

Eagle Peak Fire Lookout

I think it was in the summer of 1968, late June. I spent a little more than a month on a fire lookout just east of Lake Coeur d'Alene and south of Wallace Idaho. Another graduate student in Political Science at WSU (Washington State University) had told me and my wife about the opportunity to spend part of the summer on a fire lookout. We worked for the Idaho Lands and Forests group and they put us up in a motel in, perhaps, Coeur d'Alene for the night, before we went to the fire lookout.

We drove up the winding road to the top of the mountain (fifty-two hundred feet) in my old half-ton pickup truck and climbed up the tower sixty feet (staircase) with a walkway around the tower to examine our new home for the summer.

It had spectacular views across Lake Coeur d'Alene into Eastern Washington and we could see the weather coming from the West at least one hundred miles away. It was like a comfortable camping trip high up in the air.

We had occasional visitors, sometimes little boys who more than once told their Moms that they had to pee and were allowed to "make water" over the railing around the cat-walk that surrounded the tower.

My wife had become pregnant with my daughter and was morning sick off the tower, much like the boys. We had a Coleman stove, propane fridge, bed and all the comforts of home. In the middle of the tower, there was a table arrangement with maps and eyeglass setup that would allow us, with a map, to pinpoint lightning strikes when they came, which we then would report to the town, Certaldo, to Office of the Land and Forest people, via two-way radio that featured the boring conversation between the timber cruising people from Lands and Forests. It was on all the time and it was a pain.

Once a week, one of us would go to town to do our laundry, shop and often we would have a beer at the tavern before heading back to Eagle Peak. So on the day that was my turn to go to town, I tried to start the pickup truck to no avail as there was no power from the battery. I raised the hood of the truck to find the remnants of a porcupine meal: they had eaten all the hoses and battery cables and left a few calling-card quills in the radiator.

I was able to get the Lands and Forests people to bring me the necessary parts to reassemble and get the truck on the road again in a day or so. They also brought me a roll of chicken wire and I built a chicken wire moat around the truck to repel boarders.

Other interesting examples on the fire lookout were the visitation of black bears occasionally. We had a garbage hutch with a flap lid to bury our garbage away from the tower and we used paper bags from the grocery store to cache garbage in the bin. More than once, a smallish black bear had come to flip open the hatch and extract a bag or two to haul out for lunch.

One afternoon the tower started shaking as we were trying to have a little afternoon nap. We thought it was an earthquake, but when we looked over the edge of the tower, we saw a couple of wild mustang horses rubbing their backs on the guy-wires that anchored the tower.

At least forty years later, while making a trip to Washington state, I was driven to do a nostalgic trip to Eagle Peak. I wanted to show my second wife where I spent part of a summer in the '60's.

I looked up the Eagle Peak site on the internet to discover that it had been torn down about ten years before, but I wanted to share the spectacular view with my wife. I was completely driven.

I drove up the access road that I vaguely recalled, where I encountered a barricade that closed the road. I was driven to see the view and my wife trailing, I set off for the remembered tower. My wife finally gave up, but we remained within shouting distance as I continued to trudge on. Finally, I realized that this was a failed Don Quixote mission, so we walked back to the van and the tower remains a fond memory.