"ON THE LOOKOUT"

Prairie Reef 1945

By: Dale K. Fortune

To wake up rare'n to go and watch it break day in the east has always been part of my makeup. I look out the windows and wonder what's happening, what's new today, what do we expect; and even today I think of those days on Prairie Reef, high atop the "Rocky Mountain Front", just east of the Continental Divide and west of Augusta, Montana, headquarters for that U.S.F.S. ranger district. This is amidst a huge rough high rugged mountainous area south of Glacier Park, north of Helena and west of Great Falls; much of which has since been isolated as the "Bob Marshall Wilderness". Previously some of this was the Sun River Preserve to the east and Spotted Bear Preserve west of the Continental Divide. Of course, it had been home to aboriginal people before and since the latest glacial epoch approximately 10 - 12,000 years ago and the Blackfoot Indians, pioneers, homesteaders, settlers, cattleman, miners, trappers and farmers of the area since Lewis and Clark passed through going to the Pacific 1805 and returning in 1806. The Nez Perce were a bit to the south in the Bitterroot and Lolo County and the Sioux east on the plains. This is big game and buffalo country.

By the spring of 1945 I was 17, had spent most summers since I was 10 "work'n out" away from home on farms and ranches in the Lewistown, Montana area, and the last two of these as part of the local U.S.F.S. "summer crew". The crew was the "old man" and two kids. The old man was Paul Horvat, a small wiry Austrian who loved and lived the outdoors. He was probably in his early 50's, a wonderful teacher and a very dedicated, capable, knowledgeable worker (what you expected in those days in that place). This had been the tail end of the Great Depression, to work was normal and survival was the game.

Those were tense times. We were 3-1/2 years into Stalin, Churchill and Roosevelt's war we were led to believe was made mandatory by Japan's supposed "sneak" attack they were allowed to pull off to "motivate" the U.S.A. public to action; and F.D.R.'s New Deal had been set in motion, forever changing our country and culture. Some attempts had been made by submarine (mostly unsuccessful) to set fire to our forests and land-based sabotage by fire was feared. I didn't want to go to war; but I immensely wanted to be a "lookout".

That summer there was to be an experimental operation called Aerial Patrol using aircraft where possible patterned after a similar plan in use in Germany. This would be done in a very large area of the Rocky Mountains, Lewis and Clark National Forest. Where 42 lookouts had been manned, only ten would be that summer. Prairie Reef was one of the ten. They would be serviced by air and coordinated by aerial patrol. When informed I'd be one of those ten, I understood clearly "I'd better be on the ball". I'm sure my respected friends, Paul Horvat and the local ranger Carl Ulhorn played a big part in me having that opportunity.

Prairie Reef is a very large, three-cornered, wide at the base, section of bed rock tilted at perhaps a 20- to 40-degree incline for a mile or more reaching a narrow point of rock at approximately 8868 feet elevation. Being on the up thrust point well above the timberline, this lookout was an L-4 cabin, set and anchored directly in the rock with no other buildings or amenities. It was situated between the Sun River and Dearborn River drainages having deep canyons on both sides with vertical cliffs on the one side; goat and sheep access on the other.

On a clear day looking due east nearly ninety miles airline, I could just see the old Anaconda smelter smoke stack at Great Falls standing like a telephone pole against the blue sky. Augusta is a very small old town fifty miles west of Great Falls. From there it is thirty miles west through farm and ranch land into the foothill country, then at the end of the road at Benchmark, the low-level guard and weather station. From Benchmark, at the mouth of a major canyon in the Woodlake vicinity, it was approximately 14 miles by trail through the canyons and up to the lookout.

I went to the Augusta District (Tom Wiles was ranger there), as soon as I could get out of school (early) that spring and worked with the crew in the view area of Prairie Reef doing range fence, trail and phone line maintenance so I would be more familiar with the country when on the lookout. Our small crew of three or four stayed in the backcountry working from Benchmark and several other cabins. Horses, mules and man were the vehicles and power of that day.

The source of that stock (if not local) was the USFS Remount Depot at Minemile, west of Missoula and had been quite depleted by the war. Most of the animals on the district were old timers, able, dependable and experienced with good intentions. We used this stock in some way most every day. Every day is a living experience with livestock; but several stand out.

One kind memory is on a day out doing phone line repair. This was that old heavy galvanized single wire hung by split insulators, mostly from trees. The saddle horse I rode that day knew the job well. There were only two of us working this line. The lead man was ahead clearing some windfall, etc. I was having trouble reaching the line once I pulled the broken ends together. The lead hollered back "stand in the saddle, he's ok". Well I did, and to my surprise that horse braced with the pull,

kept me in position to make the splice and even to hang the insulator back in the tree. He was experienced; I was the neophyte. He didn't know some scientific studies would "prove" animals can't reason.

One cool morning in early June, I met another animal character not so kind. The crew boss, Walt Truckner had sent me to take the saddle horse "kept in" and bring in the horses and pack mules from the night pasture. As I went about this, I noticed one mule hanging back as I headed the bunch to the corral and as I moved in behind her I realized my saddle horse was being cautious and on guard. I didn't crowd her as hard as I first intended, and gave the horse his head. He knew what was coming, I didn't. Suddenly she let go with both hind feet narrowly missing my knee and side. I was so glad that experienced pony shied a bit at the right moment. The horse waited while I made a large hard knot in the heavy halter rope I'd brought along and then he put me just close enough to pound her hind end and she agreed to go with the bunch.

She didn't forget though, and at a later date nearly got me. We were way back repairing a division range fence and had the saddle and pack animals tied nearby. I was sent for a bar that was loaded from the rear on the side of the same mule. She seemed so docile and calm as I spoke to her and moved in to withdraw the bar. She let me get hold of the bar then humped up and obviously was going to let me have it with both hind feet. Walt heard the commotion; he came running and hollering at her in terms she understood. I felt lucky again as he began to council her with a club. I knew these were critical lessons and I needed to be smarter real quick.

Although a large portion of that very large area is now the Bob Marshall Wilderness, it contained a huge amount of good large timber, especially in the canyons. There had been logging activity in much of it years and decades before. This area contained a considerable bear population, both black and grizzly, which we kept on the lookout for. There were also cougar, bobcats and lots of deer and elk. I understood the Dearborn and Sun River herds combined were approximately 3500 head of elk. When I hear today how detrimental and disruptive roads and trails are to the native game I think back to those days. Even then those animals didn't know they were supposed to not like roads and trails and found them convenient to travel on, and often did. Bear were our most concern; but even though game was plentiful they were not habituated to man then; we had no problem, but it did keep one awake, attentive and careful.

Soon after my arrival at Augusta, fire school was announced; that would be a new experience for me and much easier than trail building, fence repair, slash piling, etc., and more sophisticated. I looked forward to it and it did leave some lasting memories. The training camp was an ex-C.C.C. camp in the Little Belt Mountains in the Neihart vicinity, approximately sixty miles south of Great Falls (over 100 miles from Augusta), and lasted several days; quite an excursion for me.

One of the events was to locate a fire. I remember six of us were shown a smudge in the upper edge of thick timber and brush across a wide basin of timber over a mile away and a fair climb. We were each given a compass with which we took a bearing and then were dispatched 15 minutes apart. I was the second to the last to go.

I noticed the surrounding ridges were more open and there were some spurs that came in close to this spot. This was quite a competitive exercise, part of our grade, and of course everyone is going to find the fire; it's just a matter of how quick. So when I was given the go ahead I angled toward one of those ridges and somebody said, "He's already off course". It was rolling country and there were times when I wondered if I'd lost my way. I'm off the bearing now; but have a certain ridge in mind that will take me back on course, or close; but now it's not putting up smoke.

Well, finally I'm back over in the general area, I think. I'm in heavy cover hopefully on the slope I've headed for; but all I see is brush and timber. Now as I zigzag up the slope wondering just where "on course" would be and don't find any opening for a back sight on camp. I smell a whiff of smoke, or was it wishful thinking. No, it's pay dirt, a little further on, here's the target, a trainer and the remainder of his little fire. One of the early ones out and I are the only two to show up.

To me it was much like trying to outfox an old musty buck, and because of the more open going I'd made good time, but the chief that dispatched us was a bit reserved in his congratulations and suggested I do more compass practice.

Quite memorable were two extracurricular activities. One night several of us did an experiment on a big fellow sleeping in another bunkhouse that slept about thirty people. Someone promoted the idea that if you can dip a sleeping person's hand in warm water they'll pee the bed. Actually, I think that by the time we'd gotten the wash pan of warm water and found his bunk the promoter had disappeared. This fellow came up fighting mad and made so much commotion he aroused the camp officials. Luckily the three of us were able to retreat and be into our beds before an investigation was made. What sounds good in the dark may not stand the light of day. We'd probably been canned.

The last evening in fire camp we were all feeling good with a bit of excitement in the air. Some of us were sparing around, horseplay, in the bunkhouse. I was wearing a heavy pair of work boots and had fully unlaced them. As kids, we'd always done some wrestling, but I learned I didn't know anything about the game. I had a hold of a fellow's arm and we were just pushing around. He'd backed me up a bit and my shoe heel was stuck between the hinge side of the door and the door jam. Suddenly he did some quick maneuver, there was a tearing sound and I'm on the floor with a badly sprained ankle, my foot still hung up in the door. He apologized and said; "the way you were acting, I thought you knew what you were doing". I didn't. As I limped off to bed someone asked, "Didn't you know he is the Montana State wrestling champion?" Well, no, I didn't, but I've tried since to remember, "A little knowledge is dangerous".

I put in a bad night and painful ride back to Benchmark the next day in the back of a covered 1-1/2 ton truck. I either had one or someone supplied me with an elastic bandage. Next morning I was told, "You can't work like that, so you'll cook for the crew for a few days". About the second day, I thought I was doing pretty good and I'd impress them with some vanilla pudding for supper dessert. I didn't get something right and it was vanilla soup. There were six or eight fellows grinning at failure; but they were kind to the kid and pretended this was the way it was supposed to be, and took the cups and proceeded to drink it.

I was embarrassed, they were entertained, and someone said, "Whoever complains about the cooking will do it". Between breakfast and supper I nursed my ankle and worried about what and how for the next meal. I grew up with a do-it-yourself environment, Arnica and Witch Hazel, Epsom Salts, Onion poultices, etc.; it healed quick and I was soon back out working, often seeing Prairie Reef off in the distance. I was anxious to be there.

As the season progressed, it soon became time to man the lookouts. I was put on Prairie Reef by horse and mules about the end of June and took very little with me; a few clothes, an old box camera, some writing material and lots of expectation. I'm sure they wondered if this kid will be able to hack it, but no one said a discouraging word. This lookout had been opened up and checked out earlier by some of the district "old hands" and was just waiting for its ears and eyes. The only snow on the peak that year by that time was a drift over the rim on a narrow ledge on the side the mountain goats and sheep used. It was in the shade much of the day and lasted quite awhile, but was quite dirty from the wind-blown dirt. My installation was brief and I was soon on my own, watching my company and transportation fading into the timberline down below.

The nearest water for the lookout was a small spring in a large swale near the foot of that long slope up to the peak, .7 miles away, a little below timberline with good forage about. Game frequented this area often, sometimes feeding above the timberline too. It was a good spring but quite a climb back up with that 5-gallon pack bag on my back. Of course people in that situation learn that water does not wear out and that its uses are calculated in declining order. Until we moved to town for high school, we never had electricity, sewer or running water (except running to the spring after it), so the lifestyle wasn't new to me. I was conservative and did make use of the snowdrift down just below the horizon on the goat side of the peak as long as it lasted, well into the summer. I'm sure no one in the pecking order above me had an idea I was using the precarious mountain sheep and goat trail over the edge to access this wonderful fresh water source. I was careful.

Four mountain sheep below lookout

To break the routine, get some exercise and to explore, weather permitting (fire-wise), I did frequently ask for permission from Missoula to "go for water"; and they expected that, not knowing of my special snow bank and the repetitive uses water can be put to. And of course, this way I didn't need to fill that 5-gallon bag full each trip. I loved to hike and did have envious thoughts when I'd look off into those canyons and remember the wonderful trout holes I'd seen before I'd been stationed on the lookout. Sometimes I'd see a little dust trail and know that a packstring was bringing in people to do what I'd like to be doing.

As lookouts know, daybreak is prime time as even a very small smoke will be easier to detect against the background colors in the angle of the early light, especially to the west (west slopes in the evening light). This is also prime time to watch for game. At the first light of day I would roll out of bed (literally) and stay low so as not to spook any game that might be in sight. They weren't there every morning, but I often did see something.

One morning I saw a large grizzly bear hunting rodents well above timberline less than a quarter-mile from my lookout. It was remarkable, inspiring both fear and respect to see the size of boulder that big bear rolled out of place with relevant ease. He would apparently smell or hear something underneath, just lean over, hook a front leg and paw or both legs on the larger ones, squat down, lean back and over came a boulder, some as large as a kitchen range or small refrigerator. And then he would scamper around and catch whatever was under the rock. I kept very quiet.

One evening I noticed that a group of elk had watered, fed in the swale and seemed to bed down in the upper tree cover along the trail. I thought I saw a rare opportunity. I called Missoula for permission to go for water very early next morning. My plan was to go down before daylight and see if I could actually sneak in close to this herd before they detected me. Depending on how you look at such things I was successful.

There was no moon; I left in the dark, being very quiet and slow, with the air currents in my favor. Now I'm into the trees and it's just barely breaking day and I don't hear or see anything; but the cover is fairly thick, especially low level. I was moving ever so cautiously with a certain feeling of success. I wait a minute, but still don't see any elk. Have they left all ready? Did something spook them away in the night?

At this point, the excitement of perhaps being successful was being mixed with apprehension and indecision. I'm now wondering how elk behave in situations like this. How do cow elk act with calves? When startled? I know there are bulls in this herd, what do they do if they think an enemy is present? Where are they? Am I being foolish? What should I do now? I realize this is definitely not prudent activity around a herd of cattle - range cattle with bulls. What would my dad think, him being an ex-trapper, cowpuncher and homesteader? Would he be proud of me right now?

It's quickly becoming daylight. Here I am in the trail, well into their cover, one foot in the air carefully looking for a quiet place to set it down and still scanning the area; there's lots of low brush among the squatty scattered alpine fir and spruce. Oh no, that's a cow's head and ears taking shape below the trail and behind me behind the tree; and there's another ahead and above the trail and now I think I make out the form of a cows back laying down below and ahead of me. Something stirred, it's another, even closer just below me, she's getting up; but she doesn't look my way. Is there a bull watching? Do these close cows have calves? Have I been foolish? Yes. I'm into the edge of the herd. Do I run back? Do I stand still until they smell me - if they haven't already?

I decided not to move but to make a little human sound to alert them. Well, they alerted, in an instant everyone was on their feet and leaving on a dead run down and out of there, past my spring, over the edge and out of sight. I felt a surge of relief and recalled another one of my Dad's admonitions, "God has mercy on fools".

I ran to where they went and looked down the steep slope; there was only a clatter of hoof on rock and quite a dust trail.

They never even slowed until they had hit the canyon bottom and were up the other side a ways. There appeared to be 40 - 50 head in this bunch, now over a mile away.

On another occasion when I went for water, I decided to take a long detour, a half-mile or more off the trail back to the lookout. It was a nice day after a storm; cool and sunny with a stiff Montana breeze blowing fall in the air. I found that side of the peak to be quite broken with a continuous series of rock ledge outcrops with a dip eroded above each one. This side was a little damper, quite steep, with more underbrush among a denser stand of alpine trees. These ledges were layered flat strata, well weathered on the exposed edges. I was quite a way from the lookout in an area that would never have people, and actually, human activity was always miles away from this mountain.

As I topped one of these close ledges with the wind in my face and the partially filled water bag on my back, looking carefully in all directions and wondering what I might meet up with, I caught a thin flat rock with my toe sending it rattling into the dip in front of me. Thoughts of cougar, bear, etc. were getting ever more present on my mind. Instantly, like an explosion, a mid-sized grizzly bear popped up out of the brush only 12 - 15 feet in front of me with amazing speed. It was over in an instant, though I was concerned as to where it went and was it really gone. My exploring was over and after a long minute of watchful listening, I hurried on up to my domain. That bear looked surprised and probably was as startled as I was. He apparently had been napping there in the sun out of the wind. You've seen pictures of bear really leaving with their hind feet up by their shoulders and front paws showing between their hind legs. That's what I saw briefly, and he was gone.

I was put on the lookout from Benchmark with a packstring and horseback; then except for one visitor and one inspection, I saw only airplanes, usually in the distance, doing patrol or checking out recorded strikes or smokes. Fire-wise we tried to spot each suspicious strike, clusters of strikes or flare ups and/or smokes as they occurred and get a bearing on each with the Osbome firefinder; then soon after the storm, or during if possible, a single engine spotter plane checked these out. If one needed attention men were sent in on foot or horseback, or in remote areas smokejumpers were brought in from Missoula with the Ford Tri-Motor aircraft.

The emphasis was on aircraft in this aerial project; and though my lookout would normally be serviced by pack animal, this was now done by plane (mail, groceries, etc). Either the spotter plane doing routine work, or if necessary a single engine plane, would do our drop on a 14-foot flare chute after getting my attention and knowing I was out of the way. Usually the drop was good with little damage, though a few times I did gather up scattered mail and groceries. I never tried to order anything exotic and had no trouble, except perhaps on point of impact. They used the small 14-foot flare chute to get a fairly quick drop so that the load didn't float off into a canyon or down into the timber. The speed of the drop coupled with a stiff breeze made the landing quite fast and harsh; and if the chute didn't collapse quickly in a wind the cargo took quite a beating. Several times this happened and did tear open the box scattering some contents, but I never had one miss the peak or get away. This of course, makes the delivery of eggs, fresh fruit and vegetables more difficult, but they did it, and I cooked accordingly.

GroceryDrop - some hit hard and got dragged by the 14-foot flare chute (squashed canteloupe - right)

I made my own sourdough pancakes and didn't order bread; but with each drop came more. So, as I'm ordering on this occasion I tried to politely get the point across that I was over stocked and didn't need more bread. This man laughed and said, "You're not trying to eat all that bread, that's for packing to cushion the drop". And, of course I got more white, doughy, baker's bread (good for pack'n).

Prairie Reef got a lot of storm activity with lots of tremendous lighting. At 8,868 feet elevation on the Continental Divide, I was up there right in it (called the backbone of the Rockies). Especially in certain types of storms, I could tell when my point was about to be struck. I didn't have any power; but there was a phone line equipped with the old hand crank phone. Of course I unplugged the phone, the radio (an old SPF set) and the antenna, and stayed as well away from metal objects as you can in a 14' x 14' space full of objects, except once. During one very ferocious lightning storm with high, variable, gusty winds, heavy dark rolling clouds and spotty rain, we were getting many strikes with flare-ups, smokes and several fires. This was late in the summer and the woods were dry, so Missoula had dispatched smoke jumpers to land on these fires as quickly as possible. This was done by Johnson Flying Service based in Missoula, with the old famous Ford Tri-Motor aircraft. Yes, they had three engines, one on the nose and one on each wing. I believe they carried six to eight jumpers per load with each plane. Most, if not all, of these jumpers were wartime conscientious objectors who were assigned to this duty to avoid combat duty. They preferred to kill fires, not people, and were a group of good young men caught in the draft. This storm was centered along the Continental Divide, high, rough, rugged country with little access to much of it, and it was moving right across my immediate area with lots of activity (quite a show).

There are lots of concerns and considerations happening in a hurry. Some of this area, already being "preserved", has become more dense and fuel heavy, it is dry, it is steep, visibility is terrible, lookouts are spread thin, planes are vulnerable - small aircraft are out, men are scarce. With lookouts this far apart in these conditions, triangulation is tough or impossible at these critical moments, but given a chance to go, one of these smokes will be seen 100 miles away tomorrow.

At the time I'm being told to "get off the radio", I'm also being asked, "What was that bearing again, is there flame, was there more than one flare up in that location, is that one still putting up smoke, do you think it's a snag, how many ridges away, is it really in the canyon bottom?" Well, the answer is yes to most of these questions for most targets and I'm still sighting more as fast as I can. Then the pilot of the Tri-Motor in my immediate vicinity says, "Quick, guide me into that smoke

you saw in the canyon bottom, I have one man left, and I want to put him on it and get out". I've been on and off the radio as the static builds and strikes to my peak happen, and know another one's coming; but I know he's having a very difficult time keeping his bird in the air, right side up. I point him in the right direction and he says, "Okay I see it".

I quickly unplug my radio and antenna (phone's been unplugged) and ker-boom, my lookout is struck and a big blue spark jumped from the radio stand to my hip and from the other hip to the firefinder stand. It didn't get my radio and there's no damage; I'm not really hurt, though I felt it. I usually wouldn't be in that spot; I guess I just helped form a path for some surplus energy finding a place to go. Certainly, the lookout lightning protection system did what it was designed to do and took the main charge to ground; one of those paradoxes of life, "To attract things you don't want".

The pilot is trying to keep his plane from being splattered on a canyon wall, plan where his jumper will be blown to, and give him a steady platform to bail out from; and there he goes, his chute blossoms, and now he's pulling cords, fighting the same battle he just was a silent partner of. All turned out well, no fire took off; no one there is hurt, aircraft survived, everybody is still on the job and will do it again.

All didn't go so well in another much more remote area. The jumpers carried a piece of rope (I believe 30 feet) to let themselves down in case they hung up in a big tree or snag. One jumper did hang up (I believe in a snag) too close to the fire for comfort, so he's in a real hurry to be on the ground. 30 feet wasn't enough, but he thought he better drop anyway, and did, so he lit on his back over a downed log and suffered a broken back. He's badly hurt, a long ways from help, in an inaccessible, remote area, and totally incapacitated. I suppose it is times like this that caused the relevant saying, "No matter where you is, there you are".

That day there was much discussion about what to do for this man and how to do it. First they intended to jump a doctor into the spot; then it was decided on "carry out" with a doctor's guidance by radio. I don't remember if the fire was contained quick enough for the other jumpers to do the job, but I believe they dropped some extras in because of the strenuous, arduous, long haul out and those jumpers already having a workout. Once they got him on a stretcher they had to be very careful, go slow, attend to him, keep radio contact and pick a course in very rough, trail-less, road-less country. It took three days to get him to where an ambulance could pick him up. I'm sure the others, like me, quietly listened and suffered with the injured man and those trying to get him to help. I don't know his name, but know they made it to medical help. Truly, "life is what's happening while we're make'n plans".

Not only could I feel the static electricity build up before a close strike, but the phone line would begin to glow, first at the building and progressively down the line. I soon knew a strike was imminent when that glow was nearly to the second pole. Those usually hit the lightning protection system, but occasionally the peak. I happened to be looking out the window at the spot where one of those hit close to the lookout. The charge followed a seam in the bedrock blasting a shallow ditch just like blasting powder would do, for about fifty feet (quite a reminder).

Having been hit once when I was 11 working on a farm away from home, I had a healthy respect for lightning. That time we had hurried to the barn with the teams and I was standing under the manure carrier track watching the ferocious storm (a real frog strangler) through a crack between the two big sliding bam doors. As the ball of fire from the strike came rolling up the track to ground at the other end too, part of the voltage jumped several feet to my head. I wasn't badly hurt but definitely educated.

Speaking of fluorescence reminds me of one dark night I woke up seeing those odd slightly glowing objects at the window; they were circular. Were they eyes? There is no storm, no lightning, and no sound. What am I seeing? My mind is hurriedly searching for some explanation. There hasn't been, isn't and won't be anyone here, or is there? Could it be some animal? I've carefully got my flashlight and sure enough there are round rings there. They are the bones in the round steak that came with my last drop. In the morning I'd roll them up in cloth and canvass, mouse proof, and bury them on the north side of the lookout cabin; then at night hang them on a wire at the open window to air and keep cool, making them last a while. The explanation seemed to be that under certain conditions the mineralization (especially phosphorus) could glow in the dark. Yes, they smelled good, looked good, tasted good and did last awhile.

Earlier that summer when we worked from a particular backcountry camp and Walt did the cooking we had a sourdough experience. As usual, in the evening he added flour for the morning hot cakes; but he insisted on also putting the eggs in then too. I knew that wasn't the way my folks did it; but he was adamant - for a while. We all gassed up bad and needed no exlax. I think it could have been worse.

Probably from that same camp, I remember a particular heavy cold rainstorm for two reasons. It was sunny in the morning and as we rode to our day's job a man of the crew, George Garrison of Augusta, wanted to sell me his brand new slicker. He wanted $10 and I wanted a slicker real bad, so we did the deal. His thirst was driving him and he was going to town that weekend and needed money. I was proud of that slicker tied behind my saddle. On the way back to camp big black clouds rolled in on us and it began to rain. I tried to give him back his slicker; but no, he wouldn't do that - "you bought it, it's yours, wear it". It really poured; I felt guilty, but dry and he was soak'n wet. When we reached a brushy timbered stream to cross, the horses suddenly threw fits and refused to go into the brush, and we didn't push them. Given a little time they finally went through snort'n and eyeball'n both sides. Apparently we'd come upon a bear that moved out.

I knew lookouts were often inspected sometime during the summer and that this aerial project was under some extra scrutiny, but wasn't concerned. Being neat, clean and doing housework was part of my "bringing up". The young fellow at Benchmark, Bill Kotz from Great Falls, and I had become good friends and talked frequently on our hand crank phone system. He had to throw a switch in order for me to call past his station, which was very seldom. He was a year older than I and had worked on this district before, I believe, and sometimes had advice for me, so I called him "Grandma".

Then one morning when the phone rang I knew it would be my friend. Bill and said "Howdy Grandma". There was quite a pause after which a strange voice wanted to know if I was in fact the lookout on Prairie Reef; and informed me he was an official from the Missoula HQ inspecting lookouts and would be up that day. I knew I'd been flippant at a wrong time and wondered what I'd done to my reputation. I've never forgotten this incident when I think of first impressions. He seemed cautious and quiet that day after his long horseback ride up to Prairie Reef, but did compliment me on my house and record keeping and as he mounted and headed back down the trail, I

wondered what does he really think and what's in his report. I still don't know.

We got some mysterious instructions that summer. All lookouts were told that without fail at a certain time of a certain day we would be outside watching carefully to the southern sky for a certain length of time, and to take careful note of whatever we saw, anything different than usual. The day came and went, we didn't see anything to report and eventually learned there had been a test atomic explosion set off way down in the southwest U.S.A. The atomic age was upon us, and Japan was next.

As far as I know, none of those ten lookouts in this project had electricity, so all had a Coleman gas lamp. The radios were primitive by today's standards (SPF sets), and also conversation was kept to pretty much "business only". We did have a little careful recreational conversation when all was calm and clear. Several times some of us communicated to each other to light our lamps on a dark night to see if we could see each other. That's nearly 65 years ago and even looking at a map I'm not sure which peaks were manned, but I remember being able to see several; one may have been Mt. Wright to the northeast, perhaps 40 or more miles away. It was an exercise to get a fix on a light at night with the firefinder sights, and then in daylight see what ridges and canyons lay between. That helped judge where a smoke or strike might be. We were each covering a very large area. I've always thought of this like ships passing in the night, you may see them; but you're very separated, each on their own.

My visitor was Lloyd Hulbert, who had been dropped on a ridge close to my lookout for a dead snag "holdover" from the storm earlier. I begged to go put it out, but couldn't convince Missoula. On time-off he had came afoot, fishing and visited me one day bringing a photo of him by a Tri-Motor plane [lower left]. He didn't stay long; but I appreciated his thoughtfulness.

I should mention another event and person I saw late that summer. A U.S.F.S. photographer, P.B. (Phil) Stanley, was sent to each lookout to take photos of the 360-degree panoramic view as seen from the lookout. He had a large camera on a tripod, all covered with a large dark cloth drape, which took plates of some sort. The photos he gave me may have been Polaroid; I believe he left them with me that day. One was of the lookout [top, right] and is the same as shown on present computer USFS records (Prairie Reef, July 1945). The other photo is of Prairie Reef itself [bottom, right] taken from the point just out past the lookout, looking a bit down and out along its sloping (very steep) side (southeast I believe). This is the side mountain sheep and goats used and that I hastily descended to go to Benchmark when Japan surrendered. This

man came up early one morning, took the photos through the day as the light was right and went back to Benchmark that evening, all on horseback, of course. I didn't have an overnight visitor all summer.

These photos would be used in conjunction and oriented with a firefinder to better decide just where a point (fire, strike, etc.) was on the ground. Much of today's technology wasn't even heard of then, (satellites, GPS, laser, infrared spotting). Helicopters, trail bikes, chain saws, and water bombers weren't even talked about, much less in use. Water and borate by plane was probably the first to appear on the fire scene.

I would turn 18 in September and was very anxious about the Army draft. So when news came from Benchmark (I didn't have a standard broadcast radio) that Japan had surrendered, I was ecstatic, perhaps partly from being so idle for so long (nearly two months); and I had seen only two people, the inspector and a smokejumper. We were having fair weather and I immediately decided I wanted to hike down to Benchmark for a visit. I would really celebrate - go fishing, eat with the crew, see some people, and what a nice hike. I called for permission. Missoula gave a reluctant 0K; but said, "Now you understand, you will report your weather at 4:00pm before you leave and you will be back to report next day at 4:00pm". In other words I had 24 hours to make 28 miles of mountain trail with an elevation change of perhaps 4,000 feet. I knew I was in excellent condition (or had been two months ago) and my enthusiasm overpowered common sense.

So next evening I had eaten early, had a little light pack ready, did the weather report and literally took off; right over the canyon rim the sheep and goats used. I figured this would save a mile or two of trail. Well, it was shorter, but very strenuous. I was on the run, both to hurry and to stay out of the way of rock I knocked loose as I cut obliquely across those slide rock areas and circumvented drop offs. By the time I'd cut into the trail below, my legs were telling me the short cut had taken its toll, and I was surprised how much of my evening was gone and I still had eight or nine miles to go. I'm having serious leg cramp problems from the abuse of that steep rocky decent and obviously that two months' soft life has done something to my "great shape".

Instead of being able to run, I'm hobbling along with real charlie-horse problems, and of course, its dusk much earlier down in the deep timbered canyon. Too, I know I'm in prime bear and cougar country and begin to think of that in a different light. I won't make Benchmark tonight, what to do? A ways ahead there's a fork in the canyon and up the other branch is Pretty Prairie, with a small cabin. I've never been there; I don't

know how far, but I'll try for that.

About the time this is all developing, an unwanted picture is in my mind and I'm listening intently for something I hope I won't meet, I hear a rock rattle in the trail ahead. My scalp tingles, I eyeball close trees for climbability, wondering if I can climb and knowing bear and cougar can. Did I just hear a horse hoof on rock? But what would a horse be doing here? To my great relief, the next instant I hear a horse blow and shortly here's George Garrison on horseback leading one for me. Oh, am I ever glad to see him, and I'm already wondering how I'm going to be back on the peak by 4:00pm tomorrow. He had heard the planning on the radio and knowing it wouldn't work, had just quietly gotten two horses ready and came to meet me. I knew he'd blown my $10 for the slicker on a bottle, but he was certainly a saint to me that evening, and I've never forgotten it. You can't judge a book by its cover.

I put in a bad night in an "extra" bed in a shelter out by the garbage pit that bear were trying to access. I had charlie-horses, nightmares and worry. How would I get back, I'd better start in the morning. I've been foolish, I'm embarrassed, my fun is gone, I'd better not waste any leg work fishing; if I were just back on the peak!

George let me worry until after breakfast when I told them I'd better be heading back, then he told me "you better fish a little, I'll take you half of the way back". I did and he did, and of course I used the trail to climb the peak (with difficulty). I just barely had time to do the procedure: weigh the sticks, use the sling psychrometer, temperature, wind direction and speed, etc. and call it in right at 4:00pm. My excursion was over, what a relief! And as I turned the radio off, I thought of George down there riding one, leading an empty horse, smiling quietly to himself thinking, "I bet that kid learned something". I did; but later in my life I'd also find that it's not uncommon to need to rest up after a vacation. Nor was it the last time in life I'd find that something I'd wanted so bad didn't bring the results or pleasure I'd thought it would. Towards fall, on one very heavy overcast morning (fall comes early at 8,868 feet) shortly after daylight, I heard the heavy throbbing of large aircraft engines that seemed very close and getting closer. I ran outside to get a fix on it just as it went directly overhead out of sight in the pea soup fog. I ran back in and turned on my new used military surplus S. J. set. I'm hearing MayDay, MayDay. This is a lost B-17 saying he has fuel for 30 minutes. No one answers him. I was afraid to wait long for fear he'd be out of my range soon, so I said, "Do you hear me?" He came right back. I told him where he was, that they narrowly missed my peak and that there were lots more, some even higher; but that if they would turn left 90 degrees, they would be near Great Falls, only about 90 miles away (Great Falls had a military B-17 airfield). He said something about flying blind without instruments and continued on course. They had come from the NNE and went on SSW calling MayDay, throttled back laboring along until both engine and radio sound died away.

I inquired; no one had heard the message or knew anything about it. A year or two later that mystery was solved when the wreckage of a B-17 was found on a peak about 200 miles away near McCall, Idaho. This event haunts me yet. Many years later, I worked with a man who had been a B-17 navigator. He knew about night training with the instruments covered, but not inoperable. Also at that time, they could overfly the base because there wasn't any way to tell which way they were flying the beam - to or from. They had panicked - and died, eleven young men in their prime. There is no one so deaf as those who won't listen.

Landmarks were part of my job every day before first light, after dusk, and even some nights. Slate Goat, Scapegoat, Arsnic, Sugarloaf, Cliff Mountain, Sphinx Peak, Haystack Mountain, Silvertip, Half Dome, Sun River with Gibson Reservoir, and of course, the Chinese Wall, a noteworthy geological formation I looked directly into, even some landmarks out on the prairie. A very interesting book titled "Islands on the Prairie" published by Montana Magazine, 1986, by Mark Maloy (Montana Geographic's series, #13) does a nice informative job of describing these isolated mountain outcrops on the edge of and beyond my view to the eastern prairie country.

I did become accustomed to and looked for dust along certain trails knowing packers were moving campers and imagined their activities, though I never saw any of them. They were people. Those outfitters must have been very careful with their cooking fires. I don't recall ever seeing smoke, much less fire. Of course, most of that activity was down in the canyons along streams and in the timber. They were experienced, knowledgeable, fit people that were a benefit to have in the woods, not a hazard to be banned. In fact, it would have been good to have had some down in Wood Creek Canyon the day I left the lookout.

The war was supposed to be essentially over, but the draft was still on, and hungry; though interestingly we still have troops in over 700 bases in over 125 countries around the world today. In early September I was notified that September 7th was my birthday and that I must report to the draft board in Lewistown, no exceptions, fire, school or nothing. I don't remember the date that I was removed (by horseback), but that was simple. Bill Kotz, down at the low-level guard station, also left for school. Because it was nice weather, no recent lightning, and early fall, someone decided not to replace either Bill Kotz or me that day. I believe it was Friday and what crew was left at Benchmark was let off for the weekend, too. So there was no lookout on duty and no one at Benchmark Guard Station either. Soon in Augusta, I caught the Greyhound bus and was home in Lewistown before I heard of the "Big Fire" that was getting bigger fast.

However, it wasn't long before I was notified I would be present at a hearing in Missoula because I'd neglected my lookout duty, causing great cost and loss. This fire had taken off down in Wood Creek Canyon and burned out of control before being reported. It was a nice warm fall day with the usual Montana breeze blowing up the canyon and the woods were quite dry, so it did what fires do in those conditions, burning a lot of timber, watershed, game, rangeland, etc. in short order and proved hard to stop. It was seen as a disaster then, not nature doing its thing. I was hearing how the lookout never reported it but eventually distant lookouts did see the smoke and inquired.

But, before the hearing, I was contacted by phone from Missoula, sort of a pretrial fact finding procedure. I was experiencing something akin to a military court marshal. Luckily the man on the phone really was trying to find out what had happened. So when he learned I'd been picked up on horseback early in the morning at the lookout, we'd rode promptly on down to the low-level guard station Benchmark, loaded immediately into a pickup and drove to Augusta; he began to see things quite differently. He quizzed me a little more about the details, my last weather report, why, when, and how I left, and just said "Thank you, you won't be needed in Missoula". I felt bad, but relieved, and never heard any more of the inquiry.

What was determined was that shortly after we had left Benchmark, was some vehicle had turned around in the grass

along the road just before the Benchmark station, probably setting fire by its exhaust. So with no one in those key places, the fire was left to do its thing, and it did.

This of course, was not the perfect ending for fire season, beneficial to the Aerial Patrol Project or complimentary to the district. It's a reminder of the human element. I was quite disappointed; up until that day there had been practically no acreage burned in my view area. I felt cheated in a way, if I'd had one more day or even half a day on my post, or had there been anyone at Benchmark, or both.

I did not find the lookout boring (quite to the contrary) and wouldn't today or any of the intervening 65 years. I was afraid I'd miss a smoke and did miss physical activity, especially activity down in those enticing scenes I'm looking down into and across at; but that was my job. Life's a collection of time and experience. That summer has remained an important part of mine, quite memorable, real, and fresh; and I've hoped to refresh it with a return trip to the mountain, and may yet, I'm only 82.

Dale K. Fortune
March 2010