

Maureen and Mike

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**Interviewee: Cathy Schloeder**

**Interviewers: Beth Hodder**

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Beth Hodder. Hi, this is Beth Hodder. I'm with the Northwest Montana Forest Fire Lookout Association, and I'm here today to interview Kathy Schloeder who was a lookout back in the 1980s. So we're going to grab some stories that she's got to tell and maybe some experiences and just go from there.

So, Cathy, would you please tell me about your childhood? Where'd you grow up?

Cathy Schloeder: I grew up in the Canal Zone in Panama and spent most of my time outdoors. My father was a very avid outdoorsman. He was a doctor but he was fascinated by all sciences, so we learned wildlife, fisheries, geology, archaeology, anthropology—everything. He collected orchids. They were all over our backyard. He was fascinated with everything. That was real instrumental in my life, growing up in the Canal Zone and having a father like that to be involved in natural resources and a variety of aspects.

BH: When did you come back to the States then?

CS: We moved when I was 13. We moved to Houston, which I did not like. I didn't like living in a big city, so I ended up leaving home when I was 17 and finishing my last year of high school on my own in San Diego, which is where my brother was living.

At that time, I thought I would go into marine biology, so I started at a community college in marine biology and then I ended up—I had ruptured my eardrum when I was a child with an ear infection, and then being in the water a lot in Panama. Then I ended up rupturing my eardrum two more times when I was scuba diving off the coast.

BH: The same year?

CS: Yes, the same year. I had it repaired. They basically say you just break an inner and outer layer every time you rupture your eardrum, and I was down to one. Now it's normal; it's a full eardrum, but I just thought, you know, I don't know if I want to keep risking this. I always had to take decongestants when I'd dive. So, at that time, I started getting a little less interested in marine biology as well, and decided to go into environmental studies. I transferred to Humboldt State University and started out there and wasn't happy there because of the rain. It just poured and poured and poured. I had met a guy at that time and I started dating him. He told me he was moving to Montana, so I thought, I'm not interested in school right now. I'm just not sure what my future's going to be. Let's see what Montana holds. So I did move to Montana with him.

The first summer I was here, I was tree planting and everything you can do as a seasonal in Montana. Then I started bartending in the fall, and we got married. Then we heard about Hubbard Lookout, which is a lookout that requires a married couple to be on it, because they have an initial attack vehicle at that lookout. So we decided to apply for it, see what it was like. He was initial attack. We had a tanker truck. It was a different lookout, because it had a cabin on the ground. That was the original lookout, and then it had a lookout up on towers.

*(Beth's note: Ray Kresek's book, Fire Lookouts of the Northwest lists it as Hubbart Mountain. To add confusion, the topo map for Flathead County is called Hubbard, but the map shows the lookout as Hubbart, and Hubbart Reservoir is below on the map).*

BH: So you lived in the cabin?

CS: We lived in the cabin and watched from the towers. Hubbard was also different in that that's a very low mountain, and it looks south toward the Nirada area. One of the reasons they had Hubbard manned is it was a very high risk lightning strike area and very fast moving because it gets very dry in that landscape. So, it was a pretty busy lookout. We got regular lightning strikes throughout the area. Marion was just to the west of us. We couldn't see down into their basin and they couldn't see down into ours, but we could talk about the pathways of the strikes and so forth. It was a really enjoyable lookout once it started getting pretty active up there.

By that time, I realized I needed to go back to school; I wasn't going to do seasonal employment for the rest of my life, so I moved to Missoula and entered the wildlife program at University of Montana. That's when I found the niche that I really wanted to be involved in. During the school year, I worked as a work study in Charles Jonkel's lab with the bears and graduate students.

Then I went on to Union Peak Lookout in the summers through the Missoula DSL [Department of State Lands], so it was easy to transfer down there. I shared that lookout with another partner. It was also different in that you could drive to it daily. Hubbard we could only come out once a month, so you had to stock up with everything you wanted in town once a month, and we took turns on Hubbard, too. Would go in. So the other person only came out every two months. Union Peak, you came up once a week, so it was easy to bring your supplies, easy to bring plenty of water up.

With Hubbard, we had to haul barrels of water and keep them on standby. We could fill the tanker at the reservoir. We actually made a solar shower on the roof, which we used the tanker to fill. So, we scrubbed it real clean to get the retardant out of it so that we could fill the barrel on the roof and have a solar shower.

At the same time, as being a lookout, I was also a dispatcher for the Missoula district office there.

BH: So when you were at Union Peak, you weren't there the whole time? You were part dispatch?

CS: I had a partner, so we would do five on and two off, and we would rotate who had the five. I would do five, she would do two, then the next time I would do two and she would do five. And on the days when I was doing two, I would fill in three days as a dispatcher. That was basically over one weekend and one weekday, because they needed a weekend dispatcher. We always made it so that she or I was being dispatcher when we weren't on the lookout for the five days.

Union Peak was a ground-based lookout. It was not on a tower. That looked out over the Potomac Valley, south towards Garnet, and east towards the Ovando area. That was also a very high lightning strike area as well as a risk for human-started fires, as well.

BH: Wow.

CS: So that's how I went from Panama to Montana.

BH: That's quite a story. So when were you a lookout?

CS: I was a lookout on Hubbard in '81 and Union Peak was '82, '83.

BH: Okay. And you worked for—

CS: Montana Department of State Lands.

BH: State Lands. Both of them were State Lands.

CS: Yes. It wasn't a federal lookout.

BH: Where were the headquarters for the lookouts? Missoula must have been for Union Peak?

CS: And Kalispell was Hubbard.

BH: Can you describe the lookout? Let's just go with Hubbard first. Were there outbuildings, sheds, cabins, what did the interior look like?

CS: Well, like I mentioned, Hubbard had a cabin on the ground that we lived in and it was two rooms, a two-room cabin. We had an outhouse. It was infested with rodents. I had a cat, which was very helpful, because after we cleaned it all out, they still tried to come in, and they were

coming in through the attic. So we would pop a ceiling opening and toss her up there, and after a while, we didn't have any more mice in the lookout.

It was a very old lookout cabin.

BH: Do you know when it was built?

CS: It was the original lookout cabin. I think they built it in like the '20s, right around that time.

BH: It was log, you said, right?

CS: No, it wasn't. It wasn't log. It was timber siding, a lot like the old white railroad housing, just a clapboard small building with a shake roof.

And then just maybe fifty feet from it is when they put the new lookout, and it was at a slightly higher spot. I'm not sure why they never put that building [the cabin] right on the peak, but it wasn't quite on the peak. The lookout was put on the peak; it was kind of the end of the ridgeline, basically, that we were on. We weren't on a mountain per se. That lookout, I think, was about twenty to thirty feet off the ground. I can't remember exactly. It was the same size as some of the older lookouts in Montana dated about the '20s—really small.

BH: Like a 12x12 or a 10x10?

CS: Yes. I think about a 10x10, and all it had was a woodstove and an alidade and a table and a chair. There wasn't any accommodations to sleep or anything. We did put a mattress up there. As the summer came on and it got kind of warmer, that cabin got a little stuffy, so it was more comfortable to sleep up in that lookout.

I'm pretty sure it had only one opening window and one opening door. The rest of the windows were fixed, because it wasn't designed to be lived in like the other ones were.

And then it had a catwalk all the way around on the outside.

The Hubbard was on the ground, and I'm pretty sure Hubbard [meant to say Union Peak] was built in the '20s, and it was a little bit bigger. It was probably 12x12. I don't think much bigger than that. It had a bed on one side, a fixed alidade, and a woodstove, and a table on it. It had a flat roof, which was really different, and we had a ladder. We would go and sit on top of the roof in the summertime and hang out and look around, and then when it got a little too hot, you'd go down inside.

BH: Was there like a hole through the roof?

CS: No, we came around on the outside, put a ladder on the outside and we climbed up on the outside. I don't think that they—I'm wondering if I even brought the ladder up; I don't remember. I know my partner and I both would use it to go up, but I think mostly people looked from the ground. We just liked to be up on the roof rather than inside all day long.

It was just down the hill, maybe a hundred yards, where one of the emergency services repeater stations was from us. So we had a road straight up to the lookout.

It had an outhouse.

BH: You said it had two rooms, so was one of them like a kitchen?

CS: No, that one didn't have two rooms. This is Union Peak. It was 12x12 building with a flat roof. The Hubbard had a two-room old lookout which was now converted to a live-in cabin. They had put in a countertop with a sink and stuff and a newer lookout as well. So there's basically two lookouts, but this older one had been converted into the cabin to live in, whereas Union Peak it was just the lookout yourself where you live in.

It had an outhouse. No running water, but like I said, we could drive there, you know, we were either coming up every two or every five days, so we always brought the cubes of water that we got filled at the office. So we had plenty of water to either bathe or drink or cook with. Hubbard you were a little more conservative about your drinking water, but we could go to the reservoir to extract water with the tanker for all the other use if we wanted at Hubbard.

BH: Did you have a cot or bunk bed or something? What did you sleep on or in or whatever?

CS: Hubbard had a full mattress that they provided. It was on a wire frame with a wire spring. It wasn't anything modern. Union Peak was also full, and it was on a wood platform with drawers that you could pull out and store your clothes and stuff underneath it.

BH: Did you have a place to store clothes at all at Hubbard?

CS? Well, we had the cabin, so it had a little dresser. It was like a little bitty house, a very little house with a tiny little table, a little dresser, a little bed. You still had to go to the outhouse. Outhouses are always fun. You get to look at the scenery more.

BH: That's true. So how did you communicate with headquarters?

CS: We had radios. We had solar panels. We also had extra batteries.

BH: That must have been pretty new for solar, wasn't it?

CS: You know, now that I think about it, it was only Union Peak that we tried the solar panels. Hubbard—no. How did we charge Hubbard's battery?

BH: Did it have a fixed place?

CS: Yeah, it had a fixed charger, but I'm trying to think, because we didn't have power at either lookout. I think at Hubbard we used a car battery, because I have a recollection of switching out the tanker battery once a week to charge. Union Peak, we brought batteries with us every week. We were able to bring our batteries up with us and keep them charged that way, charging them in the station, so we were just always grabbing a whole bunch and taking them up.

We only once ever ran out of power. That's when we had a pretty intensive week of strikes and a lot of fires, and were basically on the radio almost 24/7 to keep up with all that traffic, because at Union Peak sometimes the firefighters could get into pockets where they could not communicate out. We had to be the transmitter for them of any messages.

BH: And your water source, you said, for Hubbard was the reservoir.

CS: For non-drinking, and for drinking, we would go to a spring. There was a spring nearby that had potable water, and they had told us about it. We could go and get that out of the spring. It was rough, rudely developed.

BH: How did you haul that from the spring or could you drive to the spring?

CS: In the little cubies. Have you ever seen the cubies?

BH: Yes. And you had to hand hold those?

CS: No. We put them on the truck. Both lookouts, we had vehicles. We had a tanker truck. We would just go and fill up a whole bunch of cubies and stick them along the side. They had a place for the cubies on the truck anyway, so that you had water for people to drink if they need it when they came. And the tanker—let's face it—200 gallons is only going to go—or two or 500, whatever it was—is only going to go so far.

The idea was for Hubbard, if you had a strike and it was really small, you could put it out. I mean, if it was just burning in the duff, if it just had a tree with the top blown off, you could spray it and try to get it out. Because Hubbard was a long ways in for the firefighters. They didn't patrol—

BH: And that's why you had the tanker, then.

CS: That's why we had that initial attack, so the patrols spent more time between Kalispell and Marion on the paved roads as much as they could. They rarely would come down that long road to Hubbard, because it was almost a two-hour drive to get to Hubbard from the highway on a pretty bad road. When we started having strikes, and we would tell them, "We've got a pathway of strikes," they would then make sure they had a crew hanging out on that road if they could—if they weren't anywhere else. They'd have at least one crew. We were also up against the BIA land, so the BIA had crews that would sit right on the border, because they do share that firefighting responsibility, and, as you know, whoever gets to the fire first owns it. If BIA gets onto State land, they own it.

BH: So that's the Salish Kootenai?

CS: Yeah. And if the State gets on BIA land, they own it, too. There was always a lot of fun of people waiting for that moment. But that was the whole purpose of having that tanker there, that if it was a small strike and you got right on it right away, and you'd still have your lookout, because the other partner is still watching, so that person [with the tanker] could leave and run down there and try to deal with it asap and hopefully put it out before you needed a team, or do their best to limit it until the team could get out, because once it got going in those areas, it was hot. That whole Hubbard/Nirada area is very, very dry, and it would race pretty quickly through there, especially the grassy areas and the meadows and stuff.

BH: Yeah, I can imagine that, because it is pretty dry there. How did you cook your meals?

CS: Well, when it was cold, we'd use the woodstoves, and then we had a two-burner propane [stove] that we would cook our meals on. And then at the cabin on Hubbard, they gave us a tiny little stove, so we cooked on that.

BH: Like a regular cook stove, you mean?

CS: Yeah, yeah, but a real small one, kind of an ancient gas stove. We'd bring up a propane cylinder with us. On that one, you could bake and whatever you wanted to do. That's why it was nice to have a lookout, because if you did cook in there and get super hot, you could just go up to the lookout and hang out there.

On Union Peak, we did a lot of cooking on the woodstove, and then on the propane, of course. And as it got hotter, you're eating a lot of sandwiches and just warming up soup. You don't really want a big hot meal up there.

We didn't have refrigeration in either lookout [thinks out loud about Hubbard possibly having refrigeration: "No, Hubbard? Let me think about Hubbard. Did we have a little propane refrigerator? I don't remember"]. I know Union Peak, we did not have refrigeration, so we had coolers that we kept constantly supplied in ice, and they were just on the north side of the

building. But because we were changing, at the longest stretch would be five days. You could keep any dairy or whatever you had in there.

BH: There wasn't any other building that you could have put the cooler in, it was just by the lookout itself?

CS: No, we're kind of lucky we never had a bear [both laugh]. Never had a bear, but I had a big dog. I had a big Labrador/Newfoundland/Black Lab mix, so that might be why we never had a bear. He was pretty big himself, too.

At Hubbard, we'd have bears wander by, you know, you'd be on the lookout and you look out and go, "Oh, here goes a black bear." Never had any grizzlies at either [lookout]; they were out of the range. Well, no, not the Marion area, but we did have black bears that would wander by.

BH: So, how often did you see other people, whether they were people who were from the agency or whether they were visitors? Did you get many?

CS: I would say in Hubbard maybe once a month we'd have someone stop by. There were a few people that lived near the lookout—very, very few—and every once in awhile they'd decide to come up for the day and have a picnic. You'd meet them and talk with them. The agency folks rarely would come by unless there was a fire in the area, and then they, you know, would come in and fight the fire, and then they might come up. But they didn't just stop in for a chat.

Union Peak, we would get not necessarily tourists but people who might be floating the river, the Potomac there, and they go, "Oh, let's go up to the lookout." So we'd get a little bit more people every once in a while up there, just wanting to see what a lookout looked like, asking you questions of what you do, so that might be like three visitors a month. It really wasn't very common, but you'd get a few.

And then at Union Peak we would get firefighters, because they would pop up, because they would do the Missoula out to east, when you're going to Butte [thinking about the name of a town: "that canyon, and the Clark Fork...what's the name of that town?"] and then they'd come up through Granite, pop up over the lookout side and drop into the Potomac and then take the Blackfoot back into Missoula, so they'd be able to do a big loop like that. They were very active in patrolling the Potomac area. They had one group out there all the time patrolling. They'd stop in maybe once a month, too.

BH: How did you get supplies then? You said that you went down once a week or once a month or whatever, depending upon where you were.

CS: So, Potomac, yeah—Union Peak, we could easily just go grocery shopping the night before we headed up and bring them up, because the maximum we were there was five days. Union

Peak, we got them once a month, and it was whoever's turn it was to go to town. (Note: Cathy said she meant they would get groceries once a month at Hubbard and weekly at Union Peak.)

BH: Okay, so you got the groceries yourself.

CS: We would buy our own groceries.

BH: They did not supply you then?

CS: No, no.

BH: Did you have to pay for your own groceries and that, too?

CS: Yes, we didn't have any per diem or anything like that. It would have been nice. [Both laugh]. Yeah, no, we didn't have that. We were self-supporting.

And I also, in Kalispell, arranged with a librarian to check books out for a month. She was really nice. I told her what I was doing, and I said, "Is there any way I can get a whole month's supply, and I'll just bring the box in, and if I leave you a list of some books, would you reserve them for me?" She would do that, and I'd browse, you know, for a couple hours, and pick out what I wanted. So once a month I was just returning. I read 180 books that month on the lookout. I read a lot. Read, read, read, look, look, look, read, read, read, look, look, look. So—

BH: That's great. How did you do laundry?

CS: Well, on Hubbard, we'd do it manually, and, you're not going anywhere.

BH: Right. Did you have one of those little washboard things?

CS: We'd just wear the same clothes for days on end, and then once a month, whoever's turn it was to go to town, we would take everything and go to the Laundromat and throw it all in and give it a proper wash. Otherwise, your T-shirts—just rinse them out, wear them until—not obnoxiously stinky, but you weren't changing your clothes every Friday night.

And Union Peak was easy. You could bring five days of clothes and not worry about it. And you don't—really—you're not doing anything. I mean, we would go for walks and hikes in the evening, but, you know, you never go that far.

BH: You weren't terribly active enough to make your clothes really stinky?

CS: You know, you go down to the [Hubbard] reservoir. You go swimming. Take the clothes, give them a good rinse in the reservoir, go fishing, and stuff. And it's pretty hot, especially the Hubbard area. It's not like you're going on an eight-hour hike and really sweat it up and get

stinky. You don't, because you have to be on from 10:00 to 7:00, so you're not going anywhere between those hours.

BH: So, to get down to the reservoir, did you drive, or did you walk?

CS: Mostly, we drove. It was just like a fifteen minute, twenty-minute pop down to the reservoir. That reservoir was built for farming irrigation downstream, so it was a reasonably sized impoundment, and it was popular for fishing. We didn't have a boat. We'd fish from shore, but its outlet downstream at that time was Plum Creek land, so you'd get some really nice brown trout and cutthroat and stuff at that time in that stream, and so we'd catch fish and get fresh fish for dinner. Didn't have any gardens, because, you know, you have to have water for the gardens, so we didn't have that.

BH: Did you have a lot of canned food and that, or because you could go down—

CS: Well, in the five days, we could do a lot of fresh, or whatever you wanted. I would bring, like, a frozen chicken and, you know, cook it the first day I was there, and then eat it for the next five days or something. Or I'd bring up one that I'd cooked the night before that was already chilled. That was helpful to have it already chilled, because all you had was ice in the coolers on Union Peak.

On Hubbard, we did use a lot more canned stuff, but I'm pretty sure we had a propane refrigerator at Hubbard, now that I think about it, because I don't remember being dependent on canned goods. But we didn't have the type of produce that you can get today. We didn't have NAFTA and all those agreements, so you went with what was seasonal—cabbage, potatoes, carrots, onions, and garlic. We didn't have much salad, because your lettuce doesn't last more than maybe a week.

BH: So you'd eat fresh stuff as long as you could and then go to other stuff.

CS: Yeah, yeah.

BH: That makes sense. Did you have fresh milk and all that, or did you make milk up there, or did you even use it?

CS: I don't drink milk, and I know we used evaporated milk for coffee. We must have had powdered milk on Hubbard, because we did have cereal in the morning.

And Union Peak, I like yogurt and cheese but I don't like milk, so I would use yogurt on granola for breakfast. And again, it only has to last five days, and then you're off.

BH: Let me go back a little bit here. Neighboring lookouts—do you remember, were there others around you where there were people up still? You know, a lot of the lookouts are closed now. Or were you pretty much by yourself?

CS: Well, Marion was our neighboring lookout, and that was manned the same as ours.

BH: Okay. How far was Marion from you?

CS: As the crow flies, it wasn't very far; it might have been ten miles as the crow flies or less, but you had to go way out and around. And they couldn't look into our basin and we couldn't look into their basin.

Haskill Basin. I forgot—Haskill Basin [Mountain] Lookout. There was Bob Dwyer, and the other Bob was on that one. Then there was Marion, and us. Was there a fourth one? Those are the three I can think of right now.

We would chat, and if we saw the Northern Lights, we'd call each other up and say, "The lights are on! The lights are on! Wake up!" The other person would go, "Oh-oh. Somebody's talking." And then, if we saw strikes that were just out of our view over the hill on their side, we'd say, "Hey, Bob. I'm seeing some strikes your way in your southeast quadrant or whatever. We're looking northwest or southeast. Heads up. So we would talk about stuff like that. Or if we had a story to tell about something we saw, we would share it with the others.

Union Peak was—what's the name of that lookout south of us—she was just on the other side of Interstate 15. She looked toward the Pintlars as well. Big lookout. She was like 50, 40 feet in the air, metal scaffolding. She got hit by lightning and got pretty shocked from it. What was that lookout name? I can't remember right now. But that was the only one that we talked to.

On Union Peak, we looked northwest into the south end of the Missions and then up into the Potomac and Ovando and then towards the Garnet Mountains, but I couldn't see the other side of the Garnets, so I couldn't see the Hwy. 15 corridor, couldn't see what was happening in there, but she could see what was happening in there and then over to the Pintlars.

BH: You mentioned that you had a cat and you had a dog.

CS: Yep.

BH: Did you have any stories connected with either one of them besides the cat chasing the—

CS: The rodent?

BH: Yeah.

CS: Sometimes we'd sleep outside at night on Hubbard and the cat would come with us. All I remember is one evening she was extremely uncomfortable with being out in the open with us on the blankets. She'd just sleep curled up next to you and then she'd go off and hunt and come back and forth. And one time she refused to come from underneath the lookout leg—you know, the one that was on the tower—and then we realized there was an owl around and it was just flying back and forth and around and she spotted that and was not going to be prey to that owl, so she stayed there.

The dog we never had any interactions with. All we know is we found a packrat nest full of dog food one time. [Both laugh]

BH: In or out?

CS: Out. We never had packrats get in our lookouts, which was very nice. We were pretty diligent about looking for any possible orifice that they could come through, and making sure that they were sealed, and we always kept the door closed. But dog food was outside, and that's when we realized we need to bring the dog food inside, because, it's like, god, that dog's eating a lot of food. [Both laugh]

BH: That's a happy packrat.

CS: Yeah, and it had a cornhusk in it, too, from when we ate fresh corn. We had a little trash bucket outside that we would put our trash in and at the end of the week we'd tie up the plastic and take it with us and again, it's pretty interesting we never had a bear, because you'd be a lot more careful with that nowadays.

We had more mountain lion observations really than bears. On both lookouts we'd see mountain lions. Like on Hubbard I saw mountain lions at least four times, and twice it was a pair of siblings that were hanging out for about a week. We went for a walk and came around the corner and they're laying in the middle of the road, rolling in the dust, and kind of playing with each other. We just watched them, and then they finally took off.

And the same with Union Peak. We would see mountain lions every once in a while, usually on the road, because that was the easiest place to see them or walking below you going by.

BH: You must have had a lot of deer if you had mountain lions.

CS: A reasonable amount of deer, yeah. I mean, they don't tend to come up onto the peaks. It's pretty exposed. You're just wide open on those peaks. You don't have any timber near you or anything like that, but you'd see them off in the distance.

Below us, at Hubbard, we also had a badger that lived in the meadow that did not like you driving through the meadow. So periodically, he wanted to have a showdown with you and you're like, okay, we're going to try to get around you.

BH: Was he like right in the middle of the road?

CS: Oh yeah, just standing there looking at you like "Okay, come on, come on, come on!" And one time, we did drive quickly to get around him, and he's like running next to the tires trying to bite the tire. That was in the tanker. Like, really, you know. You're picking on something that's way too big for you. And it did have some cubs we later learned, so it was a female and not a male. On the return, instead of taking the road, we'd just kind of go a little further out and cut up through the grass and then hit the road above where the den was, and towards the end of the summer, then she wasn't so upset about us coming by. But we did make a point of not walking down there, either. We didn't want to have to encounter her on foot.

BH: That would not be fun.

CS: No. I'm pretty sure she could outrun me, at least for a short distance.

BH: I only had an encounter with a badger once. I was working for the Tally Lake Ranger Station at the time, and this thing wandered up and I could see it. Finally, when it was about ten feet away from me, I went [clears throat], and it stopped, and it hissed and I thought, oh, geez, you know. I'm outta here!

CS: Yeah. Yeah, they do an interesting hiss. We had one here a couple years ago. My husband and I were just sitting outside under the tree and having lunch, and I'm like, what is that thing trotting up the driveway? It was coming straight up the driveway. Our neighbors have cats, and every once in awhile we'll spot a cat. But it was kind of funny, you know? It's kind of this low wide thing, and then I went, "It's a badger!" It was a small female, and her face was slightly distorted, and then we figured out she had a bird in her mouth. That's why her face kind of looked funny, and then right when she got to the hydrant, she just took a right and goes up behind the sheds, behind the garden. So we bolted to the other end of the garage to watch. She came across the back and then dropped over the edge, so we snuck over the edge. She had a den just over the edge with some cubs in it, and I go, well, that's really cool—we have a badger, you know? I haven't seen it here since, but we do spot them on occasion on the roads in the neighborhood. They're here. Not enough—we have too many ground squirrels down below.

BH: Your duties as a lookout? What were your main duties?

CS: We had two major responsibilities. One is to watch for fires, and that included man-caused as well as lightning strikes. If they were lightning strikes, your duty was to mark the alidade for the pathway of the strikes and keep it marked for a minimum of two weeks, because fires can pop up a little bit later, and because I had a partner on Union Peak, I needed to let her know,

and she needed to let me know if there'd been something that had come through. So when we switched out, we would have a conversation about what had happened the last days we that were there, where the lightning pathway was, and show the marks, and show if there was a concentration of a particular area, you know, keep an eye on that.

Our other responsibility was to collect weather data every day. We were responsible for doing that. And then if there was public who came up, we were responsible for public relations. Be a good person. Put your campfires out.

BH: Did you have certain times like every twenty minutes or something where you had to walk around the catwalk and look or you just were always looking?

CS: No, you couldn't look all the time. You just can't do that. If there had been a lightning event within the last couple days, you were a little bit more diligent, like every fifteen, twenty minutes you would be checking those corridors where lightning had been. If there hadn't been anything, you could let thirty to forty-five minutes go before you take a look. Basically, you just look around 360 (degrees). You don't have to get out and walk on any catwalk or anything like that. You can just stand in a room and just kind of turn in a circle and look 360 and see if there's any puffs—that's what we called them, puffs—see if there's any puffs happening anywhere, and then go back to what you're doing. If you're on the roof, you just oh, you know, look around and go back to your book.

If you did start to see some activity, then you really spent a lot of time looking at that part of the corridor, because one can mean more than one. Also, you have to give status updates. They're checking with you every fifteen minutes. Is it changing, is it increasing, is it decreasing?

BH: This is a puff?

CS: Yeah. They want to know. Until they get a person on the ground, until they get a team on the ground they want to know its status. If it's been a particularly intense lightning event, then they may send up spotter planes at that time. They would send them up and then we would talk with them, interact with them about the corridor [that] the activity had occurred, and they would try to look down into the spots that it would take a while before the smoke got high enough or thick enough for us to see, because if it's a really tiny little puff, it could dissipate if it's several thousand feet lower in elevation. You know, a couple miles away, six miles away from you, you're not going to see it until it's really picked up in size. They would take those planes and fly those corridors, and you just kind of walk them through it and say, look, I saw a lot of strikes in this particular canyon or ridgeline, and they would check it for you.

Once fires were underway, you were important as a dispatcher for the teams on the ground if they could communicate. The other thing is, if you had a lightning event in the evening, the next morning if there was rain, you would get what are called "water dogs." Are you familiar with those?

BH: Yes.

CS: You'd have to be a lot more diligent in watching, so it would be like ten minutes of watching and five minutes of reading or something if you were reading—just to watch to say, is that a water dog or not? You know, because sometimes they can be deceiving. Sometimes you're like, yeah, that's a water dog. Don't worry about it, but other times, you're like, yeah, I've got to watch that for a while. They take a while to dissipate, or they would actually turn into a smoke. Then you're like, yeah, we got a puff, we've got a smoke, and you call it in.

BH: So your husband, you said was—

CS: That was my previous husband.

BH: He worked the tanker.

CS: Yeah. He was the initial attack on Hubbard.

BH: Okay. Did he go on initial attack at all from Hubbard?

CS: Yes. He did go a couple times on initial attack. At least two of those times, he was able to put them out with no problem. A couple other times, they turned into something bigger, and then once the crew got on it, he was relieved, because he had to go fill again in case something else would pop up. Yeah, there's a couple times they got into grass, and it wasn't windy, and it was in the evening, so things were going to calm down weather-wise anyway, rather than heating up. He was able just go and spray them down and clean them up.

BH: Did you ever respond to a fire from the lookout?

CS: No, that was never my job.

BH: Okay. And do you remember—it sounds like you had a pretty active season at Hubbard and at Union Peak. Is that correct?

CS: Yep, they were both pretty active lookouts once you get into July.

BH: Do you remember any fires? Were there big ones or little ones or—

CS: Well, definitely on Union Peak. We had some pretty good-sized fires one year. They were all over the place. Everybody was having fires. It was just a dry year like we had last year, and there were just fires everywhere. They got quite big. I would say probably the most we ever had on Hubbard would be maybe ten at most.

BH: That's a lot!

CS: But they're big. Union Peak was a lot. At Union Peak we could easily get ten because we would have invariably two to three man-caused fires with Union Peak. And they don't have to be big fires, but when the lightning strikes would come, you'd get two, three, four trees blown off and they'd start simultaneously. But they might merge, too, and they did merge in some of the areas. They would oftentimes consider that just one fire. Maybe Union Peak had probably at least ten and Hubbard probably not ten but less, like six or seven.

BH: That's still a lot, though, at least for around here. Well, the Kootenai's a little different from the Flathead.

CS: Well, we've got three on the Kootenai right now.

BH: I know. There was something just when I was coming up the road.

CS: Well, you would have smokes that disappear, so you'd be watching it and it disappeared and the crew would be focusing on this one, and it did put itself out. So, I don't know if you want to call that a fire, but we had smokes.

BH: Did you have any to you that were memorable, any of the fires?

CS: That was a long time ago. I mean I remember there was a pretty good-sized one in the Potomac that burned up a lot of land, I remember that. But that's about it.

BH: Did you get to watch it much?

CS: Oh, it was going all night long and days on end. We were watching it. It was orange at night and smoky in the day. Yeah, you see them going. Some of them you don't, you just see the smoke, because they're over the edge, unless they crown up to the top or get over the top of the ridge. You wouldn't see them. No, I didn't have anything particularly that stood out more than any.

I mean, I had some memorable lightning events, and I remember being completely in a cloud at Union Peak, because you're on the ground—completely in a cloud and you've got lightning going horizontal right outside your window and striking the treetops, literally a hundred feet down below you and sitting in the middle of the bed going, "Wow! This is really exciting!"

We did have like a St. Elmo's Fire that came out of the fireplace. The woodstove, the door just kind of popped open and this static-y stuff, and then it just kind of died out. That was like, "Okay! Okay. I'm staying right here in the middle of this bed; I'm not going anywhere else."

And like I said, that gal that was in that lookout south of us on Union Peak, she got struck when we had one of those really intense striking events, and she finally was able to call out and said, “I’ve been struck and I’ve been electrocuted. I need help.” That’s when she couldn’t communicate, so then I was on the radio calling and saying they needed to get someone in there quickly. They actually took a helicopter off the ground and went out. By the time they got near her, the storm had passed so they were able to land and take her off. She just got—I don’t want to minimize it—she didn’t get burned, she just got like a shock, an extreme shock that frazzled her really good—her nerves and everything. But she did go back. She was pretty brave about going back. I said, like, I’m not doing any metal lookouts. It’s bad enough being in wood.

BH: Your partner up at Union Peak, what was her name?

CS: Karen Lamott.

BH: Did she have any of the same types of experiences that you did, do you know?

CS: Yeah, pretty much. We didn’t have any events that, you know, you gotta be careful, you gotta watch out for this, or it scared the hell out of me. No, we didn’t have anything like that. I used to leave my dog with her, because we did have people wandering by, and it’s just good for a female to have a big, big, big black dog with you. But we never had any inappropriate interactions or anything like that. Everything was fine.

BH: Good. You mentioned experiences with wildlife: bears, and packrats, and deer. Anything else that you can think of with wildlife that you didn’t mention?

CS: The badger is all. Yeah.

BH: So, did your experiences turn out to be what you thought they would be with the lookouts? Especially with Union, or not Union, Hubbard, because that was your first one.

CS: On Hubbard, I’m trying to think—I would have been 24. That was my first experience at being isolated and alone, and even though I had a partner—you know, I was married at that time—that taught me a lot about planning, planning out your meals, and so all your ingredients, so you know exactly how much food stuff to buy. And that’s where I learned to be really professional at it, and I liked it a lot. I mean, I loved learning about maps. I loved learning about orienteering, you know, and getting people into the ground. I like working as a team with people. So, I didn’t know what to expect, but I enjoyed it, both times. All three years that I worked as a fire lookout, I enjoyed it.

BH: Did the isolation ever get to you or did you not feel isolated?

CS: You know, I really didn’t feel isolated. I like to read, and that’s where I learned to quilt, was Hubbard. I made my very first quilt on Hubbard. I learned to make preserves. They had

gooseberries and wild currants growing around Hubbard, so I went and made my first jellies. It was kind of an experimental time to try different things, and my husband at that time played music, so we'd play music and listen to music, so it was different, and I do like nature. I don't like cities and crowds. That's why I left southern California and wanted to go up to the Humboldt area. If it hadn't rained so much, I might have stayed in the Humboldt area. I like being a little bit quieter, and I enjoy nature, so was great. Somebody paying me to look at scenery all day long, I thought was a pretty good deal.

BH: Do you have any particular memories that stand out from being a lookout?

CS: It's mostly just the lightning events, and the sunsets. People think being a lookout would be boring, because you're looking at the same old same old. You're not looking at the same old. The light changes all day long, and every day it changes. You could have several days where they look the same from day to day, but throughout the day, it changes. You know, the shadows change things, the angle of the light changes things, and when you have storms that come in—oh, my god—the storms that grew over that Potomac area were beautiful: I'd get these massive anvils, and the lighting would come through them and change. You'd get purples, and orange, and blues, and golds and reds, and the rainbows, and when the lightning is striking, it's stunning. It really is stunning. I have so many pictures of storms. It's like, oh my god, yet another storm picture, but when you're in the moment, you're just thinking, "God, this is really fabulous!" and it's beautiful to watch. I guess you have to like that, and I do.

BH: You said you really didn't have anything weird that happened to you while you were up there. What about hard things? Did you have anything that was hard for you?

CS: Not really. I mean, I don't particularly like humping cubies up and down and around, but no—it has to be really hard for it to be hard for me. I never found the lookout to be that hard.

BH: Did you have a patrol point that you had to go to for either place?

CS: No. Our job was being in that lookout watching.

BH: If you had to do it over again, would you do it again?

CS: Oh yeah. My husband and I have actually talked about doing it after retirement, a while ago. But now that they don't have as many lookouts...but we would enjoy having a summer being a lookout again. We would really enjoy that.

BH: Did it change your life at all?

CS: I think being on a lookout was intensely formative for me, and I lament the fact that the federal and state governments don't have as many seasonal jobs as they used to have. I work in development in international countries, all over the world, and developing life skills is critical to

being an effective, successful, happy, balanced adult. And working at seasonal jobs helps you build those life skills. They were so formative to me. As I mentioned, they taught me orienteering, they taught me management communication, team work, organization, responsibility—all those important life skills—and I also worked as a wildlife technician for years with the state and federal governments in Montana and Alaska, and I feel it's really unfortunate that kids today, students today, don't have those opportunities. They lack really critical skill sets, just basic skill sets, to enter into the workforce and to be effective and successful as employees, as employers, as partners in the relationship. Those are skills that you bring to a relationship, as well, and they made a huge difference in my international work. I bring those same skills to building those skills in people that I work with. I've worked in Afghanistan, a highly insecure landscape, had to develop a very intense security protocol and transfer that skill set to the team, all those parts of the skill set, you know, be a good communicator, be a good team partner. My federal and state jobs taught me those skills from being a seasonal. And yes, they would have developed further if I was fulltime, but the foundation was laid as a seasonal, and I think it's unfortunate that we don't have these jobs for youth today.

BH: Have you got any other thoughts, anything that I didn't cover or anything you'd like to just mention?

CS: No, I just think we need these jobs, and I think it's a good way for people to move, to know if they want these careers or not, and to move through an organization bringing important seasonal experience with them into the organization, rather than thinking, "Oh, I just got a degree. I'm entitled to a job, and I should have that job, and yet, I don't know what it's like on the ground." You need to know what it's like on the ground. So that's all.

BH: Well, thank you. I appreciate you spending time with me, and this is a wonderful interview. I appreciate it.

CS: You're quite welcome. Thanks for asking me to do it.

BH: Certainly.

CS: I didn't think thirty something years ago I'd be doing this today.

BH: I bet. Well, thanks.

[End of Interview]