



Mallard Peak lookout as it appeared in the summer of 1949.

DON RICHARD MATHIS
HISTORICAL CONSULTANT

3114 BIRCH STREET
CARMICHAEL, CA. 95008

Mallard Peak Lookout

The devastating fires of 1910 in the Northwest served notice to the fledging United States Forest Service that a system to provide earlier warning of fires was needed. To this end the Forest Service began a program to build lookout stations on the high peaks where storms could be observed and smokes identified while they were still small enough to be managed. Mallard Peak along the divide between the St. Joe and Clearwater Rivers in Northern Idaho was an ideal location for one of these stations.

Mallard Peak was used as a lookout point for some years prior to the construction of the lookout cabin. The point was serviced from a tent camp located in the saddle a half mile down the hill to the south of Mallard Peak. The principal source of water for the lookout and the rag camp has always been the live spring just off the lip of the saddle to the east.

The first means of communication used on the point was heliograph. This device consisted of a tripod mounted system of mirrors and a shutter and was used only the summer of 1915 on Mallard Peak. This proved to be difficult due to its reliance on sunlight which was often not bright enough. The person manning the heliograph also had to be skilled in sending and receiving Morse code by flashing reflected light off of mirrors using a shutter and keeping the unit aligned to the sun.

A telephone line was eventually used for communication between the tent camp and the Pole Mountain ranger station located at Elk Prairie built in 1924. This ranger station had jurisdiction over the area until 1936 when a new station was built by the Civilian Conservation Corps at the junction of Red Ives Creek and the St. Joe River. The telephone line continued from the saddle rag camp up the ridge to Mallard Peak with a phone station located on the peak prior to the cabin's construction. This line was a single number nine galvanized wire hung from trees using a two part insulator. The circuit was completed by a common ground wire anchored in moist soil. Electric power for the phone was provided by a crank magneto ringer and number six batteries providing six volts.

The first steps for site preparation were taken during the summer of 1928 once the decision had been made in the late 1920s to build a cabin on Mallard Peak. The peak came to a point which had to be leveled with dynamite, crowbar, and muscle. About four feet was taken off the top of the peak to make a relatively flat area upon which to build a cabin. By the fall of 1928 the site was ready to receive materials for construction. Manpower for site preparation was provided from the Pole Mountain , Ward Peak , and Avery, Idaho ranger districts.

Materials for the cabin were pre-cut and moved from Missoula, Montana by rail to Avery. From Avery they were trucked to Bear Skull (the end of the road at that time) and packed on to Mallard Peak by mule train, generally following ridge top

trails. The movement of materials took place during the early summer of 1929. Construction was started and completed that year.

The actual building of the cabin was done by a crew of three men who did nothing but build lookouts, traveling from site to site assembling the pre-cut unit with minor modifications required by terrain. This crew camped at the saddle near the spring during the two weeks it took to put the cabin together.

The lookout cabin was built according to a plan developed by the Forest Service, Region 1, in 1928. This became the first L-4 plan for lookout cabins. It was fourteen feet square with a low seven foot ceiling. For the first few years the interior had exposed rafters. A ceiling was added in 1939 by Sam Irvine from St. Maries, Idaho serving as lookout that summer. It had a gabled roof covered with wood shingles. The outside of the cabin was painted an off white color (gray) and the inside was dark green. A steel cable from each corner anchored the cabin to the top of the peak. These cables were eventually discarded because it was found that the extreme cold in winter caused the cables to contract which tended to pull the cabin apart. Lightning arresting equipment covered the cabin and the internal metal equipment. Hinged fold down shutters covered the outside of the windows when the cabin was not being used as a lookout. When being used, the shutters were braced up outside above the glass forming a sun shade.

Three of the four walls of the lookout had five slide-by windows consisting of six panes of glass about nine by fourteen inches in two tiers. The fourth wall had four windows and a door with glass panes on the top. There were two spring beds hinged to the south and west walls about eight inches off the hardwood floor. They could be folded up against the wall during the day. A Lang wood stove occupied the northeast corner of the cabin and was used for baking, cooking, and heat. A table was hinged to the north wall and could be folded against the wall when not in use. Storage shelves lined the east wall where food, cooking utensils, and small tools were kept.

Rations were sparse in the early days. They included canned goods like brown bread, hash, pork and beans, roast beef, cheese, fruit, coffee, and some dry goods like flour, sugar, baking powder, beans, and rice. Later pre-packaged ration packs were prepared. A lookout cookbook was part of the equipment. Lanterns, candles, and flashlights were used for illumination. In the early evening hours mountain peaks could be located as lookouts lit their lanterns and the peaks looked like stationary fire flies hovering in the distance. Garbage was thrown down the cliff on the east side. A pit was later attempted, but digging in the rocks was near impossible. A pit toilet consisted of boards nailed between two trees with a shallow pit in the rocks. A manufactured toilet seat was installed, but a curious goat pulled it off with his horns and for some time was observed with a strange collar about his neck. An outhouse was built below the cabin to the east, but snow destroyed it so the original means between the trees was restored.

A circular Bosworth fire finder map board was mounted on a pedestal in the center of the cabin. The telephone was fastened to this. The telephone used earphones and a chest microphone so that the lookout had his hands free to work the fire finder during lightning storms and smoke sightings. A short stool with insulators on the four legs was near the fire finder. The lookout could stand on it while using the fire finder without fear of electric shock.

Outside the door on the south wall was where shovel, Pulaski, six foot cross cut saw, a five gallon back pack and two gallon water bags were hung. Fire packs containing tools and rations were also hung outside on that wall.

During the 1930s the lookout was manned by two people every fire season. When a fire was spotted in the area which was accessible to the cabin, one or both men would shoulder tools and rations and become smoke chasers, hike to the fire, extinguish it, then return to the cabin to be available for the next fire.

In 1936 the Red Ives Ranger District was established and the station was built by the C.C.C. A road was constructed over the divide into the St. Joe station from St. Regis, Montana and the lookout came under the new station's jurisdiction. Since Mallard Peak was on the border between the St. Joe and Clearwater Forests, a telephone line was extended from the lookout down to Canyon Ranger Station and the lookout serviced both forests with administrative responsibility resting with the Red Ives District.

During the 1940s the lookout force was reduced to one person and until use of the lookout was discontinued in 1953 one person generally made up the smoke chaser force operating out of the cabin. Aircraft became the vogue for detection and delivery of fire crews and equipment in the 1950s. Also, additional roads had been built into the back country and could be used to move fire crews to the scene of a blaze. The romantic phase of a lonely lookout passed as more modern means were utilized. Many lookout cabins were subsequently destroyed by administrative order to clean up the forest and reduce Forest Service liability when cabins were used by unauthorized persons. Most were burned. Mallard Peak lookout escaped this fate because of its isolated location. Charlie Scribner said it was just too long a hike to go in and burn the cabin.

Between 1953 and 1980 the lookout cabin fell into disrepair. Windows were broken out, the stove, fire finder, telephone and other installed devices were looted. The cabin was generally vandalized. The hardwood floor warped in the weather, and resident mountain goats made the cabin their haven. Some reclamation work was done by interested parties who saw the value of having a back country shelter. These were usually horsemen, hunters, and back packers. The area still has an abundance of wild life, and the cabin is an ideal place from which to observe it. Mountain goats claim the peak as home and bear, moose, elk, deer, martin, mink, porcupine, cougar, coyotes, bob cats and other species have been readily observed.

In 1980 a proposal was prepared to have the Mallard Peak lookout cabin placed on the National Register of Historic Places and begin some restoration work. Cort Sims, Panhandle National Forests Archeologist, was instrumental in supporting this effort and during the summers of 1981 and 1982 research was conducted, documentation prepared, applications made, materials supplied, and some restoration was started.

Mallard Peak lookout is now a registered historic site and an example of an important phase of forest management. It now falls under the protection of law and remains a monument to those who contributed so much in the early days of the United States Forest Service to preserve and maintain the forests which so many enjoy today.

By: Don R. Mathis
Historical Consultant
3114 Birch Street
Carmichael, CA 95608-3606

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