

MONDAY, AUGUST 30, 2021 ADIRONDACK EXPLORER

A view of St. Regis Mountain fire tower

by Alice Menis

My first day at Paul Smith's College Visitor Interpretive Center (VIC) back in June I sat on a couch in front of the bird feeders eating lunch. As I ate and watched the birds I noticed something else out of the corner of my eye. I saw a tiny spec peeking out over St. Regis Mountain's bare top. It was the St. Regis Mountain Fire Tower, the longest active fire station in the Adirondacks.

Behind the bird feeders is one of the best places to spot the tower. If you sit there long enough you may hear the loud ringing of an old telephone and a child's laughter bubble up in delight. That cheerful noise is the sound of the original telephone used on St. Regis Mountain which is now located inside our building. Before radios these towers were linked by telephones, Observers and Rangers would have to maintain miles of telephone line up the mountain.

It is hard to imagine intense wildfires here in the Adirondacks. Wildfires are more common in spring and fall when dead leaves and vegetation cover the forest floor. One of the largest recorded fires in the Adirondacks was in the spring of 1903. The fire started after a 72 day drought and burned 600,000 acres. Unregulated logging and railroad companies commonly caused these fires. Five years later in 1908 the Long Lake West fire proved that more regulation was needed to stop wildfires.

In 1909 new laws were passed to stop and detect forest fires. One method of wildfire detection was installing fire towers and hiring "observers". The observers would stay in the fire towers and use alidade tables to find exact locations of fires. We have an alidade table in our exhibit room at the VIC that you can use. What has become known as "The Last Great Adirondack Fire" swept right through lands near the VIC in 1934. It started near Tupper Lake and State and Village Police searched the streets of Tupper Lake for any able bodied men they could recruit for emergency fire duty. In the smaller more distant communities men made their way to Tupper Lake. Thirty from Long Lake, thirty five from Colton and thirty seven from the Gaspar Laporte lumber camp. Nearly 200 men from Tupper Lake joined the rag tag crew and went to work on the fire lines. The fire was finally stopped

near the VIC, at Bay Pond after burning approximately 8,000 acres.

There are still fires each year. Between 1993 and 2017 the annual average of wildfires was 217 wildfires and 2,103 acres burned but the fire towers are no longer staffed for fire detection. Some have interpretive stewards and hiking challenges that list mountains with towers has revived interest in these imposing, historic steel structures.

To learn more about fire towers come to the VIC on Saturday, Sept. 4. We have several activities celebrating the St. Regis Fire Tower. Guide Doug Fitzgerald and Jack Burke will be leading a hike up the mountain to visit the tower. At the VIC main building we will be visited by a New York State Forest Ranger and Smokey Bear in the afternoon. At night we will all gather on the deck at the VIC and watch for the lighting of the tower and reminisce about the good ole days with some old rangers. [Go to our website to register for any of these events.](#)

Top photo: The 1934 Bay Pond fire, courtesy of NYS archives. Photo of original fire tower phone provided by Paul Smith's College Visitor Information Center