

Maureen and Mike

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**Interviewee: Bob Folkestad, Marj Folkestad**  
**Interviewers: Beth Hodder, Kjell Petersen**  
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Beth Hodder: This is Beth Hodder with Kjell Petersen. Both of us are with the Northwest Montana Lookout Association. It's January 22, 2021. We're here today to interview Bob and Marj Folkestad about Bob's experiences as a lookout. Marj wasn't with Bob at that time, but may be able to provide some stories and insights as we go. And Kjell is here as a backup if he has any questions or whatever that might be relevant that I'm not thinking about. So, I'll be the main interviewer, but we're just going to go with what we're doing here if that's all right.

So just to get started, these questions are really for Bob, but they're for you, too, Marj. Can you tell us about your childhood Bob, where did you grew up?

Bob Folkestad: Yes, I grew up in Whitefish, Montana, and then went to Minneapolis. In kindergarten, we went back to North Dakota. My dad was a pastor, and he was there for a year. Then he went back to Whitefish, his favorite place, because of Glacier National Park. As a young boy, we went hiking, we went camping, we went fishing, and I enjoyed those camping and hiking trips very much. It was on some of those trips in Glacier Park that we went one time and I was the only boy. All men were on this hike. And we saw the countryside--beautiful--Cattle Queen Falls, the water come out of the falls cold as ice. And we stop at a lookout on the way in that circle trip that we took. That was interesting for me to see the lookout and see the people that were in it.

Then, when I was in high school, I applied to work for the Forest Service, right out of high school. There were several other boys that graduated that also worked for the Forest Service that summer. And as we worked on the Forest Service, we planted trees, we worked on campgrounds, we did all kinds of stuff, and it was interesting, and it spurred an interest in me to apply for a lookout. So the next year, when I got out of college at Seattle Pacific College, I was granted the lookout.

I scored high marks on the tests of the fire guard school and was very interested in and was really in touch with the goings on of fire suppression and fire detection. I looked forward to going on Ashley Mountain Lookout, and I had a great time there.

I had my dog with me, my favorite dog.

Marj Folkestad: Your only dog. (Laughs)

BF: He was with me all the time on Ashley Mountain Lookout. It was a tower sixty-five feet in the air. The water supply was about a half a mile down the mountain, and that was my main exercise, going for water. I carried the water in a five- gallon backpack and sometimes another gallon in my hand. So it'd be six gallons. It was really demanding exercise getting back to the lookout, going up to the top. The dog would tear down the stairs and scared the deer away when we got up in the morning to go out for water.

MF: And what about the mules?

BF: Oh yes, my supplies were brought up by a mule train. They had two milk cans, the big milk cans, twenty gallons.

BH: Metal ones?

BF: Yes. There were two of them strapped to one of the mules and the rest of my food supply was there for the whole summer. I had to buy things in canned goods, things that would keep. Then they brought that up, and I hiked up with the mule train. We got there and they unloaded it and everything went up into the lookout itself.

We slept inside the lookout. There were beds on the side of the of the room up there, like your cot, but it was built in. So you'd put your sleeping bag on top of that and sleep that way.

MF: What was the dog's name?

BF: Tana.

BH: Tana. What kind of dog?

BF: It was a small dog, but it was reddish. I thought it was like a setter, but I don't know what make it was.

BH: So I have to ask you just backing up a little bit. Ashley was your first lookout is that correct?

BF: That's correct.

BH: What year were you in school? And then what year did you start up at Ashley?

BF: I started off after my first year of college. And that would have been '61, '62.

MF: You graduated from high school...

BF: In '61.

MF: Yeah.

BF: So I guess that would be '62, the first year on Ashley. Yes.

MF: And it was how many steps?

BF: I don't count the steps. There were four big flights of stairs.

MF: I thought you said sixty-five steps at one time.

BF: Oh, I don't know, sixty-five feet in the air.

BH: So, you answered a lot of questions that I had for you.

MF: It was a long time ago.

BH: What organization were you working for?

BF: I was underneath the Flathead National Forest, and our district ranger station was at Whitefish.

BH: Okay. Do you remember who was the ranger there or who your boss was?

BF: I don't remember the names now. It slipped my mind.

BH: Any stories about them?

BF: Oh, one time they came up to visit me. I had reported a smoke I thought from a lightning strike, and I went out looking for it myself with the dog. Didn't find anything in the dark, came back late at night, worked our way back to the trail and back up to the lookout.

The next day, two of the individuals from the district office there came up. They saw me and they went out and checked out this section of the land about the smoke and they came back. If there was a fire they put it out but I don't know if there was a fire or not. I was maybe chasing the moonlight. (All laugh)

BH: That happens. You wouldn't be the first to do that.

BF: Yeah.

BH: So you said the lookout was a tower and that it was about sixty-five feet tall. Do you know if it was like an L-4 which is you know a style or any name that might have been associated with it?

BF: I don't know what they called the lookout, but it was about a thirteen-by-thirteen-foot lookout room and windows and a catwalk around the outside of it where you could put your Jell-O to get hard, or your eggs to keep cool as possible on the cool side of the lookout.

I cooked on a on a wood stove and got firewood from down below at a shed there. There was plenty of wood there available for that. I had to have a fire to have breakfast, have a fire to heat up lunch, and have a fire in the stove for warming up supper. So it kept me busy just living.

BH: Yeah. So did you have to cut firewood then supply yourself?

BF: No, I didn't have to cut any except maybe split some of it and come up with it that way, carried up by armloads.

MF: So had previous people cut the firewood?

BF: I think so.

BH: Probably had some fire crew or somebody up there do it and you get the benefit of their work, I suppose. Did they supply any water for you at all? Or did you—you said you hauled it.

BF: They supplied the two milk cans of water to start with.

BF: How many gallons?

BF: I bet 40 gallons, 20-gallon on each milk can; big heavy load for a mule.

BH: That would be a heavy load. Then you carried on your back a backpack to go down when you then supply yourself?

BF: Right.

BH: And you said there were how many gallons in there five?

BF: Five gallons in the backpack.

BH: That's pretty heavy too. Did it leak?

BF: No. I sweat a lot going up in the early morning hours. By the time I got to the top of the lookout with that water, I was in drenching sweat.

MF: And worked up an appetite?

BF: But as far as washing my clothes, I can't remember anything there except I must have washed some and hung them up to dry.

MF: What about some [precious] visitors?

BF: Well, my folk hiked up there to visit me, and a lady friend of my mom's was with them, friends from the church. It was good to see them; they visited me, and dad also visited me in the Oregon lookout where I was.

BH: So how far did people have to walk to get up to Ashley, just Ashley itself when they came to visit you?

BF: I think it was five or six miles. There was a little distance.

MF: Do you have any idea of how high they had to go before they walk the steps?

BF: No.

MF: I wasn't there at the time.

BH: No, that's fine. You're asking fine questions. What about other buildings at the lookout itself? Were there other outbuildings?

BF: There was the woodshed and wood in that and firewood. And there was an outhouse. Of course, you had to use the bathroom there in the outhouse. One time I left the outhouse and I saw a cat, a wild animal, slithering by and I wondered, "Boy, that's a cat there." I was surprised to see him. And I got the dog and we headed back up the lookout. He was not wanting to mess with us and we didn't want to mess with him.

BH: Now when you say a cat, how big?

BF: Oh, like a mountain lion. Pretty good size.

BH: I wouldn't want to mess with that either. You said you had deer up there?

BF: Yes. I had some visitors come up from the valley down to the south. There was a ranch clear down in there and they [visitors] came up by horseback and stopped to see me. We had a good time there a while. Then I went down one time and found them down in the in the valley where they were and stayed with them one night.

MF: Oh, but was that in Montana?

BF: Montana, yes.

MF: Oh, okay.

BF: They were kind to me and I was glad to see them. The mother of one of them was there doing the cooking and the boys looked after cattle in that place there.

Then in Castle Rock in Oregon, I was up on the lookout there, sat right on the ground. But still had the catwalk around it and all was the same similarity to the lookout in Montana except it was on the ground. And trying to think what I was gonna say.

MF: Visitors.

BF: Oh yes, there was some Dominican students for the priesthood that had a resort where they stayed in the summertime, and they came up to see me. It was interesting to talk to them, and find out more about them a little bit. And after my experience in college was when I met the Lord and surrendered my life to Jesus Christ. God began to call me to be a missionary. That's when I turned my course of study towards that in college.

I was in college for five years, and up on the lookout, I read the Bible a lot and had time to do that, because you can't be looking for fires all the time. But maybe twenty minutes out of the hour is a good rule of thumb. But anyway, these Dominicans interested me and then they invited me down there if I could go down there sometimes. So I did come off the lookout and had time off and stayed with them for one night. They had a good meal, and a good place to sleep.

There was another lookout--this is in Oregon, Castle Rock--and there was another lookout that sat quite a ways away. I visited that lookout one time and saw the fellow that was there.

But my job at my lookout there had a weather station on it, so I had to get the wind and the temperatures, and the visibility, all that and turn that into the headquarters of the forest down in Eugene, Oregon.

MF: But what about the Montana? Did you do any weather in Montana?

No, not formal weather? No.

BH: You didn't have to do any kind of weather at all, like in the morning or whatever? You know, swing the uh...

Kjell Peterson: Psychrometer.

BH: Yeah. Thank you. The name just disappeared. You didn't have to do that?

BF: No. But I had a complete weather report in Castle Rock, called in by radio.

BH: Speaking of radio, how did you communicate as a lookout with the forest?

BF: Well, we had telephones, the old-fashioned telephone line and telephone, and you rang it up. And you could call. There was a guard station down below Ashley Lookout, and I talked to them. They were people that I knew from school. There was another lookout, too, that was connected to telephones. So in the evenings, we were on the phone quite a bit with each other, talking about various things. Marj thinks I might have played chess with them, I don't know. But we entertained each other and that helped take away the monotony of being alone all the time. The radio contact was with the district office, and with the with the forest headquarters in Eugene, [Oregon], calling in the weather once a day.

BH: If you had any kind of fire traffic or whatever on the radio, how did you connect with, say, the fire people themselves? Say you had to call in a lightning strike or you had to get a smoke or something?

BF: Well, I would just call the station, the district station in Whitefish. And we had the ten code and the four code. "Ten four" was "okay," "Ten twenty" is your location--"What is your location?" "What is your Ten twenty"--and, if it was a lightning strike that I was reporting, lightnings were always exciting times on the lookout because you were aware of electrical activity all around you, and you kept track of it and wrote down the azimuth on the firefinder. So the location was the best that you could figure out how far out on that azimuth it [fire] is according to how you understand the country. On [indiscernible] firefinders, all the information helped to locate the fire or locate the strike, and that was it. I didn't get any fires from those strikes that I know of, but I kept track of them every time. And the radio contact was in touch as the daily thing with the district office.

BH: So what were your main duties you had? Mostly I know, dealing with fires, but what did you have to do up there? What were your requirements?

MF: Is this only at Ashley that your wanting?

BH: No, it's the others as well.

BF: Is to study the country, to be aware of the surroundings, and to use the binoculars and [indecipherable] on the map, so you knew them, where things were. You're very familiar with your country around you. You study the land, when you just look over the country with binoculars and just the naked eye. You could be familiarized with your territory so that when a strike did light up a tree or something, or smoke, you reported it and called it in, and if it turned out to be a fire, then of course there was the need to verify that with the officials.



BH: Now you say you called in a moon or something? What did you say that one time? Or some light? It seems that it would be very easy to call in something other than a fire. How do you determine then, say, if you have dust from a road or if it's a fire?

BF: Well, usually you can know whether it's a fire pretty easily, because you can see it and bring it in and know it's so many miles away such a direction on your map. And you call that information on the radio to the district so they have it to go by. Then they can send up people out to that spot and get to the fire or where my report went to, and they could follow it up and that sped things up. There was also airplane surveillance that was coming into being in those early days of my being on the lookout, and they could call in fires too, as they fly over the country. A whole large country around and about. I think two people must get on the airplane at least, one that was looking at spotting, and one that was flying the plane.

KP: So, Bob, I have to ask you, when you spent any time on the lookout after a rainstorm went through, you always got fooled by the water dogs. Did you have some water dogs your watch for a long time?

BF: I don't know what you're thinking of--perhaps.

KP: Well, after a rainstorm comes through, then there's little fingers of fog that come up through the trees and make you think that there's a fire out there.

BF: Oh yeah. Yeah. Well, I was fooled at least once when I went off that moon shining through the trees. I don't think it was a fire; if it was, it went out with the rain.

BH: So can you tell us about meals you had and how you cooked? You said you had a wood stove. But what types of meals did you fix and—

BF: Oh, for breakfast, pancakes sometimes, maybe some cereal--I'm not sure--my memories escaped me about the meals. But I enjoyed preparing the meals, heating them up. I liked Vienna sausage, and vegetables, and fruit in a can. I had my three-square meals a day, washed up the dishes, and put things away, and kept things tidy in the lookout. I didn't get fat because of the good exercise that I had and outdoor living.

But, praise the Lord, I enjoyed the whole experience. I probably would have stayed in Montana, but my folks moved to Oregon. When I came off the lookout, there was a little fire going on somewhere, and I went out on that fire and stayed overnight, and mopped it up, and had that experience. Then I had my car, a '51 Plymouth Belvedere, and I put my all my things in the car.

My folks had already moved to Oregon, up to Albany, Oregon, and [I] took the dog with me, sitting up high on the sleeping bags and things in the backseat. We drove all the way through Portland and on down to Willamette Valley to Albany. So the dog stayed with my folks when I

went to college, but when I came back from another college year, the dog was mine. The dog was ready to go when he saw me getting things ready, getting things packed up.

BH: He liked being a lookout dog, huh?

BF: Yeah.

BH: Did he have experiences up there of his own?

BF: The dog?

BH: Yes. Like with wildlife or people who visited or anything?

BF: Oh, he was friendly enough. He didn't bark and get restless when people came up to the lookout. He was just there. But one time, I might have split some wood or something. Anyway, it injured his foot, so that he had to go on three legs. And he would still run down to the water thing and back up again. And the injury to his foot took care of itself and healed, and he was his old self--her old self again. Oh, she was a tremendous blessing to me.

BH: Pretty wonderful company, aren't they?

BF: Yeah.

MF: They don't complain about the weather.

BH: And they don't cheat it cards.

So, you were at Ashley the first year and then you went to Castle Rock? Is that the next place you went to?

BF: Yes. Castle Rock.

MF: I thought you were at Ashley for two summers.

BF: I was two summers at Ashley.

MF: Oh, okay.

BF: And then, I think '64, '65, and '66 I was at Castle Rock. And that had a good view of the Cascades, a good view of the Three Sisters, three mountains all over ten thousand feet. I was still some distance to the west from there in the Mackenzie River Valley.

But then I had my last summer, which was a half a summer only. That was '67, and I was on a different lookout. This one was on the crest of the Cascades, where the wind could really howl and blow. And the volcanic rock surroundings up there. It was called Sand Mountain because of the results of the explosion of the volcanoes in that part of the forest. And that went by pretty fast because it was just half a summer.

BH: Was there a reason you're only up there half a summer? Was it because of the weather or some other...?

BF: I was planning a trip with a young people's ministry group of our church, the Free Methodist Church. And I had raised the money for the trip. And I was part of that and...

MF: Went to the...

BF: To the Philippines.

MF: How long have you gone?

BF: A good month or so I was gone. And Marj was up and working in Edmonton, Alberta, her home city. And we wrote letters as we wrote letters from the lookouts. And she wrote back to me from British Columbia. She was [in] the student ministry program. there with the Indians.

MF: Oh, that was still in 1966 wasn't that? Yeah, yeah. Then '67 I was back up in Edmonton, getting ready for a wedding.

BH: Let me think whose wedding that was.

MF: Yeah.

BF: But there was a big fire there. I don't know if anybody was on the lookout or not. Or whether the fire reached the lookout. I am not sure.

BF: This is now back in 1967.

BF: Sand Mountain Lookout. And it was restored eventually and they kept it up. I know. Some of the lookouts have been rented out to people that want to stay in a place like that. And so they're still used in that way. [Indecipherable] open to the public that we can be booked.

MF: Are there any tourist attractions in in Montana, you know, for people to just camp out on the lookout?

BH: There is a rental program, yes. And, there are a number of places that people can rent. In fact, are you familiar with Warner Peak [Lookout]outside of Whitefish? It's run by the state. but it's--what's the name of that range, Kjell? It's up by Big Mountain.

KP: Yeah, it's in the northern part of the Whitefish Range.

BH: Yeah, and you can drive to that lookout and you can rent it. So if you're ever get lonesome, you can go up there. So, yeah, it's amazing. They are trying to preserve as many lookouts that are run by agencies as possible. Some of them they do offer as rentals. Some they're just restoring, or not restoring but rehabbing, and trying to keep them up and running, but leaving them as they are. Others they're trying to staff either with volunteers or with paid staff people. So, it's a good thing.

MF: Yeah, that's good.

BF: Yeah, I think Sand Mountain is being used that way. And I always wondered about that fire that they had; it was a big one. It happened after I left and went to the Philippines, and closed out my lookout experiences there with that.

But you know, the lookouts were my home in the summertime. It was a good job. I didn't spend any money; you couldn't spend any money up there. Your checks stacked up, and you got them all at the end. And all that went to college expenses.

BH: Well spent.

BF: Yeah.

BH: So do you have certain things about your experiences that were especially endearing or memorable or something to you whether they're good or bad memories?

BF: They're all good memories. I appreciate the Forest Service. They were good to me, and I tried to be good to them. And I'm glad for the lookout experience. I wouldn't trade it for anything in the world.

BH: Did it teach you different things that maybe you think, "Yeah, I learned that" by having those experiences or not really?

BF: Well, my whole world view was sort of shaped by being on the lookout in the summertime and going to college in the fall. Being called to be a missionary was formulated there. My Bible study, my Bible reading was very effective. I still carry on my Bible reading every morning.

The Lord's been good to me. He sent me to Africa, to Mozambique and South Africa. Where independence came to the country of Mozambique. We had to leave in a hurry. We left

everything just about there with twelve pieces of luggage. We were called out, independence had come. And the tendency of the freedom fighters that gained the independence for Mozambique and the Portuguese left, turned it over to them. They were of Communist-leaning people.

But still I was there during that independence time and a month or so afterwards. And it was a good experience for us. There [was] three missionaries in jail when we left. And thank God that we didn't have to go to jail, but we got out. And we stayed apart of Mozambique because we left.

We joined the mine ministry in South Africa. The gold mines and the coal mines were familiar to me. And that's where I started work, visiting in the coal mines, and came home on furlough. Marj and I had not been able to get any pregnancy. And we prayed for a child. And suddenly she got pregnant up in Edmonton, Alberta. So we went back to the field, we went back to South Africa, and that's where Linda was born, in Clarkster.

I continued my ministry to the gold mines, seeing Mozambique men all the time, and from other tribes--many tribes from other countries around South Africa--come to the mines and worked. I sold literature to them, and Bibles and hymn books and things and provided for them, kept track of our church. People and leaders that were in the mines going back and forth. From their period of time working in the mines, they would go back to Mozambique, be with their families for a while and then they would come back from another contract working for the gold mines.

BH: Well, sounds like you've had a pretty rich life.

BF: It was.

BH: Yeah. Am I missing anything? Is there anything, Kjell, that you can think of with the lookouts or anything?

KP: No, I can just tell by listening to you talk about your lookout time, Bob, that it was just really an awesome part of your soul.

MF: Um hmm.

BF: Yes, it was.

KP: I did have one question. You said that you'd like to cook but you didn't say anything about Spam. Did you eat Spam when you're on the lookout? I must have eaten about a ton of Spam.

BF: Oh, yeah, I had Spam. forgot about that.

BH: And how many ways did you cook Spam or fix it?

BF: Well, on the lookout in Castle Rock, I was fortunate we had a we had a propane stove. So I could heat it up in the oven or heat it up on top of the stove or just about any way I wanted it. I could even bake bread.

MF: Oooh!

BH: That's pretty good.

MF: And he still, after fifty-three years, he hasn't forgotten how to wash dishes. Yay.

BH: Wonderful. I don't have any more questions. If you've got any more comments. that's wonderful.

BF: Well, thank you for interviewing me. I enjoyed it. I would like to be on the lookout one more time.

BH: I hope you get that chance.

MF: Yeah, he did say to me, hours or days ago, that he also played his trumpet. He practiced his trumpet.

BF: And I had a guitar. When I left the lookout on Ashley Mountain in Montana, I had my hands full--a guitar, a horn, a suitcase, and some of my clothes and things like that-- and I had to walk that hike, clear out to get out of there. But I made out there okay. And was met by the forestry personnel and taken out. And as I said, I went to a fire when I got back to the station. They had that fire, so I was gung-ho to go out one more time to be employed for the good of the forestry, for the good of the country.

BH: Well, thank you very much. We appreciate that you were there and you did what you did.

BF: Thank you.

MF: Thanks for asking us.

BH: I hope you enjoyed it. I certainly did.

BK; Thank you.

MF: Bye bye.

BH: Bye bye.

KP: Okay, bye.

BF: Bye. God bless.

KP: And you stay well too. Bye bye.

BF: Okay.

[End of Interview]