



ON THE LOOKOUT

From the
National Chairman
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Vienna, Virginia
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THE FUTURE OF FFLA

Late in August the historic Beartrap Lookout (NHLR #936, ID# 95) on the Salmon National Forest in Idaho burned to the ground. It wasn't the first lookout lost in the 2012 wildfire season, and it may not be the last. The good news is that fire crews this year have saved a dozen or more lookouts with determined efforts. Unfortunately they were unable to do the same for Beartrap Lookout. This classic L-4 cab on a one story log crib base, one of a handful of this style remaining, was an orphan. Demoted to emergency use in 1967, it received minimal maintenance over the years by various friends of the lookout, but no group was ever organized. If they had been it could have been restored as a remote rental haven with a view reached by rough but passible road. Instead it was no more than a relic "ghost lookout". Its usefulness had gone. That network of more than 8,000 in the U.S. is now reduced to 2,000 still standing of which less than 1,000 are in use for fire, recreation or interpretation.

ORGANIZING TO SUPPORT AND HELP MAINTAIN THESE MOUNTAIN TOP TREASURES

When FFLA was organized by self-described "lookout enthusiasts" in Pennsylvania 23 years ago the founders had not great plan in mind. They were motivated by their love of lookouts as well as their understanding that if they didn't step forward the fire towers would one day be little more than a memory. Some would remain in museums or an occasional on- site restoration. With a few exceptions, fire detection would morph into cameras and air patrols. The young association grew, developed a plan to have state chapters wherever it could, incorporated, and assumed co-sponsorship of the National Historic Lookout Register, which had been organized only three years earlier in 1987. Within 10 years, in 2000, there were 600 members in 19 chapters from coast to coast plus one each in Canada and Australia. By 2010 there were 31

U.S. chapters serving 36 states, plus Area Representatives in the remaining 14 states. Although our projects and influence have grown, membership remains steady at 1,000. The tenure of most of the Chapter Directors dates to before 2000. We cannot escape a reality: before too long before many of us, myself included, will be "ghost directors." It is no secret that we have had difficulty in recruiting new directors with new ideas and resources. People are busy, they don't have the money to travel to necessary meetings, they do not have access to reliable internet service, or they are not comfortable in dealing with forest leaders or state historic preservation officers.

TIME FOR SOME R&R: REVITALIZE OR RELAX?

My last two columns have asked both the Directors and the members to look into the future and tell me your hopes for FFLA. The responses I received were revealing. Two things stood out. First, our efforts to develop local chapters have yielded positive publicity and new blood. Second, many of our members, including some Directors, do not have a good idea their role in FFLA. Both underscore the importance of explaining who we are (and how to join), what we are doing, and where we are doing it. Sixteen of our 33 Directors returned a survey that I recently sent out. Of those who responded, less than a quarter had established contact with their State Historic Preservation Officer. Every state has one, and they can be a wonderful resource. Only four chapters had an annual gathering, and few had a newsletter (usually email). Several have active restoration projects. Our greatest strength and successes have been inventorying lookouts and restorations. Revitalization is the key to FFLA's future. We cannot allow ourselves to fade. It is essential both for the historic lookouts we love, and for the vitality of our association. Got ideas? Want to volunteer? Email me now: argow@cs.net.

Let's get cracking!

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