

My Summer Experiences of 1956

on Priscilla Peak Lookout near Thompson Falls, Montana

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Sun or rain, snow or sleet, the trails to the lookouts needed to be cleared and telephone wires checked and put back up. That was the way it was working for the Forest Service in the 1950's. In June of 1956, these tasks were more complicated, as there was an abundance of rain in Western Montana, especially in the Thompson Falls district.

In this district, located in northwest Montana, there were seven lookouts that used the old crank wooden box telephones, as this was before two-way radios were in use. These lookouts were connected to the work station located at Fishtrap, near the town of Thompson Falls. The lookouts were located on mountain peaks, at strategic points scattered about the forests. They usually took the name of the peaks on which they were placed. Eddy Peak was located up Cherry Creek and looked over the Clark Fork valley from near Noxon to near Plains. Lower down and overlooking Thompson Falls was Clark Mountain. Up Prospect Creek was Driveway Lookout that looked into Prospect Creek valley, and lower Clark Fork below Thompson Falls. Cougar Peak was located at the headwaters of the Vermillion River and Fishtrap Creek. That lookout could also see the lower Clark Fork Valley and Graves Creek. Overlooking the Fishtrap Valley and the West Fork of Thompson River was Mount Headley. Between the West Fork of Thompson River and Thompson River, perched on a rocky ledge was Priscilla Peak. The last lookout to go up on hot dry summers was Mount Bushnell located up Dry Creek just off Prospect Creek. Bushnell Lookout was on the line between the Thompson Falls and St. Regis districts.

The only communication link between all these lookouts was a single heavy gauge telephone wire that connected them to a switchboard in the main offices in downtown Thompson Falls. This office was located on the second floor of a local business. Each line had to be checked it's full length, a distance of 25 to 50 miles. No branches could touch the wire and all insulators must be intact and fastened to a tree or pole. This prevented the wires from touching another tree or the ground.

The first job for summer lookout personnel, fire and trail crews was

clearing trails. After lessons on safety, use of tools and their maintenance, groups of two or three were taken by vehicles to places the lines crossed the road or a trailhead. They were dropped off in the morning and picked up at quitting time.

Food and water was carried in canvas backpacks and canteens. Tools for telephone crews included a brush hook, double-bitted axe, crosscut saw, brush limb saw, climbing belts and hooks, 50-foot piece of rope, and splicing tools and pliers. Splicing sleeves were used to reconnect broken wires. A roll of lighter gauged wire was carried along to reconnect insulators, as were fence staples. With this amount of equipment, telephone crews were usually groups of three persons.

Every year trees would fall across the lines due to snow, wind or dead trees rotting off. The work was then to cut the trees off the wire, splicing the wire together, reconnecting the insulators to the trees. This meant climbing trees anywhere from 6 inches to 2-1/2 feet in diameter using climbing spurs and a large leather belt. Occasionally when the belt was too short, the rope would be needed to reach around the trees and flipped upward as you climbed.

Leather gloves were a must, as occasionally the spurs wouldn't hold and down you would come, bark flying and hands holding on for dear life! You just hoped your feet would hit the ground first and that there were no limbs or knots sticking out. Long sleeved jean jackets and jean trousers kept you from losing too much skin. You usually had a few sore spots for a while, but that was part of the job. On days that it rained, which was frequently, everything was more slippery. Rain gear was cumbersome so was seldom worn. Many days we would return from work, drenched from head to foot, not a dry spot to be found. Fortunately the temperatures were usually warm. If temperatures were cool, we usually carried a wool jacket in our packsack to use if chilled.

Sometimes the terrain became precipitous and rugged as we reached the higher ridges. Trees were stunted and gnarled. Placing insulators on those was challenging. Where trees were nonexistent, we made tripods out of small trees to keep the wire off the ground.

Occasionally, after summer storms, communication ceased until lines were walked to find links or trees that had fallen across the line.

Trail maintenance was similar, but had differences. Usually we went in teams of two. If there was heavy maintenance to be done, three or four would go together. Tools used were the crosscut saw, brush hook, axe, pulaski (axe-hoe combination), and sometimes a shovel. To maintain a trail, all brush, limbs and fallen trees needed to be removed to a width of 6 feet, so a horse or mule loaded with equipment would be able to transverse without hitting objects. The trail needed to be free of stones and trees, also easy to follow. On sidehills where the tread had sloughed off, was eroded or had filled in, new tread would need to be built. This meant "grunt" work, with shovel and pulaski. Trail work was usually faster than telephone line repair, depending on the amount of downfall or rebuilding involved. There were many miles of trail, so it usually meant more walking. It wasn't uncommon to walk 14 or 16 miles in one day. Anything longer was done by the trail crew that used pack animals. They camped along the trail until the project was finished.

The crews usually consisted of college students who needed summer employment. They came from all over the U.S., from Massachusetts, Michigan, Texas, Florida, Illinois, etc. Team leaders were usually those who had come back from previous years, and had more experience. Directors of the projects were full-time Forest Service employees. They were District Ranger, Fire Control Officer, Dispatcher, Assistant Dispatcher, Timber Sales, and Reforestation. Packers were in charge of the horses and mules that were the main transportation into the backcountry.

The Packer needed to maintain corrals, have food and water for the animals, keep them shod and in good health. Packer responsibility also meant maintaining riding and pack saddles, bridles, halters, blankets, hobbles, mantes, and panniers. Hobbles were chains put on horses' front feet to keep them from running away when not in a corral. Mantes were pieces of canvas used to wrap materials when packing an animal. Panniers were boxes for breakable things. They were packed, one

on each side of the animal. It was crucial that the packs would be equal in size and weight to prevent the saddle from slipping and injuring the animal. This was also to keep the animal from losing balance when traversing the trails. Packers were the main supplier for the lookouts and fire crews when fighting fires in the backcountry.

The third of week of June 1956, those chosen to work the first three lookouts were notified, and told to prepare to go up their mountain. The first lookout to go was Eddy Peak. You could almost drive to it. The next day was Priscilla Peak's turn. To get to this point was not as simple. It was the most remote lookout, with a 5-mile trail, starting at 2,900 feet above sea level and going to 7,000 feet. The trail zigzagged by switchbacks up a south and east slope. I was 19 years old, and chosen to go to Priscilla Peak Lookout. The day Eddy went up, I was to prepare for my ascent until September, taking all the clothes and personal gear needed for the whole summer. At my mother's suggestion, to save laundry, I took old socks and burned them after they were dirty. Shoes included the ten-inch high work shoes and some lounging shoes. A very important item was a sewing kit with several kinds of thread and needles. Three pair of blue jeans and mostly long sleeved shirts, long john underwear, a wool coat and a jean jacket completed the clothing. At this higher elevation, in Western Montana, wintery weather can happen at any time, so the necessity for the warmer clothing. Bathing facility was a washbasin, so plenty of bar soap, towels and wash clothes were needed. I cut my hair short, as I wouldn't see a barber for 2-1/2 months. Shaving equipment was a shaving mug and brush and a double-edged razor with replacement blades. A barber comb and scissors were handy, as sometimes the FCO would trim hair when he made his monthly rounds. I did grow a beard that summer just to make shaving simpler.

Books were of prime importance I took LES MISERABLE and both volumes of THE FONTINE. I also took some of Costain's historical novels and other light reading. Writing material was useful for writing feelings and ideas in the quietness. Letter writing was minimal as I only exchanged mail twice all summer.

My trusty companion was a dog named Pal. He was a cross between a Rottweiler and a German Shepherd. In the supplies were 2-1/2 months of dog food for him. Pal helped with the loneliness that could be overwhelming at times. It

seemed he could almost talk. With just the two of us, he knew many words. I also had a deck of cards to play solitaire and did some large paint by number painting. I used left over paint to do my own creations.

Food preparation was a challenge. I needed to pack for 30+ days till a packer brought resupplies. You needed variety without spoilage. Canned and dried foods were the staples. Dried and canned milk, tea, coffee, canned juice, and cocoa gave variety to drinks. For baking I packed flour, sugar, salt, baking powder and soda, vanilla, cinnamon, shortening and yeast for the bread, cake, cookies and pies I made during huckleberry season. Canned meats such as ham, tuna, spam, and sardines gave flavor to the meals. Rice, oatmeal, cornmeal and several boxes of cold cereal were cereal choices. Raisins were the primary dry fruit. Dry beans were a staple, as well as smoked, cured bacon. I kept frozen meat in a nearby snowbank until the middle of August. It thawed, but didn't spoil. Every few days I would need to dig the packages in a little deeper.

Miscellaneous items completed the supplies. They included dish soap, window cleaner, matches, white gas or Coleman fuel, mantles and generators for the lanterns, an alarm clock, cross cut saw, axe, a pack board with a 5-gallon can to carry water, toilet tissue and paper towels. Old cotton flour sacks were used for dishtowels. For sleeping, I needed a sleeping bag with sheet liners, several wool blankets and a pillow. Cooking and eating utensils were provided by the Forest Service.

The Forest Service provided the basic food supplies, which they bought by the case and stored in a warehouse. I was given a checklist of things to take and sent to the warehouse. After making my selections, they were placed in one spot in the warehouse along with all of my personal effects. The packer then placed them in panniers or manteees, making three pairs of equal weight for the three mules he used to carry the supplies to the lookout.

The morning for departure, all supplies were loaded in the front part of a 3-ton stock truck. The truck had 6-foot panel sides with an open top. The truck was backed up to a loading ramp. First on was a saddled horse, and then the three mules with packsaddles, two animals facing one side and two animals facing the other. Fortunately, it was a clear, cool day. Into the cab climbed the packer, Earl Hendren, who was the driver, Pal the dog, and me. We drove about 30 miles to

the trailhead that was just off the Forest Service dirt road on Thompson River. The trailhead was at 2,900 ft. and consisted of switchbacks up through an open pine and Douglas fir forest. Some trees were quite large, as no logging had been done in that area.

On arrival at the trailhead, I strapped on a canteen of water and with Pal started my ascent. The horse and mules were unloaded, cinches were tightened, and the supplies were loaded on the mules. The horse was first in line, then the mules. They were tied to each other to form a packtrain. The packer climbed on the horse and headed up the trail. Though Pal and I had a head start, we could see the mule train several switchbacks below. The procession started about 10 a.m. I was in good physical condition as a result of working telephone lines and trails, so set a good pace, arriving at the lookout a half hour before the packtrain. Pal explored both sides of the trail until the trail ended at about the last mile where we entered high alpine meadows and cliff rock. Now we were in pika and mountain goat country. Our destination, Priscilla Peak Lookout, stood on the rocky ledge above us.



Packer Earl and train arrived about noon and the animals were unloaded. We ate our lunches as the horse and mules fed on the clumps of grass growing between the rocks. Glacier lilies and other spring flowers were blooming profusely. It was exhilarating being on top of the world, looking down and seeing many miles in every direction. After a lunch break, the packs were unloaded at random near the cabin. Earl tied one mule to the back of the horse and headed down the trail. He said the other two mules would follow and would be ready to be loaded on the truck when he had the horse and one mule loaded. I wondered if this would be true, as the two mules didn't leave right away. I watched them. They were sometimes a half to a mile behind. Earl.

Priscilla Peak Lookout was a 12 by 14 foot cabin, located on a rock at the



edge of a 50-foot cliff. Many other similar cliffs were below. On the top of the cabin was a 5-foot by 5-foot cupola for fire observation, surrounded by windows on all sides. Located in the middle of the cupola was an alidade fire finder. To get into the cupola, a ladder, hinged to the ceiling, was let down. The cabin windows, on all four sides, were about 2 feet high by 4 feet long, with a door opening to the south.

Cabin furnishings included a 3 by 4 foot table, and a wooden captain chair with glass insulators on the bottom of each leg. As you entered the cabin, to the left of the door, were open cupboards with a workspace on top. In the southwest corner sat a small cast iron wood-burning cookstove with an oven. A black metal chimney extended through the roof to above the cabin peak. Getting a fire started in the stove was tricky. Until the stove and chimney got heated, the air was as likely to come down the chimney as go up. Using whittled shavings and dry wood to start the fire was necessary. Even then smoke would pour out the cracks of the stove and fill the cabin. The only escape was to open the door and go outside until the smoke started up the chimney, and then hopefully the cabin would soon clear. Usually there was a breeze or wind, so it didn't take long to clear the air. The stove was the lone source of heat for cooking, baking, heating water and keeping the cabin warm when the temperature dropped, which was almost every evening at that elevation. Along the west wall was an iron cot that folded up against the wall during the day. At night it was let down, being about 8 inches off the floor. The bedding or sleeping bag was left on when it was folded up. Under the north window were more shelves for books and a drawer in which to put personal things. In the northeast corner was a spot for a suitcase, duffel bag or extra supplies. Along the east wall, under the window was a small dining table. The wooden box crank telephone was just inside the door to the right of the table. It was mounted on the wall with the mouthpiece on the front and the earpiece on two prongs on the side. To ring the switchboard, you lifted the earpiece and twisted the crank on the side several

times. You would then talk into the mouthpiece to give your message. There were two phones on the same line, the Fishtrap station and mine. My ring was one long and a short, while Fishtrap was two long rings. Pal learned to identify these rings, and responded to mine. A Coleman lantern provided light. It wasn't used frequently until later in the season as light usually arrived at 5:30 a.m. and stayed until almost 10:00 p.m. in the early summer.

The floor of the cabin was planed pine boards, with small cracks between the boards. A knothole or two was covered by a tin can top nailed in place. The walls were made of two by four boards, with pine boards nailed on top. On the outside cabin wall, shingles were nailed to cover the cracks and painted white. The ceiling was like the walls, two by fours, covered with pine boards. There were several additional small storage spots. Magazines of bygone years, and other surplus items were found there. This was to be my spartan, but comfortable, home for 2-1/2 months.

When Earl, the packer, left, my work began. It was time to clean and put things away. It was ten months since there had been an occupant in the lookout, so considerable dust had collected. I started a fire, filled a dishpan with snow to melt for water, and started to clean. I washed the table, with its red-checkered oilcloth, the cupboards and shelves and finished with the floor. Things were looking brighter. The dishes and windows could wait. I brought supplies inside, and found a place for everything. By the time these tasks were finished, I was weary and hungry. After eating, I went outside to survey the surrounding valleys and hillsides. The smell of wildflowers and evergreens, and the feel of the gentle breeze filled my soul with a sense of peace and quietness. Pal was soon off chasing pika (rock rabbits) that sat on the rock outcroppings squeaking an alarm to the others. The fun was in the chase, and he would worry them for hours. As the sun set, orange and red clouds stretched their fingers across the sky. I knew this was going to be a great summer.

At daybreak the next morning, I tied the 5-gallon water can to the packboard and Pal and I set off to find the spring, which I had been told was on the trail north and east of the lookout. I soon found where the trail began. That was easy! From there on was the challenge. Most of the trail was still under banks of snow. Occasionally the trail wound out from under the snow, so I knew I was headed

in the correct direction. Also blazes on the trees guided me along the way. Finally I found the spring. It was no problem to fill the can as a trough had been made years before. Now was the climb back up the mountain with five gallons of water on my back. And up hill it was, with several steep pitches. This became part of my daily routine - up at daybreak and off to the spring. This exercise kept me in good physical condition, and it was my only water source. I used this water for washing dishes, clothes, cooking, bathing and drinking.

I had a healthy appetite by the time I got back from my water run, and consumed a large pile of pancakes. That first morning I washed dishes before and after eating I also washed all the windows.

Standing at the lookout door, the view was spectacular! To the west, about 15 feet from the cabin, was a sheer rock face that dropped straight down about 50 feet. South of the door was a swale (a low lying or depressed piece of land) and a rock outcropping, then several 20-foot cliffs dropping down to another swale and more out outcroppings. It was at this point that the telephone line came up the mountain. Several tripods held the wire above the rocks and across the swales. To the east was an open grassy hillside, with many wild flowers blooming. About 75 yards down the slope were alpine fir and juniper, gnarled and twisted from fighting the elements. The outhouse sat to the north, down a fairly steep open area. It was over a shallow pit, secured by wire, to prevent it from being blown off the mountain. Just below the outhouse was a swale with a few small trees growing. From this swale, the trail to the trailhead led off to the southeast to the first of the switchbacks. Over the ridge on the northeast slope was the 30-foot snowdrift, this last weekend of June. It was in this snowdrift that I kept my frozen meat till the drift melted in August.

Continuing north, down a fairly steep slope, was the trail to the spring. The distance from the lookout to the spring was a little over 3/4 of a mile. This trail followed the top of Sundance, a ridge that went up and down. There was snow all along the east side of the ridge. To the west of the ridge were many precipitous cliffs. Just when the ridge began a sharp incline, the spring trail veered to the east. Here the only way to find the trail, still under snow, was to look for Forest Service blazes, a dot and a slash. The trail continued down around the slope into a draw where water oozed out between rocks. As mentioned previously, years

before someone had taken a lodgepole, cut a V out of the side of it, and stuck in it in the spring. The water would run down this trough, and was high enough on the bottom end to set a 5-gallon can underneath. It would fill in ten minutes. The trail continued north on the west side of Sundance Ridge and gradually turned west toward Mt. Headley, another lookout 12 miles away. Two other trails went off the Sundance Ridge trail, down ridges to the Thompson River Road and the Fishtrap Creek Road.

Priscilla Peak Lookout was perched high on the ridge between Thompson River and the West Fork of Thompson River. Across the West Fork of Thompson River canyon was a high ridge that connected Mt. Silcox and Mt. Headley. There was also Sundance Ridge. These ridges were home to a large herd of mountain goats, about 75 or more. Every summer, Frank Gummer, the FCO (Fire Control Officer), would bring a block of salt and put it in the swale just north of the lookout. The mountain goats would frequently congregate at the salt block, along with large mule deer and an occasional elk.

Several times when making the trek to get water at the spring, Pal and I would meet a bear. Pal usually was ranging both sides of the trail, looking for chipmunks and other creatures. One morning, when rounding a corner of a snow bank, I came face to face with the bear at a distance of approximately 50 feet from me. He sat on his haunches, where he had been digging grubs out of a rotten stump. I stopped instantly and we began a stare down. About that time Pal came to the top of the snowdrift and looked over the edge. That ended the stare down! The bear took off down the trail at high speed and Pal wasn't far behind. A little later Pal came panting back up the trail and we continued for water. We didn't see the bear again for a few days.

During the summer I would often watch the mountain goats picking their way along Sundance Ridge to the salt lick. One time I saw 30 together. Six goats stayed fairly close on the ridge and would come to the lookout several times a week. Eventually I could pick these six out, even when more goats were next to the lookout. There was a large billy, two nannies with one kid each and a single nanny with only one horn. These six would often stay at the lookout for several hours and occasionally look in the cabin door. Pal learned they were not to be chased and he would just look at them. The kids would often cavort around on the foot high rock

wall that I had built around the east and south sides of the lookout. Every once in a while the adults would use the guy wires that held the lookout down as a means to scratch their backs. It startled Pal and me the first time it happened. I named these six goats. The billy was Billy, one nanny was Nanny, and the other nanny was Susie One Horn. One kid was Bobby, as he always bobbed his head when playing, and the other kid was Mary. She was the smaller of the two. At least one or two mule deer bucks would come to the salt lick every day. A large older buck with five or six prongs was often followed by a little 2-point buck. I had two 50-gallon barrels I had filled with snow for emergency use. The barrels were almost full, until the deer discovered them and drank the water down as far as their antlers would permit. One morning when I looked out the window, I saw a forest of antlers. Six mule deer bucks, with five or six points a side, all in the velvet, were on the north and east side of the lookout. Another morning I awoke to a sound just outside the cabin near the telephone wires. I quietly got out of bed to see what was going on. As I looked out the window, the wire that went from the telephone, down into the ground just outside the cabin started slipping out of the hole in the cabin. A mule deer buck had become entangled in the wire and he was frantically pulling the wire. Fortunately, it soon became disentangled, and the wire didn't disconnect. That startled him, and he bounded off. I pulled the wire back into position, and fastened it more securely.

After settling into the lookout, I developed a daily schedule. It was up at 5:30, and off to the spring, with the five-gallon water can strapped to the backboard. One and a half hours later, Pal and I were back, he having had a good run and me a strenuous workout! Breakfast was a must, then clean-up time for me and the cabin. For me, it was a sponge bath and a beard trim. For the cabin, it was dishwashing and sweeping the floor with the broom. Two or three times a week I also washed the many windows till they sparkled. At 8:00 it was check-in time, by telephone, with the main office. Usually it was an "All clear", and then a weather report was given, followed by "activity" in the forest

Next I climbed into the cupola, via the ladder, to "glass" (use binoculars) the countryside, one pie section at a time. At the beginning of the summer, along with "glassing", it was memorizing the name of each mountain peak and stream drainage as well as any other landmark.

I needed to know where each trail and road went in our area. After spending some time in the cupola, I would climb down, grab a book and go out to the south of the lookout. There I would find a comfortable spot to sit, as the warm sun beat down, and read. While in this spot, I would occasionally scan the countryside for smokes or wildlife. Sometimes it was just pleasant to sit and look at the wild flowers and the beauty of the earth. An hour later I would climb back to the cupola to glass again.

When lightning storms came through, I needed to mark each lightning strike on the map. This spot would need to be watched. Sometimes if a fire started it would be several days before the fire would get large enough to see from a distance. When sighting a fire, I would use the alidade fire finder to locate the fire position to the nearest quarter of a quarter section, township and range. I would observe fire size, location on slope, type of fuel (trees), wind speed and direction, and the azimuth (angle) from the lookout. I would also need to know which landmark was close by. After gathering all this information, I would climb down and report it to headquarters by phone. Back up in the cupola, I watched to see if there was any major change, especially in size or color of smoke. If any change in magnitude was noted, that was immediately reported. Otherwise, depending on weather conditions, I would report every half hour or hour. Most fires were started by lightning in my area, since few people ventured here. Once or twice I reported a campfire along Thompson River, but had no way of knowing until it was checked out, if it was a true fire. An average season would have about 10 fires. With the region being remote, the Forest Service wanted fires reported early and quickly, since it took a while to get to the location. Smokejumpers were sometimes used, depending on distances and fire danger. No major fires occurred on my watch.

Most days there was no fire activity. Time was filled in by reading, painting, building rock walls around the cabin, whittling or whatever came to my mind. One day, while looking around the cabin, I noticed that the dish cupboard was open and not an appealing sight. I took a flour sack dishtowel and used thumbtacks to make a curtain for it. After several days of looking at the plain white cloth, I got an inspiration. It needed some decoration. But, how to do it, was the question. I had black and white thread. My mother had taught me embroidery, in my childhood

years, while living in the remote Swan Valley of Northwest Montana. I set about drawing a picture of mountain goats. After several attempts I had something that resembled the goats, using white thread for the body and black for the horns, eyes and hooves. It needed color, but where to get this with my limited supplies on hand? I had a little paint, but not enough. Thread? A sudden inspiration hit me! I had old argyle socks on hand, which had multiple colored threads in them. Behold, I did have colored thread. Unraveling them provided brown, red, green, blue and yellow thread. The blue and black threads made rocks. Green and brown made trees; red, yellow and green made flowers and grass. When it was finished, I was quite pleased. It did spruce up the cabin. I left my handiwork at the cabin; that winter after the lookout was closed, Frank Gummer the FCO came to the lookout and saw my handiwork. He laundered it, and then gave it to my mother. We had it until it burned in our 1990 house fire.

Five o'clock was check in time to make sure everything and everyone was okay. Dinner was the next task. Being 19, I had a hearty appetite, but also had a limited food supply, so I ate judiciously, to ensure that my supply lasted till the monthly resupply came. After eating, I set off with my crosscut saw and axe to make fire wood. On a rock slide below a nearby cliff stood several dead white bark pine trees. They were still solid and made good firewood. The trees were about a foot in diameter and 20 feet in height. I would saw one down, chop the limbs off, then saw it into lengths of about 12 or 14 inches and split these chunks into stove-sized pieces. It would take two trips to take tools and wood back to the lookout. Usually I'd split more wood than needed for the next day. The extra was piled at a nearby tree. There was a sizeable stack before I left the lookout in August. Frequently in the evenings after work hours, the main office would connect all seven lookouts, so we could talk to each other. You could enter

or leave the conversation by picking up the earpiece or putting it back in the cradle. Most evenings someone would be talking, some more than others. Conversation topic ranged from girls, politics, recipes, descriptions of ourselves, and of course, jokes. As I had been the second lookout to go up, I had never met some of these fellows.

The sun would set and darkness settle over the land at about 10 o'clock. I w3ere were too many switchbacks on the trail. Would I die? I felt like it, at this moment, and the prospect of bumping down the 5-mile trail didn't help.

They were also trying to locate Dr. Rosdahl, the only resident doctor between Thompson Falls and Plains. He wasn't at his home or the hospital at that point, but should appear soon at the hospital. Too, they were trying to locate my parents, as I was underage.

At 10 o'clock the phone rang again. The doctor was located and wanted to talk with me. He quizzed me about my symptoms of the past nine hours. After a long pause, the Ranger talked again. They would try to locate a helicopter to get me off the mountain. (In 1956, there were no medical helicopters in Montana.) There were only two helicopters in the region, privately owned, and the pilots would have to be located. One was in Missoula, MT, 100 miles away, the other one 150 miles in Spokane, WA.

Two hours passed. At twelve noon, I heard horse hoofs in the distance. Pal, who had laid by my side the whole time, growled. Then another sound was heard, a whomp, whomp. The helicopter had arrived and was circling the lookout. A sense of relief filled me. Help had arrived!

There was action, now that air and ground help had arrived. Packer Earl was cutting down several trees, so the helicopter could land on a nearby swale the pilot had indicated. FCO Frank and my replacement, Jim, came to the cabin. Pal wasn't going to let them in the door. I had to practically lay on him to restrain him. Frank sent Jim to the snowbank with a towel, to get snow for a cold pack for my abdomen. He then called the main switchboard to report on this mountain drama. Next, Frank went to help Earl with the tree cutting, and the job of landing the helicopter. With the cold pack on my abdomen, the pain subsided a bit. Now my mind switched gears. What if this wasn't anything significant after all? Who was going to pay for all of this, the helicopter, wages for Earl, Frank and the doctor? Would it take my college money for the next year?

The helicopter was landed, and the pilot came to the cabin to make plans and some phone calls. He was to fly me to Missoula, to St. Pat's hospital. Should they shut down Broadway St. next to the hospital to land the chopper? I said this was not necessary, just land at the airport. With the dollar signs dancing in my head, I also vetoed an ambulance ride for the 5 miles to the hospital. A car would be adequate.

Final plans were for a station wagon to transport me to the hospital from the airport. My mother would meet me there. My father was to meet Earl at the trailhead to get Pal.

Now plans needed to be made as to how I would be positioned in the helicopter, as it was a small bubble 2-man chopper and I could not lie down. The pilot said, "If you can't sit up, we'll place you in your sleeping bag and sling or tie you under the helicopter between the struts or landing irons." I decided I could sit!

Frank helped me get dressed. He and Jim carried me down to the Bell helicopter and lifted me into the seat. The pilot got in and the doors were closed. Looking down, I could see the ground beneath my feet. The pilot stated that he would need to go straight up until we were well above the trees, then he would slide over the canyon, and drop a ways to pick up speed. The engine started, and we were off.

I grabbed my abdomen as we dropped and were flying out over the mountaintops at 7,000 to 8,000 feet, being a mile over most valleys. As we passed Big Hole lookout, I waved at the astonished fellow inside. Not many helicopters were around at that time, and they didn't usually fly near lookouts

The terrain sped by quickly, and we soon landed at the airport. Events happened very rapidly. A station wagon was at the door. I was lifted from the helicopter, and laid in the back seat. Upon arrival at the emergency room entrance, I was met by a nurse and a wheelchair and was promptly taken to a room. A lab technician drew blood, and admission questions were asked. The doctor arrived shortly and examined my painful abdomen. It was only a short time till the doctor returned and said they suspected appendicitis, and I would be going to surgery shortly.

A nurse, with a syringe announced, "This is just a little medicine to help you relax." In a short time, I was wheeled into the operating room, where another shot was given, with blissful release from pain.



Priscilla Peak Lookout in 1998
Gene Miller photo

Awakening after surgery, I felt momentarily confused. Where was I? This was not my mountain. Mother was sitting by my bed and my hands were tied to the bedrails. A nurse came in to remove the oxygen tube from my nose and untie my hands. Mother related that moments before, while coming out from anesthesia, I had easily torn the gauze ties from my hands, and was attempting to pull the tube out of my nose. She had held my hands firmly, while calling for help, and till my hands were secured more securely.

It was now 3 P.M. My surgery was over. Though my abdomen was still tender, the pain that had racked my body for 14 hours was gone. The doctor informed us that the appendix had been very inflamed and enlarged. It was fortunate that I had not moved much, or it could have ruptured, spreading bacteria and infection over my peritoneal cavity.

I still occasionally wonder why, as a healthy, conditioned 19-year old, I developed this acute episode. Was it related to the vigorous trail clearing workout of the day before? At least the whole episode made for a good story. And I did get to return to college that fall, despite the expenses it incurred.

For the four days I was in the hospital after my surgery, I received plenty of attention from the nursing staff and others. My mother said that she would hear whispering in the hall, "That is the room." The local newspaper had carried a story about this bearded mountain man who had been whisked off the mountain, in a dramatic fashion, to the hospital.

Meanwhile, back at the lookout, while I was on the way to Missoula, they were having a rodeo with Pal. After my lift off, Frank went to the lookout to gather and package my belongings. Pal paced the whole time, back and forth from the cabin to the last place I had been before entering the helicopter. When Frank and Earl were ready to depart, they called Pal, but he wouldn't follow. At first Pal wouldn't allow them to come near him, till they tempted him with food. They tied a rope to his collar and led him to the horses. Pal wasn't used to horses and was nervous. Frank mounted his horse, and started down the trail with the rope tied to the saddle. Pal resisted and braced with all four feet. The rocks hurt his feet, and he started running around the horse, entangling the horse's feet. The horse started bucking. The more the horse bucked, the faster Pal ran, which added to the confusion of entangled feet and a panicked horse. Frank jumped off the horse, and finally got the horse untangled

and Pal quieted. The next try was more successful and Pal followed them down the trail. He was very happy to see my father when they arrived at the trailhead. Dad took him home, but he wouldn't eat. He paced till exhausted, then lay moping. Even raw meat didn't tempt him, but he would drink. On the third day, mother came home from the hospital. Pal came to her, smelling her for my scent. Finally he was satisfied that I was all right, and started eating. When I came home on the fourth day, he was ecstatic, and wouldn't allow me out of his sight. He lay by my bed whenever I was in it, and wouldn't go outside unless I went too.

I recovered the remainder of August, and returned to Indiana for college in September. It had been a memorable summer!



Priscilla Peak Lookout in 2013. Taken off the cabin rental program due to lack of use, Priscilla is beginning to show the need for some TLC. Luke Channer photo