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DH This is an interview with Art Johnson at his home in Missoula, Montana, May 21, 1984. Mr. Johnson is a former Forest Service employee, we're talking about his days as a lookout. I'll start this by asking you where you worked then?

AJ As a lookout?

DH Yes, as a lookout.

AJ That was on the Slate Creek Ranger District on the St. Joe National Forest in northern Idaho.

DH What was the nearest town, for a reference?

AJ It was about halfway between Avery, Idaho and Wallace, Idaho. About twelve miles south of Wallace.

DH What were the living quarters like in a lookout tower?

AJ The lookout I was on was just an emergency lookout. It was not a permanent lookout. So there were no permanent structures. I had a tent, about 10 by 12 tent with a larger fly over the top to provide shade and that's all the living quarters I had. Dirt floor with dust 2 or 3 inches deep. And no lookout tower for performing lookout duties. I had 3 old dead snags with a platform and a map board on top. The top of these snags was cut out and then slats driven in the sides, they used for steps. And during the lightning storm when you were recording lightning strikes why I had to run up and down these snags carrying the fire finder with me, the fire finder sits on the map board. It enables you to locate exactly where the fire is. So that's all the structures there were on that lookout.

DH What did you do for supplies, food and water.

AJ The food was issued in 90 day rations at that time. And that was supposed to do you for 3 months, you had to make it do because you didn't get any other. And the water was a spring about a quarter of a mile down the side of the mountain, very steep trail and you carried the water in a 5 gallon man pack. And to climb back up to the lookout with that full of ice cold water was really something. You had to grab the brush on each side to pull yourself up, it was that steep. But you certainly learned how to conserve water, you didn't waste any. And baths were pretty far between.

DH So, how long were you at the lookout tower, for the season?
The period described in this interview was July and August, 1931
AJ At this lookout point?

DH Yes.

AJ From about July 10 to the first of September. About 120 days.

DH And were you alone the whole time?

AJ Oh yes. I didn't see a soul, not a human being during that time.

DH How did you contact your supervisor or whatever if you had to report fires.

AJ There was a ranger at the ranger station and with this telephone line that I'm telling you about we talked to the ranger quite often during the day. Especially if there was lightning. And that was hazardous too, because if the lightning strikes the telephone line why that could be hazardous.

DH Well what was the phone system like?

AJ It was just a wall telephone, maybe you've seen them, with a crank on them and that was the whole system. Just an emergency wire, see the telephone at your station was hooked on to that wire and then another wire grounding it, so you had a complete circuit. And that was all that you had.

DH And how far away was the ranger from where you were at?

AJ About 13 miles. Cause I remember saying I had 13 miles of telephone lines.

DH Were there very many lookouts in your area where you were working at?

AJ Yes, there were about a dozen on that particular ranger district. Most of them were permanent lookouts. I don't know whether there was another emergency lookout like mine or not. But there were about a dozen lookouts.

DH What would you have to do if you did spot a fire?

AJ You reported it immediately to the ranger station. In order to determine the exact location of the fire, one lookout is reading on the map with this fire finder and finds the exact location looking at line of sight to the fire. Then another lookout, miles from there, you get his exact reading and report it in. And where those two lines cross, that's where the fire was. So it was pretty simple, but very accurate.

DH If you reported the fire, did you have to respond to the fire or were you told to stay put where you were?
AJ Sometimes you had to go to the fire. If it was real small and within your particular area, why usually the ranger would ask you to go and put it out. But if it was large why—a long ways away—he'd send some help.

DH And how did they get to the fires?

AJ Well, use the road as far as they could go on the road and then hike from there on.

DH What about your transportation to the lookout where you were working at? Did you come in on mules or ...?

AJ Walk.

DH You walked in?

AJ That was sort of my initiation when I found where I was going and the ranger told me to where to go, telling me about the map. I found it was 16 miles. So that was quite a walk. The first 3 miles were almost straight up.

DH And what did you have to take back in there with you to your camp?

AJ Just personal belongings was all, extra clothes. That's all you used.

DH How were supplies for the camp brought in and the camp itself, materials back into there?

AJ All of the supplies were the groceries and they were brought in on these 90 day rations I spoke of. And the pack string brought in those groceries and camp, all of the equipment, and set up the camp, or tent, that was all there was to it. So there wasn't much to take in or out.

DH What was a typical day like? You wake up in the morning and then until you hit the bed at night?

AJ Usually, if there was nothing going on, no lightning storms around, we'd call the rangers office in the morning and again in the evening, but that's all the contact you had. In the evening I'd tell the...all the lookouts would get on the telephone line and talk to one another. They all, 10 or 12 or so, all on the same line, and two or three of them had musical instruments, and they'd play those. That was...one pretty good orchestra.

DH So other than the ranger, and the other lookouts you had no contact with the outside world?

AJ Well, we could call the central office in Wallace, the telephone company. But otherwise all the telephone lines were Forest Service. But they were connected.
DH Did you have any contact with family or friends while you were out there?

AJ No, except letters. And since I didn't see anybody for that length of time that I was there why there weren't any letters either.

DH Had you had any previous experience with the Forest Service before you began as a lookout?

AJ Yes, for just a few days. I worked on a trail crew. They were building a trail for a pack string, but that only lasted a few days and then the lookout on the lookout that I went to was transferred to a permanent lookout and I was the fill-in behind him. That was my first experience with the Forest Service.

DH Did you ever find it difficult to work either spotting fires or going to fires because of weather conditions?

AJ Well, the fires were very unpredictable. There might be a lightning strike and not see the smoke...or know that there was a fire for several days, sometimes. And then there can be a cluster of them in one place. You never know that until the smoke shows up. And the traveling was very tough because the land there just stands on edge. It's up and down, up and down, there's no level place. And it takes so long to get anywhere.

DH Any particular fire or series of fires that stand out in your mind as being memorable more than others?

AJ During the time I was on that lookout I didn't have to go to a single fire. While I was in the trail crew I think, I went to one, but I was with another man, so it must have been while I was in the trail crew. We went to a fire and it was dark, pitch dark, midnight, and they didn't have flashlights, lanterns, or anything, they had candles. And it was set in a tomato can with one side cut out. We used it as a lantern. Well, about the first thing that I did when I was climbing over a log crossing a creek, was to fall in the creek. And there went my candle and lantern and all. So I was in darkness. [chuckles]

DH Did you ever have any problems with wildlife?

AJ Well, yes. Somebody had installed a deer lick, salt lick, near my tent, the deer would congregate there every night, stomp, and blow and one thing and another. Keep me awake half the night. I had a family of pheasants that were a nuisance, they were in and out of the tent all the time. I had to keep everything covered up and not let them get up on the table and one thing and another, but they were a lot of company.

DH What about keeping animals out of your food supply? Was that a problem?

AJ Well they were...the food supply was in boxes, 99% of it was
canned. The only thing that wasn't canned was the potatoes and the bacon. So they couldn't get into the boxes.

DH Did you find this a particularly lonely job?

AJ Yes it was, but there was something fascinating about it, especially at night in the dark when you can see for miles and miles and miles. See the lookouts on the various peaks and you'd just feel like a king of all you surveyed up there on top of the mountain. But it's lonely, you don't see anybody. Of course it isn't that way now. Now everybody drives right to the lookout with a car.

DH Did you experience any uneasiness when you first came back into civilization after being out in the woods for so long?

AJ I sure tried to get out. When I finished that job I went to the ranger station and was there a few days and then he put me on a tree planting job, crew, so we were in a tent camp during that. That lasted for about a month... planting trees. All of the Forest Service work at that time was seasonal. You had to work in the spring, finish up in the fall. It was pretty hard to make enough money to carry you through the winter. It worked pretty good for college students, three months work in the summer.

DH Were most of the lookouts at that time college students?

AJ A lot of them were, yes, but some of them were natives. Of course you couldn't make enough in three months to last you through the year, but if you could get in on tree planting jobs and trail building and all those extra jobs, why you probably could make out. They were usually the native people.

DH Did you receive any kind of training before they put you out on a lookout?

AJ Well, that former lookout, he spent a few hours with me on that one. Then he was on his way, gone.

DH Did you ever get to meet face to face with any other lookouts?

AJ Oh yes, particularly in the winter time. We all lived in the Saint Maries, Idaho, during the winter and weren't working, so we'd get together quite often.

DH Did you have lots of stories to swap?

AJ Oh yes, you betcha. The bears got bigger and bigger and

DH As you came to the end of your lookout duties, was there any one thing in particular that you were really looking forward to?

AJ No. Because as I said then I went to the camp planting trees and that was altogether a different job. One thing about
being on a lookout, you...sometimes it's hard to stay in shape, your legs usually, in hiking, your legs are all right, but your arms get soft. Of course sawing your own wood and splitting it helps some. Well, that's another drawback, time went awfully slow. You couldn't get anything to read, and no radio, so you try to keep from talking to yourself, I guess.

DH Have there ever been any kind of medical emergencies, either with yourself or with the other lookouts?

AJ Well, there was...one lookout who was killed. Struck by lightning. That was a common hazard. There was one particular lookout on that ranger district where there had been three different lookouts killed by lightning because it usually strikes those mountain peaks. It didn't ever... while I was there it didn't get the peak I was on, but a peak a half a mile up from me, the lightning would strike that other peak, but it didn't just then.

DH Is there any particular reason why you decided to take this job with the Forest Service?

AJ Lookout?

DH Yes.

AJ Yes. I had worked for a lumber company for seven years and when the depression came in 1931...was about the height of the depression...and they shut down and I was laid off, no work. And I happened to know the forest ranger that I later worked for in Saint Maries so I hit him up for a job and I got it. There was no other work at that time. The Forest Service was the only work there was. Lumber companies were all shut down. Closed up.

DH Well, I think that just about exhausts the questions that I would like to ask. I don't know if you have anything else that you'd like to add that I didn't bring up.

AJ No. It's an experience that's hard to cover because it was nothing exciting or hard at all. It was the same day after day after day. It's pretty hard to write up anything interesting.

DH Was it generally a good experience for you?

AJ Oh yes, wonderful. I wouldn't want to do it again had I been offered, but I wouldn't give it...any amount for the years experience I did have. It was wonderful.

DH Well, I think that just about concludes everything that...

AJ Now, they usually have a man and wife on a lookout. And when the man is sent to a fire then, then his wife takes over, and she operates as the lookout. So she occasionally earns some money too. She gets paid for the shifts that she works. They didn't have that back then.
DH  Do you view that as an improvement?

AJ  Oh yes. As long as he was chased away on a fire there was nobody taking care of the lookout. Because if more fires show up, there's nobody to handle it.

End of tape.