

## October 4<sup>th</sup> 6:00pm Cannon Free Library Delhi NY

During the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries, fires raged out of control in many of New York State's vast wooded areas. The years 1903 and 1908 were particularly disastrous, and because of public outcry for protection from the devastation, the state began a rigorous fire and prevention and control program, including the building of fire towers.

The first state built fire towers in the Catskills in 1909 on Hunter Mountain in Green County, Balsam Lake and Belleayre mountains in Ulster County. These towers were constructed of trees and logs with an open platform built on top. Each tower was equipped with a telephone, a map, and binoculars. When smoke was sighted, an observer would call in the location of the fire to a forest ranger.

These wooden towers were replaced with steel towers and the use of towers greatly reduced the number of acres destroyed by fires because they were extinguished at the early stages. Eventually the state had about 114 fire towers operating throughout the state in 1960.

In 1971 the state started to use air surveillance and gradually closed the fire towers to save money. By 1990 the remaining four fire towers in the Adirondacks and one in the Catskills at Red Hill were closed.

A few communities heard that the state might remove their local tower. They raised money and restored the towers. Today these towers have been restored in the Catskills: Mount Tremper, Hunter, Balsam Lake, Red Hill, and Overlook mountain towers. With the restoration of the fire towers, hikers, families and school children can visit a fire tower that helped prevent the devastation of fires. After climbing the fire tower, the hiker is rewarded with a 360-degree panoramic view of the forests, lakes, mountains and valleys since most of the mountains are covered with trees.

At one time there were 23 fire towers in and around the Catskill Mountains. Martin Podskoch has researched the history of each and gathered the stories of the the observers who kept watch on the forest, the rangers who supervised them, and the pilots who, over time, replaced them. From the early 1900s through the current Catskill Fire Tower Restoration Project, the author covers these interesting structures with great detail.

The book *The Fire Towers of the Catskill: Their History & Lore* contains human-interest stories the author has gathered in personal interviews, and over a hundred photographs. The 136-page, large-format book costs \$20, and will be available after the talk.

Marty Podskoch is a retired middle school reading teacher at Delaware Academy in Delhi, NY, He now lives on Lake Pocotopaug in East Hampton, CT.

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