

A Legend Retires

by Paul Waddell

Local North Fork resident, Don Wisseman, began his long and distinguished career with the U.S. Forest Service back in 1962, working over the years as a tanker truck operator and fire prevention patrol before becoming a fire lookout in 1980. Aside from short stints at Goat Mountain, Musick Mountain and Miami Mountain Lookouts (all located on the Sierra), Don spent the majority of his career on Shuteye, providing a stable fixture up there on the mountain not only for the many firefighters he helped guide into lightning strikes, but as well to the hundreds of visitors that came to see Don, year after year, to bring him food in exchange for a story, or a song or two on his fiddle.

Just like Don, Shuteye has a long and storied history as the oldest Lookout on the Sierra. Since 1911, forest workers have used this 8300 foot high peak to watch over the town of North Fork, and out into the back areas of the Sierras. Cemented into a large rock near the lookout is an urn holding the ashes of Sam McFarland, one of the early Shuteye lookouts. Nearby are several other plaques dedicated to former Forest Service employees. Someday there will be another plaque there, for Don, who grew to love that old lookout over the years, his home away from home.

It was my pleasure, the last few years to supervise Don, which basically meant leaving him alone to do his job and call in fires across a landscape which he knew like the back of his hand. Of the 40 or so employees I've supervised over the years, Don was easily the most low maintenance and easy going I've had the opportunity to work with. Never once did I hear him say an unkind word about anybody. And I can't remember him ever having a "bad day". Of course, when Don had some health problems last year, and it became apparent that he

wouldn't be able to return to Shuteye, he was obviously disappointed. Nonetheless, he took it all in stride, and never let this disappointment get him down.

Don also loved the critters of the mountain, particularly a gaggle of chipmunks he fed peanut butter. Don also told me a story about an injured red tailed hawk he had nursed back to health down at his home in North Fork, and who later flew up to Shuteye to thank him.

Shuteye--as anyone knows who has driven the grueling last three miles up to the tower--is a rough and rocky 4 wheel drive road, that has snapped more than a few axels over the years, and bounced Don around like a Raggedy Ann doll in the cab of my truck over the twenty or so trips I shuttled him up and down from there. More often than not, on the trip down, there would be some group on the way up to see him and who, of course, were mightily disappointed that they would miss Don this go around, but promised to be back up again sometime soon to pay their respects, and bring him cake or cookies to hear him play some fiddle.

Unfortunately, Don won't have a chance to return and play a tune for those folks who missed him their last trip up. Just the same, I'm sure if they listen close enough to the breeze blowing by across the top of the mountain, they can hear Don's fiddle and voice and stories forever.

