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Tahquitz Peak lookout station, located in the San Jacinto Mountains, erected in 1917, and still in use. — *John Robinson Collection*

Guardians on the Mountaintops

The Fire Lookouts of Southern California

by John Robinson and Bruce Risher

Atop a mile-high summit, a lookout anxiously scans the forest. It is a warm September day. Dry Santa Ana winds have blown the sky clean, except for a distant line of haze over the ocean. The forest below is parched after a summer without rain. The brush-clad foothills are crackling dry. "That greasewood is like kindling today," he is thinking. It is fire season in Southern California. Forest Service, state and county fire crews are on full alert.

Fire in the Southern California mountain areas can be a fearful thing. Forest and brush conflagrations in past years have consumed not only valuable watershed, but scores of homes in the canyons and foothills. Here in Southern California the fire hazard is greater than else-

where. Dry summers, gale-like Santa Ana winds, the dense and flammable chaparral, the great numbers of people—these factors combine to make the mountains and foothills highly susceptible to a holocaust.

In the early days of the forest protection, rangers on horseback patrolled the mountains. If they spotted a fire they would first try to extinguish it themselves. If, as so often happened, the fire had grown too big, they would gallop down to the nearest guard station and call for help. Many hours or even days later, a fire crew would arrive on the scene, often to find a roaring inferno impossible to contain. It was not at all uncommon for a forest fire to burn for weeks on

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