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WESTERNERS

The Branding Iron

J. GOODMAN

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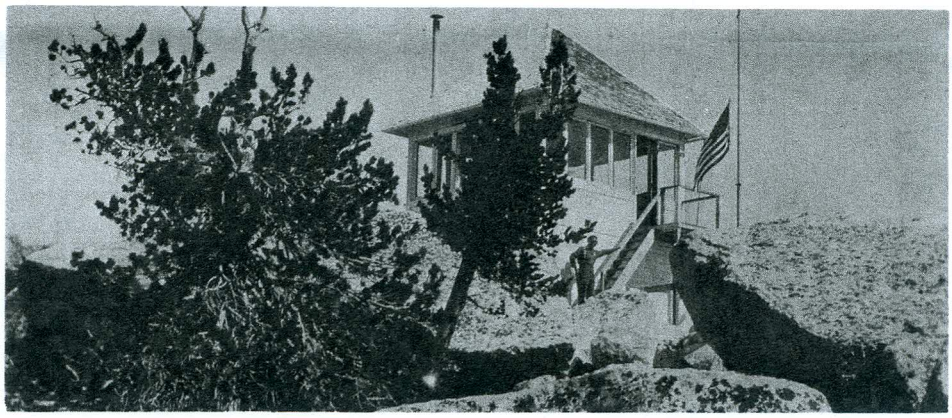


Tahquitz Peak lookout station, located in the San Jacinto Mountains, erected in 1917, and still in use. — *John Robinson Collection*

Guardians on the Mountaintops

The Fire Lookouts of Southern California

by John Robinson and Bruce Risher

Atop a mile-high summit, a lookout anxiously scans the forest. It is a warm September day. Dry Santa Ana winds have blown the sky clean, except for a distant line of haze over the ocean. The forest below is parched after a summer without rain. The brush-clad foothills are crackling dry. "That greasewood is like kindling today," he is thinking. It is fire season in Southern California. Forest Service, state and county fire crews are on full alert.

Fire in the Southern California mountain areas can be a fearful thing. Forest and brush conflagrations in past years have consumed not only valuable watershed, but scores of homes in the canyons and foothills. Here in Southern California the fire hazard is greater than elsewhere. Dry summers, gale-like Santa Ana winds, the dense and flamable chaparral, the great numbers of people—these factors combine to make the mountains and foothills highly susceptible to a holocaust.

In the early days of the forest protection, rangers on horseback patrolled the mountains. If they spotted a fire they would first try to extinguish it themselves. If, as so often happened, the fire had grown too big, they would gallop down to the nearest guard station and call for help. Many hours or even days later, a fire crew would arrive on the scene, often to find a roaring inferno impossible to contain. It was not at all uncommon for a forest fire to burn for weeks on

(Continued from Page Three)

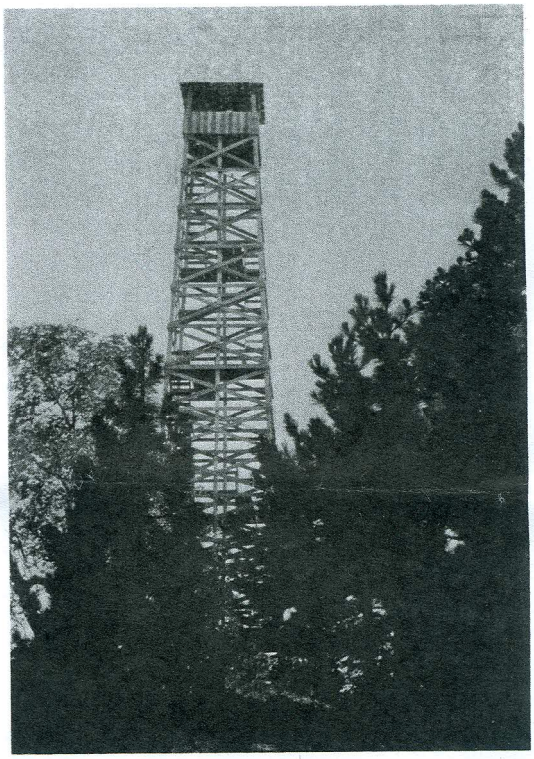
end and consume 50,000 acres of valuable watershed, not to mention extensive property damage and lives lost.

Early on, the Forest Service, along with state and county forestry agencies, realized that early detection was crucial. If a fire could be spotted soon after it broke out, the chances of containment were greatly enhanced. And what better place was there to spot smoke rising from the forest than from a mountaintop? Thus originated the network of fire lookouts that once crowned many summits. There were over 600 such lookouts throughout California in the 1940's, some 75 of them in the four national forests of Southern California: the Los Padres, Angeles, San Bernardino, and Cleveland. When combined with a network of roads, trails and firebreaks, these lookouts played a valuable part in the control of forest and brush fires.

The first fire lookout in California, and probably first in the western United States, was erected by the Southern Pacific atop Red Mountain, overlooking the Donner Pass area, in 1878. Its purpose was to report fires that might endanger the railroad's snow sheds, which protected the tracks from winter storms and allowed rail traffic over Donner Pass even after heavy snowfall.

The date of the earliest lookout station in California, built specifically to watch over the public forests, is open to question. Early Forest Service records are sketchy. There are three lookouts which may qualify: Shuteye Peak in Sierra National Forest, Bald Mountain in Tahoe National Forest and Claremont Peak in Plumas National Forest, all circa 1908. The Bald Mountain lookout may date back as far as 1904, according to one source.

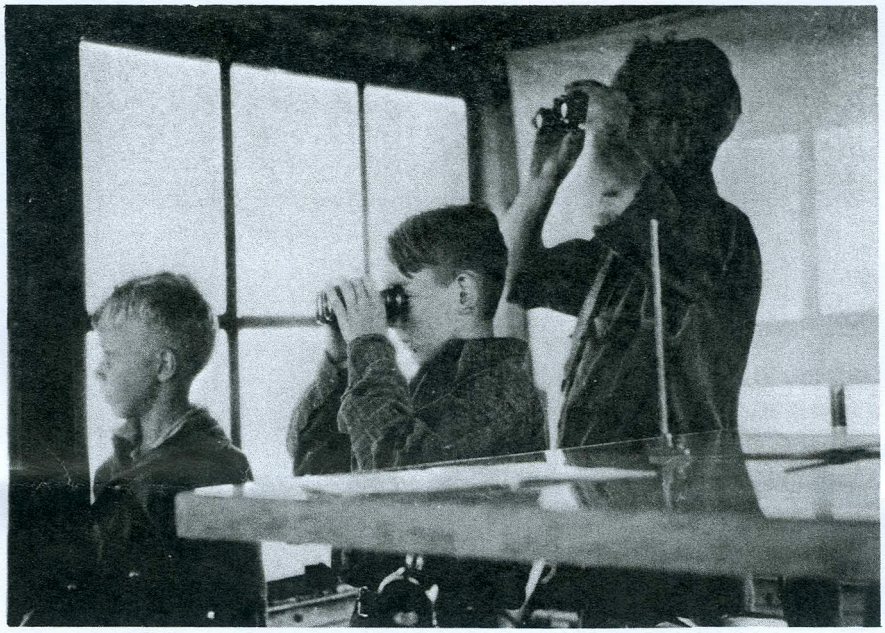
Mt. Lukens lookout, built in 1923, was located in Angeles National Forest. —*John Robinson Collection*



Grass Valley lookout, located above Lake Arrowhead, was erected in 1922, however, it collapsed in 1933. — *John Robinson Collection*

These early lookouts proved so successful in spotting smoke that the Forest Service, with the help of state and local agencies, initiated a program to build lookouts throughout the state.

The first fire lookouts in Southern California's mountains were erected in 1914: the Mount Baldy Lookout (which was not on Baldy's summit, but on what became known as Lookout Mountain on Baldy's south ridge); the Ver Bryck Lookout near Cajon Pass, built to spot railroad fires; the Vista Grande Lookout in the San Jacinto Mountains; and the Zaca Peak Lookout in Los Padres National Forest. Many more were constructed during the next two decades, culminating in the 1930's with the massive forest



A father and his two sons manned the Mt. Gleason lookout, in 1931. They lived in the stone cabin shown below. Notice the Osborne firefinder table in the foreground. — *John Robinson Collection*

Mt. Gleason lookout cabin was made from natural rock. It was completed in 1931. — *John Robinson Collection*

Lyons Peak lookout station, as it appeared around 1918, located in the back country of San Diego County. — *John Robinson Collection*

improvement program of the Civilian Conservation Corps (CCC).

The early fire lookouts were mostly flimsy wooden platforms or towers, hurriedly erected by the Forest Service, state and county fire agencies, or private water companies. In 1914, the Forest Service came out with a standard 12 x 12-foot lookout building, or cab, mounted on a wooden platform or tower. A few years later the cab size was enlarged to 14x14 feet.

There was little uniformity in fire lookouts erected by state, county and private agencies. They were variously built of wood, steel, or in the case of the Red Hill Lookout near Cuca-

A privately-built tree lookout tower located at Shrine Camp, Cleveland National Forest. — *John Robinson Collection*

monga, made of stucco. The Los Angeles County Forestry Department utilized a small 8 x 8-foot cab atop a rectangular steel tower. The County lookouts on Mount Gleason, Mount Islip and Blue Ridge, erected in the late 1920's, had nearby stone cabins for the lookout personnel. The cabin next to the Mount Gleason Lookout was large enough to accommodate the observer and his entire family. In contrast, Forest Service lookouts had living accommodations within the lookout cab itself. Some early privately-built fire lookouts were placed in tree tops, simply platforms connected to the tree and supported by a flimsy wooden scaffold.

Most of the lookouts in the Southern California mountains were accessible by narrow dirt roads, built specifically to service the facility. The few that were not reached by road—Lookout Mountain, Mount Islip and San Gabriel Peak in the Angeles; Tahquitz Peak in the San Jacinto Mountains; Cobblestone Peak, Santa Paula Peak and Topa Topa Ridge in Los Padres National Forest—were serviced by pack animals.

The early fire lookouts were manned during fire season by hired personnel who would periodically scan the horizon. When smoke was spotted, the lookout would take a compass reading, estimate the distance, and telephone the information to the nearest ranger station. In the early 1920's the Osborne Firefinder came into use. This was a moveable device similar to a rifle sight, attached to a circular map table. Around the table was a compass ring giving azimuth readings. The lookout would aim the firefinder at the smoke, get an exact bearing, and phone this in to a central fire dispatcher. After receiving bearings from other lookouts, the fire dispatcher could plot the exact location of the fire and immediately dispatch fire crews.

The Osborne Firefinder took up the middle of the lookout cab. Beside it was a telephone, replaced in the late 1930's with a two-way radio. On the sides all below window level, were a bed, table, stove and cupboards. (Rather cramped quarters, but what a view!) The lookout was protected from electrical storms by lightning

Ranger Peak lookout is what you would think a fire tower should look like. It is located in the San Jacinto Mountains. — *John Robinson Collection*

Thomas Mountain lookout, in the San Jacinto Mountains, was located south of Garner Valley. A Forest Service Chevrolet is coming down the road. — *John Robinson Collection*

rods grounded on all sides. Water was usually stored in a 40-gallon barrel under the tower. Outside the lookout was an outhouse, and sometimes a cabin.

One might imagine that the person manning the lookout would have little to do, but such was not the case. He had water to fetch, wood to split for the stove, meals to prepare, dishes and clothes to wash, and windows to clean (inside and out) at least once a week. Besides these duties, he often worked on trail maintainence. Food, supplies and mail were delivered once a week, by vehicle if the lookout was reached by road, otherwise by pack animal.

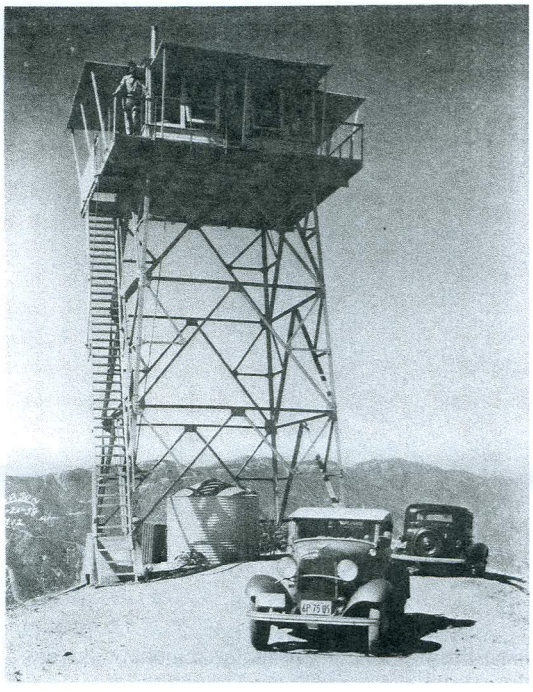
Besides loneliness and "cabin fever," those who manned the forest lookouts had to be able to survive the terror of a lightning storm. These spectacles of light and sound were not as prevalent in the Southern California mountains as they were elsewhere in the West, but they still occurred occasionally. Rising from the mountaintop, the metal towers were a strong attraction to atmospheric electricity. Sometimes a tower would be struck several times during a single storm. Although the towers were well-grounded and no one was electrocuted, the blinding flash and ear-splitting boom were terrifying to those not accustomed to such a display of nature's power. The lookout had to stay on duty during these lightning storms, watching for strikes that might ignite a forest fire. No amount of forewarning could prepare a beginner lookout for actual "combat" experience. One fellow was so unnerved by a nearby lightning strike that he took off down the mountain, never to return.

Of course, there were some who preferred the solitude provided by the isolated lookout station. Some in fact resented being disturbed. One lookout (on Butler Peak near Big Bear) fired pot shots at aircraft that passed too close to "his" tower. After complaints from several pilots, his services were quickly terminated.

Often, a certain bond developed among the lookout personnel. In the 1960's, the lookout man on Butler Peak, mainly through radio communication, fell in love with and later married the lady lookout on San Sevine Peak, 30 miles west.

The glory days of the fire lookout were the CCC years of 1933 to 1939, when an ambitious construction program saw old ones replaced and over 200 new ones built in California alone. In the fire prone parts of the Southern California mountains, lookouts were placed as little as five miles apart, in order to form an efficient grid system for instantly reporting and triangulating fires. The system seemed to pay off, for in the late 1930's and 1940's there were few conflagrations that burned more than a few acres.

During World War II, the fire lookouts were used to spot aircraft. The Aircraft Warning Service (AWS) was set up by the Army in 1935, with an elaborate plan to place spotters on the forest lookouts and atop tall buildings in metropolitan areas. Beginning in 1937, all lookout personnel were trained how to identify and report different types of aircraft. With the attack on Pearl Harbor on December 7, 1941, the AWS was activated. Two observers were assigned to



San Rafael lookout, in the Verdugo Hills, was erected by the Los Angeles County Fire Department. — *John Robinson Collection*

each lookout point for 24-hour coverage, year around. If snowbound in winter, supplies were delivered on skiis.

The fire lookout network reached its peak in 1953, when there were 5,060 towers in national forest across the country, along with hundreds of others operated by state and local agencies. Since then, the number has steadily decreased.

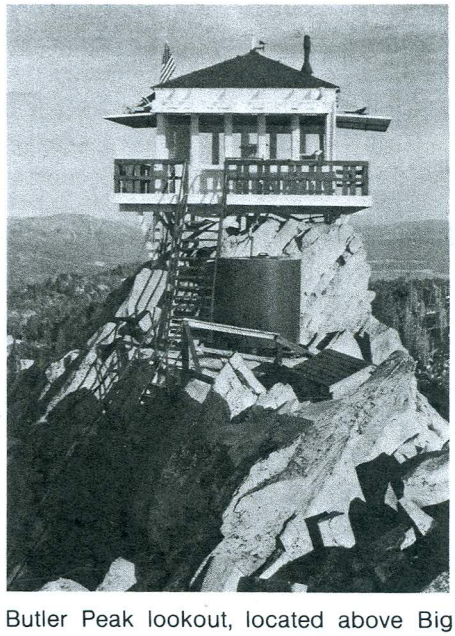
One reason for the decline is economic. In the 1930's a fire lookout could be built for $1,000 or less. Maintenance—supplies, packing charges and wages—might come to $1,000 for the summer-fall season. The typical wage was $100 per month, minus $5 rent for the lookout cabin. (Government policy required that anyone occupying a federally owned building must pay rent.) By the 1960's, the total annual cost for maintaining a fire lookout had risen to over $10,000.

The major reason for the decline of the lookouts, however, is that they have generally outlived their usefulness. Air pollution has become so bad, particularly during the late summer and fall fire season, that visibility is often reduced to two miles or less. New technologies in electronics, such as transistorized radios and infrared heat sensors, along with aircraft surveillance and satellite scanning, do the job the manned fire lookouts once did. Also, fires are usually reported within minutes of outbreak by the ever-increasing numbers of forest users.

Today, fires are fought with tactics undreamed of 50 years ago. Highly trained "hot shots," helittack crews and smoke jumpers, along with aerial dropping of fire retardants, can control a blaze much faster than in the days of old.

Most of the lookout towers are gone from the Southern California forests. A few that remain are manned by volunteers during the summer and fall fire season—Tahquitz Peak in the San Jacinto Mountains, Strawberry, Keller and Butler peaks in the San Bernardino Mountains. High Point on Palomar Mountain is one of the few still manned by paid Forest Service employees. In Angeles National Forest they're all gone except for South Mount Hawkins and Vetter Mountain. The latter is being restored as a visitor exhibit. The Los Angeles County Fire Department, Forestry Division, has moved the old Castro Peak fire lookout from its original site in the Santa Monica Mountains to Henninger Flats above Altadena, where it stands as a visitor exhibit.

The days when searching eyes guarded the forest are rapidly fading into the pages of history. In their place has risen a technology that does the job more efficiently.



Butler Peak lookout, located above Big Bear, is now manned by volunteers. — *John Robinson Collection*