

On the lookout

By Maret Pajutee | Correspondent

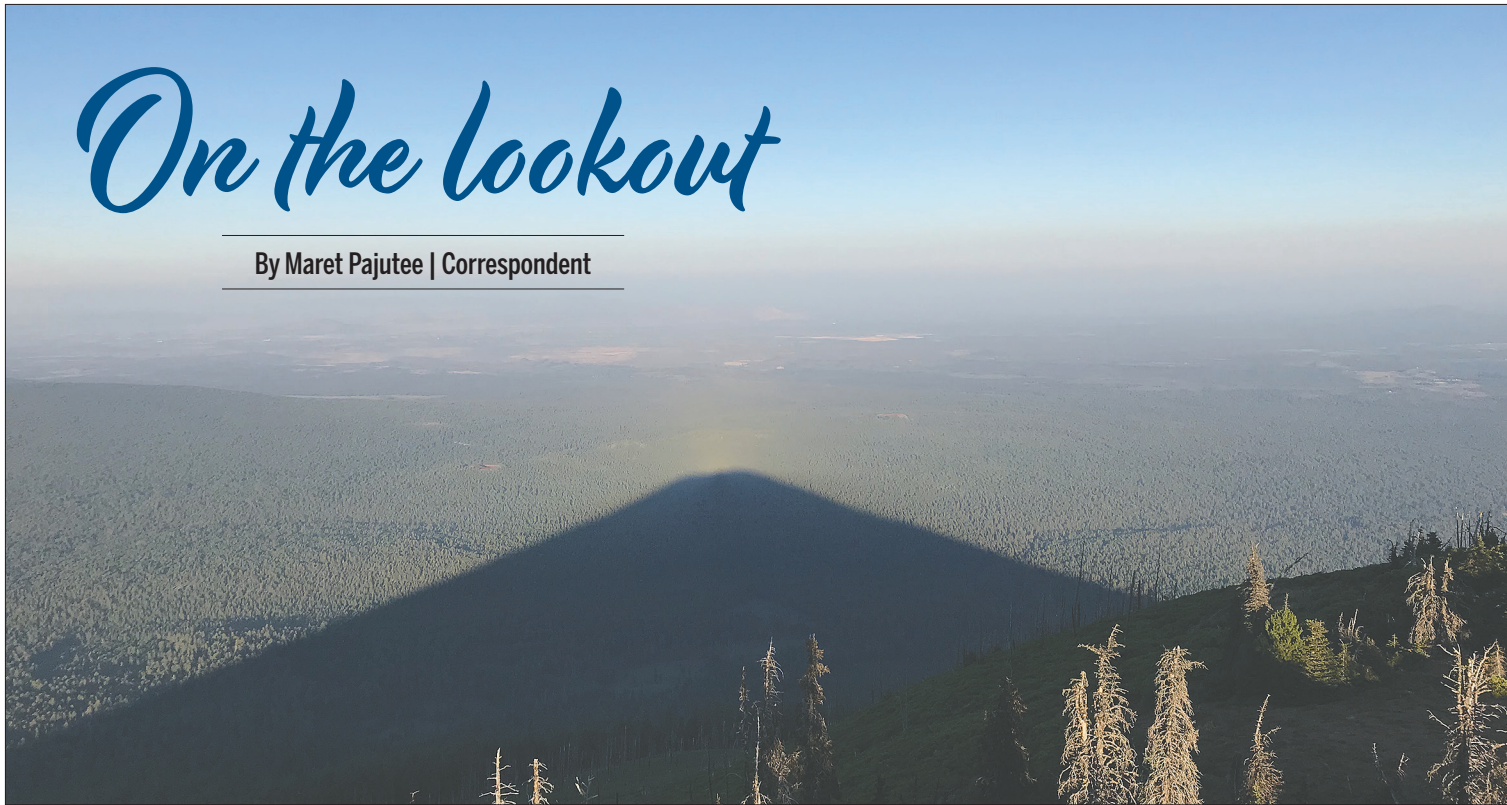


PHOTO BY MARET PAJUTEE

Living among the pine forests of Sisters, many of us enjoy a feeling of solitude with only trees, birds, and wind for company. But sometimes there's been someone watching over us.

For over 100 years there have been people climbing swaying trees, scaling towers, and living on mountain tops scanning the sky. I was lucky to be one of the sentinels. Most of the time nothing happens as you watch the mountains and they watch you. Then in an instant the work begins, scanning and mapping the wisp of smoke that could quickly darken to a black column that blocks the sun.

Wildfires are an important part of our forests, and it's complicated, but they pose a threat to buildings made of wood. Sisters is close to the

mountains where summer lightning fires have a tendency to sweep towards town, driven by evening downslope winds.

In 1915 a delimbed pine tree over 100 feet tall was fitted with iron steps made by blacksmith Hardy Allen to provide a perch to watch for wildfires. An early photo taken from the tower was hand labelled to show the Hotel Sisters (still standing today) as well as such long-gone places as Allen's Blacksmith Shop and George Aitkens Drugstore. Few structures escaped the fires which devastated Sisters in 1923 and 1924.

Black Butte had a sweeping vista of Sisters Country. So, in 1910 Ranger Harve Vincent constructed 2 lookout trees on the summit and someone would climb up to scan the forest. By 1912, phone wires were strung to the top on ceramic insulators attached to trees and a "crow's nest" platform supported by four trees provided a view towards town.

As interest in fire detection increased, more lookouts were built. There was a time when nearly every butte had a lookout. The lonely watchers would compete to see who turned a smoke in first and would chat after hours on their radios. In 1938, the Deschutes National Forest had a high of 32 lookouts, many built by the Civilian Conservation Corps. As technology improved, most were

dismantled or abandoned. By 1991, only nine were active. But human eyes in the sky are often less expensive and more discerning than cameras or planes and there are still active lookouts on prominent peaks, including Black Butte, Henkle Butte, and Green Ridge.

As a kid I fell in love with the idea of lookout life. In 1964, my father built a summer cabin on a hill facing Henkle Butte. We visited the lookout often and, for an introvert, it seemed like the perfect job. Endless time to be alone, read, draw, watch clouds, and learn how to play the harmonica. I went to college, got a degree, then became a ski bum for a few years working at Hoodoo. I asked a Forest Service guy I met if they had any jobs for an entomologist. He said "No, but they always need a lookout for Black Butte."

I jumped at the chance of a lookout job and was hired for the summer in 1984. The previous lookout, Gail, escorted me up to show me the ropes. It was a brutal environment for old buildings and she warned me the old 1934 tower would shake in a high wind like a train. Sometimes I had to kick off layers of rime ice to ascend and gloves were required to avoid nasty splinters from the railing.

You entered through a heavy trapdoor in the floor. The 7-by-7-foot cab had layers of every color paint with a final coat of deep blue. The catwalk boards were so old and dry and you could pull the nails out with your fingers. Old chairs and a wood box provided three places to sit as the day heated up, but the best place to sit was in the window frame which opened to the catwalk on the eastside. It was a warm spot in the early morning sun, and in the evening you could watch the triangular shadow of Black Butte move eastward, knowing you were riding on the top of the shadow where it glowed bright.

The 1922 cupola was in

bad shape as well, and was used to store piles of five-gallon water containers, tools, and garbage which was hung from rafters to foil the packrats. I lived in the log ground house built in 1979. It was cozy with a propane stove and fridge, wood stove for heat, and a sleeping loft where I would watch the lights of cars coming down from Santiam Pass. The 1934 outhouse was rickety, but had interesting graffiti left from the CCC guys living at Riverside Campground below (then Camp White).

It could be brutally hot in the tower and the flying ants that lived in the roof and

With its expansive overview of Sisters, Black Butte remains a perfect spot and a destination for thousands.

yellow jackets were a torment, so windows had to stay closed. But after my shift ended at 6 or 7 p.m., I would wander the butte for long hours searching for mariposa lilies, talking back to the crows, and communing with the ghosts of lookouts past.

Lookout Lynn Wilson carved a rock by his ground cabin below the crow's nest marking his tenure in 1919 June-September. Rusty metal shards and a piece of purple glass were all that remained.

The many women who worked on the Butte over the years had left no trace. Earliest was Gertrude Merrill, a stenographer from the Portland District Foresters Office who worked the fire season of 1921. Hazel McKinney, her two daughters, and their black collie Snip enjoyed living and working in the new Lookout Cupola in 1922-1927. Hazel was often mentioned in *The Bend Bulletin* and famously demonstrated the advantages of the cupola by turning in a wildfire from bed at 1 a.m.

Ed Park, who became a well-known writer, left another rock message proclaiming he was "The Bearded Bachelor of Black Butte 1948-49" as well as a gravestone for a lynx he killed there.

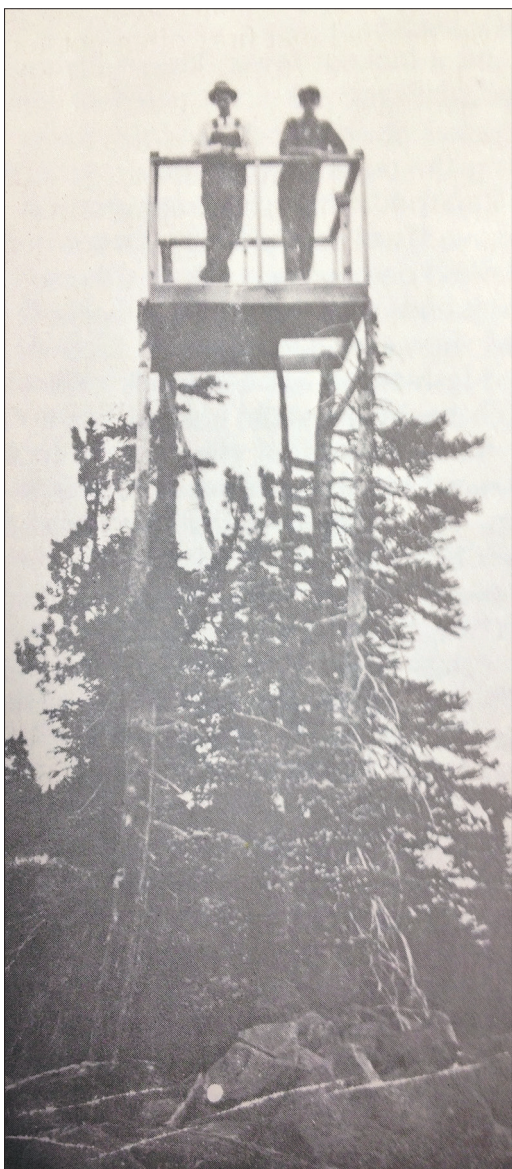


PHOTO PROVIDED

The Black Butte Lookout Tower in 1919.

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