

YELLOW ROCK LOOKOUT

U.S. Dept of Agriculture, Forest Service
Payette National Forest, Heritage Program
by Val Simpson, as told to Peter Preston
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SHEEPEATER LOOKOUT, PAYETTE
NATIONAL FOREST, 1968

Sheepeater Lookout is the oldest lookout still in full-time use within the Frank Church – River of No Return Wilderness (FC-RONR) on the Payette National Forest. It sits on the 8486-foot rock pinnacle of Sheepeater Peak, twelve miles west of the former Chamberlain Ranger Station. The original lookout, built in the late-1920's, was a 16-foot by 16-foot log and frame structure with a pyramidal roof, as shown in the photo above. The original structure fell into disrepair and was replaced in 1976 with a steel cab, manufactured by Gate City Steel, relocated in pieces by helicopter from the nearby abandoned Lookout Mountain site. Sheepeater Lookout has an excellent view of a wide area of the FC-RONR and serves as an important communications relay.

On September 9, 1999, Val Simpson, Chamberlain District Ranger 1952-1957, told an unusual story about Sheepeater Lookout: In the early summer of 1954, an inexperienced young man, who had been to lookout fireman's school, was packed up to the lookout. Included in his gear was a gallon of yellow paint and he was given specific instructions by Ranger Simpson to repaint the aircraft identification numbers on the roof of the lookout.

A few weeks later Ranger Simpson led Payette Forest Supervisor Jack Kooch and Regional Forester Tom Van Meter on a horseback inspection trip through the remote areas of the Chamberlain District. From Fish Lake, where they had stopped to camp (and fish), they travelled a short distance up the ridge to their inspection destination of Sheepeater Lookout. Upon arrival at the lookout Ranger Simpson was shocked and embarrassed to find that, in addition to repainting the numbers on the roof of the building, the young lookout had painted the rocks all around the lookout with the yellow paint, to a distance of about 30 feet, using all the paint in the gallon bucket. Supervisor Kooch said nothing to Ranger Simpson at the lookout and a short time later, at their Fish Lake camp site, Simpson broke the ice by telling Kooch that he had no idea why the yellow rocks and that the lookout had been instructed to only paint the numbers on the roof. Supervisor Kooch was so irate about the situation that he told Ranger Simpson "fire that lookout [man] and when I return in a couple of weeks I don't want to see a single yellow rock."

The ride back to Chamberlain airstrip was usually one of joviality, but on this trip few words were spoken. As soon as Jack Kooch and Tom Van Meter were on the plane back to McCall, Ranger Simpson started to rectify the distressing situation. Within a few days a new lookout was packed up to Sheepeater, accompanied by Simpson, Ranger Alternate Jack Higby, and Bill Cluff, all armed with rock bars. They spent a couple of days rolling over all the rocks, or rolling them down the steep mountain side, so the yellow paint did not appear. They were exhausted when they finished the job, having turned over hundreds of rocks, most of which were quite large. Supervisor Kooch did return in two weeks, took a look at the lookout, with the yellow rocks turned under, and rode away without comment.