

HISTORIC LOOKOUT BURNS DOWN

Structure was the last of its kind in Three Sisters Wilderness

Zach Urness
Salem Statesman Journal
USA TODAY NETWORK

The last fire lookout in the Three Sisters Wilderness has burned down, and it's still unclear how it happened.

Olallie Mountain Lookout, a sentinel that's peered across the forest and trio of volcanoes since 1932, burned down sometime last autumn, U.S. Forest Service officials said, but it wasn't discovered until this summer.

A rare "grange hall" style design located southeast of Cougar Reservoir, Olallie had been inactive for decades and looked a bit rough, but remained beloved by hikers and historians.

"It was one of the first of its kind, and one of the very last," said Don Allen, president of the Sand Mountain Society. "The loss of Olallie is a terrible one in terms of Oregon history."

The Forest Service is investigating the cause of the fire, said Darren Cross, McKenzie River district ranger. He said there was lightning across the forest in late September, but the lookout also could have been torched by a wayward campfire.

"It's really sad and a lost opportunity to save that history," Cross said. "We didn't hear about it until this spring and there wasn't much evidence since the burn area had been under snow all winter."

The lookout sat at 5,592 feet with a commanding view of the Central Cascade volcanoes and could be reached via Olallie Mountain Trail.

"It's an amazing spot to visit because you can see so much on a clear day: Mount Hood to Diamond Peak," said Cheryl Hill, author of "Fire Lookouts of Oregon." "It's also great because of its wilderness setting which means you are not surrounded by a sea of clearcuts like you are at many other lookout sites in Oregon."

Olallie narrowly escaped wildfires in the past and remained standing with the help of volunteer groups, including the Sand Mountain Society and the Obsidians, that put in thousands of hours of work keeping the building upright.

"So many hours were invested in preserving the opportunity to rehabilitate this great, high-integrity building," Allen said. "It seemed to have a will to live. It just survived the Olallie Trail Fire of 2017, which burned just about to the foundation of the lookout and stopped, as if in reverence for the venerable old building."

The Three Sisters' other lookout, Rebel, was burned in the Rebel Fire of 2017, leaving Olallie as the lone survivor until now.

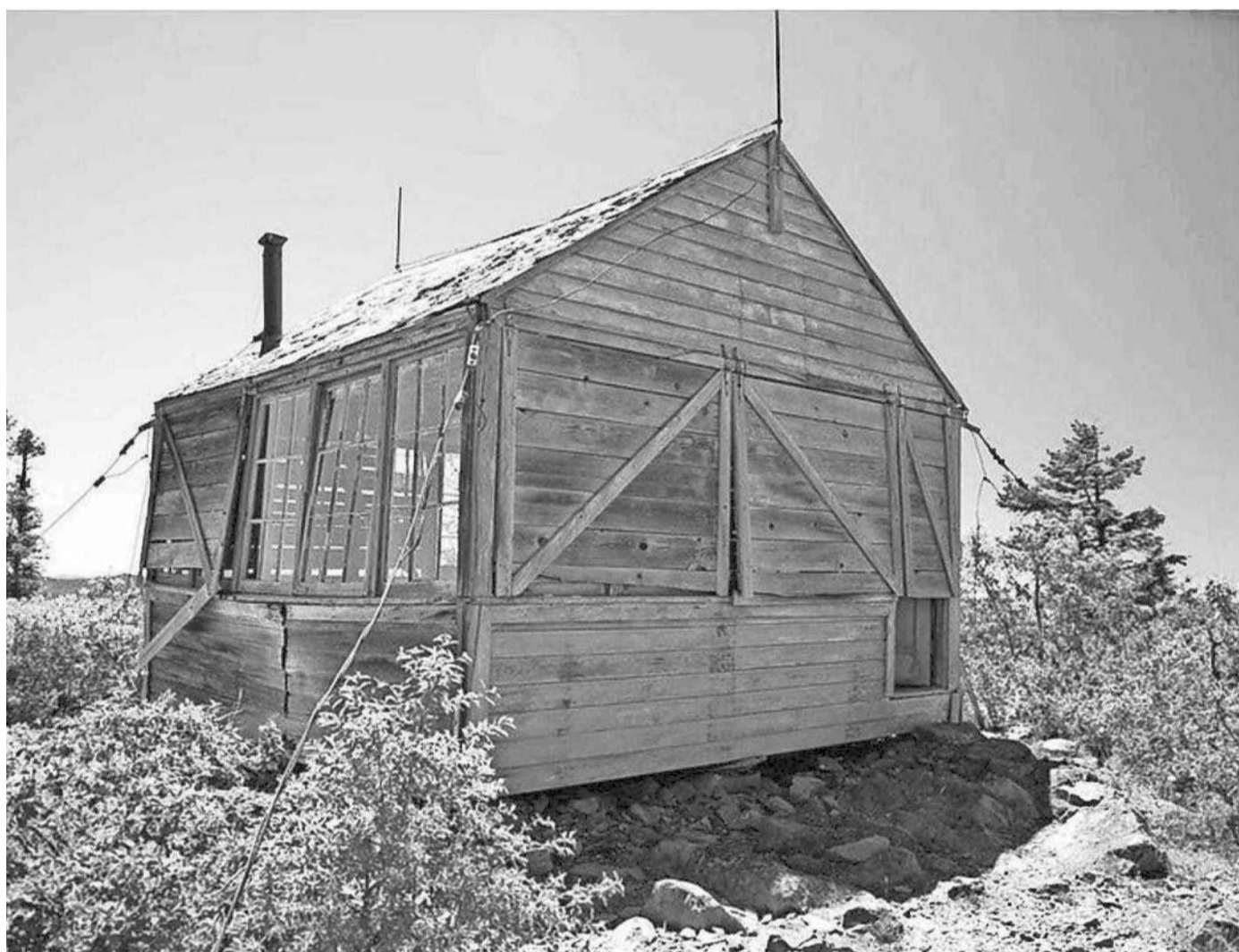
At their height in the 1930s and 40s, fire lookouts dotted between 800 to 900 mountain peaks across Oregon. Today, as technology for spotting smoke has improved, only around 160 remain, basically classified into three categories: active lookouts, rental lookouts and "ghost" lookouts falling into disrepair.

Olallie and others like it become ghost lookouts partly because they're stuck between two laws: the Wilderness Act, which discourages human-made buildings, and the National Historic Preservation Act, which favors protecting historic structures and sites.

Allen said volunteers were often allowed to maintain historic lookouts in wilderness areas because they predated wilderness designation. But that began to change in 2005 after the environmental group Wilderness Watch sued the Forest Service for rebuilding Green Mountain Lookout in Washington's Glacier Peak Wilderness. The effect was



Olallie Mountain Lookout is seen after it burned down. The lookout sat at 5,592 feet with a commanding view of the Central Cascade volcanoes. PHOTO COURTESY OF STEVE JOHNSON



Olallie Mountain Lookout, before it burned down last autumn. The lookout sat at 5,592 feet with a commanding view of the Central Cascade volcanoes. CHERYL HILL/FIRE LOOKOUTS OF OREGON

chilling on restoring other wilderness lookouts, Allen said. Many were allowed to deteriorate.

"While heritage professionals argued for stabilization at a minimum, some wilderness managers thought any modern facilities should be eliminated from wilderness," Allen said.

Allen proposed rehabilitating Olallie Mountain Lookout in 2010, when walls meant to be temporary were added, and again in 2015.

But additional work stalled and last

time Hill visited, the lookout "was in pretty bad shape," she said.

"Nevertheless, it still had a lot of character, and the visitor log showed how many people visited and enjoying coming up there," she said.

Cross said what to do with Olallie was an open question when it burned down. He said rehabilitating it or removing it and building it else were all on the table.

But the fire, whether nature or human caused, answered that question for good. Now, visitors who climb Olallie

Mountain can look out from the same viewpoint, but without a building that survived almost 90 years.

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Man shot, car is stolen at Silver Falls State Park trailhead

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A man was shot during a suspected carjacking at a Silver Falls State Park trailhead last week.

Troopers and emergency crews were called to the north trailhead parking lot for a report of a person who had been shot after 10 p.m., according to Oregon State Police.

Billy Gardner, a 23-year-old Portland man, was taken to Salem Hospital where he was treated for the gunshot wound and released.

Following an investigation, officials say the suspect stole a silver 2016 Ford Fusion with Oregon license plate 383

MAX and left northbound on Highway 214.

Officials are asking anyone with information about the incident to call the Oregon State Police Northern Command Center at 1-800-442-0776, or *OSP if you are calling from a mobile phone, and reference case #SP20-205764.

Oregon State Police was assisted by the Marion County Sheriff's Office, Silverton Police Department, Drakes Crossing Fire Department, and Woodburn Ambulance.

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