

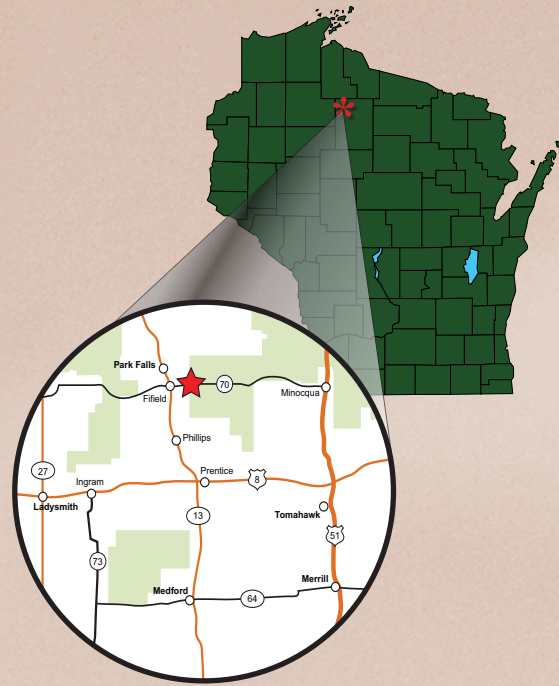
FIRE LOOKOUTS AT WORK

Fire lookouts spent long days in the small cabin atop the tower watching for wisps of smoke that might indicate a fire. When a “smoke” was spotted, a tool called an *alidade* (pictured below) was used to locate the fire. Lookouts then phoned or radioed fire dispatch officers who pinpointed the burn location and deployed fire fighting crews.

Betty Murnik, who worked in two towers in the 1940s described the lonely job of a fire lookout:

“It (was) a lot of hours all by yourself. No radios allowed — no reading material. You were looking all the time. The tower swayed up there. There was rain mixed with snow one day, and the geese were flying between me and ground.”

LOCATING A FIRE



The Fifield Fire Lookout Tower is located 5 miles east of Fifield on State HWY 70. The tower will be listed on the National Register of Historic Places and is maintained by the Chequamegon-Nicolet National Forest.

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Above the Treetops

THE FIFIELD FIRE TOWER



CHEQUAMEGON-NICOLET NATIONAL FOREST

HOW HIGH?

The Fifield fire tower stands 100 feet high and was built in 1932. A galvanized steel base supports a 7-foot square cab which has a wooden floor, windows, and a pyramid-shaped steel roof. At one time, nearly 40 towers stood vigilant in the Wisconsin northwoods, lifting lookouts above the trees to detect and report forest fires.

OTHER TOWERS OF INTEREST

Of the 38 original fire lookout towers built in the 1930s on the Chequamegon-Nicolet National Forest, only a few remain today. They include:

- Mountain Tower
Interpreted and open to the public
Oconto County
- Jump River Tower
Taylor County
- West Fork Tower
Sawyer County
- Clam Lake Tower
Ashland County
- Longmile Tower
Bayfield County



Forestry and the Fire Lookout Tower - Then and Now

LOGGING IN THE 1800S

Wisconsin's earliest logging operations had selected only the most suitable and profitable timber. By the late 1800s, demands from the State's furniture, paper, and tanning industries led to an increase in the harvesting. Lumberjacks swept across the central and northern portions of Wisconsin, employing new methods of harvesting which completely cleared forests of almost all usable trees. The result was a wasteland of stumps, brush, and bark.

FUEL FOR THE FIRE

Slash, bark and stumps left by logging practices created a tinder box during hot summers with long periods of drought. In the dust bowl era from 1930-1934, nearly 3,000 fires burned 336,000 acres each year in Wisconsin. Over a million acres of trees and property were destroyed and thousands of lives were lost. Crisscrossing the state to move timber, trains sometimes caused fires when sparks from the rails ignited brush piled along the route.

FIRE DETECTION FROM A TOWER

By the early 1930s, Wisconsin had established fire-protection districts throughout the State. Within the Chequamegon-Nicolet National Forest, 38 towers were constructed and linked by telephone line to fire dispatch offices. In 1938, the Federal Communications Commission approved the use of ultra-high frequency radios, and fire towers were soon equipped with these devices. Further technological advances included the use of airplanes for fire surveillance. By 1980, pilots largely replaced the role of National Forest fire lookouts.

FIRE FIGHTING TODAY

Today, patrolling aircraft play a major role in monitoring the size, speed, and intensity of wild fires—pilots direct ground crews to fire locations. These modern practices have eliminated the need for fire lookouts to sit in towers for long hours. While the Fifield Tower is no longer actively used, the State of Wisconsin still staffs many of its towers during peak fire season. Though it may stand vacant, the Forest Service is committed to the preservation of the Fifield Tower as an important symbol of Wisconsin's forest history.

