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Hilda Switzer Lundgren: 19 years In eight Fire Towers

80 feet up and all alone.....Hilda Switzer looks at life from a 25 metre fire tower.

Firewatcher is undeterred by bears, wolves, weather or isolation: Hilda keeps both feet on the ground despite her high position with the Saskatchewan forestry department. Between wolves, bears and almost total isolation, Hilda has her hands full. She is a fire watcher and at least eight hours of her day is spent 25 metres {80 feet} in a forest fire tower. !The first time I climbed a tower was 35 years ago in 1957 and I was very pregnant at the time,! she says. !When I had three little kids, 32 years ago, I got a job filling in for the summer at a tower at the north end of Montreal Lake as the tower person had a broken foot, {later called Molanosa Tower} . I had been working as a cook for CN crews in northern Ontario and I hated it. It was just rocks and water, water and rocks. I was on my own and I loved it. !This was Switzer's only experience as a fire watcher until much later, when her four children were on their own. !After the kids grew up, I heard of an opening for a fire watcher. I went to Prince Albert and applied for the job at a tower at Fort A La Corne, she says. !Because of my !previous experience! I got the job, but first, I told them, I better see if I could still climb a tower.! That was 13 years ago and Switzer now a 55 -year-old grandmother, speaks fondly of some of her harrowing experiences. Somewhat surprisingly, Switzer believes she has it good at the Birch Lake Tower in the Glaslyn forestry district.

No power, No plumbing : She has a one bedroom log cabin with a wood stove for cooking and heat and a coal oil lamp for light. There is no electricity {and no generator}, no plumbing {not even fresh water nearby}, no close neighbours and up until recently, no contact with the outside world except from the top of the tower. But with each passing day, through her own ingenuity, Switzer is coming closer to what is considered a civilized way of living. !When you're assigned to a tower, you're on your own. At the top of the tower the only thing in the lookout is the basic equipment you need to fires and plot and report their locations. Anything extra, you provide yourself. !When I first opened the trap-door at the top of the tower, there were no handholds or anything to grab to pull myself into the lookout, only a painted wood floor with an equipment cupboard blocking part of the way. And the worst part is getting back down onto the ladder. It feels like you're suspended in space until you get your feet on that first rung. So I got a small steel ladder and anchored it to the floor so I could pull myself up and let myself down.!

!Terrifying Experience!: For anyone who has never climbed a fire tower before. A narrow metal ladder attached to the open structure is only partially protected by encircling metal hoops. Every several steps, crossbeams make slipping a definite possibility. Carrying a cumbersome object, such as a camera bag , is not recommended. Beginners are advised not to look down, but also to avoid looking up at the clouds. Their movement, similar to standing near a moving train, creates the illusion that the tower is moving as well. Then again , looking up only

reinforces that idea that there is no end to the ladder. The best bet is to keep one's eyes on the treeline. I got tired hauling everything up and down with me," said Switzer. So I hooked up a pulley to raise and lower my equipment. I hoisted up a metal stool so I'd have somewhere to sit. I couldn't communicate with anyone from the ground because my radio couldn't pick up the signals. If a call came from another tower and I was down, I'd have to climb up to answer it. After it was clear that nothing would be done, I finally rounded up some coaxial cable and strung it to the top of the tower and back down to my truck battery. Now I can communicate from ground level and I have even rigged up a tiny television set. This will be a welcome change, because sometimes the silence in the forest can be deafening.

Grounded for Lightning.... These seemingly minor improvements have made a world of difference, Switzer says. Now, I've really got it good. At one of my towers, the ladder was in terrible shape and the floor was rotted out so bad that I had to be careful to walk on the crossbeams to keep from falling through. When I finally got someone from forestry to climb up to see for themselves, they ordered it torn down and replaced right away. Another place had no living quarters, until I talked them into getting a small portable bunkhouse. At her present location, Switzer has just had the tower grounded. During a storm, you can see big blue arcs of sparks, whenever lightning strikes. I always use the old counting system to see how far away the lightning is. When it's within five miles, I get down fast. But I figure if a lightning storm came up real sudden, I'd be better off staying put rather than be caught outside. Inside I'd be knocked senseless but I'd still have a chance to survive. That's better than being fried onto the ladder. From her perch above the trees, Switzer can see for 30 kilometres in all directions, an area of 800,000 acres. This is her second year at the Birch Lake Tower, which is much closer to her home in Holbein than previous location at Midnight Tower north of Glaslyn.

Bears and wolves visit Occasionally: She can spot bears, timber wolves and other animals in the clearing directly below, especially when her small dog barks a warning. But it's the animals that out at after dark that account for some frightening times. It's worst at night because the bears and timber wolves come," She says. I often hear wolves howling and think nothing of it, but the other night, when they stopped howling, I knew they were in the yard. The dog wouldn't even bark, it was so scared. They just love to eat up little dogs like her. I stuck my head out and saw two pairs of eyes and that was enough for me. I made enough noise to scare them away. The next night a bear came all around the cabin, clawing on the walls. I just kept thinking that one good swipe, he'd be through the wall. It was too dark to see to search outside but I remember I had a rifle. It was safely locked in my truck. I had my 22 though, so I fired and the bear was gone in the bush. The following night I sat in the truck and waited, thinking I would scare him off for good. Whenever the dog barked, I shone my flashlight around until finally I got so nervous about going back to the cabin, I drove all the way to Glaslyn and spent the night in my truck thinking what the hell am I doing this lousy job for. Now I keep the loaded gun in my cabin.

When Switzer isn't spotting fires, scaring away animals or coming up with ingenious ways to make life easier, she knits sweaters and socks for her family and friends. She has made so many that she now has several for sale at a service station in nearby Cater. She has finished knitting a sweater for herself, an original creation in Department of Forestry colors with Birch Hills running down one arm and the Tower down the other. Switzer is proud of where she works

and says the sweater will let everyone know this. Towers: North end Montreal Lk {later Molanosa Tower}, Birch Lk Tower, Big Sandy Tower, Elk House Tower { a three legged tower with a rotten cupola and tin roof, it was wired together with rusty wire & rusted off bolts} North Cabin Tower, Nisbet Tower and with Grant Devine's cut backs I was replaced by a whimpy kid from Forestry who I trained putting me out of a job, Minight Lk Tower and completed her time from 1976 - 1994 at the new Holbein Tower relief for Erwin Rusk
I miss the animal scares and a few others things but I miss the tower and the quiet of the north. At a barbecue at Tracey {Midnight & Birch Towers}& Joyce Lockharts with the staff Arnie Schmidt, Greg Hayes, Gail the secretary & baily, I was presented with a beautiful framed painting by Hiebert and a tower plaque after nineteen years I retired.