

Maureen and Mike

# Mansfield Library

UNIVERSITY OF MONTANA

## **Archives and Special Collections**

Mansfield Library, University of Montana

Missoula MT 59812-9936

Email: [library.archives@umontana.edu](mailto:library.archives@umontana.edu)

Telephone: (406) 243-2053

The transcript with its associated audio recording was provided to Archives and Special Collections by the Northwest Montana Lookout Association.

**Oral History Number: 453-009**

**Interviewee: C. Kjell Petersen**

**Interviewers: Beth Hodder and Ann Fagre**

**Date of Interview: August 25, 2018**

**Project: Northwest Montana Lookout Association Oral History Project**

Beth Hodder: Hi, this is Beth Hodder. I'm here with Kjell Petersen at Firefighter Lookout, Flathead National Forest. We are here to interview him, "we" being Ann Fagre and me, as part of the Northwest Montana Forest Fire Lookout Association, and it is August 25, 2018. We're hoping to get some wonderful stories from Kjell about his many years that he spent as a lookout.

Kjell, could you tell us about your childhood, please?

Kjell Petersen: I grew up on a dairy farm in Iowa. Even though it's flat and there are no mountains around there, I spent all my free time running around in the woods, saving animals and exploring. If you know anything about dairy farms, you know that there's no such thing as vacations or days off. My family took its very first vacation the summer after I graduated from high school, and I saw mountains for the first time, and I was hopelessly lost on ever being able to spend the rest of my life in Iowa. The only way I could figure out how to be out here was to get a degree that would allow me to work in the West, so I went to Iowa State University, got a degree in Forestry, spent the next 30 years working for the U.S. Forest Service. I finished that career 22 years ago. Most of my Forest Service career was spent in Washington and Idaho.

BH: And what did you do for the Forest Service?

KP: I worked in fire management my whole career. I started out on a pick up fire crew in 1967, which was a particularly bad year. The Forest Service hired a bunch of extra firefighters, so my first job was on a fire crew. Second summer I worked as a lookout, and then I was a station fireman running a fire crew. Then I became a district dispatcher, and a district fuels tech, and a district prevention tech. Then I moved into the supervisor's office as a forest fuels tech, forest aviation officer, and then finished my career as a forest dispatcher.

BH: So, in there, you talked about very briefly having been a lookout. What drew you to being a lookout?

KP: That very first summer when I got hired along with 20 other buddies to form a quick fire crew, I heard lookouts talking on the radio, and I would see towers standing on the top of mountains, and I was just absolutely fascinated by the thought that somebody could sit up there 24 hours a day and just look for fires. I decided that I needed to be one of those.

BH: And you were a lookout at different places. Can you tell us where you were when you were working and even now?

KP: My first lookout was in 1968, which is exactly 50 years ago this summer, a place called Snow Peak on the St. Joe National Forest. Then after I retired in '96, I went back to the Clearwater Forest and staffed late season lookout on Beaver Ridge, which is up near Lolo Pass. I did that for five falls after I retired. Then since 2013 through current, I've been staffing as a volunteer Cooney Lookout, Baptiste Lookout, and Firefighter Lookout on Flathead National Forest here in northwest Montana.

BH: So did you totally work for the Forest Service as a lookout or other agencies as well?

KP: No, no, I was only a Forest Service lookout.

BH: Do you remember where the agency headquarters were for the places you staffed?

KP: The agency headquarters for the St. Joe was in St. Maries, Idaho; for the Clearwater was in Orofino [Idaho]; and, of course, the Flathead is located in Kalispell [Montana].

BH: Do you remember who you worked for? Different supervisors?

KP: Yeah, my supervisor when I was staffing Snow Peak in 1968 was a fellow named Lee Schatz. I can't imagine anyone would remember him, but he was my supervisor for about three summers that I worked on the Red Ives Ranger District. One of the most amazing bits of information that he gave me that I used throughout my whole career was that, "Never walk anywhere without a clipboard or a notepad in your hand, because if you have one of those in your hand, everyone thinks you are busy doing something and nobody will bother you."

But anyway, he went on to the Foreign Service after he left the Forest Service, happened to be one of the Americans that was taken hostage by the revolutionaries in Iran. Luckily, he was one that the Canadian government took under their wings, hid in the embassy, and eventually were able to smuggle out to the U.S., and they didn't have to spend all that extra time in captivity in Iran. So, we must never forget what the Canadian government did for us back in 1979.

Let's see. On Beaver Ridge, my supervisor up there while I was volunteering the five falls, was a fellow named Lee Clark. One of the things I remember about that was the one fall that I was up there was 2001. I woke up one morning, it was dead quiet in the sky. There were no planes flying, there were no contrails. It was just eerily quiet. It was September 11.

BH: That must have been quite the experience. How did you find out, then, what had happened?

KP: Well, of course, I was listening to the public radio, and listening to planes crashing into towers and towers falling down. It was really bizarre to be sitting up on a lookout not being able to see anything that was going on. But I remember in a couple days right after that I was

scheduled for a couple of days off, so I hopped in my car and drove to Kalispell, and the first thing I did was turn on the TV, because I thought, I need to see what this was all about. And I still remember to this day that after I saw what that was all about, I said to myself, I wish I'd never seen that.

BH: Oh, yeah. How did you find out through the Forest Service about that? I mean, did they call you that day and say, we need you to know what happened or anything?

KP: No, I never really got notice from the Forest Service other than they said, well, there are not going to be any aerial observer planes in the air because all aircraft around the nation had been grounded. Of course, most of us had commercial radios, so we knew kind of what was going on, but it was just a very gut wrenching time.

And then, while I've been staffing volunteer-wise on the Flathead, I've been working for Leif Haugen, who is a regular lookout here in northwest Montana, staffing Thoma [Lookout], and also serves as the coordinator for the volunteer program here.

BH: Yea!

KP: Yea, Leif.

BH: Coughs. Excuse me.

KP: Yeah, so we're all going to apologize for our voices because we've been sitting up in this smoke for the last week or so, and we all have smoke-induced...

BH: Illnesses.

KP: Illnesses. Yep.

BH: We're still sitting up here in the smoke.

KP: We're still sitting up here in the smoke.

BH: Unable to see the reservoir, which should be very visible down below. Okay, so besides Leif Extraordinary, can you describe the towers that you were in? Did it sit on the ground? Was it a tower?

KP: My first lookout, Snow Peak, was built in 1963. It was a ten-foot high concrete base with a flat cabin that sat on top of it. And then the extra staffing that I did on Beaver Ridge was a regular flat-topped cabin on about a 20-foot tall wooden tower. And then various lookouts here on the Flathead, mostly tower types.

BH: Do you remember what style they were?

KP: I think most of them were L-4s.

BH: Yeah. Probably. What other types of outbuildings were there at the lookouts?

KP: Everything that I'd been staffing have been pretty much the lookout itself and then the outhouse.

BH: Did you stay in the lookout itself 24 / 7? Did you sleep in the lookouts?

KP: In everything that I have staffed, it was I'll sleep inside the lookout. Yep.

BH: And did you stay in a bunk or a bed?

KP: A bunk with glass feet on them so you were safe from lightning.

BH: How do you communicate with headquarters at these various places?

KP: In '68 when I was on Snow Peak, that was kind of in the early days of radio, so I had a big clunky radio that was in a big wooden box all of its own, and then it had another box of giant eight-volt batteries it took like three Norwegians to carry around the place.

Of course, things have gotten way more streamlined since then. I was sort of at the end of the days of telephone, so there was no telephone in my lookout. It was all radio at that point.

BH: And the various places that you stayed, how did you get water? Did you have to haul it? Was it brought to you?

KP: Most places that I staffed, water was always down the trail a mile and a half or so. In the early days, I had a metal container—I think it was about five gallons—and it was strapped to an old Clack board, and if you were in the Forest Service back in the olden days, you know what a Clack board is. It was the most uncomfortable thing that the military ever designed, and you put 40 pounds of water on your back and up the trail you'd go. By the time you got up the trail about a mile and a half, you were usually bleeding somewhere from that thing rubbing on you.

Since then, of course, staffing here at Firefighter now, there's a road here, so the water comes up by cubie, which is a five-gallon water container. You don't have to pack it up the trail, but you still have to lug that little puppy up 55 stairs when you're ready for water.

BH: What about meals? How did you cook them? What did you cook?

KP: Back in '68, of course, I went in on that assignment and I stayed in all summer, so I was tasked to make sure that I took enough food in that I wouldn't need to be resupplied. So I took in lots of canned stuff. I remember I almost lived exclusively on Spam. Oh, my god, I ate a lot of Spam. I had a special breakfast that I called Spam Delight, and I would fry two pieces of Spam—course fried Spam is so awesome because it's just so salty—and then I would put those two pieces between graham crackers and make kind of like a graham cracker sandwich, and I'd have it with a bowl of sweetened applesauce. That was always my breakfast. So I called that Spam Delight. Just a couple years ago, Libby Langston, if you heard about [her], she published a lookout cookbook, and I submitted my Spam Delight recipe to her, and she included it in there. But there is kind of like a disclaimer on my recipe. It said, "After you have Spam Delight for breakfast a few times, you need to really maintain your exercise program so you don't have cardiac arrest."

And then I probably ate a record setting amount of Dinty Moore beef stew that summer, too. I mean, I can't remember how many cans of Dinty Moore beef stew I went through, but every time I see it on the shelf in the grocery store I have a little gag reflex.

BH: Laughs. And not with the Spam?

KP: No.

BH: I mean no gag reflex when you walk past?

KP: Oh, with Spam? No. Spam's so good. Even though it's so horrible, it's still really good, especially fried.

BH: Did you bake up at your lookouts at all?

KP: I didn't have an oven, so my cooking thing at Snow Peak was a four-burner stove, and underneath was a refrigerator, which was kind of unusual because most places now have a stove and an oven and a separate refrigerator, but they were all one thing. So I didn't really have a way to bake. Then later on after I was retired, I just pretty much depended on Costco for all my food.

BH: For anybody who does not know Kjell, he is very famous at having people bring him meals to the lookout, so he doesn't have to bake; he doesn't have to cook.

KP: I know. These two came up here to interview me today and they brought lunch. All my friends know you get one free visit at my lookout, and then the next time you come up, you have to bring a meal, so one ten-day stretch last summer, I only cooked my own food twice.

BH: Oh, jeez!

KP: Yeah. It's a good gig pretending like you're kind of a starving orphan and people bring food to you.

BH: What about other people coming to see you, like Ann and me? Have you seen many people at the lookouts over your career?

KP: Well, on my early staffing on Snow Peak, it was a five-mile walk into there after about a 30-mile drive on a gravel road, so during the week I hardly ever had visitors, but on the weekends I would get firefighters from the district that would come up and hike in and bring me some fresh food or some beer or something. So I had a couple people usually on the weekends but then—mercifully—during the week, I was pretty much alone and had the world to myself.

And then, of course, around here now, doing the volunteer thing, lookouts are becoming more and more popular; people are finding out that they're just a cool place, and that the people that staff them are particularly cool people. So you get lots of visitors who want to come up and find out about lookouts and what that weird "wheely" thing in the middle of the room is all about.

So, yeah, it's not uncommon here on Firefighter to have eight to ten people a day, and then sometimes on weekends to have 20 or 30 people. If you're a real hermit, then that's a bit difficult for you. I like to be really social, and then I like to be really alone, so it's the best of both worlds. When people come visit you, you give them a little tour, and then you—I don't know—I just have a way about letting people know when it's time to leave.

BH: What about the lookouts now, do you know if they're still standing, or have some of them gone the way of lookouts of the past?

KP: Everything that I staffed over my lifetime is still standing. I was really fortunate about two months ago to go back to visit some friends on the Clearwater [National Forest], and a retired friend of mine has his own helicopter. He took me out for a three-hour ride around my old haunt. We got to fly past Snow Peak.

I think I mentioned it was 50 years ago this summer when I staffed that. The summer I was staffing it up there, I got to share it with mountain goats. There were probably 30 mountain goats that resided there, so it was not unusual for me to wake up in the morning and have a goat or two looking through the window at me. It was the first place ever I heard a pika, so, for those two reasons, that lookout is still a very important place in my history. The Forest Service turned over the administration of that lookout a number of years ago to the Idaho Fish and Game Department, and they have used it over the years to trap mountain goats in exchange with other states' wildlife projects. So the summer I was up there, I think they trapped eight mountain goats that they exchanged with Colorado that summer, and brought wild turkeys up to the area. And, of course, if you run around here, you know that wild turkeys are really thriving.

BH: Yeah, they are. You talked a little bit about having to travel five miles to get into Snow Peak after driving there, and here at Firefighter, we can drive right to the lookout, but what about other lookouts, how did you reach them?

KP: The Beaver Ridge Lookout that I staffed late falls for five years, that was a drive to. Here on the Flathead, Baptiste was a walk to, Firefighter's a drive to, and Cooney's a drive to. The opportunity to drive to lookouts is not all that common, but it's nice when it's available.

BH: And the ones that you had to hike into: did you ever have a horse, or were you just packed in, and so you hiked in with the packer, or—?

KP: The staffing on Snow Peak that I did in '68, I was flown in by helicopter, which was really nice, but, of course, anyone who came in to see me had to walk in. A curious story there: on my 20<sup>th</sup> birthday, my family loaded up their car—my mom and my dad and my sister—and they drove out from Iowa and decided they were going to come see me for my birthday.

Late in the day, they left the ranger station, driving up the road, got to the saddle where you could look out up the valley and see this big giant rock up there with the lookout on it. My mom said, "Oh, my god! You don't suppose that's where it is?" Which happened to be where I was. So late in the afternoon, they started hiking into the lookout, having no idea what they were getting into. I could hear them for a couple of hours, coming along, and they got to the lookout just before dark. They were physically paralyzed for two days after that. But the really bizarre thing is that they carried a birthday cake in to me, and it was not destroyed. That's pretty amazing when a family will carry a birthday cake in to you for five miles.

BH: How did you do your laundry?

KP: That was just on an old fashioned washboard. I'd seen them before; I'd never used them. Most of the summer, I had a pretty big snowdrift on the north side of the lookout, so I could easily get water out of the snow and melt it and use it for cleaning and stuff, so I didn't have a water problem. I just had to pack my drinking water.

BH: Do you remember neighboring lookouts from any of the ones that you were at? Okay. I've got some stories there. If you are sensitive, you may want to plug your ears now. I had a neighboring lookout [from Snow Peak Lookout] called Conrad [Peak] Lookout, which looks down on the St. Joe. I had another lookout to my east called Surveyor's Ridge Lookout. Those two left impressions on me that summer. I can't remember the kid's name who was on Conrad Lookout, but one afternoon, my tower got hit three times by lightning, which if you've not been in the middle of a lightning storm and had the lightning strike happen about four feet above your head, there's nothing else in the world that compares to that. I had a little transistor radio that sat on my propane heater, and that day, the lightning fried my transistor radio, so I spent the rest of the summer without any music. But I remember distinctly that that was the summer

that “Ground Control to Major Tom” was popular—David Bowie. I heard that at least 100 times until my transistor radio got fried, but now, whenever that song comes back, I am 20 years old, back on Snow Peak again.

That afternoon, after the lightning storm had moved over, the district dispatcher, Lee Schotts, called Conrad Lookout and said, “How’d you do with the storm up there?” Of course, the kid was pretty excited because his tower had gotten smacked, also, and I distinctly remember back in those days you had to be *very* careful about what you said on the radio. You couldn’t use bad language or anything like that, and the kid got on after Lee said, “How’d you do with the storm?”

He said, “My tower got hit, and it melted my fucking antenna.”

There was this big long silent spell on the radio, and then the dispatcher got back on and said, “I understand that the lightning melted your antenna [emphasis on antenna]?”

And the kid said, “Yes.”

So that was kind of a fun, creepy moment.

Then I mentioned Surveyor’s Ridge, which was another lookout nearby. There was a lady on that lookout that summer, and females were just kind of coming into the Forest Service then. Hardly ever did you find them alone on a lookout. Mostly they were office staff or flunkies in cookhouses. But this lady was kind of unusual, and I remember her name because her first name was Michael. I’d never known a lady named Michael before. Her last name was Colville, and I remember that because of the Colville National Forest.

Anyway, she called into the district one afternoon and said that she had gotten a flat tire on her car. So she had jacked up the car to change the tire and forgot to set the emergency brake, so after the car got kind of in the air, it rolled off the jack, down across one of the roads, down below the next road, and smacked into the timber. So, the district had to go up with a jeep and a winch and pull her car back up on the road. That was quite memorable.

Then, curiously enough, I sort of lost track of her over the years, but you might remember in 2014, a jumbo avalanche in Missoula, triggered by a skier, came down and flattened a couple of houses just on the outskirts of Missoula. A husband and wife were trapped inside of one of those houses. I found out later reading the news that they both survived the original avalanche, but two days later, Michael Colville died of her injuries, and it was the same lady that I shared lookout time with in 1968. It was really interesting. Of course, we hadn’t paid any attention to each other all those years, but I did get her daughter’s name out of the newspaper, and I was able to eventually make contact with her daughter and shared the experience that I had had with her on the lookout. Her daughter was really quite appreciative to hear that. She said that she didn’t really know that much about that part of her mother’s life.

BH: That's special. How did you get supplies to your lookouts?

KP: Well, my original one [Snow Peak]—I took everything in by helicopter. Then, everything else since then, most everything else was drive to, so you just took your own stuff in. But it was kind of unusual in that early day to have stuff go in by helicopter, because that district had its own pack string, also, but for some particular reason, I was lucky enough to get all my stuff brought in by helicopter.

BH: And you never had to be resupplied that summer at all?

KP: No. I was told before I went up to make sure that I bought enough of everything that I wouldn't need to be resupplied, so I took lots of stuff in there. A couple boxes of beer, which, of course, I had to camouflage, because they would never have allowed me to take it in. But I had kind of my refrigerator half full of beer, and one day that I got word that the district ranger was flying in to do an inspection. Back in those days, lookouts were really important things, and they were inspected very closely, and you'd better have your windows washed. So I had about ten minutes to get all that beer out of my refrigerator hidden downstairs before the ranger got there. I would have been in trouble.

BH: When you were up there, did you keep contact with the other lookouts, you know, you hear stories about people at night talking to each other across valleys and that?

KP: Some of the districts allowed lookouts to chitchat a whole lot. The particular one I was on didn't really encourage chitchatting, so if you had something important you needed to talk to someone about, of course you could do it any time, but there wasn't a big gab session going on where you played cribbage over the radio or exchanged recipes. It was pretty quiet stuff.

BH: Just in terms of what you had to do at the lookouts that you staffed, what were your main duties, and what did you do during the day?

KP: Well, most of the time of course, your main duty was just watching for fires, and back in the early days, it was pretty well established in the *Fireman's Handbook* that if you were a lookout, that, between morning check in and evening check in, you were expected 20 minutes of each hour actually out looking. I don't know that that's so specifically paid attention to anymore, but that was really an important thing, and you had to be able to regurgitate that number back, because supervisors wanted to know.

Yeah, but most of the time you spent looking. Then, of course, there was always little maintenance things to do, and then there was reading, and hiking, and time went by fast.

BH: Did you have to be a smoke chaser at any of the lookouts you were at?

KP: No, I never had to do that. I know some places did. I never had anything crop up that close to me where I had the opportunity to go, but I know in the earlier days, lots of times, lookouts were staffed with two people. One was a lookout, the other was a smoke chaser, but my period was after that.

BH: What about fires, and the number that you might have spotted at various lookouts?

KP: I don't have any idea anymore about that, but that particular summer, 1968 on Snow Peak, was a wet summer, so I never turned in an actual fire. I came really close one night. It had just gotten dark, and here was this giant glow to the east, and, I'm thinking, "Oh my God! That's a huge fire," and I'm running around trying to figure out where it was, filling out the paperwork. Fortunately, the universe stepped in just before I made a complete fool of myself, and, all of a sudden, the big full moon pops up. I don't think I'm the only lookout who's had that experience, but until you experience that for the first time, that's like, that is the biggest damn fire I've ever seen.

BH: Did you actually have any memorable fires?

KP: I don't think I have anything that stands out in my head except one, one that involves you, Beth. Okay, so just a few years ago—

BH: Ah, yes.

KP: Okay, so you remember this one, don't you?

BH: I do.

KP: I was up here. I have an app on my iPad that takes pictures of lightning strikes, and I had this lightning strike in the afternoon and then, of course, I was replaced the next day by Beth. I said, "Right over there on that ridge, there's a fire over there, but it's not showing. I just know there's a fire there." Well, then, of course, Beth took over, and it was really my fire, because I saw the lightning strike.

BH: Yeah, yeah, yeah.

KP: The next afternoon, my phone rings, and it was Beth. She's going, "Na na na na na na." She got to turn in the fire. It was really my fire.

BH: I have to tell one, though, with you, and I was the lookout up here. Across the reservoir, Kjell was down in Kalispell, and I get this phone call. I'd been sitting up here looking around, and he says, "Do you see the fire—I think it was Hash Mountain, or whatever—he says, "Do you see the fire over there?" And I said, "Well, I was just looking," and I turn around and here's this big

cloud of smoke. [Laughs]. So he got one on me, but it was actually something down in the valley that the smoke had come up.

KP: Okay, then. Are we even?

BH: We are even.

KP: Okay.

BH: What about wildlife? You mentioned goats, lots of goats at Snow Peak. Any other memorable wildlife experiences?

KP: Let's see, okay? When I was on Snow Peak that summer, I had a golden mantle squirrel. I called him Chippy. He figured out where I stored the peanuts in the drawer, and soon as I'd open the door in the morning, he'd come inside the lookout and he'd sit there and kind of get in this little beggy position for peanuts. I'd throw four or five peanuts on the floor and he would absolutely fill up his cheeks with peanuts until he could barely walk. Then, every once in a while I would fry up a pancake and give him a pancake. It was really fun to watch him go down the stairs, because he would pull that pancake down the stairs, and then it would fall on top of him, and he'd be trapped under the pancake for a little while. The next summer when I went up to orient the new lookout, as soon as we opened the lookout, Chippy was right there.

BH: Really?

KP: Yeah. He had survived the winter.

Speaking of that lookout, the next season—I don't remember his name [the lookout]—but he was from back east somewhere and not woods-wise at all. But I remember not long after I left him up there—after I kind of spent a day with him orienting him—he called the district office one afternoon and said he was kind of concerned because there was a herd of wild horses all the way around the bottom of the lookout. Of course, everyone was like going, “Wild horses?” So we started talking to him and eventually figured out that he had an elk herd that was running around the bottom of the lookout. He had no idea what an elk was.

Let's see. Another interesting wildlife story. While I was on Snow Peak, there was a pretty big trail crew working in Sawtooth Creek, and they were having trouble with a bear. The bear was getting into camp all the time while they were out working, and they'd come back from work and the camp was all torn up. So one day the crew boss called me up, and he said, “You're going to hear a strange noise down here. I don't want you to panic, but we're taking care of the bear.” Of course, you'd never be able to get away with this now, but the bear kept coming in every afternoon to the dump. So, they took a ham, wired it with dynamite, put it in the dump, and then when the bear came in, then the bear [Kjell makes a sound with his hands, probably, to indicate “gone.”]

BH: Went to bear heaven?

KP: Went to bear heaven. Yeah. [Laughs]

BH: So, in terms of your experiences, did they turn out to be what you thought they would be, or did you even know what you thought they might be?

KP: I probably had no idea what they might be. I knew they were going to be cool. I knew it was going to be a life changing thing, but it turns out it's way beyond what anyone's expectations can be. Until you actually staff a lookout, you just don't have a clue about how life changing that experience is. It changes your DNA; it changes your brain; it just changes the way you think, and you never get over it.

BH: In what ways did it change you?

KP: It taught me how to slow down, how to think differently about things, it makes you more aware about nature. Nature is the greatest educator there is. Everything you need to know, you can learn from nature if you once slow down and watch.

BH: Do you have anything that sticks out as maybe your most memorable experience as a lookout, or maybe multiple ones?

KP: I think maybe a couple of things stand out from my 1968 staffing on Snow Peak. One is, that summer, Fairchild Air Force Base in Spokane was doing lots of radar avoidance flights, so the B-52 bombers would fly [Kalispell Dispatch interrupting Kjell's story] right by my lookout, and they were dropping aluminum foil shafts, trying to confuse the radar system. But they were so low that I would be out on the catwalk and I could look down into the cockpit of the B-52 bomber as it flew by, and I could see the pilots in there. That was an amazing thing to witness out in the middle of nowhere.

Then, of course, one other thing that was significant to me that summer was I turned 20 while I was on that lookout, and if I remember correctly, that was legal age in Idaho back then. So, I knew I wanted to celebrate the fact, because when I went back to Iowa, I wouldn't be legal again. So I took up a pint of Old Crow whiskey, and one night, I sat up on the catwalk on the west side as the sun was setting, and I drank a pint of Old Crow whiskey. It was an out of body experience. Yep, yep. I wasn't too sharp the next day, but by god, I had celebrated my birthday.

BH: Did you have any weird experiences or anything that sticks out that way?

KP: I think the really weird thing was getting hit by lightning three times one afternoon. I remember the story going, lightning never hits the same place twice. It hits the same place two, three, four times, and I just remember, the place would just light up and instantly it was just

like a shotgun went off by your ear. 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.

I do remember that after your tower got struck, all that copper tubing just gleamed like brand new after the electricity zapped all the oxidation off of it. Yeah. Pretty cool thing.

BH: Yeah, I guess. Would that have been also your most frightening experience, or did you have others?

KP: Oh, no. That was definitely the most frightening thing, because until that happens the first time, you just really don’t know what it’s going to be like. And, of course, I’ve been struck since then, and it still really captures your attention, but not like the first time. [Laughs]

BH: What about the hardest thing that you experienced in the lookout?

KP: For me, the hardest thing is always coming down, because you just get so wrapped up in the place that when you have to return to society, it is just really hard on your soul. When I have to come down, I lock myself in my house for a couple of days, because I’m scared to go out in society. I kind of wait for everything to change in my brain so I can go back out and not be freaked out.

BH: Especially when you have people like us to deal with. [Laughs]

KP: Well, there are far weirder people than you two. [Ann and Beth laugh]

BH: Would there be a best thing that you feel about your lookout experiences, or would that just be put in with the memorable experiences?

KP: Probably the best thing about the lookout experience, the two greatest experiences are sunrises and sunsets. They’re just the most amazing thing to sit and watch and experience that quiet solitude part of the day. And, of course, when it’s smoky and there’s lots of fires right now, you have to kind of pay attention to which direction you’re looking, because the sunrises and the sunsets look exactly the same because of the smoke in the sky.

Then, of course, the full moons, they’re an incredible thing. Sometimes it’s really hard to sleep because it’s so light inside the lookout that you kind of have to cover up your head, because it’s hard to get any sleep.

BH: What about stars?

KP: Stars are crazy. Yeah. You see Northern Lights occasionally. You see meteors occasionally. The one thing that I always show everyone when they come visit me is how much the earth

moves overnight. I like to get out a big giant serving spoon and show people where the Big Dipper is when I go to bed and then where the Big Dipper is when I wake up in the morning. It's radical how much it changes overnight.

As a lookout, you wake up two or three times a night and you look around to make sure that nothing's on fire. But after you spend enough time watching the Big Dipper, you don't have to look at the clock in the morning or in the middle of the night. You just see where the Big Dipper is and you know what time it is.

So, it's just being totally swamped in nature that is the just most inexpensive therapy you could ever have.

BH: So, I don't need to ask you this question too much, because you are definitely a lookout in your brain, in your life, whatever, but can you see yourself doing this for many more years?

KP: I'm hoping they put in elevators pretty soon so I can get my crusty old beat up body up here, but yeah. This is so important to me, and, curiously enough, we all sort of have a routine that helps us to go to sleep when we crawl into bed at night. For me, I envision being on the lookout and looking out the window watching the stars, and that's what puts me to bed every night when I'm not up here.

BH: Any other thoughts? Anything that we've missed with this interview that you'd like to discuss?

KP: I guess, what amazes me when I have visitors up here—even the locals—is the number of people who have never been on a lookout before, so I would just mention that, at your first opportunity, you need to go visit one. Figure out if you can rent one. Figure out a way to experience a day, or a week, or an hour on the lookout, because it will change your brain for the better.

BH: Yes. Well, thank you, Kjell. It's been marvelous. Any thoughts from you, Ann? Anything to add?

Ann Fagre: Why don't you just talk about solitude?

BH: Oh, yeah.

KP: To me, it might be the fact that right now I hear the wind blowing, and I might spend an hour listening to the wind blow, or I might spend an hour looking at the flag flop in the breeze, or a tree move around in the wind, and I'll discover that for whatever time period is involved there, nothing else has gone on in my head. It's just been complete lack of wasted brain activity. You just experience this moment right now, and the whole rest of the world goes away. That's solitude.

BH: So, to me that kind of sounds like what people describe today as “mindfulness.”

KP: Yeah.

BH: So, you’re in the moment. You’re right there. You’re not thinking about other things.

KP: There’s only one thing in your head, not 27 other things competing. Just one thing. Ah, I hear the wind. Ah, look at that tree move. Ah, look at that vulture soar. That’s solitude.

BH: Well, thank you.

KP: Hey, this has been fun. I’ve enjoyed sharing time with you, especially up here.

BH: Yes, yes, being in “outer space” as you call it.

KP: I call this going to “outer space.” I just got here this morning after a day of resupply, so I’ve had a successful launch, and now I get to stay up here for ten days before I have to return to earth, but I love being up here in zero gravity.

BH: Well, enjoy every moment.

KP: Thank you.

BH: And thank you for the interview.

KP: My pleasure.

[End of Interview]