

“High Still Air”

Desolation Peak lookout in the North Cascades. Once an integral part of fire prevention, Washington's remote lookout cabine are now prime hiking destinations.

The rich history of fire lookouts in Washington State

What is the lure of a lookout site—the views? The solitude? Nostalgia for a simpler life? Perhaps it is, as Gary Snyder wrote in his poem, “Mid-August at Sourdough Mountain Lookout,” “Drinking cold snow-water from a tin cup, Looking down for miles Through high still air”.

For decades, people have spent summers as fire lookouts scanning the skies for smoke or enemy airplanes, reading pulp fiction, chasing mice and befriending mountain goats, eating beans and hauling water. “It was a great life,” wrote Ray Kresek in *Fire Lookouts of the Northwest*. “You woke up in the morning to the finest views of all. You breathed the freshest air in the world. You ate and did the chores when the spirit moved you. You had a whole mountain to

call your own. And the government even paid you to be there!”

“You felt like you owned the world up there,” said Bev Heebner of the ten summers she and her husband Charlie spent atop Oregon Butte in southeastern Washington.

The people who staffed lookouts were outdoorsmen and teachers, young and retired, loners and couples, poets and scientists. They committed to two months at the height of the fire season, from snowmelt in July through the first snows of September. It was a summer job like no other.

The first lookout station was merely a pup tent and a tall tree on a high mountain, called a “rag camp.” Western Washington's first lookout cabin was built in 1910 atop Red Mountain near Mount Adams. Devastating fires, such as the

By Judy Bentley



Bob Adler (left) and Forest Clark, members of Friends of Kelly Butte, at work restoring lookout window frames. Preservation of fire lookouts is primarily done by volunteers. Judy Bentley

Yacolt Burn of 1902, convinced federal, state and private timber companies to construct a vast network of fire lookout stations in the 1920s. During the Great Depression, the Civilian Conservation Corps added hundreds more and set up lines of communication by stretching 44,750 miles of telephone lines through the woods. At the system's peak, there were 5,000 lookouts nationwide—more than half of them in four Northwestern states—including 685 in Washington.

The highest was at 12,276 feet on Mount Adams, but it was used for only three seasons, then abandoned to the year-round ice. The most difficult to reach was Three Fingers, perched above an eagle's nest in view of Mount Baker; the approach was a series of ladders spiked into a 100-foot rock wall. Some say the most extensive views came from Pyramid Peak, the highest lookout in the Lake Chelan District. Others say the most spectacular views were from Desolation Peak in the North Cascades, immortalized by Jack Kerouac in his novels *Desolation Angels* and *The Dharma Bums*. Only one person ever spent the summer on top of Mount St. Helens; a proposed cabin atop Mount Rainier was never realized.

The cabins and towers came in standard designs, remembered affectionately by their government labels: D-6 cupola, D-1 cupola, R-3 log cabin, L-4, L-5, L-6 and R-5. The most typical lookout, an L-4 or L-5, was a 14- or 10-foot-square "cab" with a shingle roof, heavy shutters, and windows on all sides. It was pre-cut, hauled to the mountain top, and assembled on-

site. On bare mountains, the cabins were built on the ground. Among the trees, the lookouts perched on towers. Cables and ground wires secured them in high winds and protected them from lightning. They were furnished with a radio or telephone, a few old pots, a bunk, a lantern and a fire finder.

No matter how seductive the views or refreshing the air, the first job of a lookout was to spot fires. In the early years, the lookout was also a first responder. Equipped with a fire-pack with several gallons of water that he could hoist onto his back, he could set off to douse a fire in its earliest stages, especially fires started by lightning. More often, however, his job was to report fires by telephone or radio so crews could be dispatched quickly. To locate fires precisely, the lookout used the fire finder, commonly called an "Osborne" after designer William B. Osborne. The Osborne stood on a table in the center of the cabin and mapped out a radius of 22 miles in every direction. The lookout found the fire through a sliding vertical sight, took an azimuth reading (degrees from the north pole) and determined the fire's distance from the lookout using landmarks and quarter sections of the map.

Each lookout contained its own panoramic photo, showing every stand of trees, meadow, peak, and valley in the vicinity. The photos were produced in the 1930s by a team carrying 100 pounds of camera gear to 1,400 lookout sites and 200 patrol points in Oregon and Washington. The photographer perched a tripod on the peak of the cabin roof to take each photo-

Preserving Lookout History

Ray and Rita Kresk started the Historic Lookout Project and the **Fire Lookout Museum** in their Spokane home to spread knowledge about and encourage the preservation of lookouts. The one-acre museum features 19,000 relics from lookout towers, including Smokey Bear treasures, eight different fire finders from around the world, an L-6 lookout tower cab, a replica of a 1929 spar tree lookout 60 feet tall, and a 1953 Chevrolet fire truck, a 200-gallon pumper. The museum is free, open anytime by appointment between March and November. Call 509-466-9171 for reservations.

Renting a Lookout

Only **Evergreen Mountain Lookout**, ten miles northeast of Skykomish, and the **Clearwater Lookout Cabin** in southeastern Washington south of Pomeroy can be rented. But both have been unavailable recently due to storm damage to the access road and repair work, respectively. To check availability, call the National Recreation Reservation Service at 1-877-444-677 or visit www.ReserveUSA.com.

graph.

Although lookouts didn't scan the skies 24 hours a day, they soon knew the terrain and the patterns of fire starts, such as sleeper fires. Ray Kresek described a sleeper fire as a lightning fire that lies in a pocket at night. As soon as the sun hits it at dawn, it sends up a puff of smoke. The fire may then lie dormant for as long as a week, until the fuel burns on a hot, windy day. A keen lookout can spot the initial puff of smoke and watch for it when the fire flares later.

Lightning storms are spectacular on the peaks. "We lived for the lightning storms," Heebner said. "Wham, bang...very exciting." Outside, the buildings were protected with heavy copper lightning arrestors. Inside, the lookout could rest his feet on an insulated stool. "There is little or no danger involved if one stays inside," said former lookout and glaciologist Austin Post, but "the blinding, tremendous flash and crackle of the lightning bolts striking only a few feet overhead is still impressive enough."

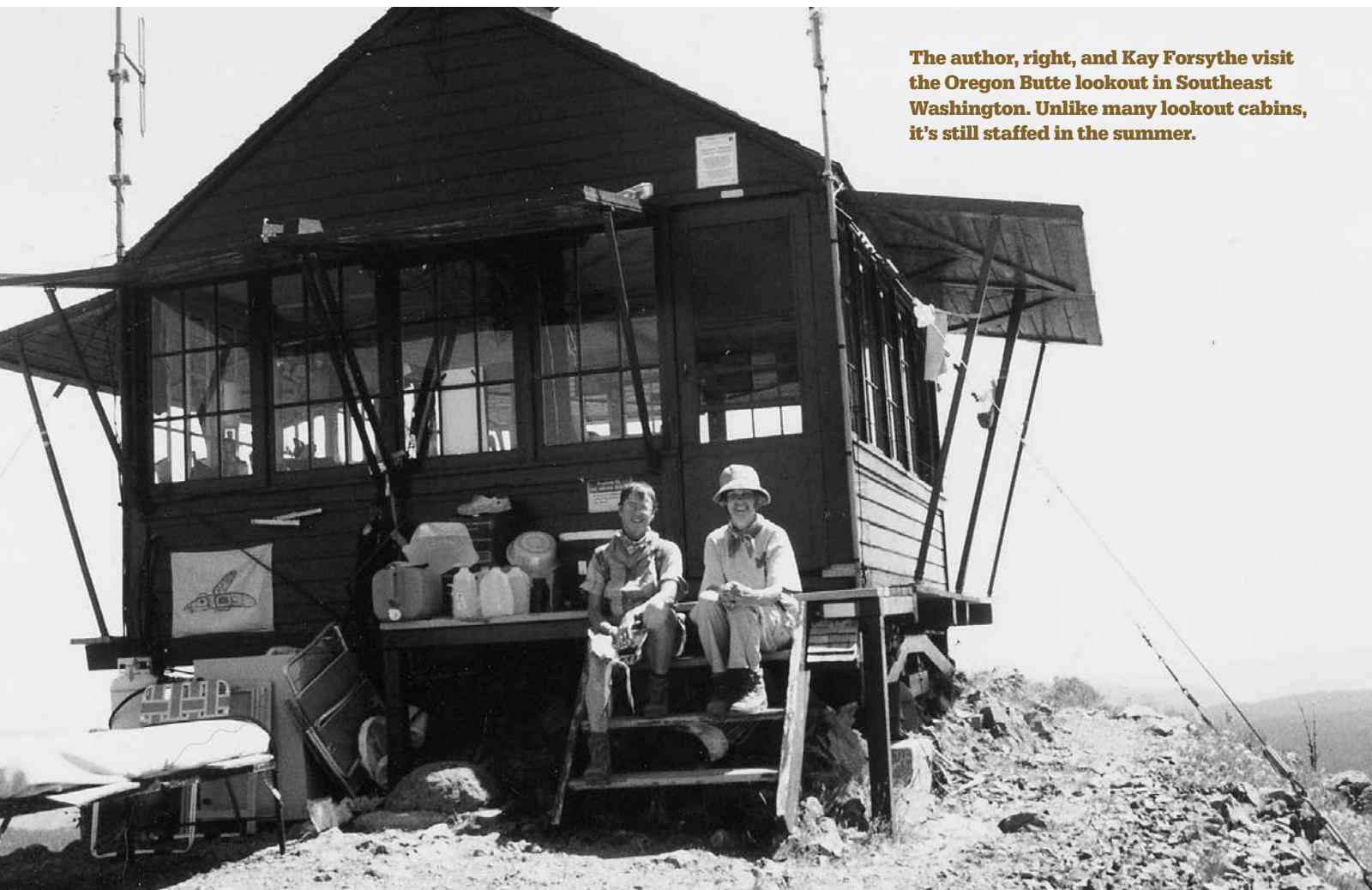
Another attraction was silence, the high still air Snyder described. Lookouts learned the rhythms of the day. Occasionally on Pyramid Mountain, Post experienced five minutes at the end of the day when "the shadows were extending long across the myriad peaks of the

Stehekin wilderness." Then "there was this total, unearthly silence—not a sound whatsoever. It was as if time itself was suspended."

Food, water, and wood or fuel were hauled by mule team or "shank's mare." In the beginning of the season, snowmelt provided water; later the lookout hiked daily to the nearest lake, pond, or spring. "The water kept getting heavier; the trail kept getting longer; the groceries got heavier," said Heebner of their decision to retire from lookout duty before someone asked, "Aren't you getting too old for this?"

Women and couples became more common in lookouts during World War II, when the government staffed the stations year-round as part of the Aircraft Warning Service. Their task was to watch for enemy planes, particularly flying in from the west. After the war, lookout stations took a more peaceful turn. Poets of the Beat Generation, including Gary Snyder, Jack Kerouac and Phillip Whalen spent summers scanning the North Cascades skies not only for fires but for inspiration. Snyder crafted many poems among the peaks in addition to Kerouac's two novelized memoirs. The 2007 summer lookout at Desolation posted lines from Kerouac's journal on the window: "On Desolation, I was the loneliest man in the world."

By the mid-1970s, lookout jobs were scarce. The Washington Department of Natural



The author, right, and Kay Forsythe visit the Oregon Butte lookout in Southeast Washington. Unlike many lookout cabins, it's still staffed in the summer.

Four Great Lookout Hikes

Kelly Butte

South Cascades

About 2 miles east of Greenwater on WA 410, turn north on FR 70. Drive 8 miles to FR 7030 on the left; follow it 6.4 miles to a rough road on the left for the Kelly Butte trailhead. Walk or drive 0.6 miles to the beginning of the trail. A new trail slightly to the east of the older trail offers an alternative to the crumbling rock and dirt gully you ascend with ropes. The climb to the lookout is approximately 1.5 miles, with 900 feet of elevation gain. Full views of Mount Rainier and meadows full of wildflowers on a clear early summer day. The lookout is under restoration.

Oregon Butte

Umatilla National Forest

From Dayton, take Eckler Mountain Road south to FR 46 (Skyline Road) to FR 4608 at the Godman Guard Station, 30 miles south of Dayton. Turn left and continue six miles to the Teepee Trailhead. The hike to the lookout is 3 miles. After 1 mile, the trail branches into lower and upper routes; the lower is more direct, shadier, and newer. The higher route goes past West Butte, reconnects with the trail just before the spring. At a junction with Trail 3113/6144, bear right to the lookout, which is still staffed in the summers.

Columbia Peak

Northeast Washington

Find the trailhead for Kettle Crest Trail 13 at Sherman Pass on WA 20. The trail winds along the west side of Columbia Mountain, about two miles to a junction with Loop Trail 24, a 1-mile loop to the top that gains 662 feet. A spur trail from the loop leads to the top, the lookout cabin on the ground, and the remains of the tower.

Desolation Peak

North Cascades

This trailhead must be reached by the East Bank Trail (16 miles) or by boat, (your own or the Ross Lake Resort water taxi; make a reservation ahead of time). To use the water taxi, park at Milepost 3.4 on WA 20 at the Ross Lake Trailhead. Hike 1 mile down to a gravel road. Go right to the dock and telephone for the taxi, which will take you to campgrounds along the lake, such as Lightning Creek or to Desolation Landing. From the landing, the hike is 4.7 miles one-way with 4,400 feet of elevation gain. The lookout at the top with spectacular mountain and Ross Lake views is staffed during the summer.



Kelly Butte lookout.

Judy Bentley



Columbia Peak lookout.

Judy Bentley

Resources, the U.S. Forest Service, and the National Park Service relied more on technology and aerial reconnaissance and, eventually there were more people in the woods with cell phones and GPS systems. Washington now has 105 lookouts still standing, with only 30 of those still actively used for firefighting. Some were deconstructed by government agencies worried about liability, some have been left to rot and some have been rescued by friends.

The National Park Service maintains ten lookouts in Washington: four in Mount Rainier National Park, and three each in North Cascades and Olympic National Parks. "They take heroics to maintain them," says Laurin Huffman, of the Park Service's Seattle office. The goal is to keep them from becoming a nuisance and to make them available for occasional fire-watch uses. With fuel prices rising, Huffman suggests, people on the ground may actually become more economical this summer than aerial surveillance. Tod Johnson at

North Cascades National Park describes a fire management policy that includes three parts: some aerial reconnaissance; national real-time lightning maps developed from ground sensor data sent via satellite to a control center; and lookouts at Desolation, Copper Mountain and occasionally Sourdough. "Because it's wilderness," says Johnson, "we don't want to fly if we don't have to. We don't want to put people in the backcountry if we don't have to." The look-

outs can provide a good visual description of what a fire is doing, and the Park Service decides whether to suppress it or let it burn into glaciers and rocks until the first snow of the season.

Ray Kresek insists that fire lookouts should remain an important third leg of the fire detection system. "The secret of any fire is to get on it as quick as you can," he said. Twenty-four-hour surveillance is more reliable than infrequent aerial reconnaissance or people whose cell phones don't have reception or who don't know where they are in

the woods. Kresek cites the Thirtymile Fire of 2001, which trapped and killed four firefighters, as an example of the need for constant eyes on the horizon. The North Twentymile lookout was only three and a half miles from the origin of the fire, but it was unstaffed that summer.

How to Help

Want to support lookout restoration? Visit the Forest Fire Lookout Association website at www.firelookout.org. To support or join Friends of Kelly Butte, contact woodman-four@aol.com, 425-487-3461, or send a check made out to Everett Mountaineers/Kelly Butte, to P.O. Box 43, Snohomish, WA 98290.

Instead, the fire was discovered incidentally by a plane leaving another fire.

In addition to having functional value, “the lookouts are a cultural resource,” said Charles Beall of North Cascades National Park. “They’re a valuable part of the wilderness experience.” Talking to visitors about forest history and ecology is a primary task of lookouts. Kerouac envisioned pilgrims who would follow him to the heights; today hikers and literary buffs make the pilgrimage to Sauk, Sourdough, and Desolation lookouts, if only for a day to share the mystique of the writers who stayed there. Poet and nature writer Tim McNulty spent the summers of 2003 and 2004 as a fire lookout at Sourdough, fifty years after Gary Snyder. McNulty’s chapbook, “Through High Still Air, A Season at Sourdough Mountain,” was dedicated to Snyder and named after the line from Snyder’s poem. In “Hub of the Wheel,” McNulty describes the Beaver fire of 2003:

“Fingers of smoke from wildfires
reach down Big Beaver and Pierce Creek valleys
and cover the deep blue of Ross Lake
like a quilt.”

Lookout advocates are working hard to preserve and restore other cabins still left in Washington. Individual volunteers and groups such as the Everett Mountaineers Lookout and Trail Maintenance Committee (LOTM) and King County Emergency Search and Rescue have worked on the restoration of the Three Fingers, Pilchuck, Heybrook, and Evergreen lookouts. A group of volunteers known as Friends of Kelly Butte is currently working on restoring Kelly

Butte lookout, southwest of Stampede Pass.

The Kelly Butte story reveals how restoration attracts volunteers. “I’m not a fisherman. I’m not a hunter. I don’t like being bit up by mosquitoes at lakes,” said Bob Adler, a lookout restoration volunteer and WTA member. “So I started going to high places, and before I realized it, I had gone to 70 or 80 lookout locations.” The Forest Service encouraged Adler to adopt Kelly Butte because it was one of only two lookouts left in the White River Ranger District. Volunteer Darryl Stafford’s family has picnicked at the Kelly Butte lookout for decades. His great-granduncle lived at Lester, supplying the seven lookouts near Stampede Pass by mule team with goods shipped on Northern Pacific trains. “It’s time to give back,” Stafford said of his volunteer work. A logbook at the lookout records visitors who have been coming for as long as 50 years.

The lookout was in bad shape when the volunteers began. Their first task was bagging up the debris and 77 broken windows (only one was intact). Then they repaired the roof. Forest Clark, Western Washington director of the Forest Fire Lookout Association, located shingles made from “confiscated cedar,” cedar cut in illegal logging and confiscated by authorities. Twenty-two volunteers carried 17 bundles to the lookout site in the summer of 2005. There were setbacks, like broken shutters that allowed 30 inches of snow into the cabin. Adler, a glazier, and the Friends of Kelly Butte restored all of the windows this winter and spring, in a barn at the Lord Hill Regional Park. This summer the windows will be helicoptered to the station and installed. Next summer, the lookout will get a paint job and cosmetic fixes.

Kelly Butte is not the only restoration project ongoing. In the same district, Suntop has been adopted by volunteers. This summer, the Forest Service sponsored a work party on the Red Mountain lookout near Mount Adams and the Indian Heaven Wilderness.

For lookout wannabes, only two cabins are available for rent in Washington (see box). If you just want to peer in the windows, lookouts remain in all four corners of the state: from Dodger Point in the Olympics to Columbia Peak in the Kettle Range, from Oregon Butte in the Blue Mountains to Desolation Peak in the North Cascades. Suntop Lookout on Huckleberry Ridge in the White River Ranger District is accessible by car once the snow melts. Some sites are a day hike with reasonable elevation gain, such as Kelly Butte and Thorp Mountain on Kachess Ridge. Others require more extended exertion, such as Three Fingers, Dodger Point and Desolation Peak. Whether you arrive on a sunny day hike or a drizzly overnight backpack, the lookout is a human benchmark, linking past and present in the vast expanses we crave. ♦

Good Reads

Malcolm S. Bates, *Three Fingers*. (Cloudcap, 1998).

Martha Hardy, *Tatoosh*. (The Mountaineers Books, 1980).

Jack Kerouac, *Desolation Angels*. (Riverhead, 1995).

Ray Kresiek, *Fire Lookouts of the Pacific Northwest*. (Historic Lookout Project, 1998).

Earl Larrison and Harry Higman, *Pilchuck: Life of a Mountain*. (1949).

Tish McFadden and Tom Foley, *How to Rent a Fire Lookout in the Pacific Northwest*. (Wilderness Press, 2005).

John McLean, *The Thirtymile Fire: A Chronicle of Bravery and Betrayal*. (Henry Holt, 2007).

Tim McNulty, *Through High Still Air, A Season at Sourdough Mountain* (Pleasure Boat Studio, 2005).

Gary Snyder, *No Nature: New and Selected Poems*. (Pantheon, 1992).

John Suiter, *Poets on the Peaks: Gary Snyder, Philip Whalen and Jack Kerouac in the North Cascades*. (Counterpoint, 2002).