



A group of volunteers, many of whom are retired smokejumpers, cut logs to replace a wall in the Huckleberry Fire Lookout on Huckleberry Ridge in the Teton Wilderness last week. The group has worked one week each summer for the last three years to make repairs to the aging lookout just south of Yellowstone.

Fire tower revival

Retired firefighters tap old skills to help stabilize historic lookout.

By Mike Koshmrl

Atop a high ridge in the Teton Wilderness a bevy of smokejumpers is laboring to replace a wall of the Huckleberry Fire Lookout. The two-story wooden tower is more than three-quarters of a century old, and in places is starting to rot and deteriorate. But for the past three years Bridger-Teton National Forest archaeologists have coordinated an effort to “stabilize” the building, which is listed in the National Register of Historic Places.

“It’s the excitement. And the challenge of really good people working hard together.”
– Don Whyde
FIRE LOOKOUT RESTORATION TEAM LEADER

“We have no intention of putting it back in its original state,” Bridger-Teton archaeologist Jamie Schoen said from the lookout. “We’re trying to extend the life of the structure for another 40 or 50 years.”
The National Smokejumpers See **FIRE TOWER** on 30A



From left, Bob Beiermann, Jamie Schoen, Bill Hesketh and Jack Sterling fit a log into the western wall of the Huckleberry Fire Lookout last week in the Teton Wilderness. They worked with Bridger-Teton National Forest staff for five days to replace the wall.



Logbooks in the Huckleberry Fire Lookout contain entries from hundreds of hikers and horsemen who visited the structure in the Teton Wilderness over several decades.



Former smokejumpers Don Whyde, Jack Sterling and John Sisco lift a log to the second floor of the Huckleberry Fire Lookout tower last week in the Teton Wilderness.

FIRE TOWER

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Association supplied volunteer laborers for five days last week. It's a 6-mile-long, steep climb to the site, and most of the smokejumpers were nearly as old as the lookout itself.

Don Whyde, the group's squad leader, explained the allure of the labor.

"It's the excitement," Whyde said. "And the challenge of really good people working hard together.

"Plus they like the work," he said. "They get a chance to use old skills."

The beginnings of the Huckleberry Fire Lookout will make history buffs grin.

Constructed by the Civilian Conservation Corps in 1938, the lookout was retired by the time it was 20 years old. Although fire spotters last manned the tower in 1957, it has plenty of visitors even today.

"It has become a very popular hiking destination," Schoen said. "I understand it's almost a rite of passage for people who work at Flagg Ranch or Signal Mountain. What are we doing this weekend? Let's go to Huckleberry."

The tower was placed where it is — on top of 7,200-foot Huckleberry Mountain — for very good reasons.

Views stretch south over the entire Teton Range and much of Jackson Hole. To the north, rolling forest can be seen all the way to Heart and Yellowstone lakes. The Absarokas set the skyline to the east.

The scene at Huckleberry Lookout last week in



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Jack Sterling uses an ax to shave off a high spot on a log the team will use to repair a wall of the Huckleberry Fire Lookout last week. Since the lookout is in the Teton Wilderness, the group had to use hand saws and tools to cut and place the logs.

many ways was anachronistic. Because it's in a federally designated wilderness, no power tools were involved. Instead, the smokejumpers employed hand tools such as drawknives and other 19th-century-looking utensils.

The task on July 23 was replacing lower sections of the 15-foot-wide building's west wall. It was painstaking to pull out the heavy, 74-year-old logs, Schoen said.

"One of them was a real booger to pull out," Schoen said. "This took us almost a whole day — to figure out how to pull it out, to notch it, get everything fit and get it set."

In place of the rotted logs, the crew was working to install new logs that were felled nearby, and then notched, worked and stored. They were

cut from standing dead timber a couple hundred yards away that was killed in the 1988 fires, Schoen said.

"We use local ingredients," Bill Hesketh said.

Hesketh hailed from Atlanta. John Sisco travelled to the Teton Wilderness from Olympia, Washington. Others made the trek from Casper and Big Piney.

There had been two failed attempts at nestling a new log into the lookout by mid-afternoon.

"Christ, the log's coming down again?" one smokejumper joked.

"You got one more chance to get it right, Jack," he said.

On the third attempt at trying to level the log, it settled in flush.



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