

A Circle of Life and Fire

by Bill Moore

Nestled back in the Selway Bitterroot Wilderness Area is a mountain that has a great following of like-minded Wilderness loving people. At 7424 feet elevation it is not even close to being the highest peak in the Selway Bitterroot Wilderness but it is loved by many. It is hard to pinpoint what makes folks appreciate a particular peak as it is not an unusual mountain in a wild area where all mountains are spectacular.

While such Mountains have long been precious to Native Americans its history with the Caucasians most likely started in 1918 when a tent camp lookout was located there and staffed by a



McConnell Mountain cabin 1937
(Bud Moore Archives)

lookout/smokechaser. In 1922 a residence cabin was added and in 1937 an observatory was constructed. By the mid 1950's the lookout was no longer staffed and the mountain went back to being visited by hunters, trail crews, firefighters and other folks who go to the wilds to drink from the fountains of solitude and wonder in such places.

This is the tale of a man whose character, thoughts and actions were shaped to a large degree by this place. The mountain had a great deal to do with the making of the man.

The year is 1935. Picture if you will a young man of 18 who is assigned to the furthest back lookout on one of the furthest back districts in the forest service. This fellow is already a mountain man of some skill. He is wise in the ways of the woods and the bounty they provide. This assignment holds no fear for him only the challenge of doing a good job for the ranger he considers a man among men.

The job is both detection and suppression oriented. He is a lookout/smoke chaser and his job is to quickly and accurately locate lightning caused fires and if so ordered to shoulder his fire pack and go put them out. It is a challenging and noble endeavor.

However problems soon arise. When the hot lightning storms come over the mountain he cannot go out to the rock pile where the exposed map board is located.



Owen Johnson (Bear Mountain lookout) at
McConnell mapboard 1937
(Bud Moore Archives)

He must wait in the lightning protected and weatherproof residence cabin until the storm abates to go find out what has happened. Meanwhile, his fellow lookouts in the area have gotten most of the "first discoveries" and are in the process of calling them in or heading out to put them out. In order to solve this problem he constructed a small observation cabin out on the rock pile so that he could stay out there during the storm and do his job. He acted on his own and then had to wait for a visit from the Ranger to see how his idea would fare. Upon later arrival the Ranger went directly to the small structure without even stopping to talk. The young man walked up and joined him and



Bud Moore at McConnell Mountain
observatory c.1970 (Bud Moore Archives)

explained what he had done. "Good idea Son" the Ranger replied, "let's go measure her up for windows and lightning protection." And after that it was very hard for another lookout to get a "First" in an area visible from the Mountain. And the area was even safer from the ravages of a fire.

The rule of the day was "All fire controlled by 10:00 AM the day after being located" and the times were glorious for those who fought fire. The mountain remained back pretty much the same but the man was in a process of great change. He went to war and when he returned became the Ranger on the very District where the mountain was located. Now those who staffed the lookout on the mountain worked for him. Those were good times and the standard of performance was set by the actions of the man who was now Ranger — just as it had been when he started.

The man continued his Forest Career through the 1950's and 60's and as he moved up the ladder he moved away from the District where he had spent so much time. But in 1969 he returned to Missoula, Montana as Director of Fire and Aviation for the Forest Service's 29 million acre Northern Region 1.

Along the way forward thinking legislators had passed the Wilderness Act in 1964. And the Mountain was now a resident of the Selway Bitterroot Wilderness. And the man was in charge of fire control of the whole shebang.

But the man was a mountain man and a wilderness man and well as a highly placed land manager. His beliefs were shaped by decades of backcountry experience among the mountains and what he observed in them. Fire was aggressively fought in the Wilderness still but he had concerns that in itself fire suppression was an unnatural event in an area dedicated to the idea of being "untrammelled by man." With the help of others who shared his vision the policy in the Mountain's wilderness was changed from one of "Controlled by 10:00 AM next to one of "Prescribed Natural Wildfire" Naturally occurring wildfire was once again allowed to play out its role in the wilderness when circumstances were right. Over time this became the policy of the land. It grew smokey at times over the mountain and the country took on a new mosaic more like the times the Mountain had seen before the Forest Service came.

Thunderstorms and lightning are part of the Selway Bitterroot and on July 18, 2013 a hot strike came down about 5 miles from the Mountain. Jumpers were sent, but conditions were such that it was allowed to burn as a naturally occurring Wilderness Wildfire. Such were the circumstances that it took the fire most of the month to work its way to the flanks of the mountain. And on July 29, 2013 it crested the peak and burned the old



McConnell Mountain - California Point Fire post-burn (USFS photo)

observatory and residence cabin. The sole witness to its demise was a still staffed sister lookout about 5 miles away.

The man had previously passed on, and both he and the old lookout are mourned by all who knew both. But the mountain is still there and I am confident the man would not be upset for the story is a lesson about the circle of life in the Wilderness world.

Go some day to T35N - R 12E - S23 - NE ¼ of the SE ¼ and visit McConnell Mountain. Or better yet find a mountain of your own. "Take time to Wonder". Rejoice in wild places.

The cast of characters for this tale:

McConnell Mountain

Powell Ranger District
Selway Bitterroot Wilderness, Idaho

William R. (Bud) Moore

McConnell Mtn. LO 1935 - Region 1
Director Fire and Aviation 1974

Ed McKay

District Ranger Powell Ranger District
1926 - 1940

The 10:00 AM Policy

Major Evan Kelly, Regional Forester
1929-1944

The Wilderness Act

1964

Wilderness "Prescribed Natural Wildfire" Policy

1972-2000

The Men and Women of the United States Forest Service

Lookouts Past and Present

The California Point Fire

July 18, 2013 - Season Ending Events
2013

Spring 2015

Huckleberry Lookout Restoration

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in mind, we headed back to camp for dinner and an evening of stories and libations.

The next morning, the footer log had to be removed and replaced. It was below the floor level and was spiked into the logs that held up the floor. The deck crew coaxed it out with heavy tools, sweat, and jumper sweet talk. The new log had to be cut and notched precisely because the fit was tight. The crew hoisted and removed that log three times before it finally slid into place with a most satisfying thump.



That afternoon, we enjoyed the company of some folks from Tennessee who rode horseback to the lookout. The looks on their faces when the crew hoisted a 15-foot, 10-inch diameter log over their heads and the deck crew pulled in into place was worth a million bucks! Later two reporters from the Jackson Hole News and Guide arrived, then Fita Ayers and Angelica Cacho arrived from the Bridger Teton Public Affairs office. The occasion was the 50th anniversary of the Wilderness Act so Jamie Schoen showed the press around and explained what we were doing. It was the first time any of us had seen Jamie in uniform and he took a devilish ribbing about that.

After the footer was in place, it was a matter of the ground crew cutting the next log to length, notching it, shaping two sides and hoisting the log up to the deck crew. The deck crew lined each log with a sealant, placed a foam material atop the sealant, drilled holes and inserted the end bolts, then spiked the log into place. The



last log was placed Thursday at mid-morning. It required a great deal of shaping work so the window plate fit level and the window supports fit snugly. The windows were in place about 5 PM and the crew headed to camp. A quality job completed by a quality crew and we all knew it.

This was the conclusion of work on Huckleberry Lookout; there are no plans to paint or upgrade it further. The objective was to clean it, stabilize it, and leave it for the wandering souls to find. On that, I believe we have met our goal.

Joe Luck

FFLA Zazzle Stamps and More

In addition to stamps, two more custom FFLA items are now available through Zazzle! A trailer hitch cover bearing the FFLA logo is now available and comes in two sizes to fit 1.25" (small) or 2" (large) receivers.



FFLA sticky notes are also now available. Post-it® Notes with the FFLA logo come in pads of 50 in a 4" x 3" size.

There are now eight FFLA postage stamps available. The newest features the historic Slate Point (Montana) crew's nest tree lookout visited during the 2014 FFLA Western Conference. Others



include Sundance Mountain (ID), Monjeau (NM), Lookout Butte (ID), Sterling (NY) - celebrating the Twenty Year Anniversary of the FFLA, Duckett Top (NC), High Point (CA), and Arid Peak.

To order Zazzle items, go to the FFLA website, www.ffla.org, and click on the link. While the items are available directly from the Zazzle website, the FFLA will receive a greater portion of the net proceeds if orders are placed from the link on the FFLA website. Discounts are offered for orders of multiples of items.

Big Hole Lookout 2014 Restoration Video

FFLA member Libby Langston again produced a video of Phase Two the Big Hole Lookout Restoration Project on the Lolo NF near Plains, MT. The 6-minute video of the second year Passport-in-Time project can be viewed online at:

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xqG3BF4iqzY>.

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