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Summer of towering centennials



The fire tower on the summit of St. Regis Mountain, seen here in 2014, has since been restored and reopened to the public. The Friends of the St. Regis Mountain Fire Tower will host a party this summer in honor of the tower's centennial. (Provided photo — Justin A. Levine)

SARANAC LAKE — The North Country will be home to celebrations for three centennials this summer, allowing the outdoors to mix nicely with history.

Two of the centennials are for fire towers that were erected in 1918, and one is for a hiking group that few who have visited the Adirondacks are unfamiliar with. The St. Regis and Azure mountain towers will each turn 100 this year, as will the 46ers hiking club.

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46ers

The 46ers, which now has registered more than 11,000 people who have climbed all 46 of the Adirondack High Peaks, will celebrate with a full weekend of events in and around the High Peaks and Saranac Lake, including a special beer brewed specifically for the events.



Numerous High Peaks are seen from the summit of Upper Wolfjaw Mountain, one of many peaks hikers can access from the Garden trailhead in Keene Valley. (Enterprise photo — Justin A. Levine)

Kicking off on Friday, Aug. 3 with an outdoor movie night, the three-day celebration will begin with a viewing of *The 46er Film* at Berkeley Green in Saranac Lake. There will be various hikes and activities on Saturday, the 4th,

which will be capped off by a High Peaks roundtable panel discussion at the Trudeau Lab.

The panel will include forest rangers, state Department of Environmental Conservation staff, environmentalists, a former Adirondack Park Agency chairman and staff from the Adirondack Mountain Club.

All this will be followed by a barbeque at Paul Smith's College, where Blue Line Brewery will unveil its specially-made Clark and Marshall's 100th Anniversary Ale. All events are open to the public, with more information available at www.adk46er.org.

The 46ers group was inspired by the adventures of two brothers — Bob and George Marshall — and their guide, Herbert Clark. Clark was born in Keeseville, and lived in Saranac Lake most of his adult life. Named as 46er #1, he is buried at St. Bernard's Cemetery in Saranac Lake.

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St. Regis Mountain fire tower

Over the last couple of years, there have been a bevy of fire tower centennials celebrated, obviously owing to the DEC's installation of the metal towers 100 years ago. Last year, more than 100 people turned out for the Poke-O-Moonshine tower party, and another popular peak will be celebrating this year.

The St. Regis Mountain fire tower, which was just reopened to the public last year, faced one of the most uphill (pun not intended) battles to remain.

The tower, like almost all the other fire towers on state land, was deemed a non-conforming structure by the state and was slated for removal. Originally, the tower was to be dismantled and moved to the adjacent Paul Smith's College Visitors Interpretive Center (which at the time was being managed by the state).

But a group formed to lobby for preservation of the tower, which the DEC says was the longest operating tower in the state. After some legal wrangling, the

state designated a half-acre under the tower as a historic area, allowing the tower to remain on state land.

According to an Aug. 29, 2001 article in the Enterprise, the tower was slated to be removed that fall.

“If keeping the peace in Kosovo does not detain them, soldiers from a mobile artillery unit in the British army will arrive in the Adirondacks next week with the following mission: take down the St. Regis fire tower,” the article says. *“Under the guidance of the Adirondack Mountain Club, the soldiers, whose volunteer service will double as mountain-maneuverability training for them, will clamber up St. Regis Mountain, disassemble the fire tower that stands on its summit and, in ways yet to be determined, bring the pieces off the mountain and deliver them to the Paul Smiths Visitor Interpretive Center.”*

But that work never took place, and now, nearly two decades later, the tower has been reopened to the public.

The Friends of St. Regis Mountain Fire Tower oversaw the restoration of the tower, and had new parts manufactured to make the tower structurally sound.

There will be two events this summer for the tower. The first will be a presentation at the VIC on Saturday, July 28 at 2 p.m. by fire tower historian and guide book author Marty Podskoch. The second will be a gathering and food at the Lake Clear Lodge on Sunday, Aug. 5.

For more information, go to www.friendsofstregis.org/centennial-celebration.

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Azure Mountain fire tower

Azure Mountain, which is accessible off the Blue Mountain Road in the town of Waverly, north of Paul Smith's, will hold its centennial celebration on Sunday, July 29, with festivities at both the summit of the mountain and in St. Regis Falls.

At 10 a.m. that morning, the public is welcome to be at the summit of Azure (a 1-mile hike) for readings and recollections from current and former heads of the Azure Mountain Friends group, which worked to preserve the tower and continues to do trail work and provide interpretation to hikers.

Then, starting at 2 p.m. there will be cake, punch and raffles, along with talks by DEC staff and Marty Podskoch at the St. Regis Falls Adult Center.

To find out more about the Azure Mountain celebration, go to www.azuremountain.org.

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History

Many of the Adirondacks' fire towers are reaching, or have recently reached, the 100-year mark. This is due to a concerted effort on the part of the state's Conservation Commission, the forerunner of the DEC.

In 1903 and 1908, hundreds of thousands of acres were burned across the Adirondacks, which, according to the DEC, affected places as far away as New York City. In response, the state began erecting wooden towers and manning them with fire watchers.

The wooden towers, however, were far from sufficient, and began to break down within a few years. The open structures also provided no protection from the elements for the fire watchers.

So in 1917, the Conservation Commissioner began a program of erecting steel fire towers to replace the wooden ones. The towers largely came from the Aeromotor company, which was known for building windmills. By the 1940s, there were more than 100 fire towers in service around the state.

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(Correction: An earlier version of this article incorrectly said Azure Mountain is accessible off the Blue Ridge Road rather than Blue Mountain Road.)