

Lady Fire Spotter ..

LANE ENDICOTT looked down from her glass cabin atop Verdi Peak with more than usual alertness to the thunderstorm raging below. An extended Indian summer had parched the eastern slopes of the Sierras into a veritable tinder box. The power-packed clouds, rumbling with inner charges, parted for a brief moment. Lightning bolted into the trees. A tall pine burst into flames. The most potent enemy of the forest had struck.

The lone woman lookout moved swiftly to the fire-finder. Carefully plotting a bearing on the rising smoke, she transmitted her information to the Truckee dispatcher. Within minutes an initial fire fighting attack force was on its way to the blaze. The crew throttled the fire before it could spread out of control.

Lane is a fire spotter during the summer months — mid-June to mid-October — on the California-Nevada border. Rugged Verdi Peak, rising on the sky, commands portions of the Tahoe rain forest and—on the dry side of the Sierras — the desert mountains and valleys stretching eastward. From her vantage point she is charged with surveillance of a circular area 45 miles in diameter.

For four seasons this charming and diminutive 48-year-old brunette has “manned” the Verdi Lookout. Her only companions: a German Shepherd dog, Princess; a suitcase organ; and a Bible. The other 19 stations in this district are staffed, for the most part, by husband and wife teams. Lane’s outpost is the most isolated.

What does a woman think and feel on a wilderness peak, alone against the fury of a thunderstorm? Is she ever frightened?

“No,” says Lane, “I have never experienced fear in relation to my work or to the fact I am isolated.

“I have experienced bitter cold and fatiguing heat. Driving winds have laced the tower with frost, snow and icicles, until it looked like an ice-bound ship. Winds often reach a velocity of 70 to 80 miles an hour.”

During one siege she had all she could do to keep a few peepholes clear in the frost-bound windows while far below she could see dust rising on the parched back roads.

The sun is often unfriendly, too. In the late afternoon it beats through the windows on the west side of the

glass cabin. Then it is nearly impossible to detect anything in the valleys below.

Born in Coos County, Oregon, Lane was raised on a Canadian ranch near the Yukon. She is no stranger to the



LANE ENDICOTT AT HER VERDI “GLASS CABIN.”

outdoors. She was running trap lines for her brother long before railroads, highways, electricity and piped water came to her neck of the woods. During the war she took ground school pilot training and became a pre-flight inspector of medium and heavy bombers. Occasionally she flew out with a test pilot as flight engineer.

Her first job with the Forest Service was as a clerk-typist. When Lane secured a more active outdoor role in the Service and won her Verdi lookout appointment, a few skeptics gave her two weeks to “come back to civilization.” But, she fooled them, and became the first woman to wear the Forest Ranger’s uniform.

Today, Lane is a highly regarded “veteran.” She has learned the tricks of her trade. She knows, for instance, that “smoke” does not always mean fire. A moving herd of sheep can

By BEVERLY WALTER

raise a dust cloud that looks for all the world like a brush fire. On moonlight nights condensed vapor hanging in the canyons after a thunderstorm is deceiving. The color of smoke has singular significance. When black smoke turns to brown, the lookout knows the fire is "beginning to roll!"

Accuracy is extremely important in pin-pointing a new fire. A half-mile error in rugged terrain could mean an hour or more delay in bringing up fire fighters. And the lookout must be familiar with the "helispots" in his area—the helicopter landing fields cleared in the forest. Air borne fire fighting is proving to be extremely efficient.

On her isolated job, the lone woman lookout has learned not to anticipate regular deliveries of supplies. "The thought uppermost in my mind," Lane says, "is that whatever is on its way up is really not necessary." A patrolman tries to reach the Verdi tower every two weeks to deliver water. Occasionally an "excuse day" is granted to the lookouts—when the fire hazard is low—on which they can drive to town for supplies. Lane seldom uses her "excuse days."

Last season she brought a new Estey organ to her post. Dampness and steam in the tower gave it "bronchial pneumonia" — but not before she composed two ballads, "Dawn on the Mountains," and "Call of the Wilderness."

"Only music or an artist can describe these beautiful views," she says. "There are endless enchantments on moonlight nights. Witnessing a thunderstorm at your feet brings a vastly different feeling. Early dawn finds all the low country swathed in deep fog, every canyon filled to the brim. At sunset the wildflowers seem to be reflected in the sky—even the sun appears reluctant to leave such beauty. Evening brings peacefulness, and a balm of Gilead to the soul . . ."

Lane had wanted to be an evangelist. "I find the Bible traditionally beautiful, thrillingly alive and gloriously establishing the future." It comprises 99 percent of her reading matter during her summer tours atop Verdi.

She has witnessed from her tower the drowning of two men in the Truckee River during a flash flood, and the strange phenomena of Uni-

identified Flying Objects. About 300 people visit Lane during a season—Eastern professors, executives from San Francisco, Nature lovers, camera hobbyists, entertainers, jeep explorers. On a single day she had visits from a stalwart lion hunter and a very enthusiastic high-mountain rare-specimen butterfly collector.

The native mountain characters also pay their respects: grouse, squirrels, fawn, mountain lion, bobcat and porcupine. A sympathetic understanding is growing between these wildlings and the woman who as a girl in Canada counted as her "duty" the killing of coyotes and hawks.

"Someday I hope to live in my own ranch home in the high country and write fiction, poetry and an operetta I have longed to create," says Lane.

"But I wish," she adds, "that a poet—like Robert Service—would write a rugged he-man tribute to the fire fighters. There is no easy way to fight a fire."

For the back country explorer, the trip to Verdi Peak is a spectacular experience. The good 10-mile dirt road to the peak begins at the little mountain town of Verdi on Highway 40.

The road to the top of Verdi follows Dog Canyon. It crosses the Truckee River on an old bridge before making the slow climb to the first

Spotting forest fires from a glass perch atop an isolated mountain peak is exacting—and lonely—work.

summit. From this point the road leads through dense woods and again begins its climb, passing groves of wild aspen bent to prayerful positions by the heavy winter snows.

A few towering pine trees—overlooked by the destructive Comstock loggers of an earlier day—point toward the snow-bound span of the Sierras. State hunting camps, only inhabited during deer season, are frequent along the road.

If more than two cars pass this way in a day, the natives grumble, "Traffic is heavy."—END