

Maureen and Mike

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**Oral History Number: 453-021**  
**Interviewee: Mark Hufstetler**  
**Interviewers: Beth Hodder and Kjell Petersen**  
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**Project: Northwest Montana Lookout Association**

Beth Hodder: Hello, lookout friends. I'm Beth Hodder here with Kjell Petersen, both of us with the Northwest Montana Lookout Association. Today we're excited to interview Mark Hufstetler, current lookout with the US Forest Service, with his stories that we wish to add to our oral history collection. It's a project that is available worldwide. And this interview will become part of the University of Montana ScholarWorks collection at the Mansfield Library. Mark's father was a career Forest Service employee, and Mark grew up at several Forest Service stations. So, you might say he came by his lookout desires honestly. We have lots to learn from you, Mark. And I think Kjell has a question for you before we begin.

Kjell Petersen: Okay, first of all, Mark, welcome. It's going to be fun chatting with you. One of the things, if you are interested in thinking about while we're doing the interview is over the years of running around rubbing elbows with lookout people is there a characteristic that you find common in lookout people that you find attractive and interesting, and like to focus on and give that some thought. And maybe as a closing we'll explore that again, just to kind of end our session. So welcome, Mark, looking forward to this.

Mark Hufstetler: That's a great question Kjell. And I just want to start by saying that I'm really happy to be chatting with you guys again. You're a couple of great lookouts yourselves. And I think this project is a wonderful one. And I'm really looking forward to our conversation.

BH: Well, are you ready to begin? Would you like to start by telling us about your childhood, where you grew up, how you got to be in the lifestyle that you live.

MH: Okay, I was born in 1958 in Ogden, Utah. And I feel like I was really lucky to be born into a family that always loved the outdoors, and especially the outdoors of the Rocky Mountain West. My grandfather had an old homestead cabin up in the Uinta Mountains on the Ashley National Forest and I spent a lot of my childhood summers there and spent many days wandering through the back roads of the Ashley and hiking along the ridges and through the forest there. And it really became a part of me from a very early age. And it's something that made me understand how wonderful these places are and how valuable life spent in them can be. As you said, my dad was a Forest Service person for his entire career. He started in the cartography office down at the regional office in Ogden, Utah. And then as he worked his way up the government ladder, we were transferred to a variety of Forest Service stations in Region Four, which is Utah, southern Idaho and part of Wyoming and Nevada. I spent a couple of years on the Challis National Forest when I was in elementary school, and we moved down to the Dixie National Forest in southern Utah. By the time I was in junior high, we were on the old Bridger National Forest living in Kemmerer, Wyoming. I have really fond memories of all those

places. Especially the Challis because that was the smallest town and it was where we spent the most time out in the mountains. I have a really strong memory of the summer of 1966 when I was eight years old. Almost every weekend my mom would pack a picnic lunch and we'd all get into the International Travel-all and pick a forest road that we hadn't been on before and head off to explore. And on one of those days our destination was, I think, the first fire lookout tower that I saw. That was Twin Peaks lookout which is a little west of Challis on top of a 10,000-foot mountain. And I remember pulling up there and I remember my dad taking me up the steps into the tower and meeting the lookout guy who was probably pretty nervous that somebody from the supervisor's office showed up unannounced. And he showed me how the firefinder worked. And I stood out there and admired the vista. And I thought, at that point, that was a heck of a life. And I remember that day. And so, getting up to Twin Peaks must have been a sign.

I got back to Ogden in time to finish high school, and then got my bachelor's degree at a little school in Salt Lake called Westminster College. In those summers I needed to find a summer job, obviously. And I remembered having visited Glacier National Park with my parents when I was a kid. And so that was where I wanted to work, and ended up getting a job with a hotel concessionaire there, which I kept for six summers. And the very first hike that I tried to do in my first summer there was to get up to Mount Brown Fire Lookout, because it looks over Lake McDonald Lodge where I was working. And it was a beacon inviting us all to go up there. I didn't make it the first time; it was too steep. But I ended up going there several times and then falling for the other lookouts in the park--a half dozen of them. Those years, you know, caused me to realize that Montana was the place I wanted to live. And so, I ended up staying there. I've been there ever since. I moved here in 1983, and I'm still living in Bozeman. I got a Master's Degree in History at Montana State University after moving here. And my first job in the history field was back in Glacier--of all things. I was hired by the service partners to do historic research on the Park's backcountry cabins and other structures and that included some fire lookouts. So, I got to visit very remote locations in the park working there and {catch} fire lookout which has become one of my favorites, and that was a couple of summers. And that really cemented my love for these places.

BH: Mark, can I stop you second? Which lookout did you say?

MH: In Glacier?

BH: Yes, the one that you just were mentioning.

MH: That was Porcupine Ridge Lookout. Yeah, Porcupine is one of the most remote lookouts ever built in the park. The trail to it is no longer maintained. And I managed to get up there for an overnight trip in 1987. It was in October and {in the park sub district ranger at the time}, so I was the first person to make it up there that year. it's got a remarkable view looking down Waterton Lake and over towards Mount Cleveland, the highest point in the park. And I have a real soft spot for that one. It's a beautiful, beautiful spot, and super remote. And I like the

remote lookouts the most for sure. After that I spent the next three decades working as a professional historian, owned a small consulting business that did archaeological and historic research. I didn't really think about becoming a lookout until fairly late in that arc. But by the time I was in my 50s--you start to realize that you know life is short and you should do the things you really want to do while you can do them. And I knew I wanted to get back into the outdoors. So, with that an opportunity came for me when I had written the history of Porcupine Ridge and the other Glacier Lookouts, that material went into the Park's archives. And a few years after that the information was discovered by a young man who had just started being a lookout in the Northern Rockies and he was intrigued by the history and, I think, saw my passion for the places. And he sent me a handwritten letter out of the blue, wanting to talk lookouts. And of course, I did that, unquestionably so. And that young man was someone named Leif Haugen, who is still a lookout today. He's finished, I think, 29 seasons as a lookout, Leif and I became acquaintances way back then. And back in 2013 or '14 I hiked up to Thoma Lookout to visit him. And Leif mentioned to me that he had set up a volunteer lookout program for the Flathead National Forest. And he wondered if it might be something that I would be interested in participating in? And I jumped at the chance instantly, no question there, and sent him a couple letters in the fall. And when it came time to organize the lookout schedules for 2015 he had a spot for me--two weeks at Baptiste Lookout, down on the Hungry Horse Ranger District of the Flathead. And it was an exciting chance for sure. I was really thrilled to do it.

KP: So, I might add Mark, just not to break your thought. But we just did an interview with him a few months ago, and he'll be showing up on our oral history site shortly also.

MH: Leif is definitely, I'm not sure if he would characterize himself as this, but he's become the grand old man of Northwestern Montana lookouts for sure, twenty-nine years and an unequalled passion for these places. And at the same time, he's pretty much the nicest guy that you're ever going to meet. So, I think we all owe a debt to him because some of the lookouts that are staffed today, you know, certainly wouldn't be staffed any longer if not for his efforts, and I really owe my midlife career change to him as well. And I am super grateful for that.

BH: Now, when you hiked up to meet Leif was that the first time you met?

MH: No, we had we had talked a couple of times before and I had hiked up to see him I think once earlier. I think that was the summer of 2013 that I went up, maybe 2014. And then at that point, I think he had he started the volunteer lookout program in in about 2012. And so, it was a couple of years under his belt, and it was pretty well established by then. He had staffed two lookouts, Firefighter and Baptiste, with volunteers since 2012. And then in 2015, he added Cooney Lookout down in the Swan. And after I had signed on to Baptiste, I got an email from Leif that said there was a week at Cooney Lookout as well. And I offered to take that one, so my first summer I spent three weeks being a volunteer. I thought Cooney would be a good introduction because it's a lookout you can get to by road. And I was feeling a little daunted by the notion of spending two weeks at a place as remote as Baptiste doing a job I'd never done before. So, getting to go to Cooney for a week was a good way to introduce myself to it all.

Cooney is different from most of the lookouts that people think of because it's not on top of a mountain. It's on a fairly low ridge in the valley. And so, it doesn't have quite the same exotic feel that a lot of our lookouts do but I really grew fond of that place. It's got a wonderful view of the Swan Valley and it's interesting because it's been there for decades and it's become a part of the lives of the people who live there. And so, if you staff Cooney, you'll get to know some of the local folks and they'll come visit you and you feel like you're not a mountain-top hermit as much as you are a temporary part of a small and fairly close-knit little community of folks. So, it's a pretty different experience. But it's, it's a neat one. And I enjoyed all those summers at Cooney.

KP: Well, in addition prior to the Forest Service taking back home ownership of Cooney, it was under the control of the Department of State Lands and Conservation, and they took extremely good care of Cooney. So, it's just a really nice, comfortable, up-to-date lookout to start on. It's actually pretty fancy by lookout standards. And I think the state custody of that place, you know, obviously helped keep it alive, as long as it did. And it's also what helped to make it a part of that local community. I used to receive visits from the State Lands folks who would come by to check on their lookout and make sure it was going. And I think I got a sense of wistfulness, that it really wasn't part of their mission anymore. They operated it until about the time of a fairly large land exchange in the valley that consolidated private logging lands, with state lands, and forest lands. And so, a lot of the Cooney viewshed became less relevant to the state mission. But it still is a great spot to look over the valley. And it has called in some fires over the last few years for sure.

BH: So, Mark, before you came back on board with the Forest Service work with the Flathead National Forest did you not have a lookout that was in the Lewis and Clark Forest? Some place over like Kings Hill Pass?

MH: Right. I'll talk a little more about Baptiste in a second. But to answer your question, I volunteered for the Flathead for the summer of 2015, 2016 and 2017. And at the end of the 2017 season, the Forest decided to change Baptiste from a volunteer lookout post to one occupied by an employee of the Forest Service. And I would have gladly taken that spot. But the position was taken by someone who was already working as a lookout on the Flathead. And so I was resigned to not being a lookout that summer, but I received a call in early 2018 from from the district office, White Sulfur Springs. And he had seen the application that I put into the government system and had an opening at a lookout on Porphyry Peak, which is in the Little Belt Mountains just above Showdown ski resort. And so my first summer as an employee of the Forest Service was spent up on Porphyry but I kept an eye on on the Flathead and kept an eye on Baptiste and when it turned out that Baptiste was going to open up in 2019 I, I jumped on that chance right away and headed back up there.

BH: And this time you were a staff employee?

MH: Right, I volunteered--just as kind of a recap--in 2015 and 2016 I volunteered at Baptiste and at Cooney. 2017 I volunteered at Baptiste, Cooney and also Cyclone Peak all on the Flathead. In 2018 I was a paid employee down on the Lewis and Clark at Porphyry. And since then I've been an employee of the Forest Service at Baptiste working there for the full summer. I'll talk a little bit about the orientation to get started as a volunteer employee and my experience in getting up to Baptiste for the first time because that was pretty adventurous to me. On the Flathead, there's a fairly well defined training program for fire lookouts, which is something that a lot of national forests don't really do. Some forests will just, you know, hire someone and send them up to their mountain top and have them try to figure out the job on their own, more or less. But the Flathead-- they do a two-day training program for new lookouts and returning employees every June. And then there are also refresher training courses for people returning year after year, both employees and volunteers. So in 2015 I spent part of a week in June at the Hungry Horse district office, going through a two-day session on how to become a fire lookout. And it was the first time I got to meet other fire lookouts, employees and volunteers and get to understand what was involved. And every year in the middle of this, the local volunteers stage a potluck dinner, where all volunteers can get together and meet the employee lookouts and get to know one another. It's something that is just extremely cool. And I had a blast my first one. I still remember a lot of that evening. And it's something that sets the Flathead and Glacier lookouts apart that we are truly part of a lookout community. You know, Jack Kerouac used to talk about the community of lookouts. And it's something I feel very strongly with a group of folks who call into Kalispell Dispatch. The training program includes a half day of learning meteorology, time spent learning how to use the Osborne Firefinder, how to use the radio, how to identify smokes. We go to one of the lookouts, usually Firefighter Lookout, where we have some hands-on experience doing all that stuff. Folks do in back country lookouts in the Flathead. At that time, the volunteers are also asked to bring a box containing the food and supplies that they'll use during their hitch in the backcountry. And the Forest will arrange to get that box of supplies up to them. At Baptiste that was usually as part of a pack string of mules. The folks volunteering at Cyclone, generally Forest employees will carry that up for them.

I spent a lot of time that first year trying to figure out what the heck I was going to need for two weeks all alone in the wilderness and put together a box of stuff and I gave it to Leif during the training. And then three or four weeks later, I got a phone call from him. He sounded a little embarrassed on the phone and he said that, well, we had a rodeo on the trail to Baptiste, and I said what is he talking about? And it turned out that one of the mules heading up the Baptiste pack trail had spooked for some reason and had managed to break away from the pack string and, and disappeared down the hill. And when they found it a couple hours later, it didn't have its load anymore. And my box of supplies was on that missing load. So the fire crew spread out to find it and they didn't find the box until the next morning. And it had been eaten on a little bit by the local critters. And I thought it was a little bit hilarious. It was it was a sign to me that I was heading into another world quite different from the one I lived in my life.

BH: Can you describe the type of lookout Baptiste is.

MH: Sure. Just about all of the Flathead's operating lookouts today are what are called R-6 lookouts. It's a design that was first used in the early 1950s, in Region Six of the National Forest Service. I think 1953 was the year that they started to switch over to the R-6 design and so Cooney, Cyclone, Baptiste, Spotted Bear and Jumbo are all examples of the R-6 design. All but Jumbo are on towers constructed of pressurized timber. Those towers were typically constructed and designed in increments of ten feet. So, there are some ten-foot towers, twenty, thirty, and forty and even some higher than that. The Spotted Bear Lookout tower is two stories so it's a twenty-foot tower. There are three stories at Baptiste so it goes up thirty feet. Cyclone is a forty-foot tower. So they have rectangular tower legs of pressurized timbers with crossbeams and one flight of stairs going up to each set of those crossbeams. The top of the tower has a catwalk that's cantilevered out from those tower legs. And then a cab which is about fifteen feet square.

So, you've got two hundred twenty-five feet of interior space which you know is both your office and your home. I tell people they're the original tiny homes and that's what they are. You've got windows all around, a single door, inside the firefinder stand occupies the center of the space and then there's usually one wall that's considered the kitchen wall—on Baptiste it's the south wall. It's got a propane fridge, a propane stove, and a couple of work counters. There's also a small wood stove for heat and each of them has a single bed and a work desk, and a few storage shelves and that pretty much completely fills the space. But it's really a marvel of efficiency once you get used to all that. I was surprised that I didn't feel claustrophobic existing in such a confined space because I kind of thought that I would have. Maybe partly it's because you're surrounded by windows. Someone once told me that I would feel like being in a prison, being trapped in a little square room, but definitely not that at all. Our lookouts are very well kept. Leif has done a lot of restoration work on them. And they're some of the best equipped lookout buildings that I've seen. I've been to several dozen over the years now.

The supplies going up to Baptiste--generally they come up by pack mule. What doesn't come up by pack mule comes up on the back of a Forest Service employee or the person staffing the lookout. We use propane to keep the refrigerator going and keep the stove going. And at the beginning of every summer, we take a mule load of propane up. I supply all the dry goods for the entire summer. Put that into a dozen or so big boxes and that comes up on mules as well. We get paint, other repair supplies, things like batteries and so forth and those all come up. Once in a while we'll get a helicopter delivery if there's something urgent or if the pack mules aren't able to make the trip. I carry up smaller things on my back when I go up at the beginning of a hitch or come down for days off. The problem with eating at a lookout obviously is that you don't have a ready supply of fresh foods. And you have to figure out how to be able to subsist on dry food more than you normally would at home. And then you have to bring up whatever fresh food you want at the beginning of your hitch. I'll always carry up a dozen eggs and a pound of butter and some cheese and some half and half for coffee, that sort of thing, along

with some fresh vegetables. Pack down all your own garbage of course, as well. One of the interesting things about the life is learning how to subsist with much less waste than you do when you're living in the world of humans below. I can be up there for two weeks and I'll barely fill a small garbage bag with everything that I consumed. And that's pretty remarkable.

KP: What's the most exotic thing that's been delivered to you?

MH: You know, one thing a lookout always does is to convince his friends to come up and bring snacks or bring, you know, bring a bag of fresh fruit or something that they're craving. And one summer when I was volunteering, I told a friend in complete jest that I wanted a quart of ice cream. She called my bluff and bought a quart of ice cream and packed it in dry ice and carried that up on her back. And we had huckleberry pie ala mode that evening, which was just the you know, it's the coolest thing. When you're not close to a grocery store, you find that little things like that end up meaning quite a bit to you. And that was a great evening. I had all kinds of fun. And don't you end up having a completely different view of water after you're up there? Oh yeah. That was the hardest part. And in some ways, it still is. Most of the Flathead lookouts aren't accessible by road. Of the seven that we staff you only drive to two of them. And that means that you have to carry water to the lookouts. At Baptiste, there's a perennial stream about three quarters of a mile below the lookout about five hundred feet down elevation wise. And so, I have to carry water up from there. During the week, I'll take a five-gallon water cubie down to the stream and pack it back up. At the end of the summer, that stream dries out and I have to go down another quarter, half a mile, to a little bit bigger stream and haul water up there. So, you think about every drop of water that you use. You learn how to wash dishes in the most economical way possible, reusing water over and over again for different steps of the process. I also try to collect additional water up at the lookout when I go up at the beginning of the year. I'll fill a couple of big old garbage cans with snow that's still there. There's going to be snow at Baptiste. Most of the lookouts go up in June. And the first trip up I'll fill a couple of garbage barrels with snow. And then by the time the staffing season begins that will have melted and I'll have some wash water and water for a shower. I also collect rainwater off the roof of the tower that I use for the same thing. That's one of the best things about having a rain up there is I know that I'll have the luxury of all kinds of extra water for a few days and I can take an extra shower or two. That's something you value when you have to think about it. I think it's a good thing to experience, too, because you take things like that for granted in the world today. Existing for a few weeks or a couple months in a world where things are a little bit more simple and straightforward shows you the value of things that we take for granted in our world today.

Going back to my volunteer years--the first summer I went to Baptiste, that was 2015. And I think I got there about August 20 or so. And didn't have much idea of what to expect--you know that it would just be idyllic, quiet, nothing going on sort of existence for two weeks. But as I was hiking up, there was something called the Bear Creek Fire, which happened by Spotted Bear Ranger Station. As I was hiking up, the Bear Creek Fire decided it was going to take off. And so, I got up to the tower, and I plugged in the radio and turned it on. And instead of not hearing



much of anything I was hearing an endless stream of radio traffic from the Spotted Bear folks, as they were urgently trying to manage the fire, and more importantly, to get folks out of the fire area, to rescue horses, and evacuate vehicles and that sort of thing. And it was one of the most dramatic evenings I'd ever experienced, even though I was doing it vicariously, listening to those people working and resolving the situation that they had been put into by this exploding fire. And what it did is it changed my perspective of the job and of government fire management pretty quickly right at the outset, as--it's not a mountaintop vacation; there's a reason that we're up there. And it's important that the people managing fire, working with fire, are pretty talented and dedicated guys doing a job that is at times super stressful and very dangerous as well. That's something that was impressed on me a little bit more when I transitioned from being a volunteer to being an employee. I was lucky that the Lewis and Clark National Forest folks offered to help me get my red card that summer. A red card is basically a credential that says you're qualified to be on a fire crew. And so that involves going to what the Forest Service calls guard school. You spend a week there learning about fire, learning about the biology of fire, how it works, how it progresses, how weather impacts it, and then how humans respond to that--how they fight fire. It includes classroom time, and then we had a day when we went out and actually fought a pre-set fire to learn the techniques. I was in my late 50s when I did that, and I was surrounded by a bunch of 19-year-old kids. And it was one of the hardest things in my life. But at the same time it was really valuable because it taught me [indecipherable] that it's more than just being alone on a mountaintop. You're part of something that you know has a long tradition, but it's also [indecipherable] and the people who fight fire and the people who watch for fire have lives that intersect in the act of the fire itself. Even though you don't necessarily realize that when you're on top of the mountain.

KP: A curious note I'll throw in here, just two days ago I noticed on the national lookout Facebook page that what you and I sat in classrooms for our hours and hours and hours, as young people taking various firefighter courses and weather courses, and fire suppression courses, they're now offering online, which blew me away when I saw that.

MH: It's interesting how all of that evolves. You know, if I had been a lookout eighty years ago, back then they were mostly 19-year-old boys who were without training and they were spending their first summer away from home. And now lookouts are a variety of ages of both genders. And they have a background that folks didn't have back in the early days. But at the same time, we still use a lot of the same tools and techniques that have been used for 80 years. So, it's an interesting intersection between history and technology between the past and the present. You know, I still call in a fire using a two-way radio that would have been in use in the 1950s. But at the same time, I can get information off the internet that confirms the location of lightning strikes, and provides so much meteorological and other information that wouldn't have been available to folks who did this job a couple generations ago. So, it's an interesting mix of old and new. And one of the things I like the most about that life, is that when you're in a lookout tower, you're basically existing in a way that was developed one hundred years ago. Your daily life isn't really all that different from that of someone who was a lookout in the '20s or '30s. It's really cool to be able to experience that and to bridge that time gap, if that makes

sense. You realize that a lot of the things about our natural environment haven't changed that much, and that some of the basics of existing in that environment haven't changed that much either. Even though we're in the age of the computer, internet and lots of technological toys, you're still able to live a life that is from a century ago. And it's still a productive and valuable one; and I think that is just really cool.

BH: Mark, do you have any stories from any of the lookouts that you've got that were special to you when you were at that particular lookout-- Cooney, Baptiste., Porphyry, Cyclone, any of them?

MH: You know, they're all a common experience, but each of those lookouts is different. Every lookout has its own personality. You know, the thing I love about Baptiste is that it seems to be the most traditional lookout experience of all of them. And that's partly because it's a super remote spot. You know, I'll get on the average twenty-five to thirty visitors in the course of the whole summer. And so you feel more detached from civilization there and you have more a sense of being part of the natural setting than you do in some places. But the people who visit are always wonderful people. You go to Cyclone, and they'll see twenty-five to thirty visitors in a day. And a lot of those folks aren't as attuned to the setting as you might be. Cooney gets folks who are out for an evening drive, over on Porphyry a lot of recreationists using side-by-sides and ATVs. But the interesting thing about all of them, and this is almost without exception, is that they're all thrilled to be there. They come there, at least in some part, because they have an understanding of the magic of these places. And they come up the stairs, and they're super excited to be there. And they're excited to meet a lookout and excited to talk shop with them. And it's really fun. But I think it also is a great way to get to explain forest management and do it in a way that makes people excited about it, which is really neat. I've met a variety of folks at the lookouts. Old friends have shown up unexpectedly, and people with intriguing life stories, people from a variety of different countries, all kinds of stuff. At the same time, you get away from the people, and then you find yourself interacting with the environment at a level of intimacy that you don't get to do anywhere else. You become obsessed with the weather? How cold is it going to get? Do I need to get the stove going? That sort of thing? Is that a bear out there in the in the avalanche chute? Do I have to go get water tonight, all that stuff.

And I've always got my dogs with me. And that adds an extra layer of interest to it all because they're living there. They're living their Jack London adventure, I call it. One of my dogs a couple summers ago decided to try and eat a porcupine, for example. And so, I had to evacuate the tower with her and hike six miles to the car and drive an hour to the emergency vet. You just live a life that includes demands or expectations that you don't have elsewhere. I've always been intrigued by the interactions between other lookouts and nature at Baptiste especially. You know, there are 11 or 12 of us who call in to Kalispell Dispatch, 11 or 12 lookouts right now, and we're all watching the same weather, or a variety of the weather anyway. And we will send texts back and forth, you know, talking about approaching storm fronts and lightning and speculating on what will happen. And I'll get a get a message from one of the lookouts telling me to look outside because there's a spectacular cloud formation that's just the most gorgeous

thing they've ever seen. And you go outside, and then you realize that you're the only person, you and those other mountaintop dwellers are the only people who are experiencing that in the world. And that's just a remarkable thing. It's really rare and it's wonderful.

Did you want to talk a little bit about some of the daily aspects of lookout life?

BH: That would be great.

MH: What the routine is? That sort of thing?

BH: Sure.

MH: Fire lookouts on the Flathead and in Glacier Park, as well, typically work an eight-hour day, 8:00 am to 4:30pm. We have two daily expectations without question regardless of what else is going on. Every morning at 10 o'clock, we call in the weather. So, we'll do a very brief overview of what the weather conditions are at the lookout. You record the temperature, the humidity, cloud cover, amount of precipitation, whether there was lightning, that sort of thing. And every morning at 10 o'clock on the dot the first lookout calls Kalispell and tells them that and then the second and the third and the fourth, all 11 of us always in the same order. It's a way for the lookouts to remember that we're part of that lookout community, that everyone else is still out there. And we know that the whole Forest is listening as well, and they know that we're out there. And they also know what the conditions are like, in the rest of the Forest. The second thing we have to do is, at the end of the workday, we'll do the same kind of round robin afternoon check in. In between, you know, we spend time doing maintenance work on the lookouts, I'll hike down to get water, talk to visitors, a variety of other things. And sometimes when there's not a lot of going on weather wise, we'll be able to curl up with a book or just kind of exist in that space for a little while.

BH: Have we kind of exhausted what you wanted to speak about?

MH: I'm trying to think if there are any other cool stories that you guys would like to hear? I don't know. Is there anything else that you would like to ask?

KP: Well, I just want to throw in here. I feel like I've been to church this morning. (Laughter)

MH: I'm not sure how I'm gonna take that.

KP: Well, if you think that you've covered what you wanted to share with us, I might just toss in the opportunity for you to speak a bit about the question I asked you at the start, if there's a characteristic that you found over the years, in lookout people that you find interesting and attractive, and pretty common.

MH: You know, I guess when I first started doing this, I had an expectation of what lookouts were going to be like, and I thought that they were nearly all going to be cranky, antisocial old farts who were existing on its mountains because they weren't interested in humanity anymore. And I was really dreading that orientation week, because I wasn't sure I was going to be able to hang out with people like that. And it was a tremendous shock to me to discover that that's not the right stereotype. Fire lookouts are an amazingly diverse bunch these days. You go back eighty years, and there were almost all young men who were doing this on their way to other paths in life. But today, there are equal numbers of men and women pretty much. We have a couple of paid lookouts who are young adults and some of us who are getting close to retirement--different ages. All kinds of different political and philosophical persuasions. But only a couple of them have been these nice, cranky old guys that I thought I was going to be stuck with. They've nearly all been engaging and truly wonderful people. And it surprised me for a while wondering why people who are so interesting and who are so, so engaging to be around--why they're choosing to live that life. And I guess I've come to the conclusion that one of the reasons that so many lookouts are like that is because to be a lookout you need to have a sense of adventure. You need to be willing to break away from your regular life and from your friends; from your world for a couple of weeks or a season and do something where you rely only on yourself. You need to have a little bit of courage that you know some people don't have—a willingness to go out there and be part of something new and be part of a world that in our current society, we don't get a chance to experience anymore. And so, they're a fairly distinct breed, not by being antisocial, but by being freer spirits than a lot of people allow themselves to be nowadays. And so, you have a collection of those free spirits who are each on their own mountaintop, but at the same time, sharing a summer in that way. And it's a really unique and really meaningful sort of experience for I think, everyone. You're living a life that only those people can fully understand. And you're living a life that you love. And you know that those other people love the same life that you do.

You know, I've met folks who are in their eighties now, who were only lookouts for a couple of months when they were nineteen or twenty. And those summers for so many of them have become defining points of their entire lives. Everybody needs a great adventure to have that defining point in their life and going up to a mountaintop for a summer was that for a lot of those folks. And it's really, especially if you let it be, it becomes life changing. It's pretty rare these days. And it's pretty cool. And to be part of a community of folks who have the gumption to go out and let themselves experience that, you know, that makes it even cooler. You know, maybe that sounds a little bit self-congratulatory. I don't know if it is or not. But I think there's really something to be said for, you know, going off into a new adventure completely on your own like that. And then finding other people who have that same feeling of adventure. There are not too many places in this world today where that could still happen. And I think we're really lucky as lookouts to be a part of that experience. It's both an individual experience and a shared experience that only a handful of us these days get to know about. There are probably just a couple hundred lookouts that are occupied by people who actually live in the towers anymore, I guess. And maybe fewer than 50 of us who live in towers that you have to hike into. So, it's a pretty small fraternity these days. And I think we all realize how fortunate we are to be a part of that fraternity. I know I am.

KP: Another word that comes to mind, which you're living proof of, is addictive.

MH: Definitely addictive. It's a job. You're either going to hate it or you're gonna love it. And, there are people like Leif, and some others that I know who've been doing this for decades and have found their place in the world that way. And there are folks like me who, you know, I had a pretty satisfying career all in all, but I didn't realize until I started doing this, that this was more. And plus, it gets addictive for the right people. And especially when you realize how rare these experiences are nowadays. Absolutely.

BH: Well, and Kjell always calls it having it in your DNA. I think that's part of it, too.

MH: That's exactly. That's exactly it. And I think we all understand that. You know, half of my friends are incredibly jealous about what I do in the summer. And the other half think I am completely 100% nuts for wanting to do it. You know, how can you live without a television and without running water? and how can you use an outhouse in the middle of the night? and how can you not take a shower every single day? and how can you do this? And they probably wouldn't be happy up there. But some of us are invigorated by those things. And I'm glad that I've had the chance to do that.

BH: Well, this is a marvelous experience that you're sharing, Mark, and you've said so many things that I couldn't even put together in terms of everything that it's meant, you know--from living a life from a hundred years ago to the present, and everything that goes along with that. And we certainly enjoy hearing your stories and what life is like for you because it is unique, and we're happy to have been able to talk to you today.

MH: I really enjoyed this conversation as well and appreciate the chance that you two have given me to run on about something that I think is pretty cool. And it's something that you know, may not last forever. And there's going to be some value generations from now being able to remember how all of this was. And I'm really glad that you folks are doing these oral histories for just that reason.

KP: Well, I'm gonna just toss in as a final thought before we close is that I really appreciate you sharing your time with us, Mark, so that we can capture this for history. And I also really appreciate the number of times that I was able to share outer space with you. And so, it just really invigorates me to hear the story over and over and thank you.

MH: I have really fond memories of sharing the South Fork valley with both of you. It's just not the same to call Firefighter Lookout these days and not have Kjell down there to give me grief.

BH: Well, more down the pike to come for all of us.

MH: Absolutely. Absolutely so.

BH: Thank you, Mark.

MH: Thank you so much, guys.