

The Summer of 1920 on Smith Mountain Fire Lookout

Weiser National Forest, Idaho

By Esther L. Binning

Heritage Program

Payette National Forest

U.S. Department of Agriculture - Intermountain Region

In 1971, Esther L. Binning wrote the following account of her experiences in 1920 on Smith Mountain Lookout with her husband, George H. Binning, who helped build the D4 cabin / cupola style lookout that year.

"In 1920, my husband decided to try a lookout job on one of the highest peaks near the Seven Devil territory. He went in early to help build the tiny square cabin on the top-most peak of Smith Mountain. It being close to 9,000 feet high, was all boulders on top and had to be tied by huge cables to the largest to keep from being blown off in the ever-present wind.

"There was a 90-mile branch of the Union Pacific which ran due north into the wilderness for all sorts of transportation. As there were only four or five automobiles in town, one depended on either horse or train to the upper country.

"I packed a few clothes in an Army duffel bag, rented our three-room unmodernized house, took our huge red setter (named Red) on a leash, boarded the little train, getting off 50 miles later.

"I found a man who was driving a rig into the town of Bear. Bear was a very very small gathering - Post Office - little store - Forest Ranger's cabin - and a dwelling or so - all amid the largest stand of Yellow Pine or Ponderosa Pine this beautiful state boasted of.

"The rig was a small, flat-bottomed truck with no sides - a single seat across the front and an open engine to cough and sneeze and lurch over what had been deep mud - now dried and rutted. Red was the size of a small calf - he stood on a plank back of our seat and when the going got really rough would wrap his big tail around my neck in front of him. He was the largest setter I have seen, when he'd jump up and put his paws on my husband's shoulders he was all of six feet tall.



"Upon reaching Bear, I was met by a very hunchbacked, frail little man who didn't look too pleased to see me. I suppose he thought I meant trouble. He picked up the duffel bag - looked around and growled about 'the rest of your gear' - and was greatly surprised and pleased when he found the bag to be all of it. 'Thought you would have a trunk or so,' he commented.

"He brought out two saddle horses - and again was gloomy upon hearing I'd never ridden horses. We had 11 miles to go - up and up into more wilderness. Somehow, the horse I rode knew I lacked authority and 'know-how' and kept lagging behind - and stopped at every bite to eat in spite of me. Finally the Ranger (Lafferty) had me change horses - but in no time the second horse was doing the same. I seemed to be a complete failure and just trailed along behind as best I could.

"Red was in his glory and traveled many more than 11 miles before we stopped. Once I ventured a remark about the beauty of the few dead trees so starkly shining against the deep green ones behind them. Their bark was long gone and their trunks had been wind and rain-polished to a shining silver grey of great beauty. For a moment the little Ranger lighted up - so to speak - saying something about his sister who was an artist and how few people ever thought a dead tree to be other than ugly. I decided he meant that as a sort of compliment as he began to point out various interesting facts as we rode along.

"It was evening before we arrived - and to find the lookout not quite finished. The rocky top of the mountain was scorched and burned by the many lightning strikes and the little cabin not only needed tying down but wired to catch the bolts of lightning in future storms. So I was to stay down the side of the mountain in the old cabin. It was one room - no doors or windows - a bed - table - tree stumps for chairs - the little cook stove was on the porch, the floor of which had been eaten into holes where the porcupines had chewed for the grease spilled by other lookout men.

"Across the yard was the spring for our water - and I can still see the faces of the lovely little monkey flowers - buttercups - dog-toothed violets - clustered in bright profusion about the tiny pool of wonderfully cold clear water. No pollution in those days.

"The little Ranger turned right around and headed back - to ride down the trail in the moonlight. A frail, little man in body but no Ranger today could equal his rugged spirit - his great interest and knowledge of the forest as it was in those days of virgin wilderness. I was greatly complimented when at the end of the season he visited us in the valley below. I made the coffee so strong it was almost thick because he told me one should never wash the pot - just add fresh grounds to the ones there as long as the pot held enough water.

"I was no cook - having been born and raised in Chicago, cooking for mountain men was a frightening project.

"One day the head forestry man was to be there - I remember I had opened a can of peas and creamed them - there were two identical enameled coffee pots - one held "drippings" of all sorts and flavours, one was for coffee. As I was told this gentleman (who later became the chief of the U.S. Forest Service) preferred tea - I cleaned the coffee pot - put the tea leaves in - boiled water in a pan and poured it in the pot the last thing.

"Mr. Rice (supervisor of Weiser and old Payette Forests in the 1920s) ate what I now know was a very poor meal and drank for or five cups of tea before I noticed a green scum on top of his last cup and

realized with horror the tea and boiled water had gone into the pot of drippings in my confusion over fixing a meal for so important a man.

"He merely smiled and said 'some people put rancid butter in their tea and he quite liked the flavour of these drippings.' I left as soon as I could and dropped salted tears into the clear water of the little pool. He was indeed a gentleman and rode his many miles on horse trails and slept in the open and never carried a gun or weapon of any kind. No wonder he rose to the top chief of all forestry.

"I used to climb straight up the trail to the cabin above - sometimes racing the clouds as they came along as it was an eerie feeling to be closed in by one. There were large flocks of grouse - not at all afraid of me - today, it is pure luck to see one or two.

"When I would be in the lower cabin I could hear the men's conversation away up on the top though they talked in a natural tone. They were amazed when I repeated their words, they were at least 500 yard above me.

"Finally the lookout was finished and we could move up - the water was carried up in waterbags on the back of the horse we had rented. The lookout proper was a small second-story affair with windows in all directions - an alidade in the center and a telephone to check each day with lookouts on other points. I learned to know their voices apart and it was most interesting to meet them all when the snow began and we met below at the little Ranger's cabin at Bear.

"There were many interesting days for me - one time we walked over a 15-foot snow drift in July to a tiny lake where a deserted mine lay, everything just as the people left it. They had gone down the narrow trail with only what they could pack out on horses. We wandered through the empty buildings.

"The shelves in the kitchen were full of spices and odds and ends. A baby bonnet and shawl were on a hook behind a door that flapped lonesomely in that never-ending high mountain wind. We left it all as we found it, trying to conjure up the images of those disillusioned people.

"We had no fresh meat - bacon chiefly - and once a sheepherder walked in to trade some lamb for bacon. Sometimes my husband could leave long enough to get a few trout. Fishing was fishing in those days.

"One night before we moved up to the lookout old Red came whining softly to our bed and then we heard the hollow thumping of a bear as he crossed our yard and went on - we found out later, to the sheepherder's supplies cashed down the mountain side - tearing it all to pieces and eating what he could.

"The flocks of sheep that were driven across the mountains would sometimes be a welcome noise of cries and tinkling bells across the wilderness, but the damage they left behind them was a terrible thing to me, Where ferns - wildflowers, bushes of huckleberries, salmon berries - everything edible within their reach - had been lush and beautiful - it would be stripped and the earth's deep dust, cut by their sharp hooves, and left with a mighty stench as great as their destruction. So it goes with sheep!

"When alone, I would have to climb up to the lookout room thru a hole in the ceiling and to this day, if really tired, I find myself in dreams trying to pull myself up thru that hole by hanging onto the window frame and hauling myself to the room above. I can remember being afraid I'd never quite make it.

"Twenty-five years went by before I had an opportunity to return. The porch roof of the old cabin had fallen in - the old stove was rusted and all apart, but I found one of its lids, bought it home and cleaned and varnished it and use it as a hot pad. A more spacious lookout had been built above, and a road for cars went into the old mine.

"Bear is more of a town now, but dries and swelters in a hot sun, a rattlesnake had left its skin on the road in front of the P.O. The enormous Yellow Pines were all gone - only stumps left to rot in the ground. The deep shade, the ferns gone, dust on all the bushes from the cars - few fish in the creeks - many of which had been man-straightened, so lost their natural volume of water and fish as well.

"The cars brought progress - but also account for a destruction that was never meant to be on this earth.

"One has only to see this within the last 50 years, to wonder what man intends to do - within the next 50."