

MIDNIGHT TOWER -Summer of 1963

THE BUS RIDE

As I looked out of the window of the bus at the trees of the Divide forest flashing by, my stomach turned and churned with anxiety. It felt like I had been kicked in the gut. The sinking feeling of despair was almost overwhelming to this 14 year old kid, who along with his 9 year old sister, were headed from Meadow Lake to Midnight Fire Tower. Today was the first day that school was out for summer holidays. "The plan" made a week earlier was to have the bus driver stop where our father was to flag down the bus at the turn-off to the tower. The problem was the driver didn't know where the stop was because it wasn't shown on his map. Adding to the anxiety, we had never been this far away from home in our lives and were strangers in a strange land. Compounding the anxiety was knowing that if the fire danger was too high, dad would not be able to come to the road to pick us up. If we missed the stop, my sister and I would end up in the town of Glaslyn with no money and nowhere to go. The uncertainty was devastating and the tense situation was not helped at all having to hang on to the seat ahead of me in the bucking careening highway bus, dodging craters and frost heaves of Highway 4. I tried to calm myself by thinking about the circumstances that lead up to this moment.

Dad had been offered the job as towerman on Midnight fire tower. He had been visiting Albert and Gladys Sharp some two months previously. Albert was the Patrolman for the DNR in the Pierceland area. He told dad about the tower job. Times were tough in those days, money wise. With no other prospect for work that summer, Dad decided to apply. That night at home out came the Canadian Atlas which was carefully scrutinized in an attempt to locate Midnight Fire tower. Of course the tower was not shown; however Midnight Lake itself was there. The tower it was reasoned would be nearby. Albert said he thought it was situated 5-10 miles from the lake along the highway from Glaslyn to Meadow Lake.

Mother had taken ill a month earlier. Dad had hired a neighbour with a car to take them to Loon Lake, some 60 miles of dirt road, to catch the bus to the hospital in Battleford. The car trip and bus ticket had taken all the money our family had at the time. While Mom was in hospital and recuperating, the monthly Family Allowance of \$10.00 had come in the mail. Some of this money Dad used to purchase a bus ticket for Mom to go from Battleford to Midnight Tower. Mom had arrived at the tower about a week before school let out.

My sister Lillian and I had been "farmed out" to the homes of family friends. Lillian stayed with the Forsyths and McNaughtons; I stayed at the "Sharp's" and also at home "looking after the place".

Albert Sharp had brought me into Pierceland early in the morning, sometime before 6 am and dropped me off at the DNR office where Lillian was already waiting with her suitcase and a bag. I had an old suitcase surrounded with an old leather belt, to keep the bulging contents in, and a heavy cardboard box tied with binder twine. The box probably weighed 40 pounds or more as it was full of glass quart sealer jars of canned food, some potatoes and some flour and sugar in small bags. We also had 2 bedrolls made up of a sheet and a pillow wrapped around by a blanket and tied with a heavy cord. My bedroll was a lot longer than the other one because I had my prized fibreglass bow and 3 arrows rolled up inside. I also had a canvas pack sack with some books and clothes.

Ben Siemens the Conservation Officer for Pierceland was going to Meadow Lake, so we were catching a ride. We had to be in Meadow to catch the bus for 8:30 am. Our worldly belongings were loaded in the back of the DNR ½ ton truck and we were off in a cloud of dust. The “gravel road” in those days to Meadow Lake was about 95 miles long. To travel that distance in 2 hours took some effort. We arrived at the bus depot in time to catch the south bound bus.

I was suddenly jolted out of my wandering thoughts to the present as the bus hit a pot hole and slammed me against the side. I grabbed the seat back ahead of me to brace for the next jolt. The bus began to lose speed as the driver double clutched and down shifted to a lower gear. Ahead I could make out a figure standing alongside the road. As we slowed down even more, the dust enveloped the bus and drifted ahead making visibility almost impossible. The bus was nearly stopped when suddenly a form emerged from the billowing dust. It was Dad! He was grinning and holding out his hand as if in fear that the bus wouldn't stop if he put his hand down. The bus ground to a halt and the driver popped open the door

“You looking for a couple of kids” the driver asked, as he stepped out and went to the side of the bus.

“Yep” Dad replied, as he looked quizzically past the open double door to the inside.

Lillian made her way down the aisle and clambered down the steps hanging on to the hand rail. “Where's Mom?” she asked as she jumped to the ground.

“At the cabin” was the reply.

I struggled down the aisle between the seats dragging our coats and the pack sack to the door. When I stepped outside Dad and the bus driver were unloading our stuff from the cavernous luggage compartment and stacking it on the road edge. The driver said “that's it” and slammed the big side door down. In three seconds the driver leaped into

the bus, swung the door shut, waved good bye and was rolling down the road. Clouds of boiling dust followed the vehicle out of sight.

Suddenly we were all alone, the three of us. It was oddly quiet. No one spoke for a few seconds. Dad was happy to see us after being away for over a month. Lillian was glad to be with her family again. I was relieved that we had found Midnight Tower and that Dad was there to greet us. The prospect of missing that stop still haunted me. Seeing Dad standing at the side of the road triggered an emotional relief that seemed to cover me like a wave of warm water from head to toe. All was good.

Dad effortlessly hoisted the heavy cardboard box on his shoulder and grabbed the bulging suitcase while sticking my bedroll under his arm. I slung the pack sack on my back and picked up my sisters suitcase and bag. Lillian carried her bedroll and our jackets. She chattered away like a squirrel as we walked the $\frac{1}{4}$ mile to the tower cabin. The orange-red tower copula was visible poking above the trees. I thought to myself, "the next few weeks are going to be fun".

CLIMBING MIDNIGHT TOWER

"Time to do the noon weather readings" Dad said. He grabbed a piece of paper and a pencil from the table of the tower cabin. We went outside to a clearing in front of the tower where the "Stevenson Screen" was located on a post. A Stevenson Screen is a fancy name for a white painted wooden box about 2 feet square that is made from wooden slats which make up the walls on 4 sides. The lattice of wooden slats allows the air to pass freely past the enclosed instruments, while a solid roof keeps the rain off. Inside is a dry bulb thermometer which is just an ordinary thermometer. Alongside this thermometer is an identical thermometer with a cotton wick attached to the bottom bulb of it. The other end of the wick is submerged in water in a small glass container attached below. The idea is for the wick to keep the second thermometer bulb constantly wet. This arrangement is called the wet and dry bulb thermometers. The two readings are used to look up in a table to find the relative humidity of the air.

Located beside the Stevenson Screen was a rain gauge also mounted on a pole about 4 feet above the ground. The rain gauge was a metal container of a specific size about as big as an empty tomato juice can. The rain fall was measured by pouring any rain from the rain gauge into a graduated glass cylinder and the resulting accurate reading could be made in fractions on an inch.

Wind speed was guess-timated using the Beaufort wind scale method and the direction determined using a magnetic compass. The data was gathered and we returned to the cabin and the kitchen table. The "Danger Readings" Book was opened. The wet bulb, dry bulb, wind speed, direction and rainfall were entered into the book. The relative humidity was determined from the RH tables in the book. Now came the task of computing the Fire Danger Rating. The Fire Danger is on a scale of 1 to 16. 1 is practically no chance of a fire burning or going anywhere. 16 is the highest danger. Fires could start and get out of control in minutes. When the danger was 14-16 bush operations were shut down, open fire prohibited and towermen could count on being up in the tower from sun up to sun down.

It took about 5 minutes to figure out the fire danger. Now we had to climb the tower and call in to "Divide Radio" to catch the "noon sched". Divide would call each tower in turn and they would give their Danger Reading. Divide in turn would radio the readings to the Prince Albert Keystation. When Divide called your tower, you had about 2 seconds to reply or you were missed. Missing a danger reading was not a good thing.

Dad said, "I'll go up first and open the door for you". He began to climb the tower.

"Watch the 4th rung", he cautioned, "it's missing, also the side rail is broke about 20 feet up, don't catch yourself on it. The ladder is perfectly safe."

He began scampering up the 80 foot ladder attached to the side of the tower. As he climbed, the tower rattled and shook. The ladder appeared to flex quite a bit. I later learned this was normal on 3 legged towers. They were made from lighter angle iron and braces than the 4 legged towers. The tower did not sway or move back and forth as some people claimed. It could not because of the heavy guy wires. However, the tower cupola could certainly twist back and forth, which it would do in a strong wind or when you stood inside and made it happen by firmly placing your feet along the outer wall and shifting your weight from side to side. Even making a quick step would cause a twisting movement, which to a novice, seemed like the floor had moved a foot. Actually it could only move an inch or so at most. The twisting motion was always accompanied by the rattling of the windows which added dramatically to the motion effect.

The windows were almost 4 feet wide and about 3 feet tall, made up of 12 smaller panes of glass set in a wooden frame. The copula having 8 sides meant there were 8 of these window arrangements. The window was on the outside of the copula in a track so they could be raised and lowered. This was done by the means of an attached length of fire hose with a number of brass grommets inset down the middle to make a sort of a belt. The hose was fastened to the bottom of the window and run up and over the window sill. Inside there was a sturdy spike on the wall below the sill, which one of the grommets were hooked to. This arrangement allowed the window to be adjusted up and

down for window height. On cold and windy days the windows were closed. On hot days they were fully open. Regardless of the weather, when it was at all windy, those windows rattled and banged and one wondered why they didn't shatter or break. Strangely after a few days it seemed like you never even heard them unless the noise became severe.

Dad would climb the tower in about 2 minutes, so he was way ahead of me. I stopped at the 20 foot level to look around. Not much to see except trees. I didn't get snagged on the broken rail, so I went on to the 40 foot level. Half way up now, I stopped to rest. I had a death grip on the ladder but so far I was doing well. I could see to the east and see forest and farmland spreading out to the south. I still had to peek past several tree tops. Dad had long since entered the copula and closed the trap door. I could hear him answering the sched, "Midnight Tower, Danger of 8" and through the static on the radio I could hear Nick Mazurak the Radio Operator at Divide Keystation go on and call the other towers, who were reporting anything from 7 to 10's. This meant the fire dangers were average and we would be up in the tower until after super sometime. It was exciting; maybe we would spot a fire!

I turned my attention back to the ladder. My legs were getting tired when I passed the 60 foot level. The wind had picked up a bit, I could tell that from the rattling windows. The tower also made noises as I passed from rung to rung. The ladder rungs were made from angle iron and galvanized to protect from corrosion. They were a little more than an inch in thickness and about 14 inches wide. The rungs were about 1 foot apart or maybe a bit less. I was wearing running shoes and the narrow steps were beginning to hurt my feet. My hands hurt as well from hanging on so tight.

At the 70 foot level about 10 feet from the floor I stopped briefly. I felt strangely alone, unsure if I should continue, the wind was whipping my pant legs around and I could feel it pushing on me. I began to feel scared. Scared of what, I don't know. I was perfectly safe even though my feet and hands were sore. I tried to rationalize the fear away without much success. There was a moment, I admit, when I thought of going back down.

"Only 10 more feet" Dads' voice came through the trap door. I didn't even hear him open it. "Look straight out to the horizon, don't look down, and keep climbing", he said.

I had been looking at the ladder rungs in front of my nose all the way up except for the occasional glance at the eastern horizon in front of me. I had noticed that at the bottom the tower legs were about 20 feet apart. Now they were maybe only 6 feet apart as they tapered inward. I knew I was a long way from the ground. The last 10 feet seemed to take forever. I moved slowly and cautiously and very, very carefully. I had heard stories of people freezing on the ladder and then someone would have to climb up and take

their hands and guide them slowly as they descended together. I had spent my whole life climbing trees and building tree houses at home but this was way different.

“Keep on climbing”, Dad said, as I poked my head through the hatch. “Stay on the ladder until you are above the floor”.

I grabbed Dads’ hand as he swung me off the ladder and I stepped onto the plywood floor.

‘BANG’ went the trap door and I nearly jumped out of my skin. My heart was racing. I grabbed the edge of the open window sill to steady myself. My hands were trembling, either from nerves or from hanging on so tight to the ladder. Dad was peering at something on the horizon through the binoculars. “Here come look at this”, he invited and stepped back. The whole copula felt like it moved a foot!

“Crap!!” I yelled and made a grab for the fire finder which was located on top of the metal tower where the 3 legs are bolted together.

The fire finder is a large ring with the compass 360 degrees marked on it. It is about 2 feet across with sights like a gun mounted on it. This ring rotates on a base so one can aim the sights at a smoke through any window, and read the degrees or bearing of that smoke. Because the copula frame between the windows creates blind spots, the fire finder ring and base are constructed on a slide, so one can slide the fire finder to one side and see past the window post.

When I grabbed the fire finder it moved on its slides about 8 inches towards me. “Oh shit!!” I gasped. Stumbling backwards I made a grab for the only thing in reach, which was the piece of hose for lifting and lowering the window. It promptly unhooked from the spike as I pulled, and the window shot up. Now completely having lost my balance, I let go of the hose. The window instantly shot back down and disappeared from view making a loud thud as it dropped down its tracks and hit the stop at the bottom.

Through his tears of laughter Dad was able to get out a halting, “are you alright?”

I was sitting on the floor unscathed but mortified. I never swore in front of my parents, and now in two seconds I had sworn twice. What about the window? Had I broke the window? Am I in trouble? I began to laugh too.

IN THE TOWER

The rest of the afternoon went by quickly as Dad explained how the fire finder worked, how to get cross shots from other towers and plot the location of a smoke. I had been taught how to use a compass by the time I was 10 years old; and the basics of how to

read and follow a map. This was new and exciting. It wasn't long and Ed La Roque from Divide tower (not Divide Radio Station) north of Midnight Tower, called for a cross shot on a smoke. It was actually brush piles burning out in the farm land south east of us 120 degrees, and was not a danger or threatening the Provincial Forest. Albert Klavins from Birch Tower called and gave a shot on the same smoke, confirming its location. We listened on the radio to several other towers calling each other for shots on different fires. Salt Creek, Mistohay, Cold River and even Adelfus Iron from Canoe Lake Tower, far to the North, could be heard on the frequency 1696 KHz.

Soon it was 3:00 pm. and coffee time. Because the danger was 8 and we were keeping an eye on two other smokes, less than 3 miles from the Provincial forest, we could not go down for coffee. Further more, I wasn't keen on going down and coming back up again. We heard a shout and peered over the side of the copula. There was Mom and my sister standing near the ladder. "Want some coffee" Mom yelled.

"You bet", was our reply. Dad took a coiled up rope which was tied to the floor and tossed it out the window. I watched in amazement as it arced out and down to the ground. Mom quickly tied a canvas bag to the rope and Dad began to haul it up. Now remember, the tower legs are far apart at the bottom and slope in at the top. You cannot pull anything straight up as it hits on the cross braces, which are every 5 feet, until the 50 foot level or so, then the rope will clear the tower. So to get around this problem there is a trick of sliding the bag past the first brace, hoping it doesn't catch. Once it's past the first brace, the bag swings a bit and at the precise moment you give a gigantic jerk on the rope and hopefully the bag will swing out and miss the brace. Now you pull it up just so and repeat the performance. After many tries one can get quite good at it. You try not to have anything breakable in the bag because sometimes you may hit the brace. Occasionally it gets stuck in the cross wires and you have to climb down and rescue your bag. This means leaving the safety of the ladder and venturing out on the brace. Not my idea of fun. This system was later abandoned when we procured about 200 feet of small rope and two clothes line pulleys. One pulley was fastened on a post out from the tower legs and the other to the outside of the copula by the window post. A rope was run through the pulleys like a vertical clothes line and a short cord fastened to the line to tie things to the rope. This worked well for loads which were not too heavy. You had to make sure never to let go of the rope when pulling something up, otherwise it would go thundering back down and self destruct.

We managed to get our "coffee" pulled up. Inside the bag was a glass quart sealer wrapped in a bath towel containing steaming hot coffee for Dad. There was another jar wrapped in a couple of shirts for me, full of cool-aid. But best of all were the 6 big oatmeal cookies tucked inside.

A big thunderstorm was moving past Midnight Tower to the north of us. The static from the storm became so unbearable Dad had to turn the two-way radio off. The noise on the 8BA had started as crashes and bangs and increased in intensity and strength until it was just a steady scream. With the radio off it was very quiet. You could hear sounds of vehicles, chain saws and big machinery working many miles away.

All too soon it was supper time, but because we were watching 5 smokes near the Divide Provincial Forest, Dad decided to stay up until 8:00 pm. Mom again sent up food on a rope. This time mashed potatoes and some canned meat with home made dill pickles, and home made bread and blue berry jam. A feast!

Around 7:00 pm Bill Caruthers called from his truck radio and checked in with Dad. Bill was the Conservation Officer for the Glaslyn area in which Midnight tower was located. Bill asked if "the kids got there ok?" Apparently our coming to the tower had been part of the "radio gossip" and nearly everyone in radio land knew we had arrived. Dad informed Bill that we would be on the tower until 8:00 pm. and then gave him a report of the 5 fires being watched. Towermen in those days did not have defined working hours and were expected to be in the tower when required. On hot days with high danger readings, 16 hour days were not uncommon for 10 to 14 days at a stretch.

8:00 pm. came and Dad signed off on the radio, "Midnight tower out, good evening". This was followed by a chorus of other towers signing off at the same time, and an exchange of "good evenings".

Now came the time for the climb down. Dad said "you go first". He helped me on to the ladder which at that point I was thankful for his help. With my legs out the trap door and a strangle hold on the ladder rungs, I began my decent slowly and very, very carefully. I hugged the ladder tightly as I went down. The first 10 feet were the worst. At the 60 foot level I stopped briefly. No looking down. Then I continued on downward. By the 40 foot level I decided that this was OK and I relaxed a bit. Then came the 20 foot level, by this time Dad was only 4 rungs above me. The race was on. I remembered the missing rung # 4 was coming. I looked down and I was now doing 2 rungs at a time. At rung 3, I jumped the rest of the way down to the ground. As I stepped back I remember thinking, next time I go up I will have leather gloves and wear my leather boots.

BILL CARUTHERS

It had rained for the last 3 days and the fire danger was down to 3. That meant you would have trouble starting a camp fire let alone having the forest burn. The four of us had been stuck inside the 12 X 16 tower cabin unable to go outside and do anything. The rattle of raindrops on the metal Selkirk Chimney was worse than the Chinese Water

Drip Torture. Mosquitoes bolstered by the rain infested the cabin in droves each time the door was opened. "Swatting bugs" became the past time. Putting up "Mosquito Bars" over our beds was the only way of getting some relief from them at night.

A mosquito bar is a piece of screen or fine netting that is fine enough to stop or bar flying insects from passing through. Usually "bars" were cut and sold in a 6 X 8 foot rectangle which you hung over your bed like a tent. As long as the edges were tucked under and you didn't touch the sides, mosquito bars were fairly effective against the flying blood sucking vampires.

Dad would climb the tower in the pouring rain at 8:00 and again at noon to catch the "sched" and give his reports. He was soaked to the bone and shivering every time he returned from his climb. One of the mornings the mist or fog was so low the copula of the tower was barely visible from the ground.

By now, I had read every book I had brought and was bored to tears. We all wished the rain would stop. Rain, rain, rain and more rain, too wet to go outside. It was like being in jail.

Finally Monday morning it stopped. The sky was still solid over cast but the water had stopped falling. Around 9:00 am Bill Caruthers showed up in the DNR ½ ton truck.

"Grab some grub" he said to Dad, "we are going to work at Turtle Lake today".

Dad faked a half hearted smile and said "OK, give me a minute" and began packing a bag. I knew he hated working "at the beach" scrubbing toilets, emptying garbage cans and cleaning campsites. He loved doing other work like cutting logs, sawing fire wood or building things, but scrubbing toilets he hated with a passion. But it was work and couldn't be turned down.

I watched as Dad got his gear together. It must have been the look I had as Mom wrapped up the sandwiches she had just made, which caused Bill to turn to me and ask, "Do you want to come along?"

My heart stopped for a second and then it began racing a hundred miles an hour. Would I like to go along? You bet I would like to go along! Having been cooped up for 3 days in a cabin, I would wash toilets, haul garbage, anything at all. But wait, would Dad let me come? I looked at Dad, again it must have been the pleading look I gave or maybe the thought that he wouldn't have to scrub as many toilets; I don't know, but I felt ten feet tall when he said to Mom, "can you make that two lunches"

I could hardly sit still as we drove to Turtle Lake. It was only a few miles but they flashed by in minutes. I rode in the back of the truck box because there was only room for Bill

and Dad in the front seat because an 8BA radio sat on the seat beside them. It was connected to a whip antenna 12 feet long mounted on the side of the cab.

The other connection was to the 40 lbs battery pack which rested on the floor beside the 4 speed shift stick. There was no room for me in the cab. Besides, I didn't mind the fresh air and the prospect of working for the DNR for a day put me in high spirits. Of course I wouldn't get paid, but in those days anyone working for the DNR was looked up to. Like a status symbol. The DNR only hired the best, honest, hard working people. It was an honour to be able to say "I work for the DNR". People respected you. Oh yes, those toilets at Turtle beach would be sparkling by noon!

The day went by quickly and shortly after 4:00 pm we were headed home, tired but satisfied of having completed a good day's work.

Two days later the fire danger crept up to 6 and 7's. Dad had to man the fire tower again. Strangely Bill came by and continued to invite me along to work at Turtle Beach. I was thrilled. After a couple of days we had the work caught up and Bill announced one morning "we are going to "check fishermen". I had died and gone to heaven. We were going out in the DNR boat and check people on the lake for fishing licences and over limit catches. Wow! I had been in lots of boats and canoes but only twice in a boat with a powerful outboard motor. I loved it when the boat got up and planed along at high speed bouncing across the waves sending the spray high into the air.

As we were putting on our life jackets, Bill explained the procedure. We would pull along side a boat and he would talk to the people. We were NOT to touch their boat until they reached out and grabbed our boat first. There was some legal procedure reason for doing this at that time. Once they touched our boat, I was to catch their boat near the bow and hang on being sure the boats didn't rub or bump against each other. Bill would do the same at the back.

That day we checked about 20 boats or so. In one boat two guys had licences but the third didn't. All we could see were 2 fishing rods. Bill looked at the tub containing their catch and then looked at the fellow without a licence. "Sir, I happen to have a book of licences with me" Bill said. "Would you like to buy one today?" I think a fishing licence in those days was \$3.00. The guy reached for his wallet and produced the money.

A few minutes later we were on to the next boat. As we turned away I looked back to the boat with the 3 guys we had recently checked. I could distinctly make out the three fellows each holding a rod.

On the road back to Midnight Tower I asked Bill about selling the fisherman a licence. "Oh". Bill said, "I knew he was fishing".

“How did you know”, I asked?

“There were 3 tackle boxes” he replied.

“Why didn’t you charge him”, I queried.

“Well”, Bill said. “I could have. I would have to seize their fish and equipment, if they contested the charges I would have to go to court and even if we won the case the guy would be uncooperative in the future. We are trying to promote tourism and want people to come and fish and not have a bad time. Yes he was in the wrong but now he is fully licensed and legal and probably will be more careful about buying a licence first. I also didn’t make an enemy out there today and hopefully he will respect the DNR and the resources in the future”.

To me it was confusing, we had the guy cold, and we could have nailed him. To a 14 year old the world was pretty much black and white. In later years I learned that Bill was one of the “old time CO’s” They understood that a little PR went a long way to having people follow the laws instead of threatening them with charges and fines and jail. Don’t get me wrong; when charges needed to be laid, there was no hesitation either.

JACK DAVIES

I hope I’m spelling his name correctly. Jack was the most amazing person I had ever met. He was the Patrolman from Glaslyn and worked under Bill Caruthers. I have never seen anyone work as hard as Jack. Jack had one arm which ended a couple of inches below the elbow. There was absolutely nothing he couldn’t do. He was a carpenter by trade but was a skilled in all the trades. Yes, he could even push a wheelbarrow. Friends of his often joked that the only thing he couldn’t do is order 6 beers because he only had 5 fingers.

One “low danger day” Jack came by the tower and asked if I wanted to go to Turtle Lake. Having been there several times with Bill I knew what was in store for me. “Sure, I’ll go” I said and packed a lunch. We had a great time. There was another crew cleaning toilets and hauling garbage, we were building picnic tables and painting them. First we cut the parts for 10 tables, drilled holes for bolts and then assembled them. Then came the priming and painting. After the tables were thoroughly dry we loaded and delivered them to the campsites. Because I couldn’t be there every day, it took nearly two weeks to finish 10 tables. When I wasn’t there Jack kept busy with other projects. People were always stopping to see Jack and ended up talking for hours it seemed. It was a wonder he got any work done at all.

We always stopped for dinner usually at an empty campsite. Jack would light a fire and open a can of stew or beans and heat them up. He always gave me half and only ate half himself saying he couldn't eat a whole can anyway. I was thrilled because we didn't get to eat canned food "store bought" very often. It tasted strangely wonderful. Once dinner was over I would find a shady spot and try to have a nap if possible. Too soon, I would suddenly be jarred back to the real world by Jack slamming the truck door. This was the signal to go back to work.

It was good working with Jack, we got along fine and I learned lots about carpentry from him. Most importantly he got to know me, and when I called him from the tower to check out a smoke, he knew who he was dealing with.

"NECESSITY IS THE MOTHER OF INVENTION"

These are the words Bill Caruthers said as he surveyed the wheel barrow I had recently constructed. The idea of a wheel barrow came as I was lugging a 5 gallon metal back pack can full of water from the "well" up to the cabin. Firefighters use these metal back packs for spraying a fire with the attached hand pump. I had removed the hand pump and used the container to haul water to the tower cabin for washing and cooking. It weight about 50 pounds when full of water. The "well" was located about 300 meters from the cabin and down a steep hill on the edge of the swamp. Dad had originally dug an "Indian Well" at the swamp when he first arrived.

"Indian wells" as they were known in those days were dug near a water source to get clean water.

Ordinary household wells were about 4 feet by 4 feet and anywhere from 6 to 16 feet or more deep. They were lined with a wooden "crib" to prevent cave-in. It typically took days or weeks to dig and construct a good well.

To build an "Indian Well" you would locate a suitable spot along the edge of a slough, swamp, creek or lake and start digging about 2 or 3 steps from the waters edge. The hole would usually be less than 1 foot square and dug down below the water line. As the water seeps in it is bailed out. The water starts out muddy and full of leaves and vegetation, as it is bailed out, the incoming water becomes clear and cool from being strained through the ground.

Back in the 1950's there were few vehicles and most people traveled to town with horses. Horses had to be watered, so every water source along the trail had an "Indian Well". The horses would drink from the slough or pond while people drank from the well. If there were horse tracks at the "well" you bailed it out really good first. Local folklore

was that the Indians had dug some of these wells long before the country was settled, hence the name "Indian Well". Later when roads were improved and new roads constructed these wells disappeared.

Hauling water for the cabin was a back breaking job. One day I discovered a wooden spool that lay beside an old dilapidated barn near the tower cabin. This was the old barn where the towerman, many years ago, kept his horse or horses. It was rotted and the roof was starting to cave in. When the telephone or telegraph line from Glaslyn to Meadow lake had been taken down, all the insulators were stored in the barn. There were boxes and boxes of glass insulators piled in there.

Looking at this wooden spool I got the idea of making a wheel barrow to haul water. Construction began immediately. The two sides of the spool were held together with 4 steel threaded rods. I removed the rods and was left with two wooden wheels about 18 inches in diameter. Nailing the two pieces together I made a single wooden wheel about 3 inches wide. There was a 2 inch hole in the centre of the wheel. I found a section of pipe the right diameter and length to make an axle. Next I fashioned an A shaped frame from three pieces of 2 X 4's. The lower ends of the A were carved down to form handles. The top of the A was fastened together firmly; just behind this, the pipe axel was fastened so the wheel would clear the frame. To stop the wheel from wobbling, two rub bars were fastened on each side of the wheel. Far from perfect, but with some bacon grease for lubrication, the wooden wheel was workable. A salvaged wooden box was attached to the top of the frame to complete the wheel barrow.

The box held 2 metal water back packs just nicely. It was not a total success because the hill up from the swamp was too steep to push two cans of water. The remedy was to leave the wheel barrow at the top of the hill and carry the cans full of water, one at a time, to the top. This was still a huge improvement over carrying them all the way to the cabin one at a time on my back. The wheel barrow was also used for hauling firewood and became a very useful tool for moving other heavy things. Years later I stopped in to check on things at the tower site and the wheel barrow was still there in the weeds exhibiting signs of being used from time to time.

One day Mom and my sister and I were stuck in the tower cabin as the rain poured down outside. Mom announced we should have a game of checkers. The fact we didn't have a checker board or checkers didn't stop her. A checker board was soon cut out of the side of a cardboard soap box using a sharp knife. Using a pencil and ruler the squares were laid out. Now we had to colour them. Using a black crayon, alternate squares were made black. It was decided not to color the other squares red. By the time this was all accomplished the rain had quit. Now came a trip to the gravel pit located at the highway turn off. We spent a good hour searching for white and black pebbles to use as checkers. Lillian carried our treasures home in a small metal lard pail. That night

after Mom had washed the pebbles and selected the best ones for the board we sat down for several games of checkers. That home made game gave us many hours of entertainment while at the tower. I don't know what ever happened to it.

I had brought my "bow and arrows" along and spent many hours firing arrows at all sorts of targets. I made my own arrows from straight willows growing along the swamp. The heads were made from nails driven in the end and sharpened needle sharp with a file. The end was then wrapped with brass snare wire to bind the arrow head all together. Feathers were split and glued to the other end in a group of three and trimmed for flight. The arrows worked well, they would pierce a rabbit clean through. In those days rabbits were fair game anytime and were often a source of food. Later the rabbit population began to develop sores and blisters. At this point people began to hunt them less and less for food. Rumour had it they were infected with Tularaemia, an infection that can affect humans.

After loosing most of my arrows in the bush and spending hours looking for them surrounded in clouds of mosquitoes and black flies, I gave up on archery for a while.

One day I decided to make a "sling" for throwing rocks; just like David had in the story of David and Goliath. I found two chunks of strong cord about 3 feet long. I acquired a piece of heavy denim cloth about 6 inches long and 4 inches wide to use as the pouch. I tied a cord to each end of this pouch. One piece of the cord I tied into a loop on the free end. I put the loop in my right hand and with my thumb and forefinger, held the end of the other cord. Then I placed a suitable rock in the denim pocket.

To "fire" the rock, the sling is now swung around 2 or 3 times above the head and at the right moment release the cord held by the thumb and finger while still holding the loop. It takes practise but in a few days I could hit the chimney of the tower cabin 2 out of 3 throws. Well, I only got 3 throws in before Mom came out and put an end to that. It was effortless to launch a rock way above the 80 foot tower. Hitting a gallon paint can at 200 feet soon wasn't a challenge. It wasn't long before the can was dented beyond recognition. Unfortunately sometimes the rock came out of the sling before it was released and a couple of near disasters prompted me to go on to other projects.

Mom and Lillian would spend many happy hours making doll size pottery with clay dug from a spot not far from the cabin. They fashioned tiny cups and plates and tea pots. They also made flower pots and picked flowers to put in them. It was actually kind of neat seeing the miniature table settings they produced. I avoided invitations to join them for "tea" as often as possible, as I was interested in more important things. When I did occasionally accept an invitation, it was actually fun. We would pretend to be lords and ladies and talk with an English accent.

We had a minor crisis one day when it was discovered our “fresh meat” in the form of a chunk of Bologna had turned mouldy on the outside of the casing. In order to preserve our food, Mom had to immediately peel off the wrap, cut the meat into smaller pieces and fry them. To solve this problem it was decided that I would construct a “cooler” on the shady north side of the cabin. Fortunately I had found an old empty 5 gallon metal oil pail someone had abandoned in the bush behind the old barn. The lid had been removed and the pail was still in good shape and clean, not rusted. I dug a hole over 3 feet deep behind the cabin as planned and buried the pail with the top about one foot below the surface. A piece of old plywood cut to shape served as a lid. A heavy rock was placed on top the lid for security and then covered with an armful of grass cut from the swamp, for added insulation. The cooler worked well. Even on the hottest days the contents were kept cool by the moist ground. Bologna could now last a week or more, margarine was no longer soft and runny. As a side benefit, mice and other critters were no longer a threat to our food.

BIRCH TOWER

The weather had turned damp and cool. Low black rain clouds drifted by all day but no rain came from them. Occasionally only a fine mist would fall. It was dull and dreary. The danger was back down in the 4 and 5 range. Bill called on the radio one morning and informed Dad that he would be sent to Birch Tower to help Albert Klavins build a log building. Later that morning Bill arrived and picked dad up and all his gear.

Dad asked Bill how long he would be gone. Bill said until the danger comes up again. Dad said “well Chris could run the tower while I’m gone and I wouldn’t have to come back until the building is up”.

. Bill was delighted at the suggestion. He knew I could handle the tower because Dad had shown me how and I was used to running the radio by now and could plot and report smokes. Matter of fact I had been calculating and reporting the weather and danger readings for quite some time now.

‘OK” Bill said to me, “just make sure you keep a good watch”.

“Call me at Birch Tower every evening at 8:00 pm“ were Dads’ parting words.

I couldn’t believe it. I was running Midnight Tower! 14 years old and running a tower. Incredible! They trusted me to watch over the Divide provincial Forest and keep it safe from fire. Me! They were counting on me! OK, enough of the revelry and back to reality. It was time to take the noon weather readings and calculate the danger reading and get on up the tower in time for the “sched”.

ON MIDNIGHT TOWER ALONE

The next morning after Dad had left Midnight Tower to work on the log building at Birch Tower, I was up at 6:00 am. I mean I was up in the tower at 6:00 am. No fire was going to get by me while I was on duty! It had been a crisp cool morning with lots of huge dew drops hanging from the tower braces and guys. A hearty shake of the tower from the 20 foot level produced a mini rain shower and I got soaked. In the copula I scanned the horizon and in between with the powerful 7 X50 binoculars. I was secretly hoping I would spot a fire. Sometimes in the early mornings the thin whips of smoke from a smouldering ground fire can be picked up by a careful observer. No such luck this morning.

In those days there was some controversy surrounding the use of binoculars. Looking back (pardon the pun) I think it was started by District Conservation Officers who didn't want to spend the money buying binoculars or they wanted to use them for themselves. In any event, the story claimed that binoculars didn't help to spot fires. It went on to suggest while the towerman was looking through the binoculars a fire could spring up and he wouldn't see it. I fail to see that argument as one doesn't usually look through binoculars for hours at a time without putting them down and checking around. There were some towermen that claimed the binoculars didn't help them see. I'm not sure why they said that. I know some people have 20-20 vision or even better. I haven't heard of anyone born with 7 power magnification eyes.

For two weeks I "ran" the tower, while Dad was gone. There were a couple of smokes I spotted near the forest and had to call Jack the patrolman to check them out. Unfortunately other towers couldn't spot them for a "cross shot" Nothing really exciting. I would hear Dad or Albert Klavins call in on the sched and then sign off as they went down to work on the building. Dad would call every evening at 8:00 pm and we would chat for 3 or 4 minutes as the radio was for government business and personal calls were held to a minimum. It was all routine and becoming a bit mundane, and then it happened.

DISASTER

One afternoon I was done early and had gone down as rain showers passed through the Midnight Tower area. I wanted to make a sling shot, the type with a forked stick and two rubber bands. I had obtained two pieces of surgical rubber tubing in a trade and

they were just crying to be made into a sling shot. Elastic rubber like that was very rare and hard to get. I would soon be the proud owner of the best sling shot in the country.

I went into the deep bush searching for the perfectly shaped handle. I had my trusty hunting knife in the sheath on my belt, ready to cut the best “fork” I could find. I scoured the woods for some time before discovering the “fork” that I wanted.

There it was. I went to chop the selected willow down with my razor sharp hunting knife. I held the 2 inch sapling in my left hand, fingers curled around the trunk. I raised the knife in my right hand and swung the blade in an arc to chop into the wood. A branch from a nearby tree snagged my hand as I brought it down and deflected the blow and the blade sliced across my 4 fingers instead of the willow tree. I felt a sting and glanced down. For a second I saw what appeared to be white bone in the gashes and then blood began gushing out. In one motion I put the knife back in its sheath and grabbed my hand and squeezed my fingers in an attempt to stem the flow of blood. I had 2-300 meters to go to reach the tower cabin. I started walking briskly; I knew if I ran, my heart would pump more blood. Nearing the cabin I called for Mom.

“Get some water” I yelled!

“What did you do, cut yourself?” she queried. Mom knew that calling for water usually meant someone had a serious cut.

“How deep?” she asked as I neared the doorway.

“To the bone” I said, holding up my hand. Nothing ever excited mother when it came to emergencies. Calmly she began to pour water over my fingers, rinsing the blood off. After the water came the application of Hydrogen Peroxide as a disinfectant. “Peroxide” as we called it was the family cure all for cuts and open sores. Then she bandaged my fingers with strips of cloth torn from a clean pillow case and finished up by bandaging all 4 fingers together. Once my medical treatment was complete the shock started to wear off. Now my fingers hurt like hell. I was in tears lying on the bed favouring my hand. I spent a sleepless night only getting to sleep around 3 in the morning. There were no painkillers.

The next morning I was up bright an early and started up the tower. Mom had found an old leather mitt to fit over the bandages on my left hand, to keep everything clean. I hooked my left arm around the ladder side just like Jack did when he climbed the tower with one hand. Slowly and painfully I made my way up the tower. It probably took 15 minutes and my hand was hurting bad. There was no way I wasn’t going to make it to the top or be late for the sched.

I stayed in the tower all day and didn't go down. I had Mom take the weather readings for noon and call them up to me. I had pulled up the books so I could do the Danger Reading calculations in the copula. By quitting time the pain had subsided and I made my way back down. Mom changed the dressing that night and applied more peroxide. In about a week the bandages were off and the lacerations appeared healed. By the time Dad returned from Birch Tower it was almost forgotten, except Lillian had to tell Dad in her excitement, how I had bled all over and she made it sound like a big thing. I felt embarrassed in making a stupid mistake by chopping with a knife and not making sure the way was clear. Dad examined the wounds carefully and pronounced them as perfectly healed thanks to Moms' good job of doctoring.

SMOKE JUMPERS

It was around 12:30 noon. The morning had begun without a cloud in the sky and an unusually warm breeze blowing from the south. It was decidedly going to be a hot day. Even with the wind, the copula was unbearably hot despite all the windows being down.

I had just finished having the lunch that Mom had sent up on the rope, when, as I was gazing out the window to the west, I saw a smoke pop up. It was a dark column just rising above the tree tops and drifting north east. I instantly knew the general location as being just west of Turtle Lake. I grabbed the glasses for a better look. Yes, I could see the smoke now had changed to a lighter brown as it dissipated. My heart almost stopped. This was serious, it was in a bad location and with the south west wind it would blow into the forest if it wasn't there already. The smoke was now growing taller and darker. I swung the fire finder around and took a shot. I wrote the numbers down in the notebook; then took the string on the map and stretched it out along the heading and pinned it down. I picked up the microphone of the 8BA radio and called Divide Tower. No answer as Ed La Roque was down having dinner.

Moments later I called again, still no answer. Nick at the Divide Radio station heard me calling and asked what was wrong. I gave him the "smoke report" describing the size and colour and the degrees from Midnight Tower. I said I believed it to be on the West side of Turtle Lake, but without a cross shot it was only a guess as to how far. I could see the land rising to the west of the smoke so it was definitely in the area of the lake.

Nick said "stand by, I'll try and get someone on the phone". There was about 10 minutes of radio silence as I watched the smoke getting higher and wider. Then suddenly all hell broke loose on the radio frequency. I heard Ed from Divide Tower call in saying he was "standing by". I nearly ripped the microphone out of the radio trying to call him before anyone else called. I told him about the smoke and the bearing of my shot. In seconds he came back saying he could see it and gave his shot. My hands were trembling as I

plotted the cross shots on the map and wrote down the land location. I had just barely got the location written down when Bill Caruthers radioed from his home, where Nick had tracked him down. I gave Bill the new information.

No sooner had I talked to Bill when Jack called in from his truck radio. He was at the beach at Turtle Lake and could see the smoke across the lake now. I gave him the information and that Bill had been notified. "Tell Bill I'm on my way there" he said. I called Bill back. He too, was now in his truck on the way to the fire. I suddenly became the relay station as I could hear everyone, but they could not hear each other. Bill asked me to call Divide Radio Station and have Nick phone "Meadow Office" and get a fire crew ready. In a few minutes I had 3 pages of notes and messages written down, as the suppression response was unfolding.

When Bill arrived as close as he could drive to the fire, he called me on the radio and said "get a hold of Divide Radio and request the Smoke Jumpers or this fire is going to get away on us."

The Smoke Jumpers! I couldn't believe my ears. I was to call for the Smoke Jumpers. Maybe I would see them jump from the plane! I called Nick at Divide Radio and passed on the request. A few minutes later Nick was back on our frequency 1696. He had swung over to the La Ronge frequency where the Smoke Jumpers were and called in the request.

"Tell Bill the Smoke Jumpers ETA (Estimated Time of Arrival) is 14:00 hrs (2:00 pm)

I knew the smoke jumpers would come in the famous Norseman SAM or SAN and fly over the fire. Once overhead they would assess the fire and possible tactics to use. The jump master would toss out a roll of toilet paper to gauge the wind speed and drift. On the next pass the smoke jumpers would exit the plane. The pilot would circle to make sure they were safely down. Once the Smoke Jumpers were ready on the ground, the following passes would drop the gear, usually a radio, hand tools and a box of food.

From Midnight Tower I should be able to see the plane and parachutes. Every second I could, I had the binoculars trained on the smoke looking for the plane. 14:00 hrs came and went. No plane was visible. I couldn't have missed them, did I? By 14:30 I could not stand the suspense any longer. I called Nick at Divide Radio and got the disappointing news.

They had flown about half way from La Ronge to Turtle Lake and turned back as the wind was over 20 mph. They weren't coming. My heart fell. I was disappointed. They weren't coming. I missed a chance of a life time to see the famous Smoke Jumpers because of a 20 mph wind. Crap!

I had to inform Bill that he wasn't getting his Smoke Jumpers. They would have to fight the fire as best they could without the Smoke Jumpers. When I told him, there was dead silence on the radio for a few moments. Then came a terse "OK"

By the next morning fire crews were on the line, a couple of dozers were there and the fire didn't have a chance. It burnt for about a week before it was declared "out".

GOING HOME

It was now mid to late August and it was time to think about going home and getting ready for school in September. Dad had returned from Birch tower having completed the building there and was back manning Midnight Tower. The fire season was winding down now as temperatures at night were now getting close to freezing. Towermen would be getting layoff notices soon or offers for work cutting firewood or other labour jobs. We had to get home to catch blueberry and cranberry season and later digging potatoes. I don't remember how we actually got home but we left Dad at the tower with minimum food and gear, taking all the heavy stuff with us. It was exciting looking forward to going home but at the same time sad to leave the tower. It had been a good summer.

Would we be back next year?