

Lookouts instrumental in detecting fires within reservation boundaries and beyond



A spectacular panoramic view can be seen from the Eagle Butte Lookout.

Height has its advantage, especially when one is perched high atop a fire lookout station. Views are spectacular from that vantage point—one is literally above the trees and on an even plane with the surrounding towering peaks.

The Warm Springs Reservation has three such lookouts. The Shitike, Sidwalter and Eagle Butte Lookouts are located at optimal sites that allow for quick detection of fires within reservation boundaries and beyond. Each lookout is manned from June 1 through September 30 of each year.

Hank Palmer mans the Shitike Butte Lookout. This being his first year, Hank is not quite familiar with the aerial layout of the reservation. But, he has located the spots he knows on the Fire Finder map and he feels confident in pinpointing fires by calculating the locations mathematically.

Like the other lookouts, Hank remains in the lookout for eight hours a day, sometimes longer, depending on the weather and fire conditions. If lightning storms come through, he keeps an eagle eye out for smoke. Hank says that sometimes a fire can "sleep" and go undetected for up to two weeks, thus making the job even more difficult. "We have to keep an eye on certain hot spots," he says.

The cubicles atop the lookouts are small, about six feet by six feet. Within that small space is a radio, a chair, a roll of maps and the Fire Finder. The legs of Hank's chair are set in glass insulator's so that he won't be electrocuted during a lightning storm. Some storms are so intense that "the place buzzes...batteries make little noises and there is a lot of static electricity in the air," says Hank.

About 20 miles away, as the crow flies, is the Sidwalter Butte lookout. Jim Keene, a retired teacher from Lincoln City, has manned the 29-year-old tower for the past 27 years. His tenure as a lookout makes him totally familiar with the reservation landscape and weather patterns that can roll across the terrain.

Keene, married to the former Gloria Courtney, has been a lookout on the reservation for 30 years. He, his wife and two children have spent their summers at various lookouts. It's a great way for the kids to "get along for at least three months out of the year. It taught them to be creative," says Jim. Up here, he says, "you can't turn a knob for instant entertainment." He and his daughter Keely spent many hours running, tallying up a total of 500 road miles one summer.

Keene spends much of his time reading and catching up on paperwork when not occupying the tower. From his perch 100 feet above ground, Keene can view a "tree farm" developed several years ago by BIA forestry crews. He, like Hank, can see the Agency Plains and help keep an eye on the field burning.

All lookout personnel are familiar with the color of smoke that rises from different types of fires. Blue smoke comes from brush and grass fires, where brown smoke rises from burning trees.

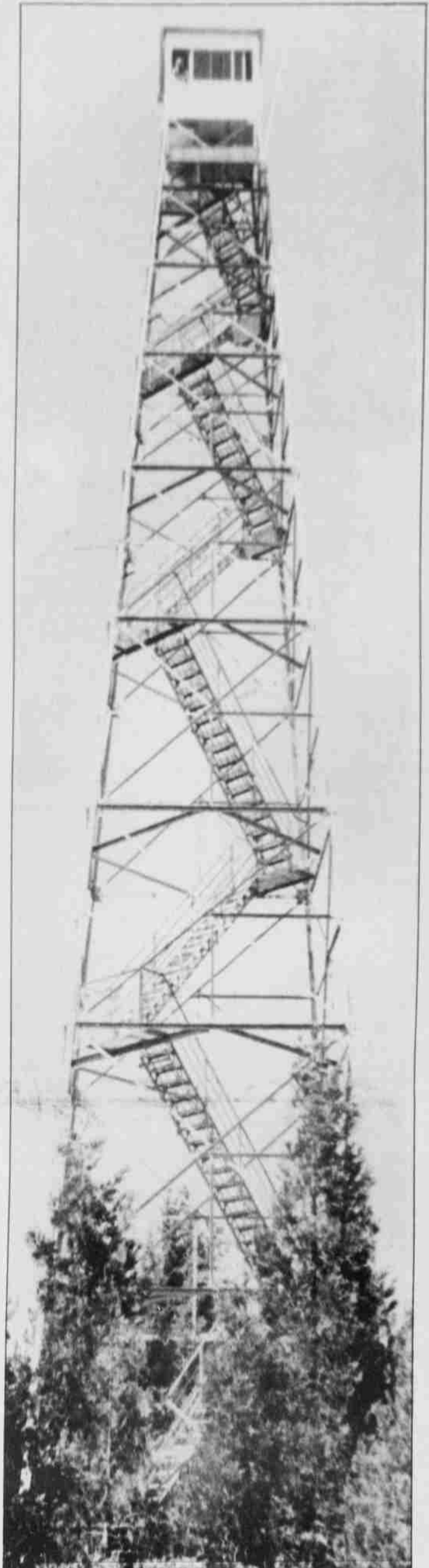
Debbie Williams is posted at the Eagle Butte Lookout, a high and arid viewpoint off Highway 3. From there, most of the Warm Springs and Simnasho communities can be seen. Debbie is not alone at the lookout, as a few rattle snakes have been spotted. Unlike the other lookouts, Eagle Butte has electricity.

All lookouts have weather stations from which a day's high and low temperature, relative humidity and wind direction and velocity are taken. Fuel moisture is also determined. Current conditions indicate that forested lands are tinder dry. Extreme caution is warranted.

With the end of September will come the end of the regular fire season. Down, off their perches, will come the lookouts, only to return next year.



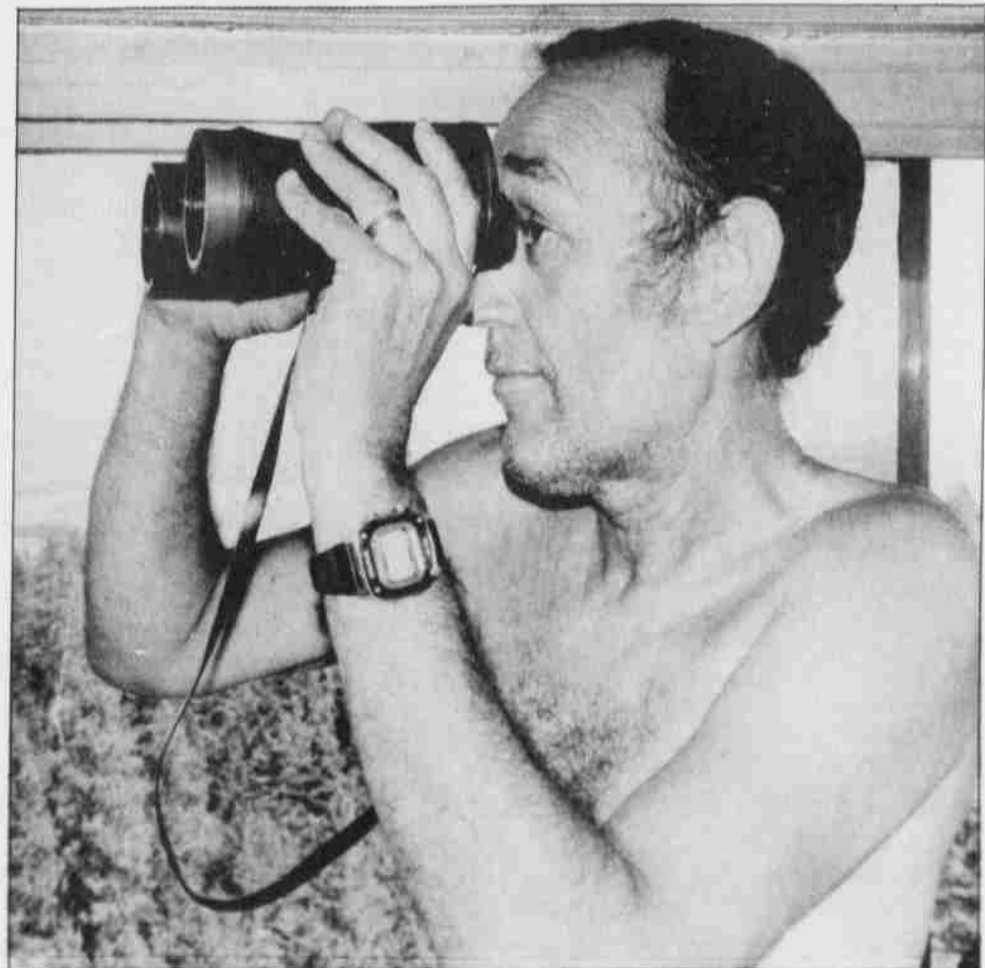
Hank Palmer is spending his first summer at Shitike Butte Lookout.



The Sidwalter Butte Tower is one of three lookouts on the reservation.



An azimuth (Fire Finder) is important in locating smoke and potential fires.



Jim Keene has been a forestry lookout on the reservation for the past 30 years.

Text and Photos by Donna Behrend