

THE STONEGA TOWER THE FIRST FIRE TOWER IN VIRGINIA

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Fire had always been part of the culture in the mountains of Virginia. The Indians used it in Indian Summer to keep their blue stem prairie grass meadows open in the limestone bottoms and loamy ridge top fields. The settlers cleared new ground with their one-eared mules (mattocks) and burned the resulting brush piles. Smoking a ground hog out of its hole was fun for the boys. Tobacco was the major cash crop. The process started in late February with the burning of seedbeds. Brush was piled on a strip of new ground, which was about eight feet wide and forty feet long. New ground was desired for such a bed because it was nutrient rich, and had none of the diseases that would attack the tobacco plants. Setting the brush on fire would kill any insect larvae and weed seeds in the soil. The wood ash served as fertilizer. The bed was surrounded by six-inch diameter logs, the tobacco seed planted, and a muslin cover was nailed to the tops of the log frame. As all this took place in the windy, dry time of early spring, it is not surprising that the fire often got away from the farmers, and caught their woods on fire. But all this was expected. No one was either surprised or upset by it all.

Things began to change in the 1880's. The railroads came to the mountains. The virgin forests were bought up by Northern investors, who cared nothing about either groundhogs nor tobacco beds, but did care a great deal about their stands of timber. The railroads were driven by steam engines, as were the sawmills of the new logging industry that was made possible by the presence of the railroads. The railroads and the sawmills themselves became the major sources of forest fires.⁽¹⁾ In 1909 the newly organized National Forests had had 3,138 forest fires reported, of which 1,186 were caused by locomotives.⁽²⁾ In Virginia itself in 1917 1,460 forest fires burned 305,000 acres of woodland.⁽³⁾

Theodore Roosevelt was elected President, and in 1898 he began a national campaign of conservation led by Gifford Pinchot, who was the first head of the United States Forest Service. The first recorded fire tower in the United States was privately built in 1902 in Idaho. The first fire tower built by the United States Forest Service was in Oregon in 1915.⁽¹⁾

In 1880 the Tinsalia Co. bought the 'Olinger Survey' of 62,000 acres, which consisted of virgin forested coal bearing land laying on Black Mountain, Stone Mountain, and Little Stone Mountain in Wise County Virginia. The next year the corporation changed its name to the Virginia Coal and Iron Company. In 1910 VCI split off the Stonega Coke and Coal Company as its operating arm. M. C. McCorkle &

Sons Co. (later McCorkle Lumber Co.) had considerable experience timbering around Williamson, West Virginia. In 1897 McCorkle moved his operations to a two thousand acre tract he bought in Big Stone Gap, Virginia, which adjoined the Olinger Survey along its southern border. In 1900 VCI contracted with McCorkle to timber Little Stone Mountain. He did so by two routes; a earthen log shoot off of the southern face of Little Stone Mountain directly into his saw mill yard, and a corduroy skid road that ran from the L&N railroad tract at the mouth of Dark Hollow to its end to the east where it abutted the watershed of the Clear Creek Water Company, a subsidiary of VCI, and now the watershed of the Town of Appalachia.^(5,6)

Sometime between 1910 and 1917 some entity, most likely either McCorkle or VCI, built a forest fire watchtower to overlook this operation. The author knows of no documentation or tradition where it was located. We do know that by 1917 it had been relocated "on the ridge top of Little Stone Mountain". This second tower was built by VCI in cooperation with the Virginia Forestry Department.⁽⁸⁾ It was located astride the triangulation survey marker noted on the USGS topographic map as "Stonega 9", which is due north of DeBusk Branch that forms the eastern boundary of the Town of Big Stone Gap.⁽⁸⁾

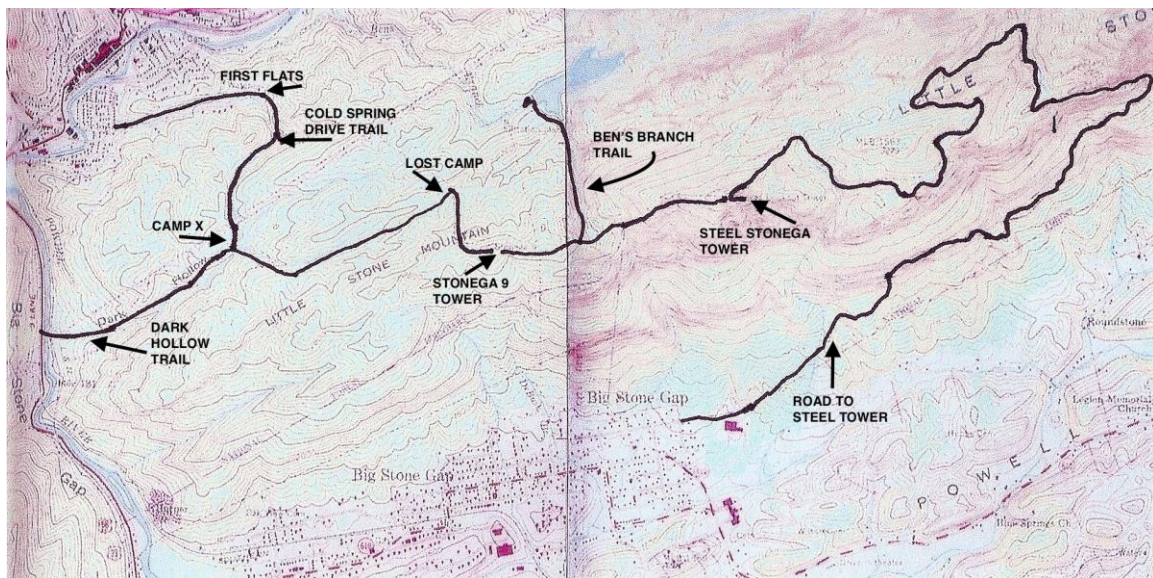
The author's best guess on the site of that first tower is on the knob about a quarter of a mile west by southwest of Camp X. The reasons for this choice are that the logging would have been begun at the mouth of Dark Hollow, and tower would have been located so as to best monitor this activity. The trail to that site from Camp X was still visible enough so that when the Town of Appalachia brushed out the trail from the head of Cold Spring Drive to the mouth of Dark Hollow they missed the original connection to that trail, and followed the trail to the top of the knob. There is no better site from which to view the lower half of Dark Hollow than from this knob, and the trail leads directly backwards to its point of access and supply at Cold Spring Drive.

Soon after it was split off from VCI, the Stonega Coke and Coal Company began the systematic modern surveying of its land holdings. This effort predated the National Geodetic Survey's modernization of its "benchmark" system in 1927. There are at least one hundred and thirty five of these 'Stonega Triangulation Points', all of which are denoted on the USGS Topographic maps. They have no direct connection to the first coal camp built by this company in 1897, and also named 'Stonega'. This second of three watchtowers on Little Stone Mountain was referenced by its location astraddle 'Stonega 9' triangulation marker. Soon, people got lazy, and when speaking of the tower, simply called it the "Stonega Tower".

Access to the tower was up a sled trail that ran up the northern face of Little Stone Mountain from the Town of Appalachia. The original name of the creek and hollow it ran up has been lost, but it now is named 'Cold Spring Drive', and earlier than that (after the late 1940's) as 'Legion Hollow'. There were open corn fields and houses in that hollow pretty much overlaid by the modern housing development in it, with a sled road connecting to the Dark Hollow corduroy road

just past the head spring of the creek in Cold Spring Drive. The loggers camped out in the woods, at least some of the time. Their campsites were still visible and their names frequently known until the early 1960's. At the head of the current housing development was 'First Flats'. Just up the creek and just past the housing development was 'Second Flats'. On top of the saddle separating Cold Spring Drive Creek and Dark Hollow Creek was located 'Camp X' (for the crossroads in the trail). Just up from where these two trails joined, and just downstream from the last corduroy bridge was a campsite whose name is lost. At the headspring of Dark Hollow Creek, in a bed of inclusion bodies from the eroded Lee Conglomerate rock layer, was located 'Lost Camp'. About a hundred yards on up the hollow past Lost Camp, the hollow ends in its saddle with a minor hollow in Ben's Branch. The trail to the Stonega 9 Tower makes a ninety degree turn at this point, and turns to the south and follows the spine of the saddle for about seventy yards until it intersects the rock fin that forms the spine of Little Stone Mountain. Turning east at this point and going about twenty yards further is the site of Stonega 9, and of the associated fire tower.

The tower was built of sawed wooden beams whose ends were stuck somehow into the cracks of the rock fin. This site was still well known to the boys of Appalachia when the author was a boy, and was a resting point along the trail that led on to the third 'Stonega Tower', known to the people of Appalachia as the "High Tower", a name not used by the people of Big Stone Gap and Powell Valley.



DARK HOLLOW WITH ITS LOGGING TRAILS, AND FIRE TOWER SITES AND JEEP ACCESS TRAIL FROM BIG STONE GAP

April 5, 1933 President Franklin D. Roosevelt started the Civilian Conservation Corp, jokingly called the "Tree Army". In its directive was clearly stated a commitment to build "fire towers".⁽¹⁾ The C.C.C. built camp Company 349, P-63 in Big Stone Gap. It was unofficially known as 'Camp Lonesome Pine'. The

address was East 2nd Ave., in an area just outside the city limits. Its superintendent was M. S. Quesenberry, Sr. The dates of its completion, and the date of construction of the third incarnation of the fire tower on Little Stone Mountain, which the C.C.C. built, are not known to the author. It was also located on the crest of the mountain. It is believed that in general both were not long after 1933.⁽¹⁰⁾ Most of the fire towers in the United States were built by the C.C.C.



THE STONEGA TOWER AT THE STONEGA SURVEY POINT #9

The reasons for moving the Stonega tower to a site approximately a mile to the east were three. The tower at Stonega 9 triangulation point was on land owned by VCI Corporation. The Federal C.C.C. could not work on private land. The new site was on public National Forest land. Also the new, and third site for the Little Stone Mountain Tower, was three hundred feet in elevation higher than the Stonega 9 site. Both the second and third towers had excellent gun barrel views up Callahan Creek of the Black Mountain sites of all the developing Stonega Company mines and their camps. The view from the last sight may have been a little better, having moved a little to cover the company's newest camp at Derby.

The name 'Stonega Tower' carried over to the new C.C.C. built tower, at least by outsiders, who to this day confuse it with the wooden tower that had stood at the Stonega 9 survey marker. It was built of iron, and had an iron cabin on top. The manufacturer was one that made windmill towers for farmers. In the post World War II era each iron member had 'Quesenberry's' stenciled on it. There is a

difference in the memories of people over whether or not this may have had some reference to the construction company started by M. S. Quesenberry II, or had been applied by M. S. Quesenberry, Sr.



CAMP LONESOME PINE EAST OF BIG STONE GAP
THERE ARE THE FELLOWS WHO BUILT THE LAST TOWER ON LITTLE STONE MOUNTAIN

The cabin was accessed via a trap door in the floor from a set of stairs. Inside were a hand crank battery powered telephone, and an Osborne Fire Finder. This last item was a flat 360 degree protractor with a pivoted bar in its center with open notched sights on each end. This apparatus could be aimed at a fire's smoke plume, and the compass reading radioed to a central office, and to other fire towers. Where the readings from various towers crossed would locate the fire on a map. The tract of the telephone lines straight down the southern face of Little Stone Mountain can still be seen today from US 23 from near Mountain Empire Community College. A wooden cabin for the attendant was located at the base of the tower, at its southwestern leg. It was about ten by twenty feet, with its door toward the tower and at ground level. Its back end was on posts at about six feet off of ground. It was painted green. No one can remember either a water source nor a toilet. The closest water was at Lost Camp, perhaps a fifteen minute walk away. The materials for the construction of the tower and cabin were sledged in by local farmers who had been contracted with by the Forest Service. After World War II when the jeep became available, the road was improved to accommodate it.



THE STYLE OF TOWER THAT THE
C.C.C. BUILT ON LITTLE STONE
MOUNTIAN – THIS IS A
PHOTOGRAPH OF THE MENDOTA
TOWER AT FUGATE GAP WHICH
WAS BUILT BY THE SAME
MANUFACTURER

The last full time attendant was Bob Dorton, who owned a general store on the south side of the Back Valley Road directly beneath the pass where the access road tops out on the mountain. He had a path that he took straight up the mountain to that pass, ignoring the sled / jeep trail. He carried his provisions in a backpack.



DON FIG

1957 AHS 'ACCOLADE'

One of its last part time attendants was Don Fig of Appalachia, who went on to become a ranger at the Kentucky State Park of the Red River Gorge. These towers

were staffed only during fire season. The first community TV cable for the Town of Big Stone Gap had its antennae attached to the tower. Its electronics were in the attendant's cabin. The Stonega Tower was abandoned for years before it was torn down in the 1970's. It was stored in an out building at the old offices of the Jefferson National Forest in the corner of Shawnee Ave. East and East 9th ST. East. This is across the road from Union High School. It was then bought by a private individual and hauled to his mountain cabin atop Morris's Butt, with intent to reassemble. It still lies up there disarticulated, awaiting some unforeseen role.

The access road to the tower at its last site changed dramatically. Its entrance was at East 6th Ave. Big Stone Gap just to the north of the Jefferson National Forest office. Initially it was a horse drawn sled road. The tower was towed up piece by piece by this means. After World War II and the invention of the Jeep, the sled road was improved accommodate this vehicle. It runs to the northeast about three miles on the southern slope of Little Stone Mountain before it turns back to the northwest before it goes through a pass in the top of the mountain. It then traverses the width of the mountain to a point above Kent Junction, from whence it picks up a portion of the old Indian trail to Roaring Fork. It then turns to the southwest and ends at the foot of the tower. An Indian trail continues along the crest of the mountain to the origin of Ben's Branch, which it follows to Appalachia. There once was a path connecting the junction of the crest trail and the Ben's Branch trail with the tower site at Stonega 9, but was obliterated about 1960 with tree laps left when the Appalachia watershed was timbered.



THE ORIGINAL FIRE 'TOWER' AT
HIGH KNOB, WHICH WAS NOT A
TOWER AT ALL, BUT A GROUND
LEVEL CABIN

NOTE THE 'OSBORNE FIRE
FINDER' THAT IS LOCATED
ON A PEDISTILE
IN THE CENTER OF THE
INTERIOR



THE INTERIOR OF A FIRE
TOWER RECREATED IN A
MUSEUM

NOTE THE OSBORNE FIRE
FINDER AND THE BATTERY
POWERED CRANK
TELEPHONE FOR
COMMUNICATION WITH
OTHER TOWERS

There were other fire towers on High Knob, Cliff Mountain, and on Stone Mountain south of Sigma (some people call this one the Olinger Tower). There also was one on the very top of Black Mountain, which had a very good view of the same area, but was in Kentucky. This tower was not on National Forest land, and no one today knows if it cooperated with those just across the line in Virginia or not.

The life of the firewatcher was a lonely one. One of the last watchers at Sigma Tower was a lady from Keokee, who tended her flower garden under the tower. The tower is gone, but her daffodils still faithfully come up each spring. The watchers would often gossip with each other over the forest service crank phones. The quality of the sound was terrible. Brad Clark of Jasper was a career Forest Service employee, and used to serve in the Cliff Mountain tower during fire season. One day he was chatting with the watcher at High Knob, and told him that a goose was flying his way. The man told everyone that Brad had said that a moose was flying to High Knob.



FROM ED WOLFE'S SOUTHERN RAILROAD, SOUTHERN DIVISION

THIS PHOTOGRAPH SHOWS THE GAP IN STONE MOUNTAIN DIRECTLY ACROSS FROM THE MOUTH OF DARK HOLLOW. IT WAS TAKEN ABOUT 1940. IT SHOWS A NUMBER OF FEATURES OF INTEREST TO THE STORY OF THE LOGGING OPERATION IN DARK HOLLOW. THE L & N RAILROAD TRACKS ARE SEEN ACROSS THE RIVER. THE LOADING DOCK AT THE MOUTH OF THE HOLLOW HAD BEEN JUST OFF THE PICTURE TO THE LEFT. THE RAILROAD WITH THE TRAIN ON IT IS THE SOUTHERN. THE PRE-RAILROAD WAGON ROAD TO APPALACHIA LAY DIRECTLY UNDER THE SOUTHERN TRACK. THE FARM ASSOCIATED WITH THE BUILDINGS WAS ABOUT 3-4 ACRES. THIS COMPLEX COULD HAVE BEEN SEEN FROM THE LOWER (FIRST) OF THE THREE FOREST FIRE WATCH TOWERS THAT CAME TO BE PLACED UP DARK HOLLOW. IT IS OF SIGNIFICANCE AS IT HOUSED A 'BLIND TIGER' THAT SERVED MOONSHINE THROUGH A PASS DOOR TO THE PUBLIC THAT TRAVELLED BETWEEN BIG STONE GAP AND APPALACHIA, AND DOUBTLESSLY TO THE LOGGERS UP DARK HOLLOW ACROSS THE RIVER

The swath of clearing for the hand crank telephone wires, and later for the TV cable, can still be seen coming down perpendicularly from the site of the last tower to the foot of Little Stone Mountain near the present Primary School. It can be best seen from US 23 in front of Mountain Empire Community College.

The way the process worked was when a smoke plume was located by the tower watchers, the National Forest office at Big Stone Gap was telephoned. This office then phoned local fire wardens who lived in the area. The author recalls one in Cracker's Neck at George Begley's. At each warden's there was a wooden chest filled with tools, such as shovels, rakes, and axes. A phone call went out to the local high school offices, where the principals would have the teachers inform their students that the older boys could be excused from classes if they were to volunteer to go fight the forest fires. The wardens would pick up the volunteers, and take

them to the site of the fire, and then supervise their labors. This often went on for days.

There was a certain cachet to all this. It was a stamp of passage into manhood for the boys, many of whom had no aspirations of a higher education. The era, itself, was also passing. The number of fires diminished dramatically with the change to diesel locomotives, and with the change from fire to chemical insecticides for sterilizing tobacco beds. Brush burning became legally regulated. The rapid spread of telephones into rural areas helped. The towers became liability problems for the government, and most were torn down. There are excellent examples of these Depression Era towers left locally on Black Mountain, and at Fugate Gap on Clinch Mountain (also called the Mendota Tower). The site of the fire watchtower at High Knob (actually never a tower at all, but a ground based structure) has been replaced with a tourist viewing tower, as has the one on Birch Knob in Dickenson County. All that remains of the Stonega Tower are its four concrete footers, and its access road, which is usually blocked by blown over trees. When one looks back on it, a way of life associated with the towers has also passed away – far away – startlingly far away.



A – SITE OF THE C.C.C. STEEL TOWER
B – CLEARED LINE FOR THE TOWER HAND CRANK TELEPHONE WIRES AS SEEN IN 2019
C – SITE OF THE WOODEN TOWER AT THE STONEGA 9 SURVEY MARKER

NOTE - To read further about the McCorkle Lumber Co.'s logging of Dark Hollow read the author's The early Timber Industry within the Gap in Stone Mountain along the Powell River Hiking Trail."

<http://bigstonegappublishing.net/Timber%20Industry.pdf>

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