

Lookouts have been used to help find and extinguish forest fires in Idaho since the "Great Fire" of 1910. They have taken many different forms over the years as the methods of transportation, fire detection and suppression have changed.

The first lookouts were simply camps on peaks or ridges with high visibility, which sometimes required "topping off" a tree and building a platform on top if the view was obscured. Several tree platforms still exist on the Payette National Forest from this period, including Rock Rabbit, Lodgepole Point, and Peck Mountain. Later, as such places were used over several seasons, a cabin would be built nearby to provide better shelter.

There was no standard plan for the early buildings; sometimes a design from another area of the country was used, and sometimes local materials would be used, especially in the more remote places on the forest. Many unique lookout buildings from this period still stand, including the 1931 steel building on Pollock Mountain, the Finn-style log cabin with dovetailed corners at Rocky Point, and the 1929 hip roofed log lookout with vertical corners on top of Chicken Peak.

In 1929, a standard 14' x14' lookout building was designed in Region 1. It was called the "L-4" or "Plan 80", and could be prefabricated from dimensional lumber or made of logs prepared onsite. From 1932 until the late 1950's this was the most common style of lookout in the Northwest.

Another design, also prefabricated, which appeared in the early 1930's was the Aermotor metal lookout. These consisted of a tower up to 90' tall, and had a 7' x 7' metal cab on the top. Arctic Point and Carey Dome are two of the best remaining examples.

From 1933-1942, the influx of Civilian Conservation Corps (CCC) crews enabled the construction of many new lookouts in west central Idaho, and provided labor to fight forest fires as well. They also built roads and bridges, and ran telephone lines to improve access and communication.

In the 1950's, due to the efficiency of aircraft and the use of "smokejumpers" in detecting and suppressing forest fires, few new lookouts were built, although existing structures in key locations were rebuilt or maintained. In the mid-1930's, more than 60 lookouts were staffed on the Payette National Forest, while today only 14 are staffed on a regular basis.

This display is presented as part of the Heritage Program of the Payette National Forest.