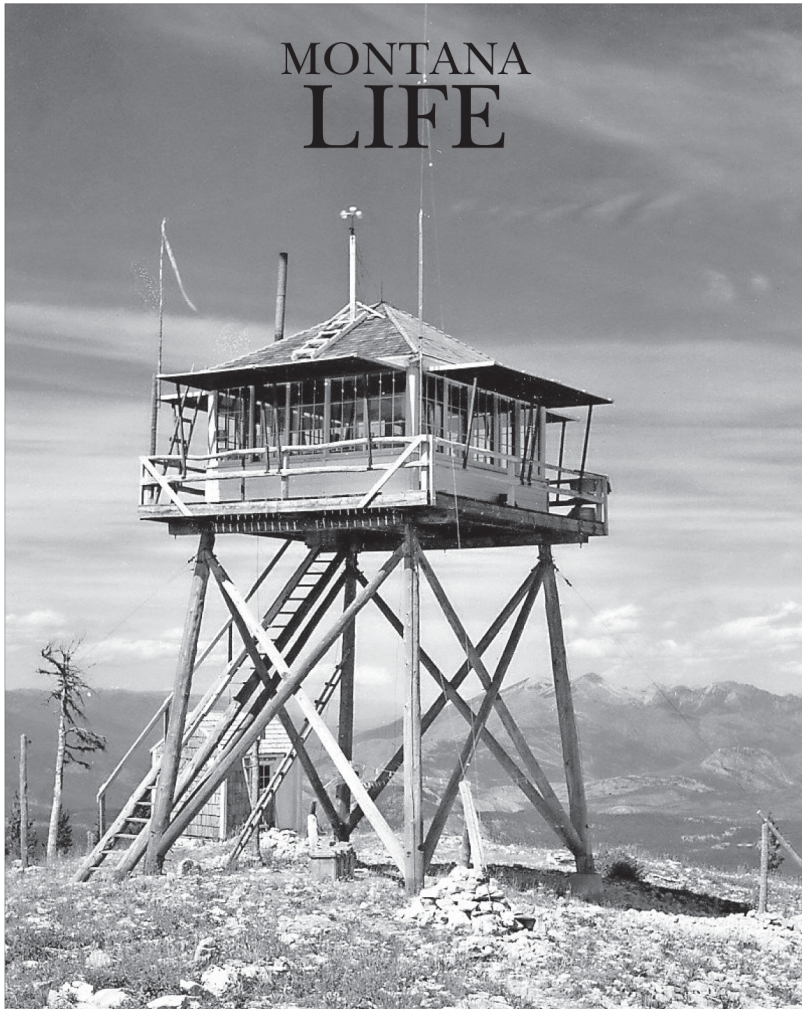


MONTANA LIFE



THE SPOTTED Bear Lookout, where Joe Osborn and Rebecca McNeese Osborn spent their honeymoon in 1948. (Joe Osborn photo)

The things they saw

Project aims to preserve oral history of fire lookouts

By JEREMY WEBER
Daily Inter Lake

When Beth Hodder was asked in 2016 to help preserve the living history of those who staffed the fire lookouts in Northwest Montana, she had no idea of the great journey that was ahead of her.

As a board member of the Northwest Montana Lookout Association, Hodder already was volunteering her time to help preserve the aging fire lookout towers on mountaintops around the area, but this new project provided a chance to help preserve their history in a different way.

A dozen interviews later, the stories and expe-

riences of the hearty souls who have manned Northwest Montana's fire lookouts throughout the decades are now being preserved for future generations with the help of the University of Montana's Mansfield Library.

"When [NWMLA President] Chuck Manning asked me to help with the oral history project, I had no idea what it would entail. I just took it from the ground up and went running with it," Hodder said. "It was a little intimidating at first, as I had never interviewed anyone before, but I have now interviewed a dozen people who worked in lookouts across Northwest Montana and collected all of their amazing stories to share with everyone."

See LOOKOUT, C5



GEORGE COLBY, Glen Locke and James Adams at the base of Blacktail Mountain preparing to take supplies to the lookout there on June 27, 1938. Alfred Williams manned the lookout that season. (A.E. Boorman photo)

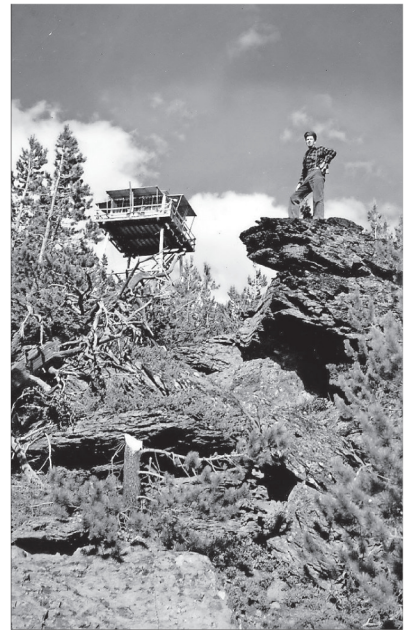
'It was just, just totally destroyed. And so I thought, 'Well, what am I going to do now?' I haven't got any communication.'



REBECCA MCNEESE Osborn washes pots on the stairs of the Spotted Bear Lookout during her honeymoon there with Joe Osborn in the summer of 1948. (Joe Osborn photo)



HARRY FULMER sits at his post outside the Haskill Mountain Lookout in the summer of 1937. (A.E. Boorman photo)



AL WILLIAMS stops for a quick photo just below the lookout on the ascent of Blacktail Mountain August 19, 1937. (A.E. Boorman photo)

LOOKOUT from C1

THE STORIES chronicle the experiences of those who came from a variety of backgrounds to help a watchful eye on Northwest Montana's forests.

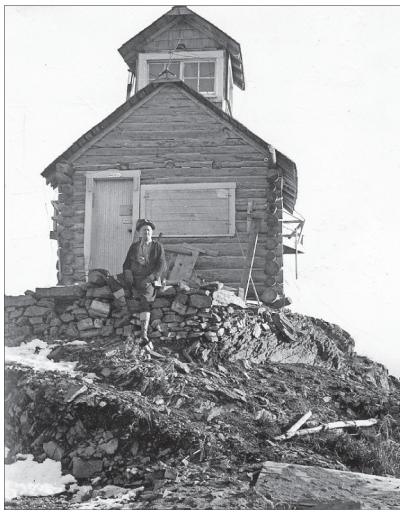
From Joe and Becky Osborn, the couple who spent their honeymoon manning the Spotted Bear Lookout in the Flathead National Forest in the summer of 1948, to Ivan O'Neil, who lied about his age to take a job with the National Forest Service before becoming a lookout on Pioneer Ridge in 1945, to C. Kjell Petersen, whose lookout tower on Snow Peak was struck by lightning three times in one afternoon, the stories are as varied as they are fascinating.

"I just remember the place would just light up and instantly it was just like a shotgun went off by your ear," Petersen said of his close encounter with lightning. "I call it a 'see God' moment, because it was just like, whoa, that is a lot of power just a few feet above your head. Fortunately, everything was well-grounded."

Gene Miller was inside the Blue Mountain lookout when a lightning strike took out his phone. "It just went kaboom! I looked inside. It was all melted," Miller recalled about the phone in his interview with Hodder. "It was just, just totally destroyed. And so I thought, 'Well, what am I going to do now?' I haven't got any communication."

There were happier times at the lookouts as well.

O'Neil was in his



A.E. Boorman rests outside the old Werner Peak Lookout 38 miles north of Kalispell in October 1941. (M.E. Boorman photo)

tower on Pioneer Ridge when he and friend George Ostrom, who was across the valley manning the Battery Mountain Lookout, got the news that World War II had ended and that they could take the weekend off to celebrate.

"It rained before V-J Day, and so then they gave us the day off and the weekend," he recalled. "[We] came down and celebrated with the rest of the people."

WHILE MANY of the stories collected pertain to lookouts that still stand, many are the last remembrances of structures that have long been lost, including several stories from Hank Mader, who helped the National Forest Service burn lookout towers that had become unusable over the

years. Many of his photos of burning lookouts are the last images of the structures.

In addition to the stories of those who have staffed Northwest Montana's fire lookouts, Hodder was excited to find that a few of the lookouts and their families had photos taken during their time on top of the mountains, especially a group of photos taken by Joe Osborn.

In 2016, Julia Osborn told Hodder the story of her father, Joe Osborn. Born in Indiana in 1911, he attended Perdue before the outbreak of World War II. A Quaker and conscientious objector, Joe joined the Civilian Public Service and, despite his intense fear of heights, was put to work as a smokejumper in Missoula. Given the

nickname "Pappy" by the other, younger smokejumpers, Joe returned home after the war to become a professor at Lehigh University. It was while working there that Joe met and married Julia's mother, Rebecca McNees, and the couple made the decision to honeymoon while staffing the Spotted Bear Lookout. It was there that Joe took dozens of photographs.

"It was a thrill to get Joe Osborn's beautiful black and white photographs. He was an amazing photographer."

With more than 15 hours of audio and many hours of video now collected by Hodder, the files of the Northwest Montana Lookout Association's Oral History Project's audio files, transcripts and images are available for download from University of Montana Mansfield Library.

To date, the online collection has received more than 700 visitors from across the globe with the audio files having been downloaded or streamed more than 450 times.

As for Hodder and her collection of history, the search continues for more stories.

"It has been very interesting being able to talk with all of these people," she said. "Their backgrounds and stories are so different from each other. The stories we have shared with us are just fascinating."

For more information on the Fire Lookout Oral History Project, visit the NWLA website at www.nwmt-fla.org/oralhistoryproject.

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