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Many of Alabama's fire lookout towers falling into disrepair, but state has no chapter of national group to help preserve structures

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Kenneth Colburn surveyed the horizon, pointing to plumes of smoke in the distance.

"There's smoke there. There's some more over there. That's the steam plant," he said, leaning against a steel girder on the third landing of the Pinnacle Fire Lookout Tower. The 100-foot tower is perched on a rocky crag just off Shelby County 331.

Colburn, a forester with the Alabama Forestry Commission, was making his first visit to the Pinnacle tower, but it invoked memories of days spent in similar towers in Tuscaloosa County in the 1980s.

"It was unreal how far you could see up there," Colburn said. "We could see fires in Mississippi."

More than 100 fire towers still stand in Alabama, and most are in rural areas. Although the towers are rarely staffed today, they are still used for communication. A variety of emergency service and public safety antennas dot the sides of most. Many are falling into disrepair. But there is a national effort to save them, and the beginnings of such an effort in Alabama.

"We are trying to protect an important part of American history, sort of like the lighthouses of the forest," said Keith Argow of Vienna, Va., chairman of the Forest Fire Lookout Association. "Fire towers are a symbol of forestry, especially sustainable forests."

Argow, a retired forester and forestry professor, said the FFLA has more than 1,000 members nationwide and chapters in about 40 states. Alabama does not have a chapter, but it does have an area representative in Montgomery architect Tom Kaufmann, who got interested in fire towers on a night hike with his son's Cub Scout troop in the Tuskegee National Forest in Macon County.

"The Pleasant Hill Fire Tower was a navigational point on the hike," Kaufmann said. "The first time I saw the tower it was at night under a three-quarter moon, but it was a beautiful thing."

Intrigued by the tower in the moonlight, Kaufmann returned in the daytime and saw it as a structure in need of care. He began researching fire towers and soon found himself recruited by Argow to be a contact person for Alabama fire towers.

Back in the 1980s, when Colburn was hired, aircraft were becoming the main fire detection tools. But the towers were still staffed.

Foresters learned to read smoke patterns.

"You don't want to holler wolf every time," Colburn said. "You could tell if a pile of leaves was burning because the smoke would come up and disperse. If it was a wildfire, you'd see it start building."

Fire towers trace their origin to around the turn of the 20th century. The first were built by states and the federal government in national parks and forests. Construction got a tremendous boost during the Great Depression when hundreds were built by the Civilian Conservation Corps and the Works Progress Administration.

Argow said an estimated 8,000 fire towers were constructed nationwide, with about 2,000 still standing. He said about 500, mainly in the West and Northeast, remain in use.

Robert Pasquill Jr., a forester with the U.S. Forest Service in Montgomery, has written a book on CCC projects in Alabama from 1933 to 1942. As of 1972, he said, the state had leased land for 165 sites for fire towers. By March 2003, 61 had been taken down and 104 remained. Fifty-three have communications equipment, so they still serve a function, he said.

Maria Schleidt, a U.S. Forest Service archeologist now based in Arkansas, said she compiled a list of 211 towers from maps and incomplete documents provided by the Alabama Forestry Commission. Schleidt also coordinated restoration of a tower in Conecuh County.

A listing on the FFLA Web site shows 211 tower sites in Alabama, with 119 still standing.

The towers are of varied construction styles and sizes, built of stone, wood or steel. Most had their access as a series of stairs and landings within a four-pole framework.

"In Alabama there are some very dramatic towers," Argow said. "At Cheaha State Park, there is a beauty on top of the lodge."

Boy Scout Troop 924, sponsored by Eastwood Christian School in Montgomery, has adopted the Pleasant Hill Fire Tower in the Tuskegee National Forest that prompted Kaufmann's preservation efforts.

Since seeing that tower, Kaufmann has spent hours in the State Archives, sifting through hundreds of Forestry Commission documents. He thinks the material is there for the compilation of a comprehensive list.

Ten people would be needed to form an Alabama state chapter of the FFLA, Argow said.

"That's when good things start happening," said Argow. "People start adopting towers, and we will fund some repairs for towers."

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