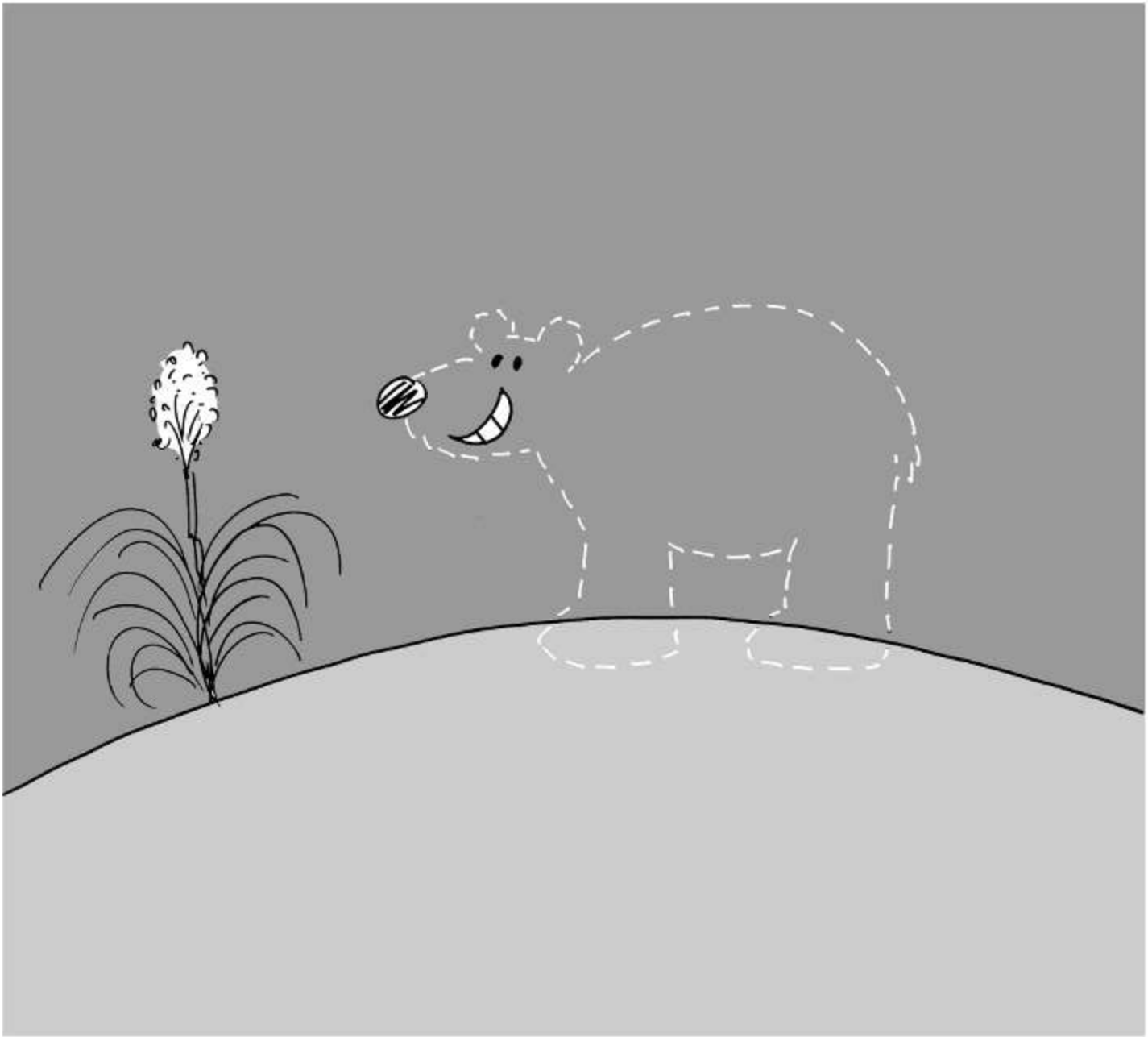
THE INVISIBLE BEAR ON LITTLE BUNCHGRASS MOUNTAIN

by Dean Norman



Fire Lookout cabin on Little Bunchgrass Mountain, Willamette National Forest, Oregon. Summer 1953

Chapter 1: Just Me and the Bear

The last mile was steep. Switchbacks up to the top of Little Bunchgrass Mountain. And there was my summer home...a fire lookout cabin. Pete the Packer rode a horse while leading a string of three mules carrying most of my gear, and he kept me walking in front of the parade. The steady clop of hoofs kept me going briskly for the first four miles, but I didn't get tired. The last mile did me in. I stood panting for breath as Pete got off of his horse to help me open the cabin. As we unhooked the shutters he pointed to some splinters and said, "A bear has tried to get in. Probably thought there was food in cabin. But now that you're here, he probably won't come back."

I was intensely interested in what a bear probably will or won't do. The only bears in Cedar Rapids, Iowa, lived in a small zoo pen and never did much. Now I was 22 years old. Old enough to vote, to drink beer, to get drafted by the army, and living for the first time in real wild bear country...the Willamette National Forest. About 50 miles southeast of Eugene, Oregon, a nice little university city. About 10 miles east of Oakridge, a tiny forest town on Highway 58. Nine miles east of Flat Creek Ranger station where I had lived with other lookout trainees for two weeks. Exactly five miles by trail from McCredie Springs on Highway 58.

My only quick connection to civilization was a party line telephone. If I didn't answer the phone when headquarters called in the morning, they would call again later. I might be out collecting firewood or lugging water from the spring. If I didn't answer all day, a ranger would hike the trail to find out what was wrong. A tree branch could fall on the telephone line and short the connection. A bear could get me. If a bear got me he would have approximately 24 hours to do what he wanted. That is why I was intensely interested in what a bear probably will or won't do in any particular circumstances.

William Cummins, the Oakridge District Ranger, had given me advice about bears. "A bear is like a hog. He roots around in the woods eating mostly vegetables, but will take anything he can get. In parks like Yellowstone some bears have gotten into the habit of eating from garbage cans and stealing food from campers. Those bears have become accustomed to being around people and have become dangerous. But a wild bear in the national forest wilderness is more afraid of you than you are of him. You will hardly ever see a bear, because he hears you coming and takes off.

"But if you do surprise a bear on a trail, don't panic and run away. You can't outrun a bear anyway. Especially if you run uphill. A bear digs in his claws and runs uphill real fast. But he is so heavy that if he goes downhill at top speed he will lose his balance. So if you ever have to run from a bear, run downhill and you will get farther before he catches you.

"But most times a bear that sees you will just walk or run away into the woods. If he doesn't go away, shout at him, wave your arms, bang on a pan if you have one handy. The only time a wild animal didn't run away from me was when I met a buck deer in rutting season. I shouted and waved my arms, but he just lowered his head and pawed the ground like he was getting ready to charge. I looked for a tree to climb, but couldn't see one the right size. Then I barked like a dog. The deer looked around, but couldn't see any dog. He didn't realize that I was making the noise. That spooked him and he took off."

(*I filed that information into my permanent memory. If nothing else works, bark like a dog. I have forgotten most of the facts I stuffed into my memory for final exams at school, but I have always remembered "bark like a dog to scare a dangerous animal".*)

Ranger Cummins continued his instructions on how to deal with bears. "The only bears to worry about in this forest are mothers with cubs. If you see a cub, back up and go the other way. The mother is somewhere close, and if you get between a mother and her cub she might charge. That's when you look for a tree to climb."

(*I filed another bit into my memory...better to see a big bear than a little bear.*)

"If you whistle or sing or make any noise as you walk through the woods, you will probably never see a bear or have any trouble with them. I've never had any trouble with a bear." Then just as Ranger Cummins had built up my confidence for a summer alone in a tiny cabin on a mountain infested with wild bears, he unraveled it with an amusing anecdote. "Funny thing though, last year the lookout on Little Bunchgrass Mountain had a bear sit down by the spring. The lookout shouted at the bear, waved his arms, banged on a pan...but the bear wouldn't go away. The bear stayed by the spring for two and a half days, and the lookout ran out of water and was getting pretty thirsty. So we decided that bear might be dangerous, and sent a ranger up the trail with rifle to shoot him. But before the ranger got there the bear went away and didn't come back. A very strange bear. Not typical behavior."

All of this information flooded into my thoughts as Pete said, "The bear that tried to get into your cabin might be the same one that kept the lookout away from the spring last summer." Then he pointed to a pack board with a five gallon water can and said, "You go down to the spring now and fetch some water, while I unpack your gear from the mules. Just follow that trail across the meadow, and you'll find the spring a little way into the woods. It's only about a quarter mile. You can't miss it."

He sent me alone to meet the maverick bear who guards the spring! But the bear wasn't there that day, and when I came back Pete and his pack animals were gone also. My gear and four weeks of groceries were piled on the ground beside the cabin. It was just me and the bear on Little Bunchgrass Mountain.

Little Bunchgrass lookout cabin closed.

Lookout open. Ready to look for fires and greet tourists.

Inside of cabin. Firefinder, telephone, firepack (hanging by window) and sleeping cot.

Spring 1/4 mile from cabin.

Chapter 2: Do Bears Eat Beargrass?

When I applied for a summer job as a forest fire lookout, I imagined living in a cabin on a tower with a scenic view in all directions. The reality was better than I imagined. The cabin on Little Bunchgrass Mountain didn't need a tower. Perched on a bare spot at the top of the mountain with a meadow around three sides, it wasn't necessary to put the cabin on a tower to see over trees. And that meant it wasn't necessary to lug gear, groceries, water and firewood up steps or a ladder. In a short time I had everything arranged inside the cabin.

Food stacked on shelves in a cupboard, my sleeping bag laid out on a bunk, clothes under the bunk, firewood under the stove, salt and pepper shakers and a coffee cup on the small table. A single chair was pushed up against the table. The 9 by 9 foot square cabin would have been a pretty cozy place for one person if the center was not filled up with the firefinder. But spotting fires was the purpose, so I couldn't complain about that.

The firefinder was a combination map and gun sight mounted on a five foot tall table smack in the middle of the cabin. You had to walk around it to get to any other place, and the aisle between the firefinder and the cupboard, dining table, stove and bunk was little more than a foot wide. Looking through the gun sight on the firefinder I could pin point the location of any place within the view on the map that was mounted under the gun sight.

To the west, south and southeast I looked into the Willamette River Valley...the most likely place to spot a fire along Highway 58 or the railroad tracks that switchbacked over the mountains toward California. Also to the southeast I looked toward Diamond Peak, and along the Bunchgrass Ridge toward Mt. Fuji. If a fire started on the Bunchgrass Ridge, I might be sent to fight it until a larger crew could hike in to relieve me. A firepack which included a shovel and two days supply of food hung on the wall of the cabin. Almost due east and northeast I looked into the Waldo Lake Wilderness. The view north and northwest was blocked by some tall fir and spruce. Other lookouts were responsible for spotting fires in that direction.

After settling into the cabin, I studied a small map that showed the way to significant nearby attractions. The spring I had already visited. The woodshed I had passed just a few yards before reaching the cabin, and it was easily in view anyway. The toilet was supposed to be located a few yards down the steep face of the ridge facing the Willamette Valley. Hmm! Couldn't see it by looking out of the window, so I followed a well worn path. It was an outhouse without the house. A small one holer, and when perched on that throne you had a magnificent view of the entire valley. But the valley was so distant that I could not see people down there even with binoculars, so they could not see me which meant privacy was provided by distance rather than walls. It would be uncomfortable in the rain, but I guess the main consideration was that I could take a bathroom break without suspending my duty to look for fires.

I cranked one long ring on the party line telephone, and told the clerk at Oakridge Headquarters that I was comfortably settled into my cabin. Beside the phone was a small list of numbers on my party line with the codes for ringing them, combinations of long and short rings. A long ring was about three cranks of the small bell handle, a short ring was one crank. But most of the other lookouts on my line had not been occupied yet. They would be soon because now it was early July, and the weather had been dry and sunny for several weeks. Snow at mid elevations was gone and melting fast from high elevations. Little Bunchgrass Mountain was only 5,300 feet above sea level. The highest mountain in view, Diamond Peak, was 8,700 feet and would retain a snowfield all summer on the north side.

After a bit of struggle I got a fire going in the stove, and heated a can of beef stew for dinner. It was not as easy as lighting a campfire on the ground. The wood had to be cut to short lengths to go into the firebox, and I found out any sticks thicker than 2 or 3 inches were hard to get burning. I had to stuff a wad of paper under some sticks split to half inch thickness, and wait till they were going good before adding larger wood.

In the evening I split some of the wood in the shed to usable diameters, and smoked a pipe as I enjoyed a peaceful sunset on the southwestern ridge of the Willamette Valley. Little Bunchgrass Mountain was named for a pretty flowering plant that grew in the woods and meadows. Bunchgrass is a white flowered lily that is also called beargrass. I had noticed some flower heads had been nipped off about a foot or so above the ground. Probably not by a small animal, but by a big animal who leaned down the gobble the flowers. Do bears eat beargrass? When darkness came I felt that the surrounding woods and the meadow now belonged to the bear, but hoped he would respect the small cabin and a few yards around it as my territory.

Woodshed 15 yards north of cabin.

A load of firewood ready to be split into kindling.

Neither rain nor sleet nor call of nature shall stop the valiant lookout from spotting fires.

Bunchgrass (a white lily also called beargrass). Do bears eat it?

Chapter 3: The Bear Tries to Get Me

I had imagined a fire lookout job to be much like a paid vacation. Hang out in a cabin, take short strolls on the mountain to see wildlife and wildflowers, read some good books, do a bit of drawing, painting or poetry if that is your creative outlet. And if while admiring the scenic vista you should see a snort of smoke and flames in the woods, make a quick call to headquarters to earn your pay. Ranger Cummins had a more structured view of fire lookout duties.

"Get up at first light, about 5:00 a.m. this time of year, and look for smokes on the mountains. A small fire might burn for many days, and the only time any smoke rises above the treetops is in the calm air of daybreak. Then you can go back to sleep until sunrise if you want to. Starting about 7:00 a.m. get up and make a careful check look at every ridge on the horizon. Very methodically run your eye along each ridge. It will take about 15 or 20 minutes to do this right. Other lookouts in this vicinity are doing this on the hour and the half hour, so you might make your check look at quarter past the hour. During the rest of the hour as you are working around the cabin just glance up about every 10 minutes and make a quick look. If you see a smoke, take time to check it carefully.

"You will see smoke often in the Willamette Valley where the railroad switchbacks up the mountain. They still use coal fired steam engines, because diesels don't have enough power to push and pull a train up those grades. There will be one or more engines front and back of a freight train. You can't see trains most of the time because the tracks are in tall timber, but there are a few places where you can see a train with your binoculars. Anyway, a column of smoke that moves along where your map indicates the tracks are located is an engine. If the smoke stops moving, then there might be a fire that has started along the tracks. Or maybe the train has just stopped to take on water. Watch a stationary smoke until you see it moving again.

"When a train goes through a tunnel there will be a column of smoke that comes out of the tunnel before the engine comes out. Watch this for a few minutes until you see it moving, and know that it is nothing to worry about. After a while you will know the route of the trains perfectly even though you can't see them. If you ever see a smoke that is not near the tracks, it most likely is a fire to be reported.

"Make check looks from sun up to sun down. Also put the flag up at sunrise and take it down at sunset. There may be hikers that come up the trail to visit, and we want you to look professional. You don't have a uniform to wear, but you should wear clean clothes and be cleanly shaven.

"You will be paid for eight hours of work five days a week. Then you get two days off if there are two days in a week when fire danger is low...like a rainy day. On a day off you can do anything you like. Hang out in the cabin, take a hike in the woods, go down the trail to the highway and go into town it you want to. But you will have to be back in your lookout the day following a day off, so you probably can't hike ten miles round trip and go into town from this lookout. And for the rest of the summer it is likely the fire danger will remain high enough so you have to work seven days a week. You get paid the same rate for the extra days of work.

"If there are more than two days in a week when fire danger is low, we will send you out to clear trails. Those days you take the ax and the two-man saw and clear any deadfall across the trails. And trim hanging growth so that a man on horseback can ride the trail without ducking. The trail crew does this in the remote wilderness, but we like to have the lookout take care of trails near his cabin. Report any trail signs that need replacing. Never go off of a

trail to take a shortcut, and always use your map and compass even when on the trails. It's easy to get lost in this thick Douglas fir forest."

Adhering to Ranger Willams' instructions regarding check looks at a quarter past each hour, I found it hard to get much done except cook and eat and keep house the rest of the time. I had camped out quite a bit and cooked over fires, but found the wood burning stove to be a new challenge. There was a pile of wood in the shed which I could use, but I was expected to gather more wood and leave a similar pile at the end of the season.

When first I saw a two-man saw, I couldn't see how to saw... (Hey! That's fun alliteration. Let's do it again.) When first I saw a two-man saw, I couldn't see how to saw since I was a single sawyer. Somebody showed me how. Rest the long, heavy blade vertically onto a fallen tree trunk, push and pull on one handle, and the weight of the blade cuts through the log like a hot knife through butter. Well, sort of like that, but with more noise. The first wood collecting foray seemed successful when I brought back several round chunks I had sawed off of a down tree. But when I tried to split them into kindling, the knots make splitting almost impossible and dangerous. The ax got wedged in the chunk, or slipped sideways after shaving off only a small splinter. Those knotty wood chunks were useless for a stove with a small firebox.

The next time I carefully selected a fallen log with no knots, and a somewhat decayed log that I thought would be easier to split. The punky decayed wood was impossible to split. The ax wedged. It was going to be a long summer.

Finally I learned how to pick the right kind of fallen tree trunk. One that was very dead, but very solid and dry, and had no side limbs. I couldn't identify the species I was cutting, but the wood split cleanly with just a tap of the ax, and then I had large supply of good firewood and bits of kindling easy to ignite.

At first I had pancakes or eggs and bacon breakfasts, and it took me half the morning to breakfast and clean up, what with being interrupted to take check looks for 15 minutes of every hour. Come to think of it when I camped in the woods at home about all we did was set up a tent and cook meals. We thought it was such a great accomplishment to cook a meal over a fire in the woods we didn't mind taking most of the day to do it.

To get time for a bit of reading and whatever, I simplified the meals. Breakfast was coffee, eggs and biscuits made from bisquick. The fire in the stove boiled the coffee, scrambled the eggs and baked biscuits in the oven at the same time. Lunch was extra biscuits that had been made in the morning with peanut butter on them. Dinner was something warmed up from cans...spam, spaghetti and meatballs, Chinese, or beef stew, some canned vegetables and canned fruit and cookies for desert.

Going to the spring for water was a chore I needed to perform about every other day. It was a very pleasant hike to the spring. It took a while to fill the five gallon can by dipping a small coffee can into the spring pool and pouring into the large can. Then a vigorous hike back to the cabin with 40 pounds of water on my back.

Each time I went for water I expected to meet the bear. He was never there. At first I didn't want to meet him, and made some noise as I approached the spring. But after a while I changed my mind. I decided my fear of bears was irrational, and could only be cured by meeting a real wild bear, and seeing him walk or run away from me. So I began to approach the spring quietly hoping to meet the bear. He still wasn't there, so I made a plan to sneak up on him at night. I was sure that he was coming to the spring to drink at night in order to avoid me. So I would wait until dark, and then slip quietly along the trail and into the woods.

I counted the paces from the spot where the trail entered the woods till it came to the spring. There was enough light in the meadow on a clear night so no flashlight was needed on most of the trail. My plan was to then creep silently into the woods, counting the paces until I was about 30 feet from the spring, and suddenly snap on my flashlight and surprise the bear.

I admit this plan seemed a little foolish even at the time, and later I realized it was a perfectly stupid and possibly a dangerous stunt. But I was determined to get over my irrational fear of bears, and didn't realize that my plan was even more irrational. I was shaking the first night I made my sneak into the woods. I shook all the time I was dipping the coffee can and filling the water can. I stopped dipping often and played the light around to see if the bear was sneaking up on me. I slowly trembled back up the trail with the heavy water can, certain that the bear was watching me.

I made this bear hunting trip to the spring every night for a week. After about three trips I began to suspect that perhaps the bear did not come to the spring at night, and I would never meet him in this way. But just forcing myself to go through this ordeal...confronting my fear...this would enable me to gradually lose my irrational fear of bears. I would hike to the spring every night that summer until bears or anything that goes bump in the night would not frighten me. But it wasn't working. Each night I was more afraid than the night before. It took more resolve each evening to force myself to hike to the spring after dark. I was determined to see this through. It had to work. I didn't want to go through life being afraid of bears in the woods.

Then one night I woke up in the middle of the night to take a pee as I most always do, and there was an adventure that changed my plans. For these late night urinations I didn't bother to stumble down the trail to the biffy. I just walked a few yards from the cabin and aimed at a different spot in the meadow each night in order to fertilize the area evenly and do no harm to the plants. I was aiming north toward the tall spruces that night when the loud stomping started. A bear was coming toward me, hitting the ground with each foot so hard that it was like the sound when the Frankenstein monster stomps around the halls of the castle.

The stomps seemed to be right in front of me. I snapped on my flashlight, but nothing was there. I played the light around in all directions. There was nothing, and yet something was still stomping the ground and coming at me. An invisible bear was about to get me! The mind doesn't have time to carefully consider a lot of possibilities in a moment of crisis that requires quick action. An invisible bear? I didn't consider this likely. Invisibility is a fun gimmick for ghost stories and science fiction, but not a possibility in real life. And life had never seemed so real to me as it did now. How about the possibility that I was so scared that my brain wasn't working properly? The image of the bear charging toward me was in my eyes, but it wasn't getting to the brain. The action for this possibility was clear and I took it.

In a mini-second I was back in the cabin, closed the door and hooked it, and zipped up my pants. All was quiet now. The bear was satisfied that he had chased me into my territory, and he had all the rest of the mountain for himself. I decided to hell with getting over my fear of bears. I would damn well go through life being afraid of them. And for the rest of the summer I would fetch water in the daylight while whistling my way down the trail to warn the bear that I was coming. He was afraid of me in the daylight, I was afraid of him in the dark, so it was even.

Chapter 4: The Sound of a Bear Walking

Alone on a mountain for an entire summer. Time to think, to reflect, to contemplate, to get in touch with the universe and one's inner self. Well, the forest service knew that the hardest thing for a lookout to do was being alone for that long. One of the lookouts in the Oakridge district walked off the job after two weeks and said, "I can't take it any longer!" The forest service knew from past experience that quite a few new hires would do this, so extras were trained to replace them during the season. Many of the guys I had attended fire guard school with were assigned to the trail crew, and if vacancies occurred in the lookouts they were ready to give it a try.

I had first applied for a lookout job in the Challis National Forest in Idaho, and was told they only hired married couples because couples were more likely to be able to stay with it for the season. Most of the cabins in the Willamette National Forest were too small for more than one person. Some like Little Bunchgrass were 9 by 9 feet. The cabin on Sardine Butte was only 7 by 7 feet, and perched on the edge of a cliff. A psychology student from Portland, Arnold Labby, was the lookout on Sardine Butte, and he said, "If I wake up in the morning, open the window, take a deep breath and throw my chest out...it lands 2,000 feet below."

Arnie said he considered taking some chicks to Sardine Butte Lookout, and raising them for chicken dinners during the summer. "But I couldn't figure out how to protect them from predators," he said. "A little chicken wire fence wouldn't be good enough. And I would have to take chicks of various ages, because if they all grew to fryer size at the same time, I would have to eat them all at one dinner." So Arnie gave up on raising his chicken dinners. But he had some good advice for a lookout who got a toothache. "Take a mouthful of water, and sit on the stove until it boils."

I wish I could remember more Labbyisms. He turned ordinary conversation into comedy in the way Steve Allen talked to people in a radio or TV audience. Us college kids delighted in laughing with Labby, but I thought maybe the veteran foresters thought he was an annoying wise ass. But when Labby left the Flat Creek station to live in his lookout cabin, an old woodsman said, "It's good to have a feller like that around a place like this where the work can get kind of boring."

One lookout in the Oakridge district was occupied by a woman who had done this job for several years. The rest of them were men and doing it for the first time. Bill Steele told me that during WWII there was a shortage of young men, so women lookouts were first hired in those years...1942 through 1945. In the post war years the forest service went back to hiring men, except for a few women who had done well and wanted to continue being summer fire lookouts.

Bill Steele was a forest service carpenter who had built many of the cabins in the Willamette National Forest. All the lumber and equipment was packed up to mountain tops by horses and mules, and Bill and a helper would camp out for a week or two while building a cabin. Bill told me that he disapproved of hiring women for fire lookout duty.

"Why?" I asked. "Can't women see fires as well as men?"

"Oh sure, they can see fires," Bill admitted. "But having a woman on a lookout leads to trouble. Some of them complain that it's hard to chop firewood, some complain about lugging water. But even when they are strong enough to do all the chores, they cause trouble."

I was curious to know what kind of trouble, so Bill told me a story about Adam and Eve. That was not their real names, but the names are appropriate for this story. Adam was the

lookout on Paradise Peak (a fictitious location), and Eve was the lookout on Snake Mountain (another fictitious place name). Lookouts are encouraged to pass the time chatting with each other on the party line telephone if they get lonely for company. So Adam and Eve got acquainted by chatting on the telephone. Then one day the fire danger was low, and Adam had a day off. He hiked six miles from Paradise Peak to Snake Mountain to meet Eve in person, and then he hiked six miles back that evening.

The two friends decided they wanted to get together again, so Adam made that twelve mile hike several times. The problem was that he really couldn't hike that far if he didn't have a day off, and still do his job of looking for fires on Paradise Peak. But he figured out a plan that worked pretty well. He would hike to Snake Mountain in an afternoon, stay overnight, and then hike back to Paradise Peak the next morning.

Of course Adam would still be at Snake Mountain in the early morning when headquarters called Paradise Peak to check on him. On a party line telephone everybody hears all the rings, and they are only supposed to answer when they hear their particular ring. Adam would answer the Paradise Peak ring and say, "Everything is fine on Paradise Peak this morning. No fires in sight." Then Eve would answer the Snake Mountain ring, and say everything was fine on Snake Mountain. So headquarters thought everything was fine everywhere until one morning Adam is checking in and headquarters hears a voice in the background say, "How do you want your eggs this morning, Dear?"

The District Ranger hopped in his truck, drove to the trailhead, and made a quick hike up to Paradise Peak. He got there just as Adam was coming up the trail from Snake Mountain.

"Where have you been?" asked the Ranger.

"Uh...I've been to the spring to get water," said Adam.

"Why didn't you take your water can with you?" asked the Ranger. "Seems like a lot of effort to hike to the spring every time you get thirsty."

"So both Adam and Eve were fired for not doing their jobs properly," Bill concluded. "That's what I mean by women causing trouble on lookouts."

It was a case of original sin repeated in modern times. A man and a woman expelled from Paradise. Men would find it easy to be virtuous if they weren't tempted by women. And women are irresistible temptation just because they are women. They can't help it.

There was no woman on a lookout within hiking distance of Little Bunchgrass that summer, so I was immune to irresistible temptation. I talked on the phone with the lookout on Mt. Fuji which was ten trail away miles along the Bunchgrass Ridge. We talked about meeting halfway for lunch someday when we got a day off, but that never happened. Neither of us were irresistible temptation to the other.

I didn't think loneliness was bothering me, and then one day I jumped when a strange sight appeared on the mountain. I glanced out of the window toward the woodshed, and there was a man and woman standing near the cabin. I couldn't have jumped more if I had seen the bear. Seeing a person after two weeks of not seeing a person, and not expecting to see one, was alarming.

Ranger Cummins had told me that hikers might come by, but I hadn't believed they would. The guy had been the lookout on Little Bunchgrass in a previous summer, and he wanted to show his girl friend the place. I chatted with them for half an hour, and when they left I realized I was feeling spooky due to isolation. I never chatted so much and so stupidly with people on first meetings as I had in that half hour. The girl probably thought I was silly, but the guy probably understood why I was so chatty. It wasn't just forest service courtesy to visitors.

After three weeks I was running low on food, and phoned in an order for groceries. Two men backpacked the stuff up the trail the next day. I had expected Pete the Packer on horses, but they said Pete was busy with other work, and they wanted a day out of the office anyway. The guys stayed overnight, both of them sleeping in the narrow aisles on the floor of the cabin...said they wouldn't make me give up my bunk. It was the only time I forgot to take down the flag at sunset. Having visitors disrupted my routine. As we were waking up and trying to get out of each others' way, one of them looked out at the flapping flag on the pole and said, "Oh, I see you got up earlier to put up the flag. That's good!" I couldn't have gotten out of the cabin without stepping on both of them, but I accepted the compliment anyway.

There was a mysterious visitor who clipped off straws from my broom. The broom kept getting smaller, and one day as I was coming back to the cabin from the woodshed I surprised the visitor. He was standing in the doorway of the cabin with a mouthful of straws that made him look cutely bewhiskered. He ran so fast his tiny feet thumpity thumped up a cloud of dust. I think he was a pika. Either he had enough straws for his purposes or being discovered traumatized him so much that he never visited my cabin again.

Another break from the loneliness was when Ranger Cummins visited to see how I was doing. It was a surprise visit, so good thing the flag was on the pole, I was clean shaven, wearing clean clothes and the cabin was freshly swept. He stayed overnight, also refusing to take my bunk and sleeping on the floor, and even cooked pancakes for our breakfast.

He asked if I had any questions or particular problems. Well, there was the matter of the invisible bear...or the bear that I couldn't see even as he was stomping the ground and charging the cabin. I was embarrassed to tell the story, and left out the part about going to the spring at night to try to surprise the bear. I just asked how could a bear be so close and yet I couldn't see him?

"Oh, that couldn't have been a bear," the ranger said. "The sound you describe could have been made by deer. When a deer wants to get away fast, he bounds several yards at a time, and each time his hoofs hit the ground there is a loud thump."

"But why couldn't I see a deer? The thumping seemed to be coming right toward me across the small meadow in front of the woods, but nothing was there."

"By the time you shined your flashlight the deer was probably already into the woods. And he kept bounding away from you, but sound travels very well on a clear night so you might have imagined the sounds were coming closer."

His explanation made more sense than my eyeball to brain disconnect theory, so I believed that my midnight visitor had probably been a deer. But could a bear have made the sound?

"There are two kinds of sounds a bear makes when he goes through the woods", said Ranger Cummins. "When he walks he makes no noise at all. Perfect silence. But when a bear runs, it sounds like a freight train coming. He goes right through bushes and knocks down small trees. So the sound you heard could not have been made by a bear."

Again Ranger Cummins had given me valuable information about the woods that I have never forgotten. I have not yet heard the sound of a bear running in the woods. But every time I hike and camp in bear country, I have heard the sound of a bear walking in the woods. I crawl into a sleeping bag and breathe lightly, so I can hear the perfect silence as a bear sneaks up to my tent. The bear has not yet tried to come into the tent, so after a while I get used to the sound and manage to go to sleep.

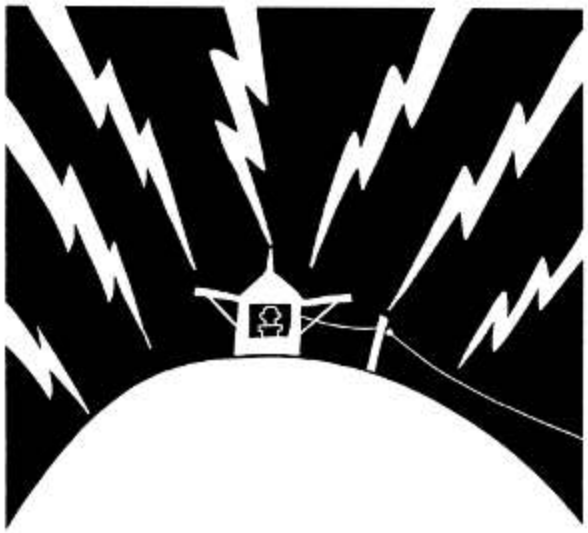
Finnegan, the greeter at Flat Creek Ranger Station.

Bunkhouses at Flat Creek for lookouts in training.

Breakfast at the dining hall. Carpenter Bill Steele in center of picture.

Slash crew at lunch among the Douglas firs.

Chapter 5: Barely Surviving a Storm



One morning headquarters called and said I had received an urgent letter. Mail had been delivered to me by my occasional visitors, but the telephone operator said this letter could not wait until the next time someone hiked up Little Bunchgrass. She asked for permission to open it and read it to me. It was a letter from my rich uncle, and the message was something like, "Your friends and neighbors have selected you to serve your country in the armed forces etc." Most of my friends had been drafted or enlisted since the Korean war began in June 1950, and now in the summer of 1953 my number had come up.

"Well," I said, "I guess I can't go anywhere right away, because this is the middle of the fire season…"

"We are sending a replacement to Little Bunchgrass today. You can hike down to the highway tomorrow, and catch the Greyhound Bus to Portland. There you will take your physical exam at the Army recruitment offices, and return to Little Bunchgrass lookout on the following day."

Government bureaucracy can be so efficient when you don't want it to be. I went to Portland, took the physical exam, and was back on the mountain for about a week when I received another urgent letter from my uncle. This one told me that I had passed my physical exam, and should report with my toothbrush in hand at the Greyhound bus station in Cedar Rapids, Iowa, at 10:20 a.m. on September 13, 1953 to be transported to Fort Riley, Kansas, to begin basic training.

Even as I was absolutely certain that my life was soon to become much different, the familiar routine on Little Bunchgrass seemed endless. Every morning was a beautiful, cool clear morning. I got up at first light to check for fires, then dressed, put up the flag, cooked breakfast, checked for fires again, and then spent the rest of the day doing some reading and writing between chores and fire check looks. I had something new to write about in my letters. Friends and family who expected me to return to the University of Iowa in mid September would not see me there. The university humor magazine titled Magazine X would have to find another editor. I had been sketching cartoon ideas and planning article ideas for a whoppingly funny last year at school, but those plans would be delayed by at least two years.

There had been little rain during the summer, and fire danger increased with each new day of perfect picnicking weather. But it seemed that there might be no reason for me to have this nice paid summer vacation, and I felt a little guilty about the small fortune accumulating from paychecks that couldn't be spent. Then one night in mid August I earned some overtime pay.

I had been told that it was assumed I worked about eight hours every day, but if a thunderstorm should occur at night when I was off duty, I should get up and earn overtime pay for duration of the storm. Bill Steele had told me how impressive these mountain storms could

be. "Once I was camping on a mountain building a lookout cabin, and my helper was a young man who was studying to be a preacher. At lunchtime he would practice preaching sermons to me, and he was really good. He could put out the word of the Lord with enthusiasm and conviction.

"One day a thunderstorm came up, and we got into the cabin we had almost finished. There was only one stool with insulators on the feet to protect you from a lightning strike. I told the preacher to take the stool, and I would just trust the Lord. If it wasn't my time to go, He wouldn't let lightning strike me. Well, it was an awful storm. Sheets of rain, lighting bolts hitting all around, thunder so loud we put our hands over our ears to keep from going deaf. When it was over the preacher said to me, "Bill, I wish I had as much faith in the Lord as you do!"

Bill Steele had other good stories about the WWII years when young men were scarce for civilian jobs. The forest service had the authority to draft men to fight fires. Maybe they still do. One time buses on the highway were stopped, and all able bodied men were drafted to go into the woods and fight a forest fire. "Some of these men were musicians from California wearing strange clothes", Bill said. "They had hats with brims about two feet wide. Pants with the ankles so tight I don't see how they could put them on if they were barefoot. Pointy shoes, sport coats with huge shoulder pads, and a chain that hung down below their knees."

"Those were zoot suits. Coats with a drape shape, pants with a reet pleat and a jingle jangle chain", I said. I had picked up this jazz cats' talk from the Lil' Abner comic strip.

"That about describes them," said Bill. "They sure looked funny after a couple days of digging in the dirt on a fire line. They were pretty unhappy, too. They weren't fellows used to being the woods, especially not all night shoveling dirt on a fire."

Then Bill stopped chuckling as he recalled building lookout cabins in the 1930s with Civilian Conservation Corps (CCC) employees. "A lot of good work was done by those young men. Building cabins, trails and bridges that are still in good shape. And a lot of them died in France in WWII. They were the first to be drafted after Pearl Harbor."

I recalled Bill's story about the preacher when distant rumbles of thunder woke me up about midnight. The storm was approaching from the Pacific coast which meant it would hit the southwestern ridge of the Willamette Valley before coming to Bunchgrass Ridge. I got out of bed and stood by the firefinder. Each time a bolt of lighting struck the ridge I marked a piece of paper below the firefinder ring to record the exact spot. The next morning I would be able to use the marks and gun sight to check those spots for possible fires. Most fires in the Cascade mountains are started by lightning strikes. These fires start small, maybe only one tall dead tree burning, and if put out quickly a large destructive fire could be prevented.

I kept up with the storm for a while, and then the lightning hit so fast and in so many places I realized this system of recording strikes was a waste of time. The entire ridge was being zapped, and fires might start anywhere along it. The lighting and booming thunder stopped as the storm moved off of the ridge, and over the Willamette Valley. It only rumbled as it advanced toward Bunchgrass Ridge.

I got onto the footstool with insulated feet, and kept my hands away from the metal firefinder ring. Everything metal in the cabin...the stove, the bed springs, the firefinder...these things were connected by a thick copper wire that ran from an iron spike on the peak of the roof to the four corners of the building and into the ground. As I waited for the storm a disturbing thought came to me. I had forgotten to disconnect the telephone. The fire lookout manual said it was very important to disconnect the phone in a thunderstorm, or else a strike anywhere on

the line could come into the cabin and zing around looking for targets. Was it too late to go outside, and throw the switch on the pole about ten feet from the cabin? I zinged out, pulled the switch, and was back in the cabin and perched on the stool in a mini-moment. Now I was ready for a storm that could test one's faith in the Lord.

The storm did not creep in on little cat feet as fog is said to do in Chicago. It pounced on Bunchgrass Ridge like the Coyote with a firecracker in his mouth. All was quiet except for the rumbling in the dark as if the clouds had indigestion. Then an explosion engulfed the cabin.

I could imagine the bear crouched under a small spruce at the edge of the meadow. He was comfortably below the ridge, and a couple hundred yards away from the cabin that was positioned and wired to attract all the ions that a storm could give it. The bear might have gotten a bit wet from rain that trickled through the branches of the spruce, but he would have the best seat to see a magnificent fireworks show. Great, fat, white bolts of lightning striking the cabin, enveloping it in an intense electric glow. Simultaneous cracks and booms of thunder shaking the cabin and the entire mountain.

Science tells us that charged ions stream up from the ground to the clouds to create the white light, and push the air apart. Then the air comes back together like two giant hands clapping and makes the boom. But humans and bears can't detect the short interval between the light and the sound, so it seems to happen simultaneously. From a comfortable distance, say from across the Willamette Valley, we had seen the light almost immediately because light travels at the speed of light which is very fast. Then the bear and I had heard the thunder later, because sound travels at the speed of sound which is still faster than either of us could run but much slower than the speed of light. If we could have remembered the mathematical formula we could have estimated how far away the storm was then. Anyway, both of us knew we were in for it now.

The bear may have looked away or blinked a lot, but I closed my eyes and held my head down for a long time. It was as if there were welders with torches all around the cabin, so if I looked out of the windows in any direction I would see blinding white light. I held my hands over my ears as the giant clapping hands were as enthusiastic as an audience at a concert that gives the orchestra a standing ovation. The preacher had stood on the stool as I was doing, Bill Steele had figured the Lord knew whether or not it was his time to go. I took comfort in an old joke… "If you hear the thunder, you know it missed you."

Finally it was over. The storm moved northeast and grumbled as it gathered strength to zap the next ridge. That way was out of my viewing area, so I flipped the switch to reconnect the telephone and went back to bed. I recorded about an hour and a half of overtime. I suppose I was only actually working when I was spotting the lighting strikes on the other side of the valley, but the storm had kept me awake while it cooked my cabin and Bunchgrass Ridge, so I didn't feel guilty for including that time.

When I reported to headquarters the next morning, Ranger Cummins asked if I had smelled anything strange during the storm. I hadn't. "Well," he said, "then lighting probably never struck your cabin. It can seem like it when the strikes are close, but if lighting actually strikes a cabin and sends a charge through the ground wires, it creates ozone. Ozone is the smell when a toaster shorts out or a lamp cord goes bad. So if you didn't smell any ozone, lightning never struck your cabin."

So the storm only shot bolts of lightning around and over the cabin, like a gunfighter teasing a cowboy by shooting at his feet and hat. Nature is so wonderfully amazing when you observe it up close.

Chapter 6: Smokey Jumps on the Smoke

The next morning I was up early checking the forest for fires. So many lighting strikes, the woods might be blazing. Of course, there had been rain, too, and rain puts out fires. I saw no definite smoke, but each little creek valley put up a rising plume of mist. Or was it smoke? I called headquarters and they told me to keep looking at all the plumes of mist until the sun had burned them off. If any persisted after that, it could be smoke.

One particular plume in the Waldo Lake Wilderness seemed very persistent. But then it would go away, and then start up again. It could be smoke, it could be mist...I wasn't sure. Headquarters put me on a conference call that included the lookouts on Mt. Fuji and Wolf Mountain who could see the same plume rising from a creek valley. Headquarters couldn't see it, so it was up to three guys on their first tours as fire lookouts to decide if this was a fire to report. It was in a very remote wilderness where you wouldn't want to send a fire crew for nothing.

By about 9:30 a.m. all the plumes of mist were burned off including the one we suspected. But we had been told to keep watching that spot for a while. Suddenly a blue cloud that was definitely smoke puffed above the trees. I cranked the phone and reported the fire about a second ahead of Mt. Fuji and Wolf Mountain. I was proud to have been first, but headquarters called it a tie and congratulated us for being alert. We all described the smoke from our points of view, and with three lookouts reporting a very accurate triangulation could be plotted to locate the fire on the map. About half an hour later the smoke stopped and was never seen again.

Ranger Cummins' advice had been exactly right. Look for the small fires in early morning before wind starts to move the air around and dissipate smoke below the tops of trees.

Around noon headquarters called and gave us a knew assignment. Smoke jumpers were going to parachute into the fire, and they would depend on us lookouts to guide them to the fire. About 5:00 p.m. we would see a small airplane circle the area. Two white parachutes would appear and drop into the woods. These would be two men. Then a pink parachute would follow, and this would be their equipment package. The equipment would include a radio. We were supposed to report the exact places where each parachute went down in the woods.

When the smoke jumpers picked up their equipment package, they would use the radio to contact headquarters. The information the lookouts had reported by telephone would be given to the smoke jumpers. Then the two men would know exactly where they were, and exactly what direction and how far they had to go to find the fire. They would fight the fire until a larger crew could hike in, and because the area was so remote this would take a day or two.

"Is there any danger that the smoke jumpers will parachute into trees and be hung up 200 feet above the ground?" I asked.

"They are dropping into a small meadow that you can't see from your lookout," I was told. "We wouldn't dare to send them parachuting into the forest for just the reason you mentioned. They are experienced at this, but not experienced in this Douglas fir forest we have in Oregon. We are borrowing them from California where smoke jumpers have been used a lot in ponderosa pine forest. This is an experiment to see if we can use smoke jumpers to advantage in our forest. It has never been done before."

Right at the expected time the airplane appeared and everything went according to plan. At last I had earned my pay for the season, and was glad to have done it well by looking at the right place at the right time. A few days later headquarters told me that everything was under control. The smoke jumpers had done well, and a fire crew had finished putting out the fire. Some time later I read a newspaper story that said the same thing. But then I talked to Plumb Bob.

Plumb Bob was a young guy about my age, but not a college kid. He had worked for the forest service since high school, and was the foreman for two weeks in June when all the summer lookouts were working on a slash crew. His name was really Bob Plum, but someone had said it backwards making his name sound like a carpenter's tool, and the nickname Plumb Bob stuck.

Plumb Bob would spread us college kids around in an area of the forest near a road, and watch us pick up dead limbs and put them in piles that would be bonfires later. This was to reduce the danger of fire along the road where truck exhaust or a careless smoker might start a fire. It was long days of tedious work, and Plumb Bob would sit under a tree telling us jokes and stories and watching us work. When his watch told him it was time for a break he would shout, "Break Time!" The first time he also said, "The trouble with doing nothing is...you can't stop and take a break." It was a humorous way of saying his work was tougher than ours. He repeated this saying at every break, and sometimes in between breaks. We always laughed, because he was a good boss even if he wasn't creative in humor. Before coming to the forest for a summer job, I had summer jobs at a lard refinery, a corn syrup manufacturer and a cereal manufacturer. Blue collar humor was always like this. A man who was not going to college, but was going to labor at a tedious job for a career would grab onto one or two good jokes and repeat them all day. And everybody laughed every time. Better than being down about your job.

On a weekend Plumb Bob took several of us in his pick up truck to Erma Belle Lake for a fishing trip. We didn't have fishing licenses and neither did he. Bob and another guy got arrested by state game officials for fishing without licenses and fishing illegally in a spawning area. It was an embarrassing story in the newspaper that two forest service employees were fined for breaking state fishing laws. It made me think Plumb Bob was a nice guy, but not very bright. Then at the end of the season I talked to him about the smoke jumpers.

"Those guys got all the credit for doing nothing, and I did all the work," he hollered. "I saved their butts, and nothing in the papers about what I did. Life ain't fair."

I was very curious to hear the whole story, and Plumb Bob gladly told it to me. "When the smoke jumpers landed, they never used the radio to contact headquarters. Nobody knew what had happened to them. I led the fire crew into the area the next day, and I saw these guys sitting on a log and smoking cigarettes. They were lost...didn't know where the hell they were, didn't know where the fire was, and they had lost their equipment package and parachutes which is why they didn't radio headquarters. They had nothing to eat or drink until I found them.

"When they landed they was supposed to fold up their parachutes and carry them. Well they folded up their parachutes, and put them down and couldn't find them again. Then they was supposed to find their equipment package and radio headquarters. They couldn't find it. They was supposed to find the fire and fight it. Well, they wandered around a little bit, but couldn't find any fire. And if they had found it, they had nothing to fight it with except stomp on it and shovel dirt with their hands. The only thing they did right was stay together and stop moving around. They stayed put until I found them, which is the thing to do when you are lost in the woods. I'll give them credit for that. They didn't panic and run around in circles like people sometimes do when they get lost. I took them to the trail, and showed them the way to go to the road and be picked up by someone from headquarters. Then I found the parachutes and the equipment package, and found the fire, and put the crew to work."

"It was pretty small fire, wasn't it?" I said. "I never saw any more smoke after that one puff in the morning."

"Small fire, hell!" said Plumb Bob. "It was burning over several acres. It took us two and half days to dig a line around it. Damn hard work, and those guys get all the credit. I asked Cummins why he told that story to the papers, and he said they had borrowed those guys from another national forest in California, and didn't want to embarrass them. They might want to borrow smoke jumpers again sometime, so wanted to keep everybody down there happy. Those guys thought they were going to be fired because they screwed everything up. But Cummins gave them a good job report, and thanked the California office for their help. Ain't no justice, is there?"

"How could they not find their parachutes after they had folded them up and laid them down?" I asked. "They must have laid them down in a place they thought was easy to come back to."

"They were warned about how easy it is to lose yourself in this thick Douglas fir forest up here. Down in the ponderosa pine forest in California the trees grow far apart, and sun shines down between them on grassy meadows. You can see clear to the top of a ridge or down to a creek almost wherever you are in those forest. But in the Douglas fir you can only see a few yards around you. If you walk around without using a compass and counting your paces, you can get lost in a minute. They just walked around like they was back in California, and they had no idea where they had been five minutes ago or where they were when I found them.

Dumb bastards. You got to listen to people who got experience when you go into these woods."

I knew then why Plumb Bob hadn't been fired when he got caught fishing illegally. He wasn't a bright college kid. He didn't obey all the rules. But he knew his job and did it well, and that's what counts when there's a fire in the woods and people are lost.

Part of our training at Fire Guard School was to walk off trail into the tall timber with a map and compass, find a stake with a number on it, and return to the road. We were told to take an azimuth reading on our compass. An azimuth is a direction expressed by degrees in a 360 degree circle where North is 0, East is 90, South is 180, West is 270, and 360 is North again. We did this individually. When Arnold Labby was assigned his azimuth, he commented, "It will be my azimuth if I don't come back." We were to look at a tree on the azimuth, keep an eye on the tree while walking to it, then take another azimuth. Never should we take our eyes off of the line to follow and just walk casually through the woods.

Canopy trees, mostly Douglas fir, were three to eight feet diameter, up to 200 feet tall. Under them were young spruce, shrubs, ferns and fallen tree trunks also three to eight feet diameter. We were to count our paces in order to estimate the distance traveled, and count and take new azimuths whenever it was necessary to detour around a fallen tree or a patch of tall shrubs. The exercise did impress us with how easy it could be to get lost in these forests. A few yards from the road everything began to look the same, and continuing without constant attention to direction and distance would quickly confuse you. All of us found our way back to the road in time for dinner, and no search parties had to be sent out. But many of us, including me, never found the stake with the number.

The importance of following and map and compass on any off trail walking was really driven home in mid June when a fisherman got lost, and search parties were sent out from Flat Creek Ranger Station. None of us new hires were included in the searches, but we heard the talk in the dinner hall each evening.

The fisherman had hiked into a mountain lake for a day of fishing, carrying only his fishing tackle and a sandwich. When he didn't come home, his wife called the forest service. She said the man had made this hike many times, and knew the trails in the area well. It wasn't a very long trail to the lake, but there was one loop where people sometimes took a shortcut across the loop. The searchers assumed this was the only way he could have gotten lost...if he took the shortcut through the woods without using a map and compass.

Planes flew over the area, but they couldn't see the ground in most of it. The ground searchers found a line of footprints where someone crossed a snowfield. The prints were six feet apart, so the person must have been running at top speed. There were no animal prints in the snow to indicate that he was running away from anything. "He must have panicked," a searcher said. "People who get lost sometimes start running. They use up energy and are likely to run in circles. If you know you are lost, you should stay in one place, and wait to be found."

They couldn't find any footprints to follow outside of the snowfield. The search was abandoned after a couple of weeks, and the man's body was found later in the summer by another hiker.

Fishing at Erma Belle lake.

Plumb Bob tries to catch a trout before the warden catches him.

One of mules that packed supplies to lookout cabins.

Pete the Packer leading a string of mules to Little Bunchgrass lookout cabin.

Chapter 7: Bare Dirt Saves the Bears' Woods

I was relieved that the storm had not ignited a fire on Bunchgrass Ridge. If it had, I might have been sent to fight it alone until a fire crew could arrive. There was a fire pack on the wall of the cabin with tools and two days of food. Two days and two nights fighting a forest fire alone was not an enticing adventure to consider. During the last week of June all the new lookouts, fire guards and trail crew hires had gone to Fire Guard School at a camp near Portland. The information was fascinating, but putting it to practice would only appeal to people who are so bored with everyday life they don't mind risking it for a little excitement.

First, we found out there are two kinds of forest fires in evergreen, needle bearing, non deciduous forests. Well, if you find it difficult to see the difference between pines, spruces, firs, hemlocks, cedars, etc. just call them pine forests. They are green in the winter and make nice Christmas trees. And as some people discover every Christmas season, those pretty green trees will burn like crazy. So one kind of fire in a "pine" forest is a crown fire where the needles in the tops of the tallest trees are burning, and the fire is spreading rapidly to adjacent trees. These fires can be so hot they create weather. The heated air rising above the fire sucks in air from around the fire and creates a powerful wind that can carry burning branches a mile or more, and drop them into other trees and start more fires. The forest service doesn't fight crown fires, because it is impossible to put them out. Nature puts them out eventually, either with a lot of rain or snow, or the fire just runs out of trees to burn. Then it becomes the second kind of fire... a ground fire...which can be put out by people. A ground fire burns dead wood, leaves and needles on the ground, and small trees with branches that are close to the ground. But tall trees with needles high above the fire are not burned.

A forest fire rarely occurs where it can just be hosed down with water, so the basic fire fighting weapon is dirt. A line in the dirt is dug around the fire so that when all the dead stuff within a circle is burnt the fire goes out. Well, almost. Then dirt is shoveled onto the glowing embers, then the embers are dug up and cold trailed to be certain they are out. Cold trailing is feeling the charcoal with bare hands. If it feels warm it is not out, so it is covered with dirt again and cold trailed again later.

I wondered if all the embers in a fire were really cold trailed, but I guess this instruction was for us who might be sent to fight small fires where it would be possible to cold trail all the embers in a circle. There were some good stories to illustrate how tricky forest fires can be.

A man cold trailed all the embers in a fire he had circled except for one smoldering stump. He just covered the stump with dirt and figured the job was done. After he was gone the stump kept smoldering down into some roots that reached beyond the fire circle and into some duff. The duff ignited and started another forest fire.

Ah, I didn't mention duff before. When digging the fire ring it is necessary to dig down to dirt...called "mineral soil" by the forest service. On top of the dirt there may be 10 inches of partly decayed needles called duff. And duff may look like dirt, but it is really duff and it will burn if you give it the chance.

In another instance a big fire burned a large area. It was not possible to cold trail everything within the circle, but the fire line was secure. Following the fire there was winter, spring, summer, and during the pleasant cycle of the seasons a dead tree was smoldering. This tree was smoldering only at the top where it was a broken trunk. For 13 months the ember smoldered down to the base of the tree, then burned through the base and the trunk fell and smashed into glowing embers onto the ground where a new layer of combustible needles had fallen. The fire fighters had to return to fight the fire again.

The basic tool for the lone fire fighter is a Pulaski. This looks like a double bladed ax such as Paul Bunyan used, except one blade is a hoe instead of an ax. The ax blade is used to chop down dead trees that are burning or might burn, and the hoe blade is used to dig a line in the dirt. With only a Pulaski and a lot of grit one man can fight a small fire, and at least slow down a larger fire by digging a line in the dirt on the uphill side. Even though the Pulaski is unbalanced and somewhat dangerous to swing, one man had cut down a seven foot diameter dead cedar tree that was burning at the top. It took him a week, but he did it.

The Pulaski was named after a forest service hero who saved the lives of a fire crew by keeping them in a cave when they were trapped in a box canyon by an advancing forest fire. Some of the men thought the intense fire might suck all of the oxygen out of the cave and they would suffocate. This was a possibility, and those who thought it likely wanted to make a run for it. Ranger Pulaski stood in the entrance of the cave with a revolver, and said he would shoot any man who tried to leave. They all stayed put, and they all survived.

As I said, these stories were entertaining, but they didn't inspire me to want to become a fire fighting hero. Who knows what he will actually do in the face of a real crisis...no matter what he has thought he might or should do in a crisis? One of the young men at Fire Guard School seemed better suited to meet tough situations than most of us. He had hunted a lot in the woods in Pennsylvania, and was very comfortable with knocking around among trees and bears and such. He had gotten married just before coming to Oregon for the summer, and he and his wife were stationed at a Fire Guard Station. Instead of a tiny cabin on a mountain top, he had their cabin, and a bunk house and stables to maintain for trail or fire crews to use at intervals in the summer. He was at Fire Guard School in case there was no crew handy, and he might be sent to fight a fire alone for a day or two.

It happened that summer. He was sent out into the woods at night to fight a forest fire. As the fire crew was hiking in to relieve him the next morning, they met him running toward them. "The fire blew up!" He screamed. "It's out of control." The crew continued down the trail and found that the fire was not out of control, and couldn't see why the man was in a panic. He was fired, and I imagine very ashamed to have lost his head. But put you or me alone in a burning woods all night...no matter what training we have had...would we be calmly digging dirt? Or might some sudden flare when a small pine exploded in flames send us running for our lives? I was glad I didn't have to take that kind of test.

Chapter 8: Does a Bear Shit in the Woods?

Near the end of August it began to rain. No storms, just soft all-day rain. Since fire danger was reduced, I got two days off which I spent making short hikes and hanging around the cabin reading old magazines. Then headquarters assigned me to trail clearing. Each morning I left the cabin with a canteen of water, lunch in a pack, carrying a Pulaski in one hand and a two-man saw in the other. The only way to carry a saw that is 6 or 8 feet long...I forget the exact measure...is to balance it on one shoulder and hold one of the handles. The saw flexed as I walked, but once I got my pace and the flexing in sync it was not unpleasant.

I felt the presence of the bear all day. Of course he heard me coming with the stomping boots and the flexing saw which stopped when the trail was blocked. Then the saw would ziss ziss ziss through a fallen tree trunk, or the ax blade of the Pulaski would whack off small growth that was overhanging the trail. I never saw the bear, but I saw fresh bear poop. He marked his territory to let me know. Maybe it was cougar poop, but I think all cats bury their poop, don't they?

I didn't worry about meeting a cougar. Ranger Cummins told me they were rare and so shy that you were lucky if you saw one in a lifetime of hiking in the forest. But as always there was the story. Two forest service employees were sleeping under the stars one night, and one of them woke up to stare into the eyes of a cougar. It was bending over him and sniffing his face. Was the cougar planning to eat the man, or just curious to see what was sleeping in his woods? The man screamed and the cougar ran off. Not typical cougar behavior...probably would never happen again.

I began to get depressed, anxious, nervous...just cracking up would describe my mood. It wasn't just the fear of the bear, it was also the dreary aspect of the woods in an all-day rain. I got wet from sweat under my raincoat. It was dark when I got back to the cabin to cook supper. And the next day and the next day and so on would probably be the same. I didn't want to admit it, but just plain loneliness was getting to me. I had only one more week to work and then I would have to leave the cabin to return to Iowa and be inducted into the army. I could stick it out for just one more week, couldn't I? I returned to the cabin one night with a firm decision that I could not stick it out for even one more day. I understood how the lookout felt when he quit after two weeks and said, "I can't take it anymore!"

So when headquarters called me the next morning "I can't take it anymore" was on the tip of my tongue, when I heard Ranger Cummins say, "You might as well close up your cabin and come down. The rain is predicted to continue for another week or so, so there won't be any need for you to watch for fires in your last week of work anyway. Rub oil onto the stove, the axes, the saw and all the metal equipment to prevent rusting over the winter. Take a couple of days."

"Oh, no problem!" I said. "I think I can get it done in one day."

"Well, take time to do it right. One or two days...whichever you need."

My mood swung from depression to delight as I oiled the equipment. All my life I have been too anxious to move on and do the next thing. I got the stuff oiled in one day, but cut my hand on an ax blade. Working too fast. I am now retired and 74 years old, and not in so much of a hurry to move on to the next thing. Some lessons take a long time to learn.

The next day I closed the shutters on the lookout, hung a bucket over the stove pipe, and hiked down the mountain, carrying my clothes and small gear in a backpack and a suitcase. The best thing was that I never had to tell Ranger Cummins that I had cracked up and couldn't

take it anymore. As we said goodbye he asked me if I thought I would like a career at an outside job or an indoors job. I told him I preferred an inside job. The week of trail clearing in the rain was still affecting my thinking, because even though I have worked indoors most of my life, I much prefer being outdoors in any kind of weather.

As I got on the bus for the three day ride back to Iowa, I was sure that I would work again as a summer fire lookout. I hoped to do it as a married couple. But life went into fast forward. Basic training, marriage to my college girl friend, a year and a half at Fort Miles in Delaware, discharge from the army, another year in college, a job, kids. Seventeen years later I returned to Little Bunchgrass Mountain with three teenagers and two dogs.

We drove a VW camper up a gravel road to the Bunchgrass Ridge within a few hundred yards of the cabin. But the cabin and the woodshed were gone. I poked around and found a ceramic insulator that had held the phone line, and took it for a souvenir. Down the steep face of the ridge the toilet was still there. Why would they remove the cabin and woodshed, but leave the toilet? Hikers were not likely to find it, because it was out of sight of the trail. Did they leave it for the bear?

Question: "Does a bear shit in the woods?"

Answer: "Yes, except on Little Bunchgrass Mountain where he uses a toilet."

The spring was gone, and I couldn't figure that out. Not even a damp spot or moisture loving plants where there had been a trickle of water feeding a small excavated pool, and a trickle running out and down the mountain. I could remember exactly how far the spring was from where the trail entered the woods, because I had counted my paces and hiked it at night. I don't think the crew removing the cabin would have filled in the spring pool, or even if they had wouldn't the ground still be damp?

Our group spent the day hiking the Bunchgrass Ridge. The meadows and wildflowers and the old growth trees were the same as I remembered them. But the opposite ridge had changed. There were a lot of clear cuts that had not been there in 1953. As we lunched in a meadow a column of smoke appeared on the other side of the Willamette Valley. Definitely a forest fire. I wondered who would report it? About 20 minutes later an airplane came and bombed the smoke with several sprays of reddish fluid. The smoke stopped. I learned later that equipment used by a work crew had started a fire, so I suppose they reported it right away. I wonder if a crew would shovel dirt on the embers and cold trail them later?

Most of the lookout cabins in the Willamette National Forest had been removed. Even in 1953 the system was obsolete. It was cheaper to fly over the forest in a small plane whenever fire danger was high than to put people on the mountains for the entire summer. As soon as the forest service got appropriations to buy the airplanes, the cabins were dismantled. Just as I had been lucky to be drafted when the Korean War was phasing down, I had been lucky to work as a fire lookout just before they were phased out.

We didn't meet the bear in 1970 either. Our dogs running and sniffing ahead of us gave him plenty of notice that we were there, so he slipped into the woods and let us enjoy a day of perfect picnicking weather on the mountain.

(After publishing this story on the Internet, I found out lookouts are not obsolete after all. A daughter of Ranger Cummins has worked as a lookout in the Willamette National Forest for several summers. She said the forest service found out air patrols were not as effective for spotting fires, so after taking down many cabins, they have rebuilt some and are building more. Most lookouts today are people who have done it for many years, and love the job.)

Chapter 9: Well, Helloooo Bear!

"The main cause of forest fires is trees." I saw that bit of wisdom on the wall of a forest service office. Another bit of wisdom would be to say, "The main cause of trees is forest fires." Some trees like lodge pole pine, jack pine, ponderosa pine, giant sequoias, red pine and others need fires to clear an area and provide a fertilized seed bed. Trees like Douglas fir seed into a fire cleared area, and when they grow tall they are protected by ground fires that consume dead wood and burn small trees. So the fire that I reported and Plumb Bob's crew put out in 1953 would have served the forest better if it had been left to burn. It would have spread over a few more acres consuming dead wood, needles and small trees while decreasing the fire danger for the tall Douglas firs that have fire resistant bark. A week or so later the rains would have put out the fire.

The forests of North America were burned regularly by lightning strikes and Indian practices, and they were magnificent forests. Then large scale logging in Idaho in 1910 left a pile of dead branches on the ground, and a ground fire blew up into a tremendous crown fire. The smoke darkened the sky over Washington D.C., and convinced Congress to give money to the forest service for a fire fighting system. Roads, trails, lookout cabins were built, and the forest service concentrated on putting out every small fire as quickly as possible. So ground fires that would have reduced fire danger by consuming litter were confined, and more stuff to burn accumulated in the forests.

My daughter now works for the forest service in South Lake Tahoe where fire danger has become acute. Dead wood and small trees clutter under the tall timber, so any ground fire could easily climb up the small trees (they call them fire ladders) and start a crown fire. It is difficult to do much about it. Large scale logging would spoil the scenery of the Tahoe basin, and cause erosion that would pollute the lake. The extreme clarity of the lake and the beauty of the surrounding forests is the foundation of the economy of the place.

If dead wood and small trees could be thinned from the forest, then some wild fires could be allowed to burn, and some deliberate fires (prescribed burns) could be set to keep the fire danger low. But that takes a lot of work, and the lumber from cutting small trees is not very valuable. When a timber company is contracted to thin the forest a bit, they are tempted to cut some big trees which is not the plan if you want to preserve scenery and soil firmness. The sheer size of the forest makes this practical only where the city has grown into the woods.

Setting a prescribed burn anywhere is risky. If it gets out of control and damages property, someone is blamed and punished. If a lightning strike fire is not put out immediately and allowed to clean up the forest floor, it might become a crown fire and damage property. The guy who decided not to put out a small fire immediately might be blamed and punished. So a lot of fire fighting continues even by people who know it is not the best thing to do. My daughter tells me that many forest rangers are resigned to the probability that most of the western forests will burn like hell in the near future. The fire danger from decades of fire fighting is so high, and there are no good practical solutions to change the situation in a hurry. When the woods has all burned and is regenerating, then new plans can be made.

Meanwhile it is joyful to hike the woods, and finally, 50 years after living on Little Bunchgrass Mountain, I met the bear. I met him in Canaan Valley Park in West Virginia. My wife and I were hiking with our young black Labrador dog when I saw a small black bear coming down the hill toward the trail. I called Drina (the dog) to leash her and avoid a confrontation. Too late. She had seen the bear, and was curious. Drina began walking up the

hill and the bear continued down the hill, each of them curious to meet the other. It was a small bear, about the size of our dog but chubbier. I expected a mother bear to appear soon.

I remembered all of the advice Ranger Cummins had given me. I made noise by continuing to shout loudly for the dog to come. Neither the dog nor the bear paid any attention. Then a second bear came bounding out of the woods and down the hill to join the party. It was the same size as the first bear, and it was bounding not charging. Two curious cubs and one curious dog were determined to check each other out. My wife and I walked back down the trail out of sight while I continued to holler for the dog to come back to us. I remembered "If nothing else works, bark like a dog", but decided to leave the barking option to Drina.

It seemed like a long time, but was probably only a few minutes, and then Drina came tearing down the trail toward us. If a mama bear was after her, it was tree climbing time. Even with our adrenalin up I didn't think my wife and I could do that. Thankfully, nothing was chasing Drina. There hadn't been any barking or growling. There were no scratches or missing fur. She was wearing the big grin she has whenever she plays with a new dog friend. I wish I had been brave and foolish enough to stay and watch Drina meet the bears. I don't know if she just met the two young bears or if the mother bear came along and met her, too. Maybe the cubs were old enough to be on their own, and no mama bear was around.

I finally achieved a feeling of being comfortable when hiking in bear country. Yes, there are stories about bad bears hurting people, but most bears are nice. It can be a rare treat to meet a bear in the woods.