

First Ignace Fire Tower Built 80 Years Ago - Present Tower in 1964

- By Dennis Smyk, Editor -

As a teenager, I worked for the then Department of Lands and Forests for many summers. It was a dream job for a boy raised in the forests around Ignace: I fought forest fires, I flew fire patrols, I helped gather feed for orphaned moose, I mowed the lawns at the base on Agimak Lake, I helped dock Beaver bush planes, I played horseshoes, and listened to wild stories from fellow fire rangers. Some of those perennial fellow seasonal workers were Ted Furlong, Ralph Linton, Joe Ignace and Dan Sheehan. Fred Nicoll was Chief Ranger, Al Robson Deputy Chief.

For a decade or so the Fire Tower on the hill north of town was manned by Paul Lacroix. Many times in my youth I hiked up the hill, following the phone line, to climb the tower and visit Paul, but the most difficult trek was in 1964 when I helped carry the steel up that hill for a new tower. Three of us carried one steel girder at a time on our shoulders, me in the middle. The rough terrain meant that there were times when the beam was well above my shoulders, indeed my head, but the break was balanced when I was on a hump and the entire weight rested on my shoulder.

In later years, even after the cupola was removed following decommissioning of the tower, friends and I continued to journey up the hill and climb the tower, once before dawn to photograph the sun rising!

Great Lakes Forest Products erected communication antennae on the tower, and in the 1980's Bruce Tomlinson and I carried up and erected an antenna for Ignace Fire Department's radio system.

Today, the tower - sans cupola - stands in silent contemplation of Ignace happenings, unnoticed and rarely visited.

The History of Ignace Fire Towers



The first tower, 80 feet high, was built in 1930 of light steel with guy wires by Gould, Shapley & Muir at a cost of \$732.65. It had an octagonal cupola. It was demolished in 1964 due to structural problems.

(Tony Berglund Photo)



The second tower, 100 feet high, was built the year the first came down, 1964. It was constructed of heavy steel. Its octagonal cupola was dismantled in the 1970's and the tower used for communications antennae.

(Ministry of Natural Resources photo.)

The towermen lived in Ignace, unlike many who manned towers in more remote locations.

A Thumbnail History of Ontario Fire Towers

Compiled by Robert Eno, Iqaluit
(Reprinted with permission)

The first fire lookout towers in Ontario appeared on the scene in the 1920's. These early towers were constructed of wood; some were simply platforms in tall trees. By 1947, there were 52 wooden, and 227 steel towers across Ontario. (Report of the Minister of Lands and Forests of the Province of Ontario, 1948)

The 1950's and 1960's marked the glory years for fire lookout towers in Ontario. By 1962, there were a total of 316 steel towers in operation throughout the province; by which time most or all of the wooden towers, save one, had disappeared. (Ontario Resources Atlas, 1963)

Ontario's fire lookout towers were generally named after the townships in which they were located, or after nearby prominent geographic features such as lakes, rivers, mountains or towns. Smoke from a distance of about 15 statute miles could be spotted from these towers, which provided a coverage of over 700 square miles of forested area. Each tower was situated in such a manner so as to provide overlap with at least two of its neighbours. In this way, the location of a smoke could be determined - using a device, with which most mariners are very familiar, called an "alidade" - through triangulation. The alidade was mounted on a map of the immediate area with the geographic position fire tower located at the centre of the map. The entire map/alidade platform was mounted on an ingenious sliding device which could be offset to sight fires which would otherwise be obscured by the corner posts of the cupola. (Cleaver, personal communication, 2002).

Fire towers were organized into divisions; in each division, a "key" tower was established. All of the towers in a particular division reported to the key tower,

which in turn, reported to Chief Ranger's Office, who reported to the Forest Protection Office and the Forest Protection Supervisor. This obviated the need for countless radio transmissions which would no doubt have created a real muddle in communications and a constant din of radio chatter. The regular routine called for the key tower to conduct a roll call to determine local conditions such as rain, lightning, etc. All divisions operated on the same radio frequency so that if a smoke was detected, its location could be determined, by triangulation, even between different divisions. By the late 1950's and early 1960's, all towers were connected by telephone lines; in fact at one time, the former Department of Lands and Forests had more miles of telephone line than Bell Canada. (Cleaver, personal communication, 2002)

Much of the literature that I have seen, indicates that towermen were a very unique and solitary breed. One writer had the following to say about the towermen: "The work of a towerman is of an exacting type, requiring freedom of fear of heights, good eyesight, intelligence, and a contentment with his job great enough to overcome the loneliness of the life." (Hess, Q.F., Sylva Magazine, Vol 5, # 5, 1949).

Towermen came from all walks of life: loggers, lumbermen, trappers, highly-educated, scholarly types, and in many cases, veterans of both World Wars.

One individual worth mentioning was a retired British army major who had acted as a liaison officer to the Royal Navy during WWII and who became a towerman after the war. The man in question apparently had a weakness for wine. Each year, he planned to earn enough money as a towerman to return to his native England in the autumn. According to the story, at the end of the season, he would purchase his train and boat tickets and then check into a suite at one of the finest hotels for a little R & R before embarking on his journey. Within a week, the travel plans were set aside, the tickets refunded for cash and the money spent on revelry. At the end of it all, broke and without a means of earning a living, the man would return to the bush to work as a camp clerk with a logging company. (Dillon, J.C., Sylva Magazine, Vol. 17, No. 1, 1961).

Another interesting character worth mentioning was a fellow by the name of James Guiney, who manned the Mount St. Patrick Tower (Tweed District) for 22 years from 1922 until his retirement in 1944. Guiney grew tired of climbing up and down the ladder, day in and day out, so he devised a system of weights and pulleys that enabled him to ascend and descend the tower with a slight pull on a rope. Apparently, one day, one of the weights dislodged, resulting in Guiney making the descent much more rapidly than intended, and with predictable, though not fatal, results. Guiney subsequently abandoned his apparatus and returned to the old method of getting to the top by climbing the ladder. (Crealock, A., Sylva Magazine, Vol 2, No. 2, 1946).



View of Ignace from the first tower. (Tony Berglund Photo)

Not always men...

The job a tower observer was not always restricted to men. During WWII, quite a few women were employed as tower observers, although very few retained their positions after the war (Sylva Magazine, Vol. 16, No. 2, 1960).

I am aware of at least two women ("tower girls") who served in this capacity: Ms. Ernestine Morin, who manned the Lowbush Tower in the late 1940's, and Mrs. Georgina Mary Mylymok, who manned a tower near Upsala in 1959. Both women were profiled in Sylva Magazine.

A humorous poem, penned by L. Moreau, and published in Sylva Magazine (Vol. 9, No. 3, 1953), quite possibly sums up the life of a towerman:

A TOWERMAN'S LAMENT

Oh, a towerman's life -
a towerman's life -
A towerman's life is not bad
with a wife -
But when you're alone,
it sure ain't like home -
Before you start working,
examine your dome!
You wear out your pants -
you wear out your shoes -
You cook your own meals and
you don't get no booze.
You slowly go batty -
believe your own lies -
You nearly go blind from
the sun in your eyes!
I can see all the country,
from Bolkow to Sheehan,
And watch Lou go by in his
flying machine.
Oh! well - it's a job -
and I really feel great
When reporting the "smokes"
Lou can't see from his crate.
But when summer's gone -
let me tell all you guys -
I'll never come back to the bush
and the flies,
I'll head for the city -
you won't see me here -
Unless I am broke again -
April, next year.

The demise of the tower detection system began in the late 1960's, when it was decided that aerial detection was a more cost-effective and efficient means of spotting forest fires. By the beginning of the 1970's, lookout towers were being taken out of operation; by 1973, the tower detection system was closed down entirely and replaced with aeroplanes. It was the end of a glorious and romantic era for the "sentinels of the forest".

Many towers were likely demolished and/or abandoned in the 1970's.

Whys and Wherefores.

Why not? To the casual observer, fire towers and the activities that took place in them were mundane and certainly nothing to write about, however, once one starts to delve below the surface, one finds a fraternity of fascinating, odd, and sometimes roguish characters, as well as some captivating stories from the bush. As indicated above, working in a tower was not a job for a dull or ordinary person and the job itself served a vital, albeit low-key, function in the scheme of protecting Ontario's forests and wildlife. In the bigger picture, Ontario's fire tower detection system truly is a piece of Canadiana and an integral part of the history of natural resources conservation. More and more, I am finding, through my research, that there is a great deal of interest amongst those working in the field of conservation (as well as those who have retired), in the "corporate history" - of which the tower detection system was a part - of the Ministry of Natural Resources and its predecessor, the Department of Lands and Forests. Those fire towers that are left standing - and indeed, the places where the now demolished towers once stood - may someday be considered as historic sites; if this has not already happened. The next logical question is: what am I going to do with all of this information once I've compiled it and verified its accuracy? I honestly do not know. For the time being, I just want to get it all down before it disappears altogether.

As it is, the remaining towers, the people who manned them and the records that proved their existence, are vanishing quickly. Ideally, I believe that a book should eventually be written about the tower system and the people who kept it running, and ideally, it should be written by someone who lived the experience. That is another battle for another day. For the time being, I will continue to compile information and attempt to make some sense of it all.

* * *

A cool grey sentinel,
Poised against the sky,
O'erlooking forest, stream and
man's endeavour,
Itself a man made thing.
To foil man's ignorance and
carelessness,
It's purpose.

W.W. Tweed
(Sylva Magazine, Vol. 6, No. 5, 1950)

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