

HISTORIAN'S CORNER

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Reddon, Delaware, 1992 (5th meeting) "The Eastern Shore Conference"

By now, each successive "Conference" of our still emerging association was "looked forward" to even before the last one was finished. We had all become enamored with the aspect of what the Forest Fire Lookout Association was growing into. Each six-month period between our meetings brought more "lookout contacts" to our attention. This was still basically before the real emergence of "e-mail" and personal computer systems. We conversed back and forth by letter writing and phone conversations. Lookout Network newsletter became THE source of information on what was going on in the "lookout world". It was still a rather rudimentary off-the cuff publication of sheets of copies run off mostly on Joe Higgins' office copier machine. Hefty packages of white manila envelopes of photographs and maps to fire towers were customary events. Postcards of fire towers became a nearly fanatical exercise of some fire tower aficionados and each show was attended in earnest. Late evening phone calls resulted in notes about fire towers being scribbled down on scraps of paper and stuffed into some sort of order for the next Conference's reports.

By January 1992 our association was celebrating its 2nd year of investment and Reddon, Delaware would be the 5th meeting of our group. Ray Grimes and I traveled down the Eastern shore route, after crossing the Memorial Bridge to historic old route 13. For me it was a return to a familiar highway I had traveled often when I was in the US Navy and home-ported at Norfolk, Virginia on the Aircraft carrier, U.S.S. Independence CVA 62. We stopped at the Delaware Visitor Center on route 13 across from the very tall Smyrna Fire Tower, 120 feet in height, settled in a clump of tall evergreens nearly as high as the tower's flat-roofed cab. Standing unused since the 1970's, Smyrna, like all of the state's fire towers, had been deactivated by the forestry department and turned over to the State Police for radio communications. At the center we were pleased to bump into Steve Cummings who had also taken the opportunity to stop before continuing on to Reddon.

The historic site at the experimental forest was a large rambling log building that had once been owned by Andrew Carnegie as a summer retreat. Accommodations for us were right in the building, making a very pleasant way to have a meeting of this sort. A likeable diner was discovered not far away and we soon took in the "flavor" of the upper eastern shore of the Delmarva Peninsula. It was, of course, January and cold pervaded even here, near the Mason-Dixon line. One of the more interesting sights here were the native holley trees that grew wild in the surrounding forest.

The conference agenda took into account on-going bylaw discussions, state fire protection reporting and the adoption of a uniform dues or membership structure. Guest speakers, arranged by Steve, gave us a good accounting of what it was like to fight brush fires and marsh fires in Delaware, and the history of the state's very tall

fire towers. We visited the Ellendale, Viola, and Dagsboro towers in the chilling cold temperatures. We agreed to meet again in the summer 1992 at the Weeks State Historic Site in Lancaster, New Hampshire. This was being arranged by Bill and Iris Baird of Lancaster and Chris Haartz, our New Hampshire director.

Our New Jersey delegation left at the Dagsboro tower and headed north, via the Cape Lewes-Cape May ferry across Delaware Bay. Enroute through the back roads of the Jersey Pine Barrens, Ray and I had a humorous event when we ran into heavy smoke blowing across the county road we were on. Investigating we found three foot flames creeping through the woods on a long stretching front. We proceeded to try and smother the fire using a shovel we had and the sandy soil until we realized it was hopeless. Climbing back in our vehicle and proceeding up the smoky road we soon discovered New Jersey Forest Fire Service brush trucks up the road, sheparding the "prescribed fire" they were doing.! Oh well, we had had good intentions! Unaccustomed to prescribed fires in the northern part of our state we had naturally assumed it was a wildfire and were doing our level best to extinguish it!
.....to be continued.....

Air Marked Identifiers on Lookouts

A recent inquiry from the National Aeronautical Charting Office of the Federal Aviation Administration on lookouts that had identifiers painted on their roofs resulted in research by USFS personnel into the origins and status of the program.

An item from The Army and Navy Courier, December 1939, tells a little about when the program originated:

"As a means of making forest flying safer and as an aid to all flyers crossing national forest terrain, it has been proposed that the roofs of national forest lookout houses-most of which are prominently located on mountain tops and ridge points-be painted with numbers to coincide with numbers oriented on flyer's maps. With more than 3500 lookout houses scattered over 175,000,000 acres in 38 states, Alaska, and Puerto Rico, it is obvious that this marking would entail a large amount of work and considerable expense. Nevertheless in a few localized areas the work is already started and eventually both the Forest Service and the Civil Aeronautics Authority hope it can be carried out nation wide."

Elsewhere, it was determined that the Forest Service did not ever devise or maintain the list for this visual flight numbering system. The Civil Aeronautical board did this with the FAA. This placement of numbers was all facilitated by the Civil Aeronautical boards in the various states at the local level working with the local units of the FS, and that lookouts are not the only FS facilities with Civil Aeronautical numbers on their roofs. The FS did this in cooperation due to fact that their facilities were in remote areas and had visible surfaces, plus, they had a fleet of aircraft and were very interested in maintaining visual locations as well. In fact, there was a ten year cycle established years ago for the various units of the agency to re-paint the numbers on the roofs.

This numbering need in most places has diminished due to the various electronic tracking and locational methods established, and many of these facilities and numbers have faded and melted into history. Most Forest Service employees today do not even know that there are old numbers on the roofs of their facilities, or why! It has become past history! Yet, in a few places, the FS has actually maintained the Civil Aeronautical number on the roof just due to location and history.

The general recommendation to the FAA is to keep the symbols for the remaining lookouts on their charts, but remove the identifiers that, in most cases, have not been maintained.

We'd like to hear from anyone who has additional information on this program!

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