The following transcript was provided to Archives and Special Collections by the Northwest Montana Chapter of the Forest Fire Lookout Association with its associated audio recording.
I'm Beth Hodder (BH). I'm here with June Ash (JA) and her son, Gordon Ash (GA). June and her husband, Rod, were lookouts, and I am here to interview June to ask stories about what you and Rod did while up there and anything else that seems to be relevant to the time. The interview’s being conducted by the Northwest Montana Forest Fire Lookout Association, of which I am a part.

BH: June, where were you a lookout?

JA: We were on Big Swede in Libby, Montana. We worked for the Kootenai National Forest. We both were college students from the University of California at Berkley. Rod was doing research for his masters, and he wanted to do a little book reading and research. We thought, well, how could we maximize and make a little money at the same time? So, we applied with the Forest Service for the lookout job in the year 1952.

We left Berkley and drove north and arrived in Libby, Montana for the summer, and worked on Big Swede. It was a pretty exciting experience for us, because Big Swede was a very popular lookout. We faced over the area where the future [Libby] dam was to go for Lake Koocanusa, and we were right across the stream from the asbestos mine that is so famous in Libby, Montana. Also, because the dam was going in they were going to have to rearrange the major railroad going through the area. We looked right down on the railroad; I mean, we could time ourselves whenever the train that usually we were acquainted with going through Whitefish would go through down in the basin.

We worked with three other lookout people (there were four of us), and we worked out of Warland, where the dam was to go. We either lived in a motel in Libby, Montana or at Forest Service headquarters in Warland. We were trained for—oh, I couldn’t tell you—but it was at least a week, maybe more, and that was pretty interesting in itself. I can remember we had a lot of good laughs, because the fellows were to go out in the woods and get lost and try and figure out where they were and all the logistics about locations, you know, the numbers, and so forth. It wasn’t just a matter of just following a trail; you had to be authentic about where you were located, and where you’re going, and all that kind of thing.

BH: So, using compasses, you mean?

JA: Yeah, oh yeah.
The thing I remember most about Warland was that in the evening we’d meet down at the Warland Bar as the train went through and we would wave at people on the train. I had my first shot of whiskey down in the Warland Bar.

BH: How old were you then?

JA: I was 22, and Rod was 23.

So we received our training, and then we were stationed up at Big Swede. By being up at Big Swede, we were a hub of traffic because of the location of the dam and the railroad. We had the Army Corps of Engineers visit us, and railroad people. It was very interesting to think about it.

We received our Sunday paper by airplane. They would drop it down for us on the hilltop. That was fun.

The lookout was 50 feet up off the ground, two flights of stairs. It was a little cabin on a platform with a porch. It had a wood stove and, of course, windows, all the way around, and, of course, the mechanism by which you charted location.

BH: The firefinder?

JA: The firefinder. And that was pretty important to learn how to use. You know, it’s a big circular thing, and we had to figure out really quite well what we were doing and where [the fire] was. We also had the telephone in connection with the Forest Service station and we had a radio. We could be talking on the radio with the fellow lookout people.

One thing I remember mainly about the experience is that one of the fellows on—I think it was Snow Mountain—he was up there by himself, and he spent a lot of time carving things. He made us a nice little statue about 10 inches tall. It was a block of wood with a bear on top of it, and he had painted the bear black, and the wood was a nice natural color. It was awarded to Rod and June Ash for spotting the most fires in Libby, Montana. Of course, the most fires were all from the Libby dump. But anyway, we did spot some fires.

Herb Flodberg was the ranger and Kyle Beebee was the assistant ranger, and we worked with Kyle on everything we would do. Herb was, of course, the one that directed us and hired us, and that kind of thing. Herb stands out in my mind as being very fastidious about the use of the roads going up to the asbestos mine that people would use for poaching and hunting. He would often be up there or he would call us at the lookout and say, "What headlights do you see?" and we would spot them for him.

BH: Did he catch poachers because of your help?
JA: Oh yes. It’s that time of year, because this was June, July, and August.

We went up two flights of stairs to the cabin, and I must point out that I am a post-polio person, but I did very well doing that. We had an outhouse down the hill that we used for regular occasions, too.

We did our chores which we were required to do, compassing the area periodically to make sure everything was in order and nothing was going on, and in between times we would read, play cards. As I recall, we got tired of Pinochle. It drove us out of our minds, because someone would win straight for four or five days, and then they change, and then the next person would win every four or five days again. It really taxed our tempers.

I even made some serviceberry jam on the wood stove, so that was fun.

BH: Did you bake in there, too?

JA: Oh, yeah, because we used the stove for that. I can’t remember too much. Maybe I made simple things. I don’t know if I made any bread, but who knows?

I did simple laundry [on the stove]. We’d go down to the fish hatchery at the bottom of the hill and to get our water and then bring it up in big containers. I think I did some simple laundry regularly, and periodically I would get in the car and would go down to Libby and use the laundromat.

We did a lot of good cooking on that wood stove. I enjoyed that thoroughly. You could make stews and all kinds of things, or you could get some stuff to bring from down below and make up more.

We had a little cold box underneath the lookout that was used more as a refrigerator type of thing, and it worked fine.

BH: So did you have to bring the ice up for it?

JA: I can’t remember if we had ice on it or not, but it would probably be pretty cool up there.

BH: Did you have a shed or anything that it was in or was it outside?

JA: It was an outside box hanging down from the bottom of the lookout. It was pretty tricky, because you could only access it from the stairway going up to the top of the lookout. You had to hang on steadily with your feet on a step. There was a handlebar, and you’d have to reach in and open the door and get out or put in. It was tricky. I can remember that was a pretty interesting or exciting experience.
GA: It was the Kootenai National Forest’s original food storage requirements, which they don’t do anymore. [Laugh]

JA: We had a lot of grouse up there. They used to tease us from the Forest Service station and ask us if we had any live meat for dinner, or something along that line.

BH: Were you allowed to shoot them?

JA: I have no idea [laughs]. It seemed to be a standard joke on the Forest Service.

Oh, the other thing that we enjoyed while we were up there, we were able to listen to the 1952 Democratic Convention that was being held and listen to all the speeches that came around, Adlai Stevenson and so on and so forth. That was interesting. We’d never had that opportunity before.

BH: So you had a radio to listen to?

JA: Oh, yes, that’s what we made sure, that we took a little radio with us up there.

BH: You drove up and down from down below. How often did you go up and down? Did you go down weekly for groceries or anything like that?

JA: At the most, maybe once a week, and maybe not that frequently. We were able to manage very well. You could always bring up some canned foods and things like that.

BH: And that was to Worland that you went shopping, or Libby?

JA: That’s a good question. We were out of Libby by a few miles, so if I wanted to go to the laundromat, I guess I would go to Libby and do my grocery shopping. If anybody was coming up from the valley floor, they might call and ask if there was anything we needed, and that was always helpful.

BH: You said you had a lot of visitors, too.

JA: Yeah, the railroad people and Army Corps of Engineers. They were the most important ones that were looking down to figure out what they were going to do or where things were going to be or they were going to locate.

GA: Did Kyle come up once in a while, Kyle Beebee, or the ranger?
JA: I don’t remember that they did a lot of that. They would check with you. We’d let them know what was going on and so on. They came up because they were checking the equipment to make sure that everything was in working order.

BH: What about regular visitors?

JA: We got those every once in a while, yes.

BH: Were there trails up there, too, or did people just drive up and back down?

JA: I remember that there were people that were probably as interested to meet us as well as to see what was up there. They would visit for a while and then they’d go back down. I can remember one time I was out walking on the road, because I could get some exercise that way, and it would be a little bit more navigable to go on the road rather than the unbroken territory. I came across a bear in the process, and we scurried in our separate directions. I had gone into the bushes to hide from the bear, and a car went by, going up to the lookout, so I missed that car visit. It took me a while to get back up to there. I got back up to the lookout in time to say goodbye to them. It was unusual to have company from time to time.

BH: Back in those days, not that many people probably came up. You saying that they were probably as interested in you as the area, I can see that. They probably thought you were not an oddity but intriguing. Why would you be up here?

JA: Yeah. It was always a good story to tell.

BH: Did you let people in the lookout?

JA: Oh yes. We always let them come all the way up. That’s where we’d visit. We very seldom just stayed down at the bottom. We’d welcome them to come up. They were busy taking pictures. Gordon had asked me what was an exciting time, and I guess one of the times was when we had a huge electrical storm that was coming down from Canada, and that did keep us busy. We were being hit by lightning and we had to make sure we were sitting in our chairs that had the little insulated booties on them. We didn’t move. You wouldn’t want to use the telephone, either. You could get an electrical shock.

BH: Could your stove give you shocks, also? Was it metal?

JA: No, I couldn’t tell you what kind of material it was. It was a substantial black type.

BH: Did the lookout ever get struck?

JA: I don’t think so. We would have known that. Interestingly enough, I don’t remember the wind that much.
BH: Did you have birds that came by?

JA: No, we had the pheasants—the grouse—down on the ground. I hadn’t been too much of a birder at the time. Shamefully, I look back on it now, because in time we had become quite the birders.

BH: So, did you and Rod share duties or time?

JA: Definitely. We were both hired employees. In fact, I think there was a regular structure, because I can remember one time I came down on Saturday to do shopping and I went into the Forest Service station. The district ranger looked at me and said, “What are you doing down here?” I said, “I’m getting some groceries,” and he says, “But you’re supposed to be working on the weekends.” So, I think Rod was hired for Monday through Friday and I was hired for Saturday and Sunday. I decided from then on that I was either going to do my grocery shopping during the week or I wouldn’t go to the Forest Service station on Saturday.

I can remember one night we were awakened at 3 or 4 o’clock in the morning and it was Herb Flodberg and he said, “What do you see?” We scrambled out of bed, and we looked around, and there was a huge fire down in the valley and some guy’s barn was on fire. Herb heard about it, probably, from the fire depot.

BH: Do you know how many fires you might have called in that summer? Did you have to fill out a log while you were up there that the Forest Service gave you that was specific to the lookout, like you had to put down, *At 8:00 in the morning we walked around and did this...*

JA: Yes, we would report just exactly. I’m sure that was the case. That’s one way you could follow up and make sure that you had things checked.

BH: Now you said before you started, and you were down at your fire school...

JA: Worland.

BH: Yes. You stayed down there. Did you drive down every night and stay down there or did you sleep in the lookout?

JA: No, we did the training for two weeks before we went up to the lookout. When we were at Worland getting the training, we were living down there. We didn’t come up to the lookout until we were through, and then we never went down for anything. We were always at the lookout at nighttime.

June Ash and Gordon Ash Interview, Oh 453-003, Archives and Special Collections, Mansfield Library, University of Montana-Missoula.
It was a marvelous experience. We got very comfortable with the lookout. It was a home to us, and we even shed a couple of tears when we left at the end. We had enjoyed our stay up there. It had been fun to do the things that we had done, and, of course, it was a marvelous opportunity to get better acquainted, too, in a lot of ways.

BH: How long had you been married before you went in there?

JA: We got married in ’51 and this was in ’52, so it was barely 13,15 months that we had been married. Of course, we’d been students, too.

Another young couple was on Warland Lookout, and she was writing a mystery story. I think she might have even been a professor in Illinois at one of the universities at the time. I think she had a great time writing her mystery story while she was up there.

When we left the lookout, we stayed down at Kyle BeeBee’s for a few weeks while Rod worked for the Forest Service fire crew, and we also got acquainted with the area a little bit. We hiked up to the various places in the mountains and so on. That was really nice to get acquainted with the area.

GA: Did Dad do any smoke chasing? Were there any local fires while you were up at the lookout?

JA: No, nothing that took him away from the lookout at the time.

BH: When he was done, though, and he was working as a fire crew member, did he get any fire experience?

JA: Yes, there were some things going on at the time. I can’t remember what they were, but he was busy.

BH: I had a couple other questions. How did you normally cook your meals and what did you normally eat?

JA: We cooked them always on the wood stove. Of course, cooking on the wood stove you could have easy things, like you could have pancakes. The components of pancakes are all things like flour, salt, whatever. It’s easy to put something like that together. And you could always have eggs, they last forever; good old powdered milk if you want it; and for pots, we cooked a lot with the Dutch oven—stews, anything that you could make up with fresh vegetables and potatoes. If you didn’t have any fresh meat to throw in, you could get a can of stuff.

BH: Did you use Spam?
JA: I think Spam was a regular product. It was no problem [cooking]. We enjoyed using the wood stove immensely. You could warm up the cabin and make it comfortable, and gee, just think, preserving the serviceberry jam. That was pretty good, because I’d sterilize the jars.

BH: Where did you get the serviceberries, right around the lookout?

JA: Yes, down at the bottom.

BH: Did you get huckleberries, too?

JA: I’m sure we must have, because, as I recall in writing any history about huckleberries, I say I learned about them up at Big Swede.

BH: Did you have any frightening experiences up there?

JA: Probably the electrical storm that hit us so hard that one time. That was a little bit—I wouldn’t say frightening—it puts you on your alert, and it made you think carefully about what you were supposed to be doing. You talked about it: “Okay, do this; do that.” It created immense suspense. It would be a challenge.

BH: Did anything weird happen to you while you were up there?

JA: Hmmm. I don’t know. We were in the hand of nature, and everything that happened would be expected or would be natural. We didn’t see anything in wildlife that would have been weird: it would be natural to see a bear; it would be natural to see the grouse. I’m sure there must have deer, but maybe by that time it just got so natural, you think of deer as being your farm animal dog, your pal.

BH: Did it influence your life in any way, your experiences up there?

JA: Oh, definitely. We had always been raised by families that took us camping in the summertime, so we both were outdoor kids. This just emphasized how much we appreciated the natural environment and made us aware of habitat.

Eventually, that had an immense effect upon our lives. Rod's major was in Anthropology. It was on Ecology, which is the relationship of man to his native environment. I’m sure all this fit in with where he was going and what he was studying. We checked the area in the Libby, Montana about teaching, because he was definitely going into education. I vacillated about whether I would get my credential or not. We checked out teaching positions, and we found that we probably could have gotten about $2,000 a year for a teacher’s job.

BH: Was that good money at the time?
JA: Not very good.

We logged that in our minds, but it didn’t seem very hopeful for us. We checked in Idaho at the State University on our way back, and it wasn’t too much more, maybe $4-6,000.

We ended up getting our work done in California, but as we had gone south from Libby, we had gone through the Flathead area and the Mission Mountain valley and looked up at the Mission Mountains and saw that dirt road going through the Swan Valley, and we made a note of that. That was in 1952. Interestingly enough, in Rod’s first job in Northern California, he worked with a teacher that had been born and raised in Eastern Montana. Her dad had hunted in Holland Lake in the Swan Valley. She told Rod about that when she told about seeing the area.

In 1962, we returned to the Swan Valley, we crossed the Lolo Pass on the first highway that had gone over, and we lost all the hubcaps on our Volkswagen bus in the process. But anyway, we got into the Swan Valley, and we returned there quite a few times in the 60s, and in 1969, we decided that it was some place that was dear to us. Down in the valley getting some food one time at a little hamburger stand, we asked the lady if she knew of any land for sale. She said that her son and daughter-in-law were selling their place because he was moving with the Forest Service to Oregon. She said, “Would like to see it?” We went to see it and we bought it. That was in 1969 in Condon.

GA: Min Copra, wasn’t it?

JA: Yes.

GA: Min Copra was one of the original homesteaders. For a couple of summers—she was one of the real early entrepreneurs—she and her daughter would have an ice cream cone stand out on the highway. We as kids always liked it because we’d get to stop at Min Copra’s stand and get an ice cream cone there on our way through.

JA: I must admit that when we had come into the valley, we explored the whole area in the process before we camped up at Glacier Creek. The reason we got up to Glacier Creek was, when we came into the valley, like faithful former Forest Service employees, we went to the Forest Service station and the ranger there at the Forest Service station—as wonders will never cease—was the fellow student that Rod had met when he had done blister rust [work] over in Idaho. He had been so impressed with his summer program with blister rust—because they were both college students at the time—that he had gone back to Illinois where he had trained, and he went into Forestry, and he became a ranger in the Swan Valley. So, he was the one who recommended that we go up to Glacier Creek, and that’s where, whenever we came during the summer, we would camp at Glacier Creek.

BH: When did you move there permanently? You lived in California.
JA: After we got the cabin we’d come back every summer. In education, you had your summers free, and instead of making money and surviving, we would take off and come back to Montana for the summer. We even came back at Christmastime. Then we retired here in 1984 and have been here ever since. Then my husband passed away in 2006.

It’s been a nice adventure with Montana. When we first started out and we told people back home where we were going they said "Montana, where’s Montana?" If they tried, they would get it mixed up with Minnesota. Then they couldn’t figure out where Montana was. We always got a big kick out of that. Those were the days when.

It [working on the lookout] was a marvelous experience. Oh, one thing I remember, the fellow that was on Pinkham Mountain out of Eureka on the lookout, he was a lonely fellow, too. Instead of doing what the other fellow did and carving things, he liked to talk on the radio. And, oh! He could buzz you and go on and on and on, but eventually we learned how to handle it.

Time marches on. In 2001 or 2002, I received a phone call from my daughter who works for the Kootenai National Forest in Eureka, and would you believe it, she was calling me from Pinkham Mountain. I tell that story wherever I go, that it was so amazing to me that when I didn't even have any children and was one year married, in time I was going to hear that same conversation from Pinkham Mountain. "Hello." Fifty years later.

BH: Did you ever get back up to Big Swede yourselves?

JA: We did. We used to go that way quite a bit of the time.

GA: You took us up there right after the dam was built. I remember we stayed with Beebees and we drove up there. The dam had just been finished. I was probably 7 or 8.

JA: That would be right. Then, of course, as we would go north if we went into British Columbia—or anywhere north in there—why, you could always look up and you could see Big Swede. It stands out. I’m pretty sure it’s still there.

BH: There is a book out that has all the lookouts that they could find in the Pacific Northwest [Fire Lookouts of the Pacific Northwest, by Ray Kresek]. I know it’s in there.

Do you have any recollections, Gordon?

GA: No, just the stories, hearing about them, and that opportunity of going back to Beebees as a real youngster and spending time with Kyle and his son and family there on their ranch. Between going to Glacier Lake or the end of the road, and then the visits and stories like to Libby there, those were substantial memories in the development in my youth as far as where I was going to go and what I was going to do later in life for sure. I remember Dad often talking about, how in picking the Swan Valley, it was on Swede, looking at the map, and there wasn’t any roads in the Swan, and hearing about, "We're going there."
JA: You were about, as you say, 7 or 8 when you were staying at Kyle’s. I have that picture of you and the kids on the bridge at Warland before it was torn down for the dam.

BH: Did they destroy the town or move it? What happened to it, do you know?

JA: I think in the process it was totally moved out. There wasn’t much to it. Probably there was the Forest Service outfit, and the Warland Bar, and I don’t know what else.

GA: I remember reading about 20 years ago in one of those drought cycles where the lake was really drawn down, and people could go out on the bridge and look down and see in the depths where Warland was. You’d probably not see a structure, but there were remnants of foundations.

BH: Any other thoughts?

JA: We learned that the Forest Service is a good organization. Very definitely. It was a fantastic, positive experience working with them. We ended up being lifetime volunteers for the Forest Service after we finished educational background. That had a very positive effect. Then, of course, we produced two kids who have spent their life careers working for the Forest Service. Gordon, my oldest, has lived in the Forest Service for a period of time every summer of his entire life.

BH: Well, thank you for your time—both of you.

JA: I’m not sure that there was a tremendous amount there to say except that it was a very positive experience. We accomplished our goals and I’m sure we accomplished the Forest Service goals. It was all a very good experience.

I have to point out, too, that Kyle Beebee turned out to be the forest man that made sure about that Cedar Grove out of Troy. He’s the one that led to the establishment of preserving that grove. That’s the kind of background that we have; the kind of people that we were working and dealing with.

BH: Your experiences are ones that not many people have, so they’re pretty dear to us.

JA: Well, it’s the passage of time. Isn’t that interesting, that you don’t realize at the time what’s happening in terms of being a mark in history. That’s exactly what this turned out to be, a mark in history.

BH: That’s true. Most of the lookouts aren’t even around anymore.
GA: That picture right behind you there midway, that’s Dad coming out of the privy [photo of June and Gordon with poster behind them shows photo Gordon talks about].

BH: So he’s got his hands on his hips and he’s standing on a trail? I’ll be darned.

Well, I guess I’ll end the interview. Thank you again.