjoy being part of any discussion with the state of New York that explores options other than the tower's removal.

Sen. Betty Little (R-Queensbury) and Assemblyman Chris Ortloff (R-Plattsburgh) are still others in favor of keeping the tower on top of St. Regis Mountain.

Little, who said she is optimistic that the tower will stay, has, over the past two years, written letters to DEC Commissioner Erin Crotty and talked to others in the DEC about the tower's historic value and the importance of it remaining on top of St. Regis. She said she has been able to help in the effort to postpone taking down the tower for the past two years.

"I believe [fire towers] are historic," Little said. "I believe if they go down, they will never go up again."

"If we can get a group willing to support and care for [the St. Regis fire tower] enough, and I do believe there is a group willing to do that, there is a good case to keep them up."

Little said because the tower has great historical and cultural importance in the area, she will continue in her efforts to designate the area as historic.

There are approximately 24 fire observation stations left in the Adirondacks today, although only the towers on St. Regis, Hurricane and Wakely mountains are in violation of APA regulations.

Not everyone is keen on saving the tower on top of St. Regis Mountain, though. Besides the obvious efforts to remove the tower by the APA and DEC, Neil Woodworth, deputy executive director and counsel for the Adirondack Mountain Club, said it is the club's stance that the tower should be removed. Its reasoning is that the tower is in what

is classified as a canoe area and, as such, nonconforming. He notes, however, that the ADK has enthusiastically supported the restoration of towers in wild forest areas.

"Our position is based on the law," Woodworth said.

He also said the club only has finite resources to restore towers and must prioritize. He said it would be better to use existing resources to put a knowledgeable person such as a summit steward on top of mountains like Azure and Arab that already have restored towers, where there is no legal controversy.

There are also many environmentalists who argue that while the fire towers were once useful, they do not fit in today and should be removed because they are man-made structures in nature.

In the early 1900s, Gov. Charles E. Hughes signed amendments to the existing Forest, Fish and Game Law which provided for a forest patrol service and provisions for the erection and staffing of forest fire observation stations after the "great fires" of

1903 and 1908 which consumed nearly 1 million acres of forest in the Adirondacks. Today, all the towers have been abandoned, because fires are more easily detected by aircraft. The rising cost of manning the towers is also a factor.

Citizen groups have formed committees to restore towers on some mountains such as Hadley, Poke-O-Moonshine and Arab. As treasurer in the successful effort to restore the fire tower on Azure Mountain, Petrelli said that only about \$3,000 was used to restore Azure's tower, because many of the materials were donated and volunteers helped in the effort.

If people want to be spared the vertical hike to see one of these historic towers, they can visit the Adirondack Museum in Elizabethtown and see the steel fire observation tower that was built on top of Whiteface Mountain in 1919. In 1973, it was moved to the museum's grounds.



ANOTHER TIME — The late Leander Martin of Gabriels, a New York State Conservation Department fire tower observer from 1939 to 1942, stands atop St. Regis Mountain watching for forest fires. Martin's wife Agnes, who still resides in Gabriels, provided this photograph of her husband.