

Monjeau Lookout: Jewel of the Southwest

by Mark Gutzman, New Mexico FFLA Chapter Director

The history of the Monjeau Peak Lookout began in 1936 with the construction of a D-6 cupola type ground-house lookout by the Civilian Conservation Corp (Figure 1). The D-6 provided living quarters for the lookout in the main 14'X14' cabin, and access from a ladder into the 1/4 scale observation cupola on top.

In 1940, the D-6 was replaced by what is probably the most unique lookout in the Southwest. The new lookout tower's design, constructed of native stone, was probably an homage to the original D-6 with its lookout residence set below the 7'X7' observation cab.

The cab, manufactured by International Derrick Company (plan #B6601), is set atop a seven foot square breezeway providing ladder access into the cab through a trapdoor. This structure sits on the northeast corner of the fourteen foot square observers cabin, allowing the roof to be used as an open air observation deck.

Access to the tower is by way of a sweeping staircase of native stone that rises to meet two more staircases, the first of which accesses the observer's cabin, and the second, the breezeway and lookout cab (Figure 2).



Figure 1. Monjeau Peak's D-6 Lookout circa 1936.



Figure 3. The 1960s alteration of the windows provided an unobstructed view of the surrounding landscape.

Sometime in the 1960s, the windows were changed to provide an unobstructed view through panoramic panes (Figure 3). These windows were replaced with the original style during the 2006 restoration of the lookout; although there was verbal opposition during the planning stage by fire personnel, stating that the full paned windows were better, providing optimal unobstructed viewing (Figure 4).



Figure 4. Monjeau cab after 2006 restoration.

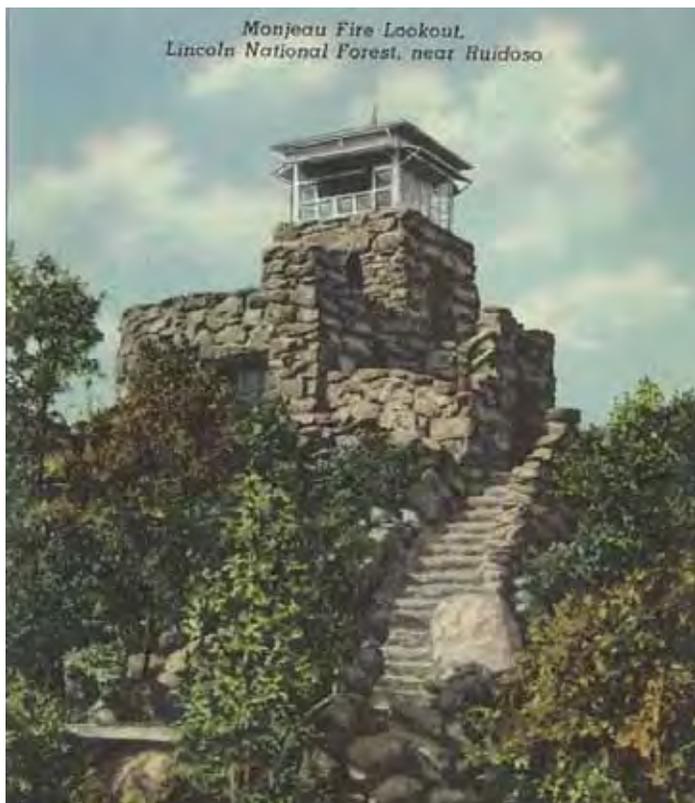


Figure 2. This painting (by unknown artist) illustrates the beauty of this unique fire lookout.

Due to its unique (in the southwest) "Rustic Style" construction, and its location within the Smokey Bear Ranger District (birthplace of Smokey Bear), Monjeau has been a major tourist destination since its construction in 1940, and sees thousands of visitors every year.

The history of the "Rustic Style" is presented in the USFS pamphlet FS-710, September 2001, The Built Environment Image Guide: For the National Forests and Grasslands. An excerpt from this document is as follows:

"By 1940, W. Ellis Groben, Chief Architect of the Forest Service, had written Architectural Trends of Future Forest Service Buildings. In it, Groben decried the widespread use of inappropriate urban styles on many forests. He advocated "buildings of a more distinctive character...which both express the purposes of the Forest Service and which are more appropriate to their particular locales."

All these guides emphasized the need for harmonious design using local natural materials such as timber and stone. They also called for the use of trained design professionals.

The style was generally referred to as "rustic architecture." It was based upon a canny combination of pioneer building skills and techniques, principles of the Arts and Crafts movement, and the premise of harmony with the landscape. The guides captured and codified the prevailing design that already had been practiced for many decades in natural settings such as New York's Adirondack Reserve and the early national parks.

The work of the CCC influenced virtually every national forest. While the architectural style was consistently rustic, featuring stone and massive timbers, regional variations that reflected cultural context and the availability of building materials did occur.

The rustic style resonated strongly because it reflected the character of the forests themselves and stood in pleasing contrast to the increasing "civilization" of the rest of the country. People sensed a connection to the uniqueness of the natural settings and to frontier traditions. These bonds contributed strongly to the agency image for decades. For many people, rustic architecture represents the ideal for natural parks and forests. Indeed, the work of the CCC is a legacy we cherish to this day' (Chapter 2: A Brief History of USDA Forest Service Built Environments-the Civilian Conservation Corp and Public Works Era; www.fs.fed.us/recreation/programs/beig).

Monjeau Lookout was added to the National Register of Historic Places in 1988 along with many others in the Southwest, through a thematic nomination that is presented in the Cultural Resources Management Report: Lookouts in the Southwestern Region, published in September of 1989.

Forest Service lookouts staff Monjeau seasonally, providing both fire detection duties as well as docent services to the public. On June 4th of this year, a dry lightning strike started the Little Bear fire in steep terrain within the White Mountain Wilderness, managed by the Smokey Bear Ranger District (Figure 5). The fire that was initially assessed at 1/4 acre by the first two firefighters on scene who were dropped in by helicopter, would ultimately burn



Figure 5. Two firefighters were dropped in by helicopter to make the initial fire assessment.

approximately 44,330 acres. The fire started just south of Elk Point, at an elevation of 10,200 ft., near the head of the Gamble Canyon-Three Rivers and Upper Rio Bonito watersheds. On June 6th, Lincoln NF employee Linda Cole took a photo of Monjeau still under clear blue skies (Figure 6).

Late on the 8th of June, 30-40 mph winds began to cause significant spotting across the fire line; and the fire quickly grew from 8,000 acres the morning of the 9th, to 15,000 acres by that evening. Since the lookout cab was the only part of the lookout that sustained significant damage, it appears that superheated winds blowing through Monjeau's breezeway probably ignited the wooden floor of the cab which then began to consume its interior from the bottom up (Figure 7). All of the window glass, chair, Osborne pedestal (the Osborne Firefinder

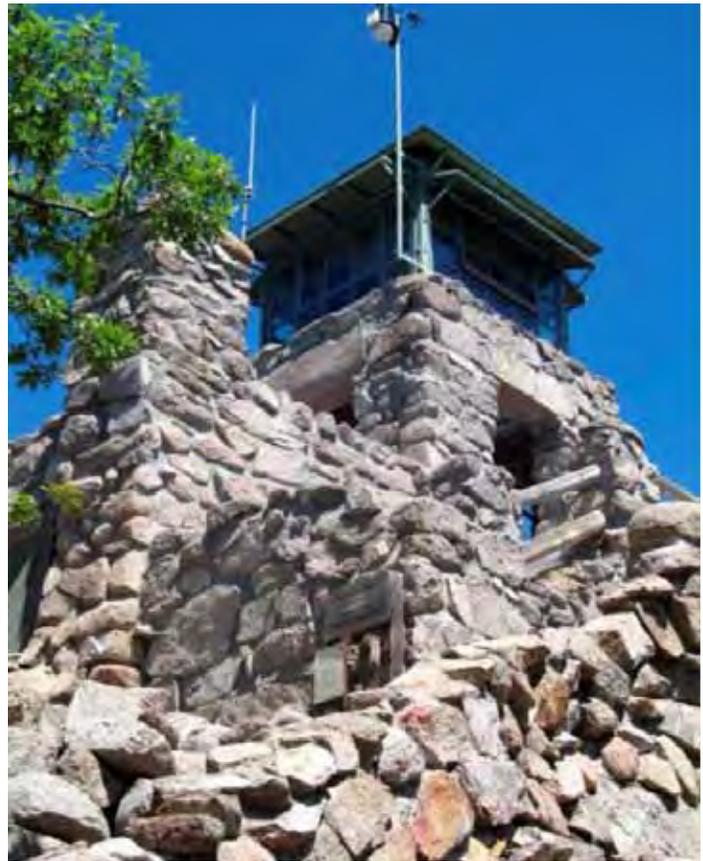


Figure 6. Monjeau Lookout under blue skies.

was taken from the site before archaeological staff arrived, and is missing), and the various other accouterments of observation not totally consumed by the fire were found in a pile on the observation deck (cabin roof) floor. The only damage to the Observer's cabin were a couple of minor cracks in two of its windows.



Figure 7. Photo taken standing in the breezeway looking up.

The tower structure itself appears to have passed through the fire unscathed save for a coating of soot. In fact, the timber hand rails, and wooden description sign (and NHLR register plaque) did not burn.

Assessments are currently being made by USFS Archaeologists and Facility Engineers to restore this jewel of the southwest to its former glory; and hopefully by the 2013 Western Conference it will be.

For more images of Monjeau and the fire damage, visit the Lincoln NF's Flickr site at: <http://www.flickr.com/photos/lincolnnationalforest/sets/72157630528992842/>.