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Oral History Number: 153-001
Interviewee: Virginia H. Vincent
Interviewer: Susan M. Isakson
Date of Interview: March 4, 1986

Susan Isakson: This is an interview of Virginia Vincent at her home in Missoula, Montana, March 4, 1986, about her experiences working on a lookout for the Forest Service. The interviewer is Susan Isakson, a Forest Service archives technician interviewing for an oral history project for the archives management course at University of Montana, winter quarter, 1986. How did you come to start on the lookout?

Virginia Vincent: I've always loved the out-of-doors and liked being independent. In 1960, I had applied in Region One of the U.S. Forest Service but was turned down; for, at that time, they were still expecting the lookouts to hike out to a nearby fire and be the initial attack. I kind of dropped the idea and in 1970 tried again and was offered one of two lookouts west of Missoula on the Nine Mile District. For the last 16 years, I have manned one or another lookout.

SI: Can you tell me something about some of your first experiences on lookout? Like maybe the...

VV: Oh yes! The very first year I was on Stark Mountain, which is in the Nine Mile drainage northwest of Missoula. I went up on a lovely late June Sunday, sunny and very pleasant and got my food hauled up the two flights of steps and more or less settled. I went to bed and awoke the next morning to two inches of snow.

SI: What time of year was this?

VV: About June 28. It was actually one of the earlier starting dates that I've had here.

SI: Did you have any training or anything before you went up on lookout?

VV: Yes. I was lucky and attended what is called Guard School, where all the new employees for that summer are trained in fire-fighting and radio usage. Then, the lookouts had a chance to use the maps and become acquainted with what they have to report, which is color of smoke, the amount. A small fire has the amount of smoke from ten campfires. Hence, we don't usually see campfires.

After our five days of training, the lookouts on the district went around opening the towers that were to be manned and that was pretty good training. Unfortunately, they've not seen fit to always train new lookouts and some people have been put up for, like five minutes' instruction of "peer through that slot on the ring around the map," and then you have to decide where on

the map your fire is. But we have had several training sessions on how to detect landmarks and what is expected in information and who you call and such and it really pays off.

SI: Can you tell me some of your experiences the first few years? Anything memorable that you really remember?

VV: For one thing, the first three years I was on Stark Mountain, the Forest had what was called a semi-automatic repeater radio, which was in use on Stark Mountain. People would call me and say, "Please turn it on." But it was such that I did not hear general chatter on the Forest. After that, I was given the channel that I could hear all the rest of the traffic. That started getting interesting to hear people comparing notes.

We had one fellow who wanted to know what to do with huckleberries. We tried to tell him you make pie, or put them in muffins, cake or whatever. Another conversation I heard were two of the girls up near Thompson Falls. One of them couldn't seem to get in any sunbathing. A lot of our lookouts nowadays have flat roofs and it's a very nice way to spend an afternoon. The only trouble is that the air patrol that comes once a day in those years would circle and circle and she couldn't understand why. There was nothing really to look at (laughs). Much of our lookout work is hum-drum.

SI: What is the typical day like?

VV: Presently, the last few years, we worked an eight-hour day, from nine-thirty in the morning until six in the evening. You don't have to stare out the window for hours and hours. You get into the habit of looking up maybe every 10, 12 minutes and glancing around. After your first year or so, you have learned the landmarks and what smoke looks like, what to expect. You learn where they're logging so that if heavy equipment throws up exhaust you watch a little longer, but realize that's what's doing it. You can take your radio down if you wanted to walk a little bit so long as you can still see your area. We have half-hour for lunch and often at that time I would go down, stretch my legs, so to speak.

While I'm in tower, I work at handcrafts or index quite a few local histories, Forest Service histories. You can work on sewing or painting and usually you get to re-finish the lookout because they get very weathered. You can read and cook, just so long as you're there to answer the radio and keep an eye out, especially late in the afternoon during the heat of the day. In the evening is a good time to go for a hike out on the ridges or down to your spring. The secret of enjoying a summer is to have lots of little things to do.

SI: Did you have any big fire years during your years on lookout?

VV: Yes. I never can remember. The most recent was 1984. I had the largest acreage burn...it was just seven miles from me. Of course, the summer of '85, as we all remember, there was much smoke to watch. I had a grandstand seat for the Hellgate-Mount Sentinel fire. I watched

big ones down in Idaho, usually just seeing the column of smoke. But the one closest to me was rather exciting. It started in a hay field about seven miles from me and went up the hill, but most of the time I didn't even smell smoke. The wind was just the angle that it didn't envelope my point.

SI: Did you get a lot of visitors on lookout?

VV: Yes, really. Some do, some don't. Stark Mountain is designated a vista point and, though it's eight miles of real mountain road, has quite a few people. I figured it averages at about one and a half persons per day, but there'll be several days in a row with no visits and then often mid-week a family will come up or two carloads. So I see quite a few people. Forest Service employees come up if they're working nearby.

SI: Any that you especially remember?

VV: Yes. One is a fellow and his family. He works for the fire lab and they have a summer place at one of the little ranches below. They try to come up for a thundershower. Invariably, the tower would go in the cloud and one couldn't see much. Mostly it's people that are...just wonder what it's like to live up there, and I tell them that living in a lookout is like living in a fishbowl: glass windows all around.

SI: You mentioned earlier to me that you took your cats up there. Are those two cats the only ones you ever took up?

VV: No. The granddame of them all has just passed away, but she has been there all 16 summers that I have. Some of her daughters had families, so I have had a variety of feline companionship, and the two I have now I expect to take this summer.

SI: Can you tell me some things that maybe have happened with them, the reactions they've had or other people have had to them?

VV: People get a big kick out of finding a pet up there, and they have at times had their freedom. More recently, I keep them very close because one night, back in the mid-70s, the mother cat and one of her daughters spent the night out which I did not care for them to do. About five in the morning, I hear a "thump thump thump" up the stairs and racing around, it seemed, but I was sound asleep. I flung the door open and realized something went down the stairs. I went to the head of the stairs and just bear that gray light of dawn, there on the landing, was a bobcat. With a blink of my eyes, he was gone. He jumped ten feet down onto the broken rock and not a sound.

Then I wondered where the cats were. I found my mama cat perched on the two by four railing and just absolutely petrified. She just cowered for two days. The other cat came in later in the morning totally unconcerned. I think the tiger had been on the stairs waiting to come in, and as

this cat moseyed around at the base she bolted and was enough ahead of him. I have often wondered about eagles and larger hawks picking off a cat, so I've kept them quite close nowadays.

SI: Have you seen a lot of wild animals up on the lookout?

VV: Yes, really pretty good. I have deer, whitetail deer. Finally I've had several elk. They had a plant back in '81 and now I see more than I had previously. Never have had a bear right at the top. I've seen them eating huckleberries well below in a basin below the peak. Have had coyotes at times. Again, saw a bobcat in broad daylight. I think the best treat was a wolverine. It's like a gigantic skunk with puffy-colored stripes. He sat right on the road about 200 feet from the tower. When I moved to try and get my camera, he saw the motion and ran off. But that was the rarest animal.

SI: Do you get a lot of birds up there too?

VV: Oh yes. I think I've listed about 50 different species, including a seagull, geese, and ducks flying by. There are bluebirds nesting. Had a robin nest right on the tower—in the rafters, right under the cabin. Chickadees, nutcrackers, woodpeckers, and some warblers. There's really quite a variety. The flowers are something else—all summer, unless it's very dry.

SI: Did you do anything other than...do weather observations when you were on the lookout? Or did they on your lookout?

VV: Yes. At first they took weather there at a lookout over in Fish Creek, which is lower, kind of a medium altitude for the forest around us. They gave me a weather station, one of these white boxes, and I took humidity readings, wind, and sky cover. Did that for several years and then I guess they decided it was too...being one of the higher points on the forest, it wasn't as...the information wasn't that important. So I no longer give regular weather.

SI: Can you tell me some about the other kinds of visitors you have? Any specialists?

VV: Oh, yes. For several summers in the early '70s, several of the large minerals companies were prospecting for various types of minerals in western Montana. It would be interesting to talk with some of the geologists. They'd come up and tell you what kind of stone you were sitting on. Sometimes, the ranchers would come up. We had a grazing permit in the early '70s on those ridges, but that was done away with because they realized there wasn't that much grass, really.

Another interesting group was from the Northwest Bible School that was being established at Alberton. They had people from all over the country come in the summer to help build and paint and had their conferences there. Several summers, groups would come up. A lot of them were from Iowa or the mid-west—real flatlanders. They all want to know what's it like when a

storm come. It can be quite awing and luckily many of the storms in that area seem to split and go around Stark Mountain. Actually, I've been there 15 of 16 years and have only had lightning strike the tower twice while I was inside.

SI: Do you have the stools with the insulators on?

VV: Yes. One had either a chair to sit in with the glass insulator on the feet or I have just a stool. I have a wooden bunk now so I feel fairly secure sitting on that. No way would I touch anything metal. The time the lightning struck the tower with me inside, the cats come and lie on the bed while I sit there and they're quite quiet, not bothered at all. I knew there had been some pretty close bolts. It was daylight, luckily. All of the sudden, flash; but before the thunderclap, there was a snap. Then, this terrific bang and the cats flew.

The second time that happened...I have a propane gas plate to cook on and it sputtered. I didn't see any sparks. Some lookouts say their wood stove will spark and maybe the fire-finder, which is the metal ring, movable ring around you mat, will have sparks on it. It just went (makes noise) like that and, of course, the cats just flew and tried to hide.

Actually, some lookouts are right in storm paths and have more hits. I've seen St. Elmo's Fire. But I think the most awing is when you get a wall of clouds rushing in on you. It's black with little white edges and it's rolling along and the wind's pretty hard. Once you're in the clouds, there's less wind, less rain, and usually less lightning. It'll flicker.

SI: Just kind of like being in a fog bank?

VV: Yes. You don't see anything down below you. It's just like in a fog. I have seen lightning below me when a cloud is hanging over the valley and it seems to be coming out of the bottom of the cloud. Then we get, towards the end of the summer, what we call our light show come in from the west—just a whole front and there'll be like six storms in it, all in a row. One will sparkle and a minute later another one sparkles and sometimes there would be four or five lightning strikes all along the horizon. That's kind of interesting because sometimes it comes and sweeps over us and other times it just dissipates by the time it gets that close.

SI: Are the nights pretty clear up there? Can you see the stars real well? And lights?

VV: Yes. In fact, in early July, the first three weeks of July, the sky is light until 11 p.m. Real light because I can see so much sky. Along towards middle of August, we get to watch stars and shooting stars and northern lights. We have seen some nice displays of northern lights.

SI: Can you tell me what the differences have...the changes have been over the years that you've been on lookout?

VV: Yes. For the 16 years that I've been on, we are working less hours because of budget problems, no doubt. They always hope you'll be there twenty-four whether you're paid or not. When I first started in '70, we all had wood stoves. They would provide us with the Coleman camp stove with the pressurized white gas and this gave you a chance to have a quick lunch or hot drink without heating up the whole lookout with the wood stove. Most of the lookouts around Missoula have roads to them. So they haul water to you in milk cans and you...I leave mine under the lookout where it's partially shaded, and it stays nice and cool. Then every time I go to town I'll haul five gallons or so up there with me. Then they had the great idea that we should have propane. Stark Mountain has a gas plate and a gas heater and lights and so I use the wood stove just for atmosphere, much preferred to...in fact I don't use the gas heater at all. Stick in the mud.

Comparing it back to the 30s, let's say, when most lookouts were packed in by horse and had telephones, the lookouts then had to patrol their phone line to see that it wasn't broken or about to be broken by falling limbs. They also patrolled and maintained nearby trails and they had to get their own water. In fact, when I got to Stark there was a sign posted that said, "Lookouts will make their water haul at seven every morning." Now, it comes by truck nicely, and we don't patrol. They prefer the lookout to stay on point during a fire so that we can watch for wind changes and spot fires. With the two-way radio, powered by batteries, life is very easy. Hence, you need to make sure you can keep yourself busy to be satisfied.

SI: Do you work seven days a week or how do you...

VV: It varies with the district. Most of them work five days a week, but we are all on duty on weekends when the forests are being used more by the public. Then, we have two days during mid-week as our days off. If there is fire potential enough they will put you on overtime for at least part of your days off.

SI: Then you can leave the lookout and go to town?

VV: Yes. I find every...I take enough food so I'm happy for two weeks and can go three. It's just a matter of going down for a little fresh food and having a bath. Compared with many years ago, it's kind of a lot of fun still.

SI: Thank you. I think that should finish this interview.

[End of Interview]