NORTHWEST MONTANA LOOKOUT ASSOCIATION

Dedicated to the preservation of forest fire lookouts in Northwest Montana





NOTES FROM THE BOARD

We continue to be gratified and amazed by all the work our dedicated volunteers and partners complete each season. Our major projects, such as Wam Lookout pictured above, have transformed historical structures. We are proud to work with all of you to preserve these special places.

As of October, our 2026 volunteers have donated 365 hours of time, with an in-kind value of more than $32,000 on 13 projects. Bravo!

Chuck Manning, Board Chair



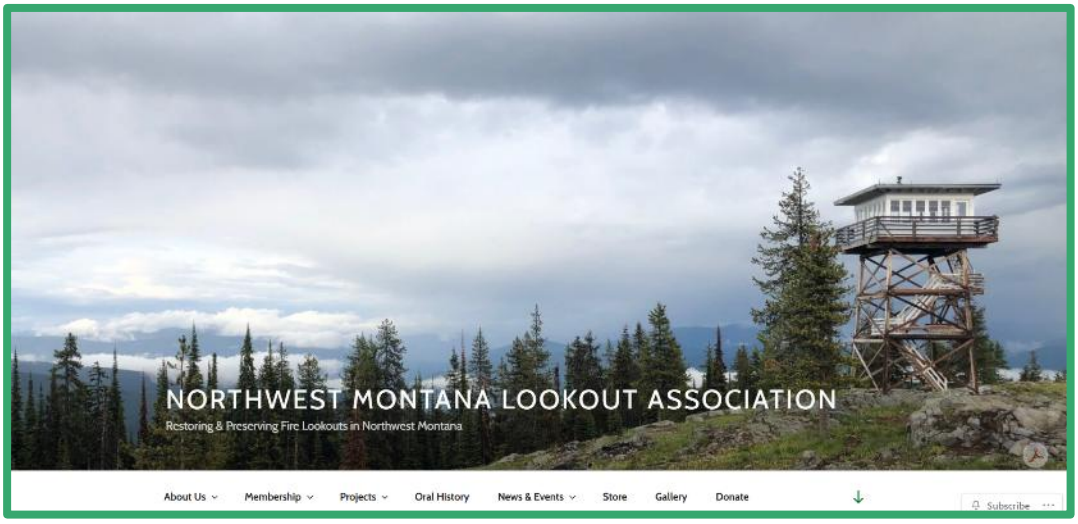


WELCOME NEW BOARD MEMBER

Patty Sommerfield Brennan

Patty built her career in corporate governance and sales management, serving as a National Sales Manager and Board Liaison for major technology firms.

Patty was inspired to join the Board by her friendship with NMLA founders Chuck and Nancy Manning, and her brother Dale's volunteer staffing at Cyclone Lookout. She brings her professional background to lead strategic fundraising initiatives to ensure the long-term preservation of historic treasures like McGuire Mountain and Stahl Peak LOs. An avid outdoor enthusiast, Patty loves skiing, mountain biking, hiking, playing Mahjongg, and walking her two dogs, Thor and Loki, with her husband, Chris. She recently checked off a major Montana bucket list trip by flying into Schafer Meadows to raft the Upper Middle Fork of the Flathead River for four days with Chris and her nephew Dean Lihou as oarsman—a true testament to her love for sharing Montana's wild places with her three grandchildren and extended family.

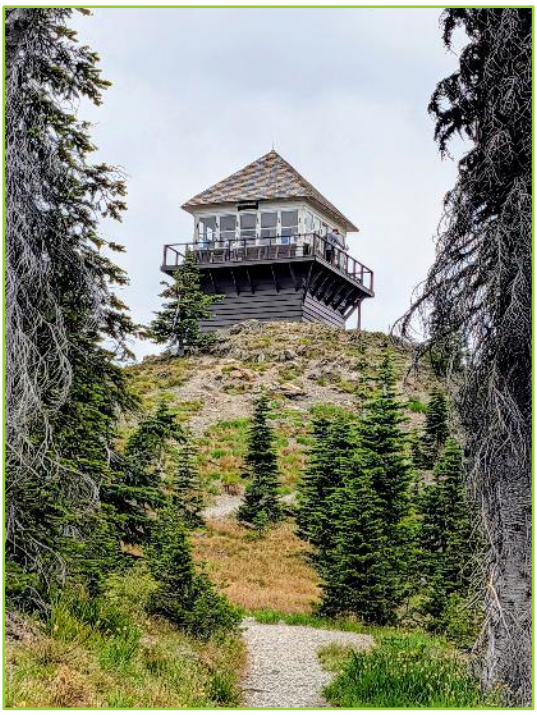


NEW WEBSITE

Board Member Morgan Ray has been very busy behind the scenes updating our website and moving it to a new platform. If you haven't been there in a while, check it out HERE

2026 PROJECTS

GLACIER NP



Mount Brown Lookout

Built in 1929, Mount Brown Lookout is one of the oldest remaining fire lookouts in Glacier National Park. It features a short hip roof and panoramic views of Lake McDonald via a five-mile trail.

The condition assessment by NMLA volunteers Greg Evans and Katie Marsonette found the interior cab and storage area in good condition aside from floors needing paint. However, the exterior needs substantial maintenance, including caulking and painting, replacing heavily weathered shutters and the south catwalk railing, painting the catwalk decking, securing bottom siding boards with hardware cloth and nails, reinforcing stair railings, and repairing the privy.







Porcupine Ridge Lookout

Rescheduled: Porcupine Ridge is hard to get to! Due to trail access issues, this project will now take place next summer.

Volunteers Joann and Joe Schmidt, Bob Cowdrick, and Steve Glow were scheduled to perform the assessment and install new shutters (which were delivered to the lookout earlier this summer).

Porcupine Ridge Lookout overlooks the Waterton River drainage. Built between 1939 and 1940, it is a classic two-story National Park Service frame cab. Although it has not been used regularly for fire detection since about 1972, the structure remains standing and continues to support backcountry ranger operations.





Heavens Peak Lookout

Rescheduled: The site assessment by NMLA volunteers Kira Powell and Rory Trimbo did not unfold as planned, as the access route from the Camas drainage proved unfavorable. As a result, the assessment has been rescheduled for next year using an alternative route.

Heavens Peak Lookout is located about a mile northwest of Heavens Peak. Built in 1945 by conscientious objectors during World War II, the structure combines stone and wood to withstand its rocky, windswept site, featuring a stone foundation, a stone-walled catwalk, a 12-by-12-foot cab, and a flat roof.

KOOTENAI NATIONAL FOREST

Ksanka Ranger District

Mount Wam Lookout

Situated on a 7,121-foot peak in the Ten Lakes area of the Whitefish Range, the Mount Wam Lookout was built by the Forest Service in 1931 and is one of the last remaining gable-roof L-4 lookouts. Last used for fire detection in the 1950s, the structure now sits near the Pacific Northwest Trail, where it frequently serves as a shelter for thru-hikers.

To protect the historic building from the harsh mountaintop environment, Northwest Montana Lookout Association volunteers Ashley Ehrmantrout, Steve Glow, and Chuck Manning repaired and secured damaged shutters and constructed a new shutter for the entry door.

Pack support for the project was provided by members of the Northwest Montana Back Country Horsemen (NWMTBCH). Alden Totten and his daughter, Seline, packed all the necessary materials and supplies, while Guadalupe, Ezekiel, and Abraham Chentnik packed the supplies out. Thank you, NWMTBCH!











McGuire Lookout

After 35 years of abandonment, McGuire Mountain Lookout was restored in 1982 and added to the rental system. Constructed in 1924, the lookout is a D-6 cupola design, a standard model of its era before the L-4 series became widely used.

Barb Hvizdak and Chuck Manning completed the restoration and maintenance work this year, which included converting the removable cupola shutters back to the original hinged system, spot painting the structure to protect it from extreme weather and installing screens to improve ventilation. Critical packing support before and after the project was provided by Alden Totten, Seline and Cody Allen, and Wayne Allen from the Northwest Montana Back Country Horsemen, along with Andrew Cote from the Riverstone Family Lodge.

The lookout is currently available for public rental through Recreation.gov.





Robinson Mountain Lookout

Robinson Mountain Lookout is one of the few remaining gable-roof cupola lookouts, a style that was once common in Montana and northern Idaho. Built in 1929, the 12-by-14-foot shake-and-frame cabin was abandoned in 1948 and restored to serviceable condition in 1983 by the Kootenai National Forest. It sits at an elevation of 7,404 feet, just a few miles south of the Canadian border.

Volunteers Gary Weber (National FFLA Treasurer) and Chuck Manning conducted the assessment, with assistance from Ksanka Ranger District employees Marcy Goheen and Traci Swope. Atlee Yoder, a local resident who supplied the riding stock and has spent many hours stabilizing and maintaining the lookout over the years, was also instrumental throughout the process. Overall, the structure remains in good condition. It does have a few on-going maintenance needs. Robinson LO will require future attention to resolve specific structural issues









Stahl Lookout

Stahl Peak Lookout sits on a high outcrop in the Ten Lakes area. Built in 1926, this cupola-style lookout cabin served as an active fire-detection post into the 1960s. Today, it operates as an emergency shelter situated near the Pacific Northwest Trail, which spans approximately 1,200 miles from its eastern terminus in the northeast corner of Glacier National Park, Montana, to its western terminus in Olympic National Park, Washington.

Ahead of potential restoration work at Stahl Peak, volunteers Barb Hvizdak, Mark Miller, and Chuck Manning of NMLA conducted this year's pre-project assessment. Planned improvements include removing and restoring all windows, building and replacing all shutters, and repairing the south wall, which has settled due to its loose-stack rock foundation. Look for volunteer opportunities at Stahl in the coming years.







Three Rivers Ranger District



Keeler Mountain Lookout

Keeler Mountain Lookout, located in Lincoln County, Montana, within the Kootenai National Forest, sits roughly 10 miles south of Troy. Ahead of the 2026 fire season, Stacey Dunn, Larry Shadow, and Chuck Manning teamed up with the Forest Service to perform a condition assessment, exploring the possibility of reactivating the structure as a staffed fire lookout. Upgrading the lightning protection system emerged as a top priority for both the Forest Service and NMLA volunteers. Basic maintenance issues of replacing unsound wood material, scraping, painting, and hardware repairs were identified.

The current structure is a 53-foot treated lumber R-6 tower, marking the third lookout at this site. The location's history dates back to 1924 with a 50-foot platform tower and a log cabin (which still stands), followed by a 50-foot pole tower featuring an L-4 cab in 1934. The present 53-foot treated timber tower with its R-6 flat cab was constructed in 1963. Access to the area is currently closed off to protect grizzly bear habitat.







NW Peak Lookout

Rescheduled: The project is rescheduled to 2027 due to helicopter availability and increased wildfire activity.

Located within the Purcell Mountains in the far northwestern corner of Montana, the NW Peak Lookout sits inside the 19,100-acre Northwest Peaks Scenic Area, just south of the Canadian border and near the Idaho border. The site was first established as a patrol camp in 1921.

In 1929, a prototype gabled L-4 ground house was constructed, serving as the forerunner to the classic L-4 models built throughout the West. Although abandoned for fire detection in 1955, the structure survived the elements and was restored in the 1980s as a protected historic site. It is now listed on the National Historic Lookout Register, and it remains one of the few surviving gabled-roof L-4s.

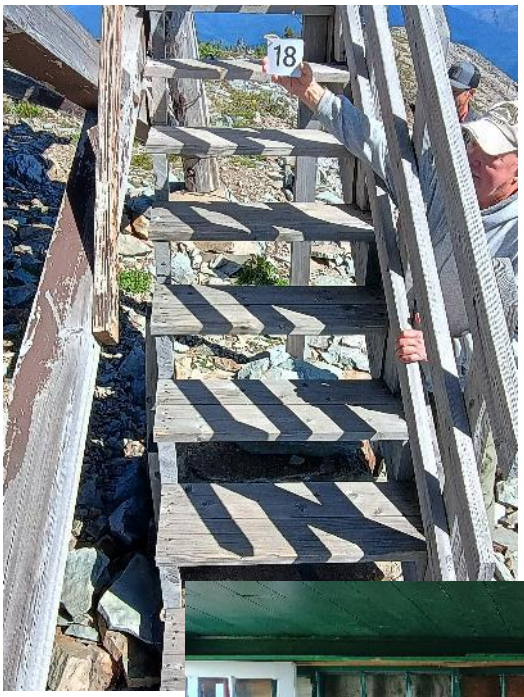
The 2026 work plan called for reinstalling the windows reconditioned in 2024–25, replacing the exterior siding, installing new shutters and braces currently stored in the lookout cab, completing the ceiling boards, adding a new ridge cap and lightning protection air terminals, and painting the entire structure inside and out. We hope to be able to complete this work next summer.



Mount Henry Lookout

Mount Henry Lookout is located approximately 10 miles northeast of Yaak at an elevation of 7,146 feet. A condition assessment was conducted by Ashley Ehramantrout, Mitch Eddy, Karen Sheets, Mark Sheets, and Bob Lambrecht with the goal of undertaking a major restoration project on the lookout in the coming years.

In 1925, the Kootenai National Forest constructed a stone-and-frame cupola lookout on Mount Henry. This structure was replaced in 1942 with the current L-4, 14-by-14-foot cab with a catwalk on a 10-foot log tower. Mount Henry Lookout was abandoned in 1973; it is now used only during emergencies and was partially restored in the 1990s.







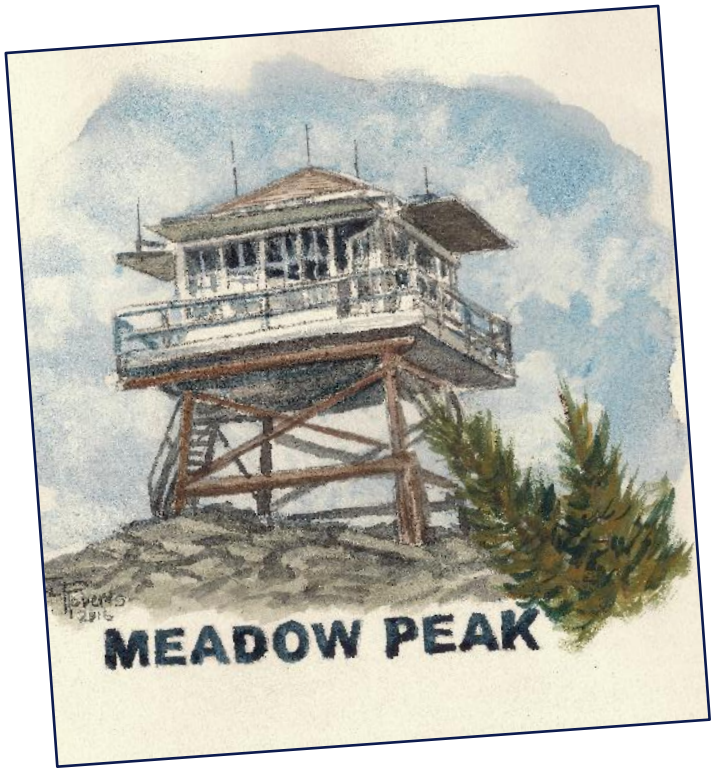
Libby Ranger District



Meadow Peak Lookout

Sitting at 6,710 feet in northwestern Montana's Purcell Range, Meadow Peak Lookout in Kootenai National Forest has monitored wildfires for nearly 100 years. The site's original cupola cabin was replaced in 1936 by a 15-foot timber tower featuring an L-4 cab. In 1957, it was upgraded to the current L-4 lookout, which sits on a 10-foot treated timber frame with a wrap-around catwalk.

Troy Denman and his son Turner repaired the shutter hardware that had become bent due to the strong winds. This lookout is above the Lost Prairie drop zone and McGregor Lake. The Libby District rents this lookout from July 1 thru September 30 annually. It is a favorite. The NMLA did extensive restoration on this lookout over the past few years, to support future use.



Artwork by Tom Roberts, as shown on mugs and notecards



Zeigler Mountain Lookout

Located atop a flat 20-acre summit at an elevation of 5,296 feet, Zeigler Mountain Lookout overlooks the surrounding rugged terrain. The site was first established in 1915 with a log cabin and a three-legged platform tower, followed by a second platform tower in 1928 and a 30-foot pole L-4 tower in 1933. The current structure, a 32-foot treated-timber R-6 flat-top tower with a catwalk, was constructed in 1959.

Deb and Bob Starling, alongside Chuck and Nancy Manning, conducted a condition assessment for the Libby Ranger District to evaluate the feasibility of restaffing the lookout for future fire detection.

The lookout tower, catwalk, and cab exterior were found to be in good condition. The door shutter was securely fastened to block rodents—preventing physical access inside, so the team removed two window shutters to photograph the interior. These photos revealed very good interior condition, complete with the basic equipment required for restaffing, and no evidence of rodent activity or droppings.





Werner Peak Lookout

On a bluebird day in October, volunteers Deb Starling, Katie Marsonette, Cathy Calloway and Doug Berglund took a trip to the Whitefish Range to do a condition assessment of Werner Peak LO. This lookout is in the State Rental system, and overall is in good shape. Measurements were taken to replace the catwalk door and possible additional maintenance items were identified.

The existing lookout is at least the third structure used as a lookout on Werner Peak. A crows nest lookout was used there prior to 1914. The first permanent lookout in Montana was built there in 1914. It consisted of a log cabin built on a three-foot log foundation with a glass cupula on top, where one man could watch the forest. It was replaced in 1941 by an L-4 tower. That lookout cab was flown off the mountain and replaced by the current L-4 structure in 1985.

Montana DNRC











It is an interesting mystery what became of the 1941 lookout cab, It was moved to the site of the Northwest Montana Historical Village and Museum south of Kalispell. The site was open to the public for about 5 years in the 1990s. The main museum building burned in 2007 and the land has since been developed. The ultimate fate of the lookout is not known.



Little Napa Lookout

Little Napa sits on Montana state lands in the Swan Unit. This year Ashley Ehrantrout and Mitch Eddy used their timber framing experience to follow up on some areas of concern in the 2025 assessment. Their findings are that overall the lookout is in good condition. They recommended options to replace/repair the X bracing on the west side of the lookout. They estimate this could take a crew of two or three about two days to complete.





THE NIGHT THAT CHANGED EVERYTHING



It’s a wonder that Rick and Marli Davis lasted through their first night ever on a lookout, let alone becoming lifelong lovers of the lookout world. In 1971, the newly married couple bounced their way up the North Fork Road in the Flathead National Forest on their way to their first assignment at Cyclone Lookout. All of their gear was in the back of the Forest Service truck, which took them to the trailhead. At that time, the Cyclone trail began on the North Fork Road and went for six and a half miles and twenty-one switchbacks up to the lookout.

As Rick said, “Fortunately, they carried our gear with horses, but we walked it. So, the very first time we ever saw a lookout was when we came around the corner and saw an outhouse on the right-hand side, and then here's a forty-foot tower. It just took my breath away.”

Marli said Cyclone was only fifteen feet square. “But it had, you know, stove and refrigerator, propane. It had a little bit of a breeze box to where you could keep some things kind of fresh. It was really comfortable, just a twin bed. But we were younger then; we both fit on the twin bed, so that worked out okay. So, there we were, and really, we didn't have any trepidation, and we were just excited-- all that home sweet home had to offer…Until that night.”

Never having been on a lookout before, the couple had no idea what to expect. As Rick said, “So that night—remember—we've never been on a lookout before. We had no idea what it was going to be like.” This day was the beginning of four fire seasons as agency lookouts followed by years of volunteer lookout work. Put all of the years together, and Rick said they could not match the storm he and Marli experienced that first night. “It was unbelievable. We had a couple of flare ups within 300 yards of our Lookout tower. The people that were at Numa [Lookout in Glacier National Park] counted over 100 strikes just in that vicinity, not hitting the tower, but in that vicinity. It was very active.

“At one point we were in a cloud. I know the lookout itself was in a cloud, because it was just all this static, and it was wild, absolutely wild. And so about halfway through this, I'm terrified. So is [Marli]. We don't know. We're either sitting on the bed because it had these, these insulators, or a little stool. So, I got on the crank phone and I called Ed Griffith, who was our supervisor. I said, ‘Ed, what's going on? We're scared. What's going on?’

‘Get off the phone. Call me in the morning.’

Both laughed.

Marli realized they were on their own.



Rick broke in. “Yeah, it was just amazing. I remember the wind was so strong that the guy wires that hold the lookout stable were kind of singing. You could just hear the wind whistle through them and the lookout didn't sway. It shook. The windows were rattling a little bit. Oh, and by the way, this was only the third year of service that this TT flat-top lookout* was in service. So it was solid. I mean it was as safe as it could be. It had five lightning rods on the roof.

*Note: The abbreviation "TT" stands for Timber Tower**,** indicating the material used for the supporting structure, while "Flat Top" describes the style of the observation live-in cabin (cab) sitting at the top.

Marli recalls, “We were blinded by all of that lightning, too. And so that was probably the only effect that was--it took a while to come back from.

“It was so bright. And I know this doesn't even sound believable, but I would put a pillow over my face because it was like, it might be hurting my eyes. It was still bright, even with my face covered with a pillow. And so it was scary, but I was pretty confident, like Rick said, it was a new Lookout. I thought, you know, this is what this lookout is built for, right? It's doing what it's supposed to do, so it's got to be okay. But, you know, all your training that you get--all about the alidade and how to read the degrees and watching for fires and scanning and all of that-- I guess they don't talk about the storms because you really can't explain it to somebody. You know, you have to live it. You have to be there in a tower when a storm like that happens. And, and so it was a shock. But then by the next morning, when we realized we were still alive, the lookout was still standing, you realized how thrilling it was.”



“And I think that kind of is what cements for people that love lookouts and keep going back, because it is the power of nature and you're just right in the middle of it. And I think that's one of the things that just becomes a part of what your soul wants to experience again. So, you start sort of praying for storms, you know. And of course, you don't say that. That seems kind of counterintuitive to what we're supposed to be doing up there, protecting the forest. Of course, we are doing that. But it is so amazing to be right in the middle of a storm like that, and even when it's off in the distance, which, of course, most of them are, not right there, but just watching, looking out the windows, and watching the lightning and following the course of the storm, which direction it's moving, how fast the wind is blowing, and

just being a part of that whole development of storms, and watching it happen is pretty amazing. And it gets to be something that you really look forward to and really love.

“What it did, though, is we figured if that's as bad as it gets (and we had no idea that it was), we kept reflecting back as storms would come in later on. It didn't match this, so we'd bake cookies and have coffee and get excited about the thunderstorms rather than being scared out of our wits.”

Rick agreed. “Yeah, we did.”

Marli said, “And here comes our supervisor that very next day. And we were just like . oh boy…” Rick grins. “To see if we were still alive from the night before.”

And Marli thought, “We’re probably going to get fired.”

Rick expected their boss to say, “Get out of here, ‘cause you’re chicken.”

Marli smiled. “We didn’t get fired. He let us stay there. So that worked well.”

It worked out well enough that the Davises still staff Cyclone Lookout each summer as volunteers. A 1971 fire on the first night they ever served as lookouts may have provided the impetus and glue to secure their love of lookouts. Today, they are also members of the Northwest Montana Lookout Association Board of Directors.



This story is a part of an oral history interview that Rick and Marli Davis gave to the Northwest Montana Lookout Association on June 8, 2025. It is archived with the University of Montana Scholarworks program and also on the NMLA website.

.

SAVE THE DATES!

WILDERNESS SPEAKER SERIES

Tuesday February 2, 2027
Tuesday March 2, 2027
Tuesday April 6, 2027

Always interesting, enlightening and a nice dose o wilderness during the winter months. Hope you can join us.



View past talks HERE

2027 COMMUNITY EVENTS

RAFFLE & BREWERY FUNDRAISERS GENERATED > $2000 FOR FUTURE PROJECTS



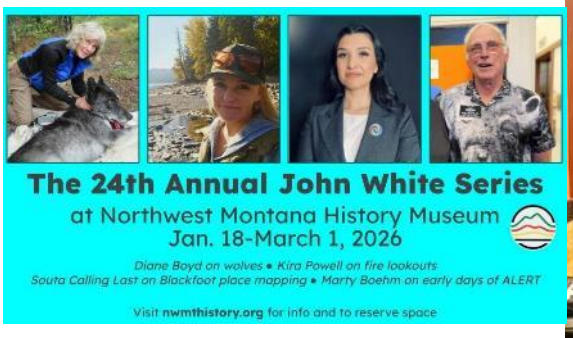
















Fire Lookouts – Beyond the Fire Finding Duties

As I've had the privilege to visit with lookouts from the 40's, 50's, 60's to current there is always another skill set that doesn't get talked about as much. Several Uncles, Aunts, and both grandfathers of my husband served as lookouts. There are still stories of the great food they learned to enjoy and make for themselves. (And of course some things that are not favorites.) A common story I've heard from those memories and from those that I was lucky enough to get to visit with from the Smokejumpers Association and other retirees, was the pride in their Baking Powder Biscuits.

It is fitting as I opened the Lookout Cookbook Region One (U.S. Department of Agriculture Forest Service 1954) that the first recipe is just that. I thought it would be fitting to share that and encourage us all to take the time to enjoy a fresh baked biscuit! Good luck. Another tip in this same cookbook is to take a tin can to use to cut your biscuits out. I smiled as I read the tips thinking how much marketing occurs today for specialized kitchen gadgets. As I visit a lookout, while looking at the structure, and needs, and helping coordinate opportunities, I also think of the stories the lookout can tell. Enjoy!

Deb Mucklow Starling

Baking Powder Biscuits (from the Lookout Cookbook Region One)
1 cup flour
1 teaspoon sugar (helps brown the biscuits)
½ teaspoon salt
2 level teaspoons baking powder
2 tablespoons shortening
½ cup milk
Sift flour, sugar, salt and baking power. Cut in shortening until thoroughly mixed with dry material, gradually add milk, and make into soft dough. Roll ½ inch think with little flour on board, cut with floured biscuit cutter. (A can top may be used as a biscuit cutter.) Bake in hot oven about 12 minutes or until nicely browned.



F

Lookouts in the News -- From the Daily Interlake July 17, 1925

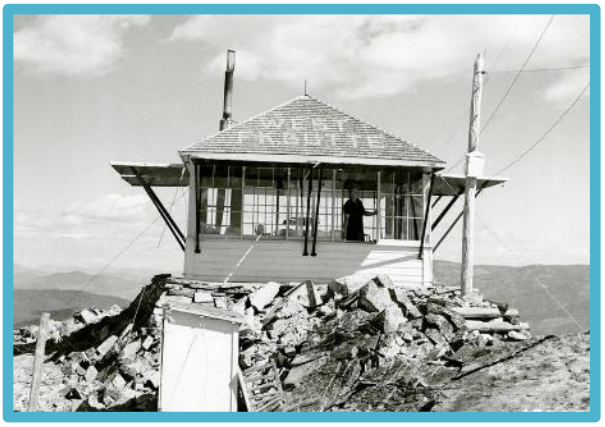
"LIGHTNING KILLS FOREST LOOKOUT AND STARTS FIRE

Priest River, Idaho, July 13.—Paul Blickensdorfer, lookout at South Staldy ranger station north of Priest Lake was killed by lightning during an electrical storm Sunday, which started forest fires which were rapidly spread by high winds. The fires cover an area of 40 miles square at the head of Priest Lake, which are being fought by 150 men.

An airplane from Spokane to Missoula was dispatched to map the fire. One fire is reported to have skipped upper Priest Lake for two miles, and set a fire on the other side.

Blickensdorfer was a student in the University of Idaho, and his home is in Cincinnati, Ohio. He was sleeping on the floor of his lookout cabin when it was struck by lightning, having given his bed to forest officials.

No one else was injured."



West Fork Butte LO, KD Swan Photo, 1943

Opportunity – West Fork Butte Lookout - Can You Help?

The northwest Montana lookout Association has received a request to consider leading/helping with the restoration needs on the West Fork Butte Lookout on the Missoula RD of the Lolo National Forest. While we'd love to say yes, reality is that our plates are over flowing with needs and our commitments to our partners on the Kootenai and Flathead National Forests, Glacier National Park and the lookouts on state lands on northwest Montana.

That said, we offered to share this need in our annual newsletter in case one of you or several might be willing to find help to lead this effort or make progress.

The lookout was constructed in 1934. It is L-4 ground cab. It is currently in the Forest Service Cabin Rental Program and a very popular destination. It does have drivable access within ¼ mile.

Priority work identified as a need includes: dryland stacked talus for foundation stabilization and wall stabilization. There is additional needs after these projects, but these are require first. There are current assessments completed that could be shared. ,
While this list sounds daunting, we are thinking this is what some of you have helped with on our current project at Northwest Peak. Others with similar needs were Mcguire, Wam, and Mud Lake.

Please contact Sydney Bacon (406-329-3827/Sydney.bacon@usda.gov) if you might be willing to help the Heritage staff and District/Forest restore the West Fork Lookout.

Look for the latest lookout information on FACEBOOK and Instagram. (@nwmtlookouts)

Find our merchandise HERE

NMLA
P. O. Box 2704
Kalispell, MT 59903