

Maureen and Mike

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This transcript represents the nearly verbatim record of an unrehearsed interview. Please bear in mind that you are reading the spoken word rather than the written word.

**Oral History Number: 127-001**  
**Interviewee: Arthur A. Johnson**  
**Interviewer: Dan Hall**  
**Date of Interview: May 21, 1984**

*Note: The period described in this interview was July and August 1931.*

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 going to be talking about his days as a lookout.

I'll start this by asking you where you worked then?

AJ: Where...As a lookout, or—

DH: Mm hmm, 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 12 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 three 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 side—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. And it enables you to locate exactly where the fire is. So that...that's all the structures there were on that lookout.

DH: What did you do for supplies—food and water?

AJ: Well, 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 certainly learned how to conserve water. Didn't waste any. And baths were pretty far between.

DH: So how long were you at the lookout tower for the season?

AJ: At this lookout point?

DH: Mm hmm.

AJ: From about July 10 to the 1st of April...or 1st 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. [laughs]

DH: How did you contact your supervisor or whatever if you had to report a fire?.

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 were...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 emergency wire. See, the telephone at your station was hooked on to that wire and then another wire grounding it, so 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. Because I remember saying had 13 miles of telephone lines.

DH: Were there very many lookouts in your area where you were working at, or—?

AJ: Yes, there were. There were about a dozen on the...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: Report it immediately to the ranger station. In order to determine the exact location of the fire, one lookout would get his reading on the map with this fire finder and find exact location

from looking at line of sight to the fire. Then another lookout, miles from there—you'd get his exact reading and report it in. And where those two lines cross, why, that's where the fire was. So it was pretty simple but very accurate.

DH: If you reported a 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 in...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—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.

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 it 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 that I spoke of. And the pack string brought in those groceries and tent—all the equipment—and set up the camp, or tent—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 into the 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 their...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. [laughs]

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

AJ: Oh well, we could call central office in Wallace—the telephone company. But otherwise, all the telephone lines were Forest Service. But they weren't 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 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. Then there can be a cluster of them—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. It takes so long to get anywhere.

DH: There 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 that must have been while I was in the trail crew. We went to a fire, and it was dark—pitch dark, midnight. And we had...they didn't have flashlights, and or lanterns, or anything; it was candle. 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 the log crossing a creek, was to fall in the creek. There went my candle and lantern and all went [slaps table]. So I was in dark for the rest of the time. [laughs]

DH: Did you ever have any problems with wildlife?

AJ: What?

DH: Did you ever have any problems with wildlife?

AJ: Well, yes. Somebody had installed a deer lick—salt lick—near the...my tent. The deer'd congregate there every night and 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 were in boxes. It was...99 percent 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.

[long pause]

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 gets lonely; you don't see anybody. Of course, it isn't that way now. Now everybody can drive right to the lookout in a car [unintelligible].

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

AJ: Well, I was sure glad 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 the tent camp during that. And that lasted for about a month. Planting trees. All of the Forest Service work at that time was seasonal. Go to work in the spring, finish up in the fall, and it was hard to make enough money to carry you through the winter. It worked pretty good for college students—3 month's work in the summer.

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

AJ: A lot of them were, yes, but...and 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, probably could make out. They were usually the native.

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 wintertime. We all lived in 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 yeah, you betcha. The bears got bigger and bigger. [laughs]

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?

AG: No. [pauses] 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, sometimes it's hard to stay in shape. Your legs usually—hiking, your legs are all right—but your arms get soft. Of course, sawing your own wood and splitting it helps some. Well, another drawback—time went awfully slow. You couldn't get anything to read and no radio, so try to keep from talking to yourself, I guess.

[long pause]

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

AJ: Well, there was one lookout who's killed. Struck by lightning. Yeah, 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 was—

Unknown Speaker: I thought you made coffee?

AJ: I did. [laughs] [unintelligible].

US: Oh, okay. I thought maybe he'd want—

AJ: The lightning would strike that other peak, but it didn't get mine.

[long pause]

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

AJ: Lookout?

DH: Mm hmm.

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 of a 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. 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'd 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 a...it's an experience that's hard to cover because it was nothing exciting or hard. It's the same day after day after day. 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 any of it [unintelligible] for the year's 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 shifts that she works. They didn't have that then.

DH: Do you view that as an improvement?

AJ: Pardon?

DH: Do you view that as an improvement?

AJ: Oh yes. Because while you were chasing away on a fire, there was nobody taking care of the lookout. So if there were more fires show up, there was nobody to handle them.

Well, we'll have some coffee? Want some?

DH: Sure. I think this will conclude our interview for today.

AJ: Yep.

[End of Audio]