

Airway Beacons PIT Project, June 2011

Cibola National Forest, New Mexico

By - PIT III Project Team

A third successful aviation history Passport in Time (PIT) project took place in the Mt. Taylor District of the Cibola NF in June, 2011, again thanks to a crew of dedicated people! Volunteers from Wisconsin, Arizona, California and New Mexico teamed up to preserve and interpret Beacon Site 61, atop a ridge on the Continental Divide at the Oso Ridge Fire Lookout (elevation ~8700 ft). The site includes the base of the long-gone beacon tower, which held a fire lookout cab as well, and the original generator hut that housed the power to light the airway beacon¹. A 1930s cabin that once served as the residence for the lookout, is also squeezed onto the small volcanic knob near the currently used lookout tower.

The key PIT III goal was to preserve the exterior of the in-situ genhut and to begin to develop interpretation so that we can share the history of the "illuminated sky road". The project had several other goals: to replace the roof of the 1930s fire lookout cabin so this building would not be lost to the elements, to record oral histories about Oso Ridge and early aviation in the region, and to document the remains of the abandoned Acomita Intermediate Landing Field - Site 63 on the LA-A airway, just south of Mt Taylor on Acoma Pueblo lands.

As in the past, PIT III volunteers presented their airway research to the public at an evening event in Grants, and solicited local site information. The New Mexico State University, Grants Branch, displayed exhibits about the 2009 and 2010 PIT projects including a scale model of a typical beacon site, and a variety of artifacts from plane crash sites.

This was a full week of work amid heat, haze from wildfires, and persistent 'face flies'. Returning and new volunteers persevered with good nature, aided by a home-cooked luncheon served by a local volunteer's wife. FS budgets were low this year but a volunteer came through with much-appreciated souvenirs of the PIT week: "U.S. Lighthouse Service, Airways Division" ball caps and "Airways Keeper" certificates.

¹ The key to success of early US air commerce was the 1930s system of lighted beacons for night navigation based on Postal Service airmail efforts begun in the '20s. Emergency landing strips, 40 to 50 miles apart, were linked by lighted beacon towers at 10 to 15 mile intervals. In western New Mexico, the earliest air route was laid out by Transcontinental Air Transport (TAT), along historic Route 66 north of the Zuni Mountains. However, after a tragic 1929 Ford TriMotor crash on Mt. Taylor (recorded by the 2009 PIT project), federal aviation agencies mandated that the airway route be straightened to avoid the peak and to pass south of the Zunis, across what is now NF land. This route became the Los Angeles-Amarillo (LA-A) airway, crossing the Continental Divide just south of Grants, NM. Several sites on this route were surveyed by the 2010 PIT volunteer team. The genhut for Site 61 (610 miles from the western start of the airway in California), was preserved during the 2011 PIT.

The Oso genhut 61 preservation is just the beginning of efforts to bring aviation history to the public. Cibola County Historical Society is working to preserve GenHut 62, once sited on the Forest 8 miles east of Oso Ridge Lookout. This genhut was recently moved to the Grants Airport, where the Society is developing a regional aviation history center; Oso Beacon 61 will be a satellite site for visitors to the center.



At the start of PIT 2011.



Success! The genhut for Beacon 61 preserved.



Replacing roof of 1930s cabin in tight quarters.



Acoma tribal official showing PIT volunteer large trash dump associated with the Acomita Airfield. Our appreciation goes to Acoma Pueblo for granting us permission to visit the site.