

RECOLLECTIONS OF A TOWERMAN

It has always puzzled me that some fellows found life at a fire tower boring. I found it anything but boring and looking over my old log books and records I have the idea that a very interesting book could be written about the experiences of a towerman.

However in the present instance only a general description can be given and many details must be omitted.

From 1963 to 1971 I was on four towers in the Meadow Lake Region, Midnight, Cold River, Mistohay and Divide.

In 1963 I went to Midnight. I had no vehicle of my own, so somebody, I forget who, took me and my baggage to Meadow Lake, where all my stuff, and plenty of it, was piled in the back entrance of the DNR office, and was the cause of much cussing until Bill Crothers came to pick me up.

I had never climbed a fire tower before, and I didn't feel very happy the first time. Midnight, like Birch and Sundance, was an old three-legged tower with wire bracing. The ladder rungs were further apart than on the four-legged ones, and the ladder was broken in several places. But before long I got used to it, and it seemed a perfectly natural way to go to work.

Of course the general public knows that government employees never do anything, and towermen do less than any others. Ha! The first damp day Bill came out from Glaslyn and asked if I would like to see Turtle Lake. Well, of course! I didn't notice he had two shovels in the back of the truck. We spent a delightful day digging a drainage ditch at the back of the campsite. I went out a number of times with Jack Davis the patrolman, and we hauled dirt and gravel to build up the camping pads.

Jack and I dug out young spruce out of the ditches along the highway and planted them in a thick belt round the tower site. We hauled water for them with a pumper-trailer. I still go in to see them once in a while. Every one of them was alive and healthy the last time I saw them, but the tower has moved.

The DNR telephone line to Meadow Lake had just recently been dismantled, and a lot of the wire and insulators were stored in an old barn at the tower.

The cabin at Midnight had a Selkirk chimney. One day during a thunderstorm there were a number of electrical discharges from the bottom cap of the chimney down to the stove top. They were about as thick as a lead pencil and hissed instead of banging or crackling as one might expect. It was rather unnerving, and I prevented any further occurrence by using an old antenna wire to ground the chimney outside.

There were two main fires that I spotted that year. One was started by a cat that caught fire, and the other was from a ground fire that had burned all winter. The latter could not be seen by any other tower, so I could not get a cross shot. It was finally definitely located by Stan Prystupa who climbed a hill to look around.

Late in the summer I went to Birch Tower to help Albert Klavins cut stub posts and logs and build a log garage. We took turns on the tower if conditions warranted it. My son, Chris, who was fourteen, unofficially kept an eye open at Midnight.

That fall the famous CC23 was operating in Meadow Lake Park, construction foreman Jim Mollison. There was a lot going on, road building, gaveling, campsite construction and all. Hector McKenzie was second-in-command because he could read blue-prints. Ed LaRocque was straw boss, and I was secretary and bull cook.

When I left I wrote up a Progress Report after the manner of the old adventure stories, and left it on Jim's desk just to bug him, but it tickled his fancy and he showed it around. It later appeared in the Dome. (Newsletter)

The next year, 1966, I was at Cold River when that tower was half a mile from the Alberta border. Here I disgraced myself by reporting a capsized boat on Cold Lake, which turned out to be a bunch of floating reeds, when the police boat finally located it. I felt a sudden urge to join the French Foreign Legion.

That year there was a big fire on the Air Weapons Range. I was asked to go up the tower extra early one morning to relay information to Albert Sharp, who was out with a Type 7. (two-way radio) While in the tower I happened to see something to the north of me, not a smoke but a faint wobble in the atmosphere. I felt suspicious and called Albert. He went up the Martineau road, stopping wherever there was a good vantage point. Fortunately the air was clear and reception was good. Eventually he spotted a fire in a spruce bluff on the shore of Cold Lake. We alerted the CO, Ben Siemans, who went up with the boat, and in no time there were five men and a pump on the scene. The next day it was declared "out". It could have been a bad one, but luck and good communications saved the day.

Communications were not always that good. Our great enemy was static. My notes are full of entries such as "out for static" "Impossible to read for static" When you got a steady stream of sparks across the ground switch you might as well pack up.

In 1965 I went to Mistohay. This was a good tower, but my chief recollections of the place are the almost impossible trail, and bears. I have never anywhere seen as many bears. They look in at the windows, they left dirty paw marks on the cabin walls, and I came within an ace of being nailed by an angry she-bear.

About the middle of June we had a big rain. I got three and a half inches at the tower, but Goodsoil they had six. Highway 55 and 25 were washed out in dozens of places. I had a '47 Dodge car, and I managed to get down the trail with it. Joe Roth met me and guided me to a point on 55 from which I could get home. In Pierceland they only had an inch.

The next year I went back working for the LID. (Local Improvement District, similar to today's RM) but in '69 I got bumped and returned to the DNR, this time on Divide tower.

Apart from the Mistohay bears I saw more wildlife at Divide than anywhere else. Moose, deer, lynx, birds and a reasonable number of bears. The tower had been raised to 100 feet, but even so it was not much higher than the trees. It was not a very easy tower to observe from. Ordinarily it was Ed LaRoque's tower, but he was off that summer on sick leave. Being in such heavy forest it was always damp. On May 19 we had 3 inches of snow. The only fire I can readily recall was over by Lac ??? where a truck caught fire, and by evening 350 acres were burning.

On July 11 I went back to Mistohay. The Apollo flight to the moon was the big news then. On the night they landed I went to Peerless and watched the event on tv at the Rainbow Inn. That night there was a terrific downpour and on the way back to the tower I got hopelessly stuck and spent the night in the car. The Apollo crew went all the way to the moon and back without a hitch, and I couldn't even make the 20 miles back to the tower.

This was the year they were experimenting with the new fire danger readings, and I was the guinea pig. FFMC, DMC, DC, ADMC, FWI. I am not sure I can remember now what they all were.

I had found a number of skeletons of cattle down by an oil well site. One day a twin-engine plane flew around, but had to go back to Goodsoil to land. Later a car came up with several men. The cattle had been poisoned by something left at the oil site. The owner was claiming for them and these people were assessing the damage.

1970 Mistohay again. On the way in a burnt out truck was blocking the trail. The next day two plainclothes police with a dog came to the tower. It appeared that two bad actors, a man and a woman, had camped for a while in the tower cabin not long before I got there. For some unknown reason they deliberately burnt their truck. Then they kidnapped an elderly couple and their car from Goodsoil, and made them drive them down somewhere on the prairie where they locked them in a granary. The police eventually arrested the pair. They told the police that there had been another man with them, but they had tied him to a tree at Mistohay and shot him. The police didn't entirely believe this story, but they asked me to watch out for any concentration of birds or anything else suspicious. Two or three days later I saw a raven flying up the ravine with something red in it's beak. And then another. So I went up the ravine- and found two ravens pulling at a dead rabbit. No human body was ever found.

1971 the big event was the introduction of VHF. It didn't entirely eliminate the static problem, but it was a great improvement. It was a line-of-sight affair, but when the repeater was set up at Divide it worked very well. And it was portable.

A sketch such as this would be incomplete without a mention of the funny things that sometimes came over the air.

“wait till we see if it's where it is”

“I think that was all, except there was something else”

“ is Charlie there or am I talking to him”

“C25 – Dorintosh...C25 – Dorintosh..oh, that's me!”

“ I don't want to go over my head, or else I catch it at the other end”

“Do you want the mike or the speaker?” “ I want the speaker, the thing you speak into”

There are many more but this will suffice here. Let none of us be smug. We have all pulled boners on the radio at some time or another.

More and more we were sent to work in the park, which I detested, so in 1972 I was back in the LID where I stayed till I retired.

I think I got in on one of the best and most interesting periods of the DNR. In '63 at least some things were still primitive enough to be interesting. Even our old radio set-up seems primitive compared to present day communications. I used to pinch-hit for Nick (Mazurak) at Divide sometimes. One of the best jobs I ever had. I talked to people over a wide expanse of the North, most of whom I got to know but never saw. The air was busy in those days. Now Divide is shut down and silent, as are most of the keystations. And so many of those whom I knew are silent also. But it was good while it lasted.