

LIFE ON A LOOKOUT

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The lookout stood, fortress firm, three stories high on the end of a rocky ridge. The never-ending wind gave it an aura of isolation that was misleading. The gravel pile at the turnoff less than half a mile away was a handy place for tourists to stop and say, "Lets go see what the lookout is like". So, many of the travelers drove that steep half mile, climbed the stairs, and were surprised to find a very ordinary family living there.

The State Forestry Department favored hiring couples—the husband was the warden, the wife the lookout, with a teenage boy assigned as additional crew. The crew member and any additional overnight visitors slept on the second floor, along with the extra supplies. Nearly everything else was relegated to the top, or lookout floor. When I say "nearly everything", I am excepting the function of the outhouse, which was located down in the back forty, safely distanced from the sensibilities of visitors, and not real handy to the lookout either. Around the outside of the building at the top floor ran the catwalk. Since our boys were small this catwalk had been lined with chicken wire. It was fun to watch timorous visitors venture out, hugging the building, while the boys buzzed by them on rollerskates.

It was the job of the warden to clear roads for fire access, fight fires, and fill out forms. But this was the area in which my husband's family had lived, in which his grandfather had homesteaded. The people were friends and neighbors, and he sometimes came back at the end of the day with apples from an abandoned orchard, a relic from an old cabin, or ice cream from the store at Long Creek. In addition he kept the fifty-gallon water barrel full, no mean feat when you consider that there were from five to ten people to feed and diapers to wash everyday.

It was the job of the lookout to watch for fires, or "smokes", as we called them, keep the place reasonably clean and the coffee pot on, and check in every hour with headquarters on the radio. That radio was our safety net. We did have a telephone, which we used to alert local ranchers when the warden needed help, but the radio kept us in touch with the warden, the district warden, and other lookouts. Once during an electrical storm lightning hit the ground outside the lookout, traveled up the ground wire, and blew out the transformer in the radio. I looked at the smoldering radio, now silent, and felt an unreasonable sense of isolation which persisted until the radioman brought us a spare and the friendly hum again permeated the room.

I think it surprised visitors to see a well-stocked book case. This was not by accident. Our first year on the lookout I had taken four books. By the time the summer was over I had those books nearly memorized, and was reduced to reading left over magazines of the true crime variety. In subsequent years I made sure there was enough reading material to keep my sanity, and I never again read a magazine whose name started with "true".

At one point I thought it would be a good idea to learn to play fiddle, so eventually, Sears Roebuck catalogue in hand, I ordered one, for twenty dollars, I believe. It came and was carefully unpacked, tuned after a fashion, and that evening we put bow to string. I knew less about a fiddle than practically any thing else, and presently we noticed something flying around the lookout, dodging under the shutters, trying to get in. It was an owl, out on the evening hunt, and from what he could hear, inside was a dying mouse. We looked at each other. I put the fiddle away.

There was, about ten miles from the lookout, a hot springs that had once been a popular watering spot. This had been one of the selling points when the district warden was recruiting. "Take the little dirt road, its not that far, go for a swim in the moonlight". We tried several times, but something always came up. Finally we took the little dirt road (read: goat trail) and got down to the hot springs. The pool, it turned out, was closed, but there were tubs for a welcome soak. Things were looking up until time to go home. We had several visitors and it turned out that none of them had brought towels. As we sogged back up the hill I wondered if, moonlight and warm water notwithstanding, the romance had really been worth it.

We played a lot of dominoes that first year, but it seemed that every time we reached a critical point some one would take the mandatory look around and say, "I see a smoke". So much for dominoes. We both had hobbies, we read to the kids and played chess with the older nieces. But our favorite entertainment was when visitors came and we sat and listened as they spun tales of homesteading the open range and coping with this wild, harsh, magnificent land.

One rancher would sometimes bring his wife and two small children to the lookout on his way to a fire. During one of these times a second storm moved across the lookout area with some rather close lightning. I looked around from my task at the fire finder to see how the visitors were doing. They had disappeared. Then I saw them: three sets of eyes peering out from under the bed.

This rancher had a talent for tall tales. There were a lot of rattlesnakes in the area and the previous evening he had met up with one. As he told it: "I threw down my hard hat and the snake struck it. The next morning when I went back there, that hard hat had swollen up as big as a fifty gallon barrel."

We had some easy years without many fires, but the law of averages caught up with us during a hot, dry summer when it seemed that everything was going to burn. There was a fairly large fire near the lookout, steep country, lots of sagebrush and juniper, and after the first day so much smoke it was hard to see. Not that the lookout was not needed—with radio frequencies then in use the lookout acted as relay between mobiles, hand helds, and headquarters. Neighboring ranchers rallied round—fought fire, hauled water, brought sandwiches and cold tea to the lookout, and eventually helped us move some of our things out of harms way. We were on the point of evacuating the lookout

entirely when the weather broke, it started to rain, and the fire sizzled to a smoky standstill.

It was usually pouring rain when we finally moved home in the fall, and our first task was to get the kids in school. One fall we found our house had suffered storm damage—shingles had been blown about and the roof leaked. We mended the damage, cleaned up the mess, got the kids in school, and enjoyed the rain. But somehow we missed the quiet buzz of the radio, and someone, somewhere, saying, “I see a smoke”.

