

SHEEPEATER FIRE LOOKOUT STATION

USDA PAYETTE NATIONAL FOREST

HERITAGE PROGRAM

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The Sheepeater Lookout is the only remaining staffed lookout on the Payette Unit of the Frank Church - River of No Return Wilderness. As early as 1912, maps show a trail to the top of the mountain. Its high elevation of 8,486 feet above sea level made it a great place for spotting fires. From the summit the view includes the Bitterroots, Big Horn Crags, Gospel Hump, Pilot Peak, Cary Dome, Black Butte, Chicken Peak and the Loon Mountains. Moose can be seen grazing at Fish Lake. Wildlife such as marmots, mountain goats, bighorn sheep and an occasional cougar have all visited the lookout at one time or another.



This site has been used as a lookout since 1924 when a lookout and spotter were present on Sheepeater Mountain. In 1929, the first building was built. It was a rustic log and framed building with a steep pitched wood shingle roof. The picture shows smoke chaser/lookout John Cook below and his sister Ruth Cook on the roof holding onto the lightning rod for balance. John Cook had his horse ready so he could ride to a

wildfire when one was spotted in his vicinity.

By 1935, a new building had been built on the top of Sheepeater Mountain replacing the earlier structure. The 1935 building was a typical 14X14 Forest Service plan R-4 #80 which included a pyramid roof and multi-paneled windows on four sides. It was built directly on the flat stone available on the mountain and using milled lumber hauled up to the mountain by mules. A standard single person Forest Service latrine was also installed in 1935 and is still in use today. It is perched precariously on the steep edge of the mountain.



In 1976, when the 1935 building fell into disrepair, it was dismantled and replaced with a 1957 single room, prefabricated metal cab lookout relocated from Lookout Mountain. It is not unusual for the Forest Service to move buildings. The steel beam and panel R-6 flat-roofed cab is designed to be moved. Jim Butler and his crew rode horseback up to Lookout Mountain to dismantle the metal cab.

They measured all of the dismantled steel components. Using the Gate City handbook, he calculated the weight by foot. The components were then divided and packed for helicopter sling loads for transportation to Sheepeater Mountain.

The Forest air officer at the time was Gordon Fouche. The measuring and load consolidation took 2 or 3 days. Bruce Yergensen was stationed at Chamberlain Guard Station during the move. Yergensen helped measure the building at Lookout Mountain for size in order to construct the appropriate base at Sheepeater. He and Ed Allen built the concrete and stone piers at the new site. Later, one of the lookouts stationed there built a basement under the building and added stairs using the flat native rock that covers the mountain top.



Jim Bulter (left) and Gordon Fouche taking a break on Lookout Mountain while taking apart the 1957 metal cab to move it to Sheepeater Mountain.

This flat topped metal cab lookout is the only one of its kind in the Frank Church - River of No Return Wilderness. These low profile flat top style metal lookouts were a big improvement over the 1930s era lookout buildings. First constructed in 1953, the stronger flat roof made trips to the "top" by the lookout far less traumatic than walking on the steep pitched roof of the older lookouts. The flat roof resulted in a quieter building because the old pyramid roof caught more wind. The single-paned windows were designed to be much more water resistant than the leaky multi-paned windows of the older style lookouts. Larger window panes and greater window space greatly improved visibility. Metal galvanized buildings were easier to maintain as they did not require paint and did not deteriorate as easily as wood. Additionally, these buildings were designed to be disassembled and moved to new sites as needed. This building design is a tribute to Forest Service ingenuity.

Living at the lookout is a full-time job. Water has to be hauled uphill from a spring a half mile west of the lookout. Firewood is collected from the surrounding forest. Reading is done by lantern light. A solar panel powers the radio. The lookout only gets supplies once a summer by pack train. The lookout plays an important part in fire monitoring. He or she is kept busy watching the weather and noting where lightning strikes occur. During the fire season the lookout may act as a dispatcher, relaying information to aircraft, ground crews and other lookouts. The lookout is even evacuated from time to time when the fires come too close.

Sheepeater Fire Lookout Station is located approximately 12 miles west of Chamberlain Guard Station off Forest Trails #003 and #023. Trails are not always identified by signs, so always have a current map when hiking in the wilderness. When visiting the lookout station, please use proper fire lookout etiquette. Never enter a lookout unless you have been invited in by the person staffing the station. Keep noise to a minimum; bring your own food and water, and pack out your own trash.