

The Lookout Is No Longer Person on 'Paid Vacation'

By H. M. von STEIN

The lady in spike heels and pink slacks had some difficulty in negotiating the last 50 feet of rocky trail to the catwalk of the glass walled house where the legend "Elev. 7000" was etched on a brass pin set in the stone.

Her escort, a broad shouldered young man with an espresso haired, wearing riding boots, was not much assistance. Their poodle made it with less stress.

"Oh!" puffed the lady, sweeping the hundred mile panorama of jumbled peaks. "I bet you like it here!" she accused. "All alone."

Not Exactly Alone

The man with the binoculars hanging around his neck said he was not exactly alone. The wife was in town, 40 miles away, buying groceries.

"Oh, I thought the government furnished your supplies. We thought we might take one of these jobs," the lady confided. "My husband wants to get something you know—not so hard. Hard work makes him irritable."

"How many hours a day you got to put in on one of these jobs?" the broad shouldered one inquired.

The lookout indicated a chart pinned to the wall upon which was printed: Time of first observation 5:40 a.m. Fifteen-minute intervals were clocked off, with half hour periods emphasized, down to 7 p.m. or until dark!

Quarter Hour Intervals

The lookout explained it meant that the entire visible area was to be scrutinized at quarter hour intervals, segment by segment, with binoculars.

The young man became thoughtful when he learned looking for fires is the primary function of a lookout, but his observation must also include anything out of the ordinary.

The several box like short wave radio phones, the lookout explained, were to communicate the results of these observations to headquarters.

Scarcely anyone not presently connected with forest fire detection and suppression, is aware of the changes which have taken place affecting this work.

Not of Ignorance
Stories about lookouts and forest fires are not written out of ignorance; nor are they deliberately misleading, but practices differ widely in various localities and under different agencies.

Also, techniques are changing with the expansion of forest use and the increased importance of forest resources, not all of which are measured in cash.



LOOKOUT HOUSE—This is the present lookout house. The fine is in the cupola, and the vertical rods Dutchman Peak lookout house. The fine are radio-telephone antennas.

Another factor, especially in western Oregon, is the increased presence of civilian aircraft. Prospectors, lumbermen, geological surveyors, engineers and just plain sight-seers thread the canyons.

While military aircraft and regular air lines pass constantly at higher levels, reconnaissance flights from any of the three national forests bordering the Rogue, or the Oregon state department of forestry, are overhead almost hourly during periods of high fire hazard.

Along with the fantastic increase in access roads into regions which, a few years ago, were accessible only by trail, the population of any area of a national forest on any summer day is likely to be altogether unmanageable.

Fire potential is with everyone, and possible need for help in case of accident. The resulting pressure on the lookout is many times what it was in the "good old days" when all

a man needed was a supply of magazines and canned goods.

Fire control anywhere is dangerous work. When a forest fire breaks out, the chances that someone, somewhere along the line will become excited, increasing the potential for injury is almost a certainty.

An explosive, running fire, for this reason, if for no other, is a forest officer's nightmare. This is why the fire control officer must be as certain as he can that his personnel is alert and capable.

Regards An Applicant

It explains the reason for the seemingly old-fashioned care with which a forest officer regards an applicant for a fire control position. It isn't just another job. Persons not constituted to absorb the days, weeks, and sometimes months of monotonous routine and standby, and yet able to react quickly, exercising sound judgment, with safety, are not fire control personnel.

Periods of intensive action may be long, and anyone in fire control will, sooner or later, be called upon to do more than his prescribed job calls for.

Conditions are being improved for lookouts and smoke chasers as rapidly as budgets will allow. The fact becomes ever more persistent that any loss of timber, forage, wild life habitat or other forest resource is becoming intolerable in view of the increase of public need.

Lightning Only Source
Twenty years ago, when this lookout first leveled an Osborne Fire finder, almost the only source of forest fire in the back country was lightning.

Contrary to one idea which seems to be quite general, forest fires, when first ignited are not always visible to more than one lookout. This denies the advantage of the cross-shot, and makes it imperative that each lookout become intimately familiar with the geography under his observation as it is related to the map on his fire finder. A separate knowledge of either is not sufficient, because a fire finder is not a fire locator. It only gives a compass direction and vertical angle.

And if there is such a thing as "most important" in the entire area of fire control, it is not the ability to organize armies to fight big fires, but this first instant of detection and rapid transmission of all the correct information to the dispatcher.

No Longer Uncomplicated

Because of all these factors, the work of the lookout is no longer the uncomplicated, leisurely life it is sometimes pictured.

The routine of 12 hours observation, following the time chart the best he can, includes frequent message relays by radio, and on some stations, three daily weather observations. Key stations rebroadcast fire weather reports twice daily and, during high hazard periods, special bulletins are put on the air.

Often an exchange of information from the head office to some mobile radio unit deep in a canyon requires the assistance of the lookout. Smoke jumpers in remote areas, unable to talk out on their HT sets, usually can contact some nearby lookout.

Because he must be there when needed, the lookout may not leave his station at any time without signing out, indicating how soon he will be on duty again, and he may not be gone for more than a few moments at any time without requesting permission from the dispatcher.

Become Critical
Following lightning "busts," communications become critical along with shooting smoke. The lookout may be busy all through the night, "talking a crew" in to a blaze which is visible to him, but which the crew in the canyon cannot see.

Next morning, at daybreak, the lookout is transmitting instructions from headquarters to the crew; reporting their situation and relaying orders for aerial drops of food or equipment or additional fire.

Aerial supply, on the scale to which it is now employed is comparatively new and increasing in scope and efficiency. Crews which have been out all night may have hot meals and, if needed, "wet water" to help put out the fire. In some circumstances chipped ice is dropped where fire is creeping deep among rocks.

Borate planes will be used again this season more extensively than ever. The Rogue River National Forest is currently expanding and improving its facilities at the Medford airport.

Add His Judgment
Here again the lookout may be called upon to add his judgment to that of the dispatcher and other observers as to the need or value of a borate drop before a crew can arrive at the fire. His advice to the dispatcher on the progress of the fire is part of his job and his suggestions are important and often his advice is taken, because he is looking at the fire. This also applies to the approach and course of storms in his area. Crews may be called from the field on the strength of his report.

Besides these duties, the lookout, if he does not have a wife, does his own cooking, a matter of much more critical importance than generally conceded. Balanced meals are important under the peculiarly exacting circumstances of a high mountain lookout.

It is specifically required that the man keep himself and his station neat and clean at all times. He also does all the repair work, painting and minor construction on his station—and hauls the water he uses, usually from a distance and, in the case of some lookouts, a distance of as much as two miles.

Proven Dependability
Men of proven dependability and (the ranger adds) capacities, may, if they wish it, be employed for 10 months of the year on the Rogue River National Forest. Season for manning stations usually begins about June 15 and ends sometime about October 15. Beginning sometime in March he would be employed in a variety of jobs including burning slash; piling slash; planting trees; seeding; erosion work; pruning; construction and maintenance of camp grounds (public); telephone line maintenance and clearing forest trails.

All of this work is associated with the purposeful use of a shovel or axe. People allergic to such conditions should avoid forest work.

During fire season the lookout or smoke chaser cannot be certain of time off. The fire control officer will, if it is feasible, arrange to get the lookout off for a day once each two or three weeks until the critical period, during which no one is certain of time off.

Unlike the lookout, the smoke chaser is scheduled to have one day each week off.

It should be noted that practices of the Oregon state forestry department and that of forests in other regions differ. National and state forestry departments are distinct and separate in all respects. They do cooperate fully in fire suppression in areas adjacent to their common boundaries.

The state employs many women lookouts, while the same is not true of the local national forest districts.

The beginning wage of a lookout in the Rogue River National Forest varies greatly, depending on the location of the station, the work load and regulations imposed by the Civil Service Commission and other agencies involved.

The work is fascinating, often rewarding, and far from being the "paid vacation" visualized by the uninformed.

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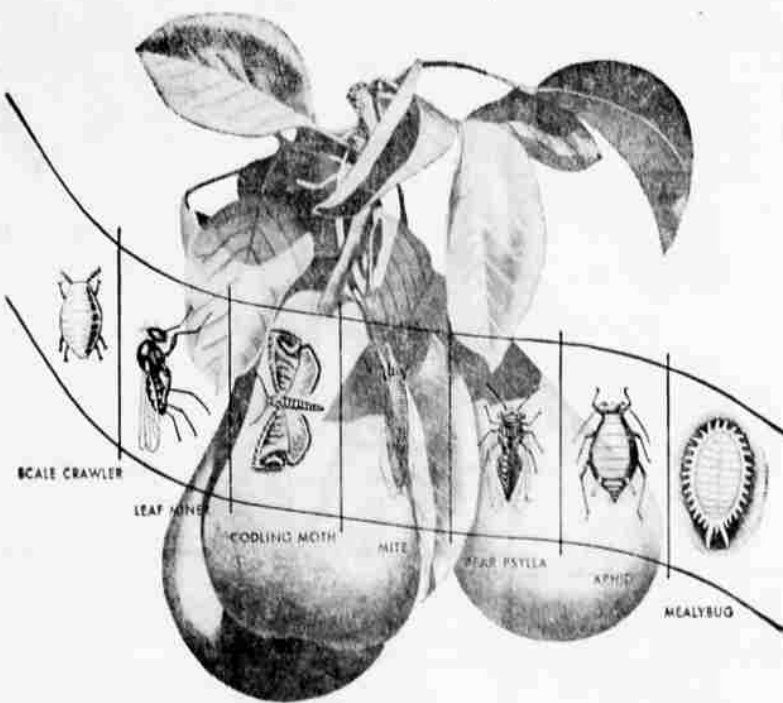
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Stevenson Donates To Elephant Fund

Portland, Ore. Zoo director Jack Marks received a \$5 contribution to the fund to buy elephants Belle and Patsy Friday.

A letter accompanying it said: "I understand that you have received all the technical assistance you required, but may wish some special fund aid."

"The already over-taxed finances of the United Nations do not have provision for a people-to-people program, and I am therefore sending you a small personal contribution toward your paternalistic scheme of elephant care."

"I have spent a good deal of my adult life trying to help Republicans—over their violent objections. I might add, and if it requires a public subsidy to produce better elephants, then I want to help."

The letter was signed, "Sincerely yours, Adlai E. Stevenson."