

# MEET HOWARD HATCH FRYEBURG FAIR'S FIRE TOWER

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“Back in the day” residents of rural communities were known for their commitment to each other, for their resiliency, hard work and common sense. This section of our final 2024 MAAF newsletter combines two of our usual features - history and an outstanding fair member - to highlight an unusual aspect of the Fryeburg fairgrounds.

Should you travel to the Fryeburg fairgrounds, and enter through the Blue Gate (aka the Livestock Gate), head towards the Natural Resource Center and there - you may be greeted by Howard R. Hatch. Most likely he will be seated on a bench, located at the base of the tower sharing memories of the involvement of his family from the early 1900's through to Howard's position as the supervisor of the replica of the Kearsarge (North) fire tower. The tower, with its tall steeple proudly keeping watch over the White Mountain National Forest, draws you to its base, and Howard keeps you there with his voluminous knowledge of the history of the citizens who made the commitment to put public safety front and center for the surrounding towns.



*Fryeburg Fair's Fire Tower Crew - Charlie Birch, Steve Salo, Kenny Corrock & Howard Hatch-Superintendent*

Neal Crouse, Howard's grandfather, was a volunteer for a total of 41 years and also worked for the Forest Service as a warden from 1929 - 1961. In 1934, Neal also worked as a supervisor with the CCC. The family's commitment continued on with Fred A. Hatch as warden (1961-1971) and then to Harold (1972-1985) and Howard who worked for the Forest Service from 1961-1994. The days of volunteers manning the local fire lookout tower volunteer have dwindled. Out of over 100 fire towers

there are only 55 remaining, and of those only two are considered active. Helicopters and drones have taken the place of the lookout but taking a tour around the tower will introduce you to the complex, scientific nature of the role of the fire wardens.

Start your tour sitting next to Howard, who will explain the critical nature of the responsibilities of the fire lookout. Mostly men held this position, but during WWII women stepped up to fill the role and keep their towns and villages safe from fire. Browse through the photo albums that share the challenges, tragedies and fire stops that were made possible by these men and women. Take a peek inside the Forest Warden box (cache) aka “The Box” whose contents were selected during the CCC years to outfit an eight man crew. As Howard explained the purpose behind each tool, he also pointed out the map that highlighted every fire tower in Maine.

Walk up the steep flight of stairs, past a life-sized statue of Smokey Bear and enter the second level/platform of the tower. Located in the center of the floor is the Osborne Range Finder. Looking similar to a giant compass, this device was used by fire lookouts to plot a directional bearing to sighted smoke in order to alert fire crews to a wildland land fire. The fire crew would see a lightning strike/smoke plume, plot it and then watch it for 3-5 days. Originally invented in 1840 by Sir Francis Ronalds to help combat fires in London, it was redesigned in the early 1900’s by William Osborne, a United States Forest Service employee in Portland, Oregon. Many of these Osborne fire finders were manufactured from 1920 through 1935, and deemed critical pieces of equipment for all fire towers. Another use for this piece of equipment was in search and rescue operations using two-way radios and using the radio in the tower as the base to plot a location. The glass windows that surround the room are made with metal sash to insure that the glass panes would not blow out during high winds.

Across the room is a crank telephone, connected to a party line. While you are standing there, sign the guest book and take a quick peek, if the weather is clear, to search for Portland Harbor. As you stand with Howard, and hear of the many responsibilities for the person on duty, he will explain that the usual time shift was 3-5 days. He will explain Hazardous Duty Pay and the USFS pay scale - assuming that you were on staff, and not a volunteer. The tower that you are standing in is a replica built in 2009 by Fryeburg Fair, with a face lift in 2012.

Now, pause and remember reading on the ground level of the tower the newspaper coverage of the Great Fire of 1947. In 1947, Maine suffered its largest fire fighting disaster in modern history. After over 90 consecutive days of record breaking high temperatures and drought, many small wildfires started and spread out of control. Fires ranged from Portland, York County and Wells, across the state and including 17,188 acres on Mount Desert Island. Statewide over 220,000 acres burned, 1,070 homes were destroyed, 2,500 people were left homeless and 16 people were declared dead. Gusty winds drove flames across nine communities, destroying and seriously damaging four more. Maine’s forest fire control division learned new ways to fight fires including improved radio communications and the creation of state of the art equipment. Maine fire wardens and volunteer/career fire departments agreed to open fire towers that had been closed for the season.



*Junia Norris from the Maine Association of Agricultural Fairs with Howard Hatch, Superintendent of Fryeburg Fair’s Fire Tower*

Overall the role of the Maine fire towers was critical in observing and tracking the destructive path of these fires.

So, thank you Howard R. Hatch, for your years of active fire service to Maine, her forests and families. Thank you for your years of diligently gathering, cataloging, labeling and capturing the essence of life in a Maine fire tower. Thank you for recreating the atmosphere and the starkness of the position, and the importance of the commitment. Thank you for welcoming guests, alongside your fellow team members Kenny Corrock and Charlie Birch, and taking countless hours to introduce folks to the critical nature of the job. For sure, “Your firefighter boots will be hard to fill!”