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## **Helen Ellett of Grafton shares memories of her days atop the Dickinson Hill fire tower in new book**

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GRAFTON — She spent 18 years working as the second woman fire tower observer in New York State, and now 97-year-old Helen Ellett has a new role: book subject.

Ellett's life is chronicled in "I Remember When: The Untold Story of Helen Ellett," written by Friends of Grafton State Park President Randy Kneer, who documented the tales from her time atop the 60-foot Dickinson Hill Tower.

Born in Troy in 1914, Ellett and her family moved to Grafton when she was about 6 years old.

Though she relocated to Cohoes when she married her husband in 1932, Ellett eventually returned to the town, where she and her husband ran the General Store.

During World War II, when many male fire tower observers were called off to fight, Ellett was approached in 1943 with an offer to take over at Dickinson Hill. She happily accepted.

A horse lover, Ellett was advised that she wouldn't be able to drive to the tower when the ground became muddy. She decided to arrive on horseback instead.

"I thought, 'Don't tell me I'm going to be paid \$100 a month for this job and I can ride my horse every day,'" Ellett recalled of her luck. "I thought that was great."

Ellett worked alone in the 7-foot by 7-foot tower cabin until 1965. In that time — interrupted by a brief period where she couldn't work due to an ankle injury that prevented her from climbing the stairs — Ellett did everything from keep a lookout for enemy planes during WWII to witness from afar the 1962 propane tanker explosion in Berlin. She also brought her typewriter to work with her, which she used to write articles for *The Record*.

Those tales and more are outlined in Kneer's book, the idea for which was implanted by local author and publisher Marty Podskoch. Podskoch was enthralled by Kneer's recollection of Ellett's stories, Kneer said, and encouraged him to ask Ellett for permission to tell her life story.

Kneer, a custodian at Tamarac Elementary School, approached longtime family friend Ellett with Podskoch's proposal in November 2008 and the pair began a long series of interviews that stretched over the next two years.

"We had some great times," he said. "Every time she would talk I could almost go back into time and see everything that was going on. She has so much to tell, you could write novel after novel after novel after novel. I was so intrigued and more than impressed."

Despite Kneer's excitement, Ellett said she initially wasn't thrilled with the idea.

"When Randy first suggested he was going to write a book, I wasn't for it, because I didn't think there was that much to write about," she said. "But then he kept talking to me ... (and) one thing led to another, and this is the book. It was fun."

Like every good story, Kneer realized his needed an ending. That came in July 2010, when he was informed that control of the Dickinson Hill Tower, which was decommissioned and left to deteriorate in 1972, would be transferred from the State Police to Grafton State Park, ensuring its eventual restoration.

Work on the tower should be completed this summer, and an official reopening is tentatively scheduled for August, Kneer said. He expects Ellett to be there to cut the ribbon, he said.

A release party for "I Remember When: The Untold Story of Helen Ellett" will take place Saturday at Shaver Pond Nature Center at Grafton Lakes State Park from 1 to 3 p.m.