

THE BIRTH OF THE MONTEREY CHAPTER

BY SCOTT McCLINTOCK

The Forest Fire Lookout Association is a nationwide not-for-profit organization of volunteers whose passion is preserving the history of (duh) fire lookout towers. We think that lookout towers are honored symbols of forestry and fire protection since the early 1900s. Most all of them were taken out of service in the 80's, when budgets were trimmed and the air was too smoggy to see very far. And once a line item is stricken from the government budget, there is virtually no getting it back. Towers were abandoned and left to deteriorate and become targets to vandals. The FFLA, when possible, teams up with the agency of jurisdiction - around here it is the U.S. Forest Service or Cal Fire- and tries to arrest the deterioration and preserve them. When possible, we restore them to working condition and sometimes we can actually put them back into service with volunteers, serving two purposes: preserve the artifact with docents and provide early detection of smokes to help preserve the surrounding forest.

These days, when someone hears about the concept of fire lookout towers, they ask "Aren't there drones or satellites or webcams that can do the same thing?" The answer is yes, in some places those technologies are being developed, but so far they don't pick up the smokes as early or as accurately as a pair of human eyes with relatively low-tech binoculars.

In 2017 I was appointed by the FFLA National Chairman as Director of the California-South Region, which goes up the coast from the Mexican border to Monterey. He pointed out that there was robust tower restoration activity in San Diego, San Bernardino and L.A. counties, and then there was a big black hole in tower projects between L.A. and San Francisco. He asked "Isn't there a forest there? Aren't there lookout towers there? I need you to get busy in that area." So I began searching the Los Padres National Forest for towers that could be revived. At first I found Hi Mountain Lookout, east of San Luis Obispo, where the tower had already been restored as a condor tracking station. I produced a video to train the volunteers there in smoke recognition and reporting procedures. That one was easy.

Then I found Chews Ridge and Cone Peak lookouts. The Forest Service used these abandoned structures to house radio repeater equipment and to support antennas. It had gone to the expense of repairing the badly-leaking roof of Chews Ridge to protect the radio gear, which was a good start in its preservation. Technicians then moved the radio gear out of Chews Ridge, leaving it empty to host a large colony of rats and mice. I began corresponding with the managers of the Monterey Ranger District and on 5/23/19 was given the go-ahead to put her back into service.

Local groups, blogs, and the Carmel Pinecone newspaper were contacted to recruit volunteers. The Ventana Wilderness Alliance was a rich source of people already versed in the area and motivated to watch over the Wilderness. With the newly recruited volunteers, tower renovation commenced on June 24, 2019.

- large amounts of rodent debris were removed
- rotting floorboards were replaced and reinforced
- an Osborne Fire Finder in the USFS Santa Maria warehouse was reconditioned and mounted on the only remaining piece of furniture: the firefinder pedestal
- new floor tiles were installed
- drywall was installed, taped, primed and painted
- a custom map case, wardrobe, bookcase and an all-wood bed were built and installed
- a desk and galley cabinets were purchased from IKEA and assembled in the cab
- the existing hinges on the trap door were moved, and a counterweight was attached to allow it to open more easily
- the existing pit toilet was rehabilitated, and a privacy surround was built

-prior to this project, the Forest Service protected the cab's windows by screwing plywood sheets over the outside. During the fall of 2019, hinged window shutters were designed and installed.

After classroom and in-tower training, 36 volunteer lookouts were certified and scheduled into 65 days of fire-watch shifts, the first one on August 25. The tower was shuttered for the season on November 25th, one day before a significant snow storm.