

Cement Ridge Fire Lookout Podcast

“My name is Barbara Peterson and I am a forestry technician fire lookout. My favorite part about being a lookout is being outside, the solitude, the peace, the quiet and just watching the progression of the whole topography and environment around me. It’s also the teamwork, the reaction and reacting with the other members of the fire crew and fire lookouts.

The structure that I work at is a wooden fire tower that was built in 1941 by the Civilian Conservation Corps. It actually is the 3rd lookout structure at that particular site. The first one was back in 1911 or so and consisted of nothing more than a log building for the lookout to be housed in and then he had a metal crow’s nest that they would climb up and look around for smoke. Then sometime in the 1920s, a second structure was built by the Forest Service and that actually was elevated. It was a one story affair that was on stilts so to speak, so it was elevated off the ground and it gave him a roof over his head when storms were going through and a place to have some more permanently mounted equipment like telephones, radios, fire finders and maps and all of that good stuff. They kept the log cabin there for him or her for the fire lookout to stay at and that sufficed until 1941 when the civilian conservation corps crew came in and built the currently existing tower which is going to be 75 years old this year.

One of the 1st things we do is of course is get up and put together a weather report that we can transmit to Great Plains. You sling weather and you do wind, sky observations, there is a rain gauge that you use in order to get precipitation and you put together a dry bulb/wet bulb dew point and relative humidity. You tell them about the conditions, cloud conditions and then you look at wind direction and velocity and precipitation. You call that in and then from there it’s a matter of getting settled in, cleaning everything up, and making sure that you are ready for the day, getting your maps out.

Every fire lookout is different. I’m always pacing my catwalk. I’m always outside, if the weather permits, otherwise I’m inside pacing around and I’m always looking with just the bare eye. And about once every half hour, I’ll take the binoculars out and start looking long range. So you spot something that looks different, so you get the binoculars out and you determine if that is a smoke or maybe dust that’s being raised, is that maybe something that the sun is highlighting it differently or a cloud is making it look different? So you determine if it’s a smoke. The next you do is get to your fire finder and remember the fire finder is basically a great big compass that sits on a pedestal with a map in the middle and the Osbourne turns and you line up, you’ve got a rear sight and a front sight and you line up your sights vertically with that smoke or what you think is a smoke. So at that point you’ve got your sights lined up and then you’ve got a peep sight on the rear sight that you can slide up and down, so you can highlight either the very tip of the smoke that you are seeing or the base of whatever it is, so you’ve always got locked to a particular place. At that point in time, you’ve got an azimuth reading from your compass on the outside, you’ve got your map base which is on the Osbourne. The center pinpoint of that Osbourne is the fire lookout so whatever you are looking at is going to lie between the fire lookout and the edge of your map assuming it’s within a 20 mile radius.

The closer you can get the ground crew into that fire, the quicker they are going to be able to go into suppression. I love it.

I absolutely love it. It’s the best job in the word. I have the best office. 360 degree view and I get paid to go there.”