

# **LIVING ON A LOOKOUT**

by  
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Not many people get a chance to leave home, go native and set up wilderness housekeeping on their own at age sixteen, but I did. I received an appointment to become a Fire Lookout on McFadden Point during the summer of 1945, an extremely high fire danger year. My younger age was overlooked because of my experience, having grown up in the Forest Service and because World War Two, then in progress, had created an acute shortage of men.

McFadden Point was a secondary lookout used only during very dry, high fire danger seasons on the Payette National Forest in Idaho. Its importance was its location in a place that gave it an excellent view of the lower elevations of the entire Big Creek drainage that flowed eastwardly toward the Middle Fork of the Salmon River, through some of the hottest areas of the Idaho Primitive Area. If a fire got started in the dry fuels of the lower canyons it would be harder to contain and would get bigger much too rapidly. Being able to see the entire 360 degree view from the top of the mountain was important.

My new home was only 8,555 feet high and did not deserve a lookout house, but it would soon bloom with a brand new white 8 x 10 wall tent over a solidly built tent frame. It would not furnish cold running water unless it rained. The water would have to be carried two miles up hill in a five gallon canvas water bag on my back and a couple of two gallon bags, one in each hand. Some water would leak out but not enough to lighten my load. At eight pounds to the gallon I was carrying 72 pounds of water that felt like 200 pounds by the time I got back to the top. The trip down to the spring and back generally took over three and one half hours, counting filling time and walking and resting time.

Now to housekeeping: the water carried up was immediately poured into a tightly covered cream can like those used on farms. The water would stay fresher and last longer. By trial and error, we lookouts could generally get water use down to two quarts a day. This was an art to be able to drink, wash, cook, and do the dishes using only two quarts of our liquid treasure. Three tablespoons of heated water would be enough to clean off a tin plate, tin cup, and one utensil, a spoon. After carefully cleaning these tin dishes they were place momentarily on the hot stove to dry off and be sterilized at the same time. A method of saving dish washing water was to eat food directly out of the can, throw the can away and wipe off the spoon. Using these and similar conservation methods, water carrying trips were limited to about one trip a week.

Most lookout stations had at least two fifty-gallon steel barrels used exclusively to collect, filter, and store rain or snow water for non-consumptive use, such as washing, shaving, and bathing. Water collected went into the first barrel that had a layer of pure charcoal to filter the water which then went to the bottom of the barrel, and allowed to exit through a regular faucet welded near the base, and be caught and poured into the second barrel for storage. Trouble was that it did not rain or snow all that much.

We were allowed ample food supplies (which we bought), and canned fruits with lots of juice were always a number one item. Fruit juice was a standby thirst-quenching treasure. Spam or canned corned beef were generally the two meat staples that all loyal lookouts had in large quantities. Pancake mix and Bisquick were a must for young, strong, growing men on their own. A half a case of eggs came in handy when used before they spoiled, which didn't happen often. As a matter of fact, none of the food items lasted too long because young men all had bottomless pits for stomachs. Eating six eggs and a pan of biscuits was not an uncommon thing to have for an extended breakfast that lasted from 5:30 am until 10:30 which was nearing time for lunch. We were our own bosses; who is to say what time lunch was to be?

Many of us lookout men used sleeping bags thereby removing the necessity of making a bed. The sleeping bag was quite often taken outside, turned inside out, and hung across a log for a spell to take in some sunshine, then folded double and tossed on the steel cot frame. The bed was made. Some lookouts dressed au natural on their isolated mountains. Not me. Too many horseflies around with too many places to bite. Because of normal household trash, like dragged in pine needles and such, it was necessary to sweep the dirt floor a least twice a day. It is said that cleanliness is next to Godliness, and we are pretty close up there on high peaks.

One standing work order was to have enough cut up wood on hand to last the next guy one whole season. McFadden had a supply of split wood stacked nearby that could have lasted two whole years. Boredom does strange things to young minds. Dead trees were easy to come by and chopping wood was an easy diversion away from answering oneself in conversation after a week or so of putting up with our own company. Sawed logs were good for stools, tables benches and whatever else came to mind (like houseless outhouse construction).

Fire control, our main reason for being on a lookout, was a non-stop responsibility since fires have no time clocks and can, and do, start up (flare up) any time. Two fires that I spotted were after dark when the flames could be seen where smoke was not noticed during the daylight.

Each lookout station had a permanent fire finder base that had been set and adjusted to an exact compass reading. The Osborn Firefinder, referred to as an alidade, was set on the base and locked in place in order to have a true reading each time a sighting was made. The alidade was a large metal ring that fit on the metal base which allowed the ring to slide around in a complete circular movement. The ring was marked off in degrees 360 markings. The 360 and the 0 were always set on the true north compass mark or reading the base. If a fire was spotted in an easterly direction it was looked at through the sight attached to the sliding ring and a reading was recorded, which might read 29 degrees NNE of ground zero which was McFadden Lookout.

If other lookouts reported the same fire (smoke) their azimuth (compass) reading was recorded and a line was shot across the master map in the fire dispatcher's office. The line (if it was the same fire) would cross the line of the first lookout's reporting, and a triangulation of the fire where the lines cross would give a better, or more exact, location of the fire. Three lookouts reporting gave an almost perfect location of the fire.

Before the days of airplane spotting and smokejumpers, the smoke chaser nearest the fire was dispatched to the fire. If the smoke chaser was twelve miles away from the fire it would take him more than four hours to get to the fire, a long time for a fire to burn unattended. Generally, any person within twenty miles was asked to go to the fire. Time was of great importance (In 1932, one fire, the "Whimstick Ridge" fire, burned eleven miles in one hour).

It might be said that there was at least one fire close enough to each lookout that gave them a free trip to a forest fire, at least until someone, or crew, came to relieve them to go back to their home on the hill. What a great change from monotony. Recalling fires is a completely different bunch of stories.

One of the second most important jobs of the lookout during the war years was to spot and record any aircraft that was in the air. The direction they were traveling, the type of aircraft it was, and its identification number were to be recorded and reported daily. Most of the airplanes flying over McFadden were B-17 and B-24 bombers. B-17s were stationed at Gowen Field near Boise, Idaho. Mountain Home, Idaho, was the primary base for the B-24 bombers. Both types of aircraft were often seen on training flights over the mountainous country in central Idaho. One camouflaged B-24, evidently on supply flights to and from somewhere, flew past my lookout several times a week. He dipped his wings in recognition most of the time. My station, I later learned, was one of their check points for navigation.

A secret project that we were not supposed to talk about, except in coded words, was the "paper balloons" that the Japanese launched in the Pacific where they were caught by the trade winds that blew them toward and over the Pacific Northwest. These papier mache balloons were armed with several incendiary bombs that were meant to start forest fires in the West. Some fires were started in Oregon and Washington. Because of the secrecy the Japanese never knew their effectiveness. One way of reporting was to tell the dispatcher that there was some papers that the Air Force would pick up whenever they could stop by. Very few were spotted on the Payette National Forest, in our part of Idaho. No fires were started by them in our sector. Only one needed to be shot down over a forest in Idaho and that was in northern Idaho, or so I was told.

One time, when I was not yet on a lookout, I was picked up at Big Creek landing field by an Air Force L-5 reconnaissance plane to guide the pilot to a definite named location where the remains of a downed balloon was reported to be. Just large fragments of what looked like gay cardboard were spotted. This sighting was actually a misplaced canvas tarp from somewhere. When balloons were actually sighted the L-5 spotting planes would fly nearby until P-38s flew in and shot them down. These reported occurrences were few in number over Oregon and Washington. Military ground search teams went to all found or downed balloons to take care of the explosive devices. The L-5s, small Piper Cub type planes, were used for fire patrol over the backcountry and several of us, at one time or another, got to fly along as guides. This was high adventure for us young bucks.

The life of a lookout person can be a very lonely life ("Man is ultimately, forever, lonely," said Clarke Moustakas). The lookout point can, at times, become an island when an ocean of low clouds and fog flood the valleys and canyons below. Being engulfed by unsympathetic elements, abandoned, alone knowing worry bordering on fear, brings resentment, emotional denial, and false bravery with nowhere to go, is a feeling that becomes a common emotional experience felt by all lookouts at least once.

If you sit on those darned mountains long enough you soon realize that you are, indeed, just a tiny speck of nothing really worthwhile. You can feel your insignificance in the true nature of things and you can, if you allow it to happen, become more lonely, more alone, and man, loneliness is a force that can bite deep into your soul.

On a lookout a person does get bored, and a person will get lonely and you can soon realize that reading helps. The several books and magazines you brought along can be read over and over; then all the classified ads in old newspapers become interesting reading, as do labels on canned goods, even the number stamped on the bottoms of the cans. When you run out of things to read you can write your own stuff, which is exciting until you reread it.

A deck of cards has a certain fascination. Many different games can be played over and over .... and over. There was one young fella on a lookout (I'll not mention my name) who played solitaire every day for three weeks, game after game. He lost until in a fit of anger he stepped outside and threw the deck of cards into the wind. They flew all over the mountain. Several monotonous days later, after a change of mind, he spent parts of two days finding all of the cards. A deck of cards, after much use, can become completely faded and flexible like a cloth rag, but are still valuable, so they are put back into the old waterproof tobacco can to be stored in a wooden goodies box for the fellow who will be there next year ... Maybe.

Shirt-pocket-size tobacco cans, with their tight hinged lids, could be found all over the mountains at strategic spots to hold and store valuables and records, Such as cards, maps, mining claims, or explicit instructions for something. A tobacco can can probably be found in a stacked stone monument on top of any mountain of challenge to any climber. They are the recording vaults of name and date of the conquering hero. The cans are good for keeping matches dry, transporting pills, and paper money. They easily hold a day's worth of grasshoppers for fish bait, or extra fish hooks. Every good lookout had several such storage vaults. No backwoods inhabitant was ever without some.

It is said that necessity is the mother of invention. The same can be said for boredom. When there is nothing to do and a few days have been spent doing nothing, something has to change so a person gets to thinking. The thoughts then become a creative process and the solutions spawned by creativity are somewhat amazing. Old tree limbs become whittled wood carvings. Pieces of boards become wind vanes. Scissored tin cans become metal flowers. Deer horn soaked in vinegar becomes soft and can be carved to resemble carved ivory after it air dries. Doodling often becomes rendered drawings and random thoughts put to words become poetry or acceptable prose writing. More than one lookout has become a writer. Still, on the other side, many writers sign on as lookouts to have the quiet uninterrupted time to polish their art.

The best pastime of all comes when the sun sets slowly in the west and a hard day of slaving finally ends. When the telephone lines no longer need to be kept open for fire reporting it is time for visiting. All points are connected by telephone at the switchboard and the dispatcher's office. Joe can call Sam and Pete, up on Goat Mountain, can listen or join in. Before the evening is over there could be ten or more lookout stations involved in one big gab fest. These hookups were a nightly occurrence, night after night until finally evenings turned cooler. Colors changed in Nature's things and ice started forming on the water bucket. Early snow would touch the peaks and the tremendous exhilarating feeling came for it was time to come down off the mountain.... Time to rejoin civilization, and girls, who never came to mind while on those lonely majestic mountains (some lookouts have been known to tell lies once in a while).

[An editorial note by Payette National Forest Historian Peter Preston: My good friend Dan LeVan Jr spent all of his growing-up years at the Big Creek Ranger Station, where his father, Dan Sr, was ranger from 1925 to 1950. Dan Jr, at his father's side, learned woodcraft and all the skills necessary to keep himself safe and sound while alone in the woods. He came to know the mountains surrounding his home at Big Creek as a wondrous connection to the mysteries of Nature. Dan and I have talked about the history of the backcountry for several years. Dan is retired from teaching school in Glenwood Springs, Colorado. I am glad that I encouraged him to write this wonderful piece about his experience as a lookout]

