

Fire Lookouts - A Legacy

From the days of the old west, through the trials of World War 2, to our current high-tech world, the story of the fire lookout is laced with romance, heroics and tragedy. Once considered the most important tool for the detection of wildfires, lookouts all but faded into obscurity. This tale may have a happy ending, however, as enthusiasts nationwide are rallying to protect this symbol of our conservation heritage.

The story begins in 1876 when the first fire lookout was built by the Southern Pacific Railroad on Red Mountain near Donner Summit to watch for train fires. In 1905, Chief Forester Gifford Pinchot reorganized the forest reserves into the United States Forest Service. Pinchot's philosophy of "total exclusion" of fires made it necessary to create an efficient organization of fire prevention and detection. Within three years California constructed its first two permanent forest fire lookout stations.

Initially, fire lookouts were crude camps temporarily set up at "patrol points" where an observer might ride his horse to make observations. Others were "crows nests" - platforms built atop the highest trees. Fire watchers often doubled as fire fighters. Spotting a smoke, he would hop on his horse or hike cross-country to quench the fire. By 1914, construction standards were in place and soon thereafter, both wooden "live-in" cabs and steel "observation only" towers were being built. Two years later 81 permanent lookout structures stood on key mountain tops.

Then came the 1930's. America was in the throes of the Great Depression. As President, Franklin D. Roosevelt authorized government programs to put the unemployed back to work. Labor work forces like the Civilian Conservation Corp (CCC's) were assigned to various public works projects and building fire lookouts was one of those. It was also the time when forestry departments nationwide were determined to put a fire lookout on top of every mountain to protect valuable timber resources. Constructing lookouts became a priority, and with the help of the CCC's, fire watch towers sprung up across the land. Builders seemed undeterred by the precarious and remote locations of many stations. In their heyday, over 8,000 lookouts dotted the countryside, over 600 in California alone.

World War II sparked a new development in the history of fire lookouts. In the spring of 1942, the Army Air Forces arm mobilized the Aircraft Warning Service and utilized fire lookouts across the country as enemy aircraft observation points. Two or more watchers staffed each lookout 24 hours a day 365 days a year until the war ended. America's entry into the war brought about another change for fire lookouts - women. In 1944, females joined the Forest Service work force and began a long tradition of staffing fire towers.

The vigor was not to last. During the 1960's and 1970's most fire lookouts and their dedicated watchers were phased out. With increased emphasis on using airplanes and helicopters for fire detection and suppression, a "let-burn" policy in many wilderness areas and a growing number of visitors and residents in the forests, attitudes towards staffing lookouts have changed. Fire lookouts across the country face extinction. Today there are only a few hundred in operation. Once considered a proud symbol of our nation's conservation heritage, fire lookouts are a fading legacy.