

# MY LOVE AFFAIR WITH A FIRE TOWER

by Bob Beanblossom

I'm not sure when or why it began; but in retrospect, I can think of several events that prompted an interest in forestry even though I had no idea at the time of what it was or that even an occupation called forester actually existed. I grew up in and around a small town in southern West Virginia called Gilbert. My parents liked to move a lot but always locally – in a radius of 10 miles or so for the most part. My dad was a coal miner and drove a “buggy” – an electric motor car that pulled loaded coal cars to a belt line that then transported the coal to an outside tippie where the coal was then loaded onto trains.

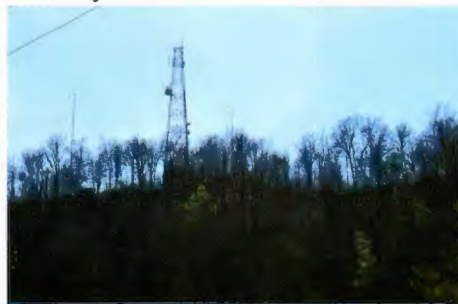
Almost all of the land in the county was owned by large coal or land companies; consequently, there was little knowledge of forestry or other environmental concerns in the area at the time other than someone being caught by the local “game warden” - including members of my family on my mother's side! Forest fires were and are a huge environmental issue and are still largely ignored by the locals even to this day.

We lived at Justice, four miles above Gilbert, when I was in grade school. The school was a primitive building heated by a coal stove, with pit toilets and an outside hand pump for water. One day I spied another teacher giving these interesting looking booklets to her students; and I immediately wanted one so I asked her for it. The booklet was entitled “The Forest Adventures of Mark Edwards” and that became my first knowledge of forestry. I was in the 3rd grade. In the summer after 5th grade we moved to a little community downriver from Gilbert called Man. I thought it was a city then and that I had to interact with “city kids”. There was a brother and sister whose father was a mail carrier who lived across from me in a trailer court. Therefore, they were much sophisticated and knowledgeable than me or so I thought. One day they showed me their Junior Forest Ranger badges that they had just received from Smokey the Bear. I immediately sent a letter to Washington DC and when my kit arrived, I was hooked. I was going to be a forester from then on and all through school that fact never changed. I never considered anything else. About the same time two other events occurred. A man I knew quit teaching to become the county forest ranger and

his wife gave me additional Smokey material including posters. The other was the fact that a scout troop was formed in Gilbert. I wasn't much of a scout – I never got beyond tender-foot – but the scout master did take us on a hike to Mingo Mountain Fire Tower. That was in November, 1964 and the beginning of a love affair that exists to this day!

The tower is called Mingo Mountain but is actually located on Horsepen Mountain. It is reached by a mile and half mile dirt road off of U.S. Route 52. The tower was built in 1926; but an access road was not constructed until a Civilian Conservation Corps camp (P-70 Camp Mingo) was established on July 29, 1935 on Pidgeon Creek about eight miles from the tower. Their major project during two years of operation was the construction of this road under the direction of camp superintendents Don Cook and Robert Poore. The CCC boys also built two pit toilets of log construction.

Mingo Mountain sets atop a high knob jutting above the crest of a ridge. The tower road encircles the base of the knoll with the observers cabin just above the road. From there to the base of the tower was about 70' vertical feet and originally a foot path led to it. Norfolk & Western Railway, however, constructed a microwave tower at the site during my tenure as ranger and as part of their lease constructed a metal stairway to the base of the tower.



The Mingo Mountain Fire Tower (center, behind trees) is dwarfed by the nearby microwave tower

The observer's cabin was a three-room cinder block building consisting of a kitchen, a living room that ran the full length of the structure and a bed room. It also had a basement where we rigged a shower. Water was supplied my means of a cistern and heat was provided by of a fuel oil stove. It was a relatively modern building having been constructed in the early 1960s. Mechanization had decimated the ranks of coal

miners in the 1950s. Southern West Virginia had been particularly hard hit; unemployment was rampant. The West Virginia Legislature responded by creating a jobs program to place these laid off coal miners to work at \$1.00 an hour on conservation projects. The program was called S.T.E.P. (State Temporary Employment Program) and was later supplemented with federal funds and became the Emergency Employment Program (E.E.P.).

The Division of Forestry was allotted funds for both its fire control and state forest programs and a new cabin at Mingo Mountain was one of the projects funded. In addition, five new towers were constructed under the STEP program around the State. These were the last towers constructed in West Virginia. In December, 1990 at the end of the fall fire season all state towers were permanently closed.

Horsepen Mountain also had its share of intriguing murder mysteries. One cold, snowy Sunday morning in early January, 1960, the body of Opal Harmon, the observer then, was discovered in his parked vehicle at the gate to the tower. He had been shot five times. It was later discovered that he was killed by George Dotson. Harmon had had an affair with Dotson's wife 17 years earlier and she confessed to it to her husband about a year before the murder just before she was preparing to undergo major surgery. For a year it played on Dotson's mind. Dotson and Harmon coincidentally met in a bar the previous night and after it closed decided to drive to the tower gate to continue drinking. Harmon was on his way to the tower to build a fire before bringing his family up the following day. When Dotson raised the affair, Harmon tried to dismiss it by saying “all women are whores anyway”. Dotson then flew into a fit of rage and killed him. An interesting tidbit was when it was being investigated by the state police on that Sunday morning, the crime scene was being photographed by a Williamson Daily News photographer. He caught Dotson driving by the scene in one of his photos; but it wasn't until days later that he was identified as the actual murderer.

In March, 1968 the body of a man from Youngstown, Ohio with ties to organized crime, was found in a pit toilet at a roadside park located across the highway from the road leading to the

tower - only a short distance from where Harmon's body was found. He had been shot in the back of the head and was discovered by an individual from Gilbert on his way to Williamson, the county seat, for jury duty. It was never established why he and his murderer were in Mingo County all the way from the Wheeling-Youngstown, Ohio area in the northern part of the State. His body went unidentified for several days.

In high school, I read everything I could find on the forestry and was constantly writing for information from every source I could find including numerous offices of the West Virginia Department of Natural Resources. I got to know the county forest rangers and conservation officers. I also could usually talk my dad into taking me to visit the tower once each season especially if I would take the spring visit as a birthday gift. Then when I turned 16 and obtained a driver's license I drove to the tower every time I had a chance.

I was there one beautiful, soft April evening in the spring of 1970, for example. Smoke from surrounding forest fires was especially thick and towers had a night check. It was a Saturday night and the district had had 149 fires since the previous Wednesday. Typically, observers worked from 0900 to 1700 but due to the fire load were called back to duty at 1900. The observer and I were setting, quietly talking and listening to the radio traffic when all of a sudden, we heard a heated confrontation over the radio. The observer at Gartin Knob Fire Tower in Lincoln County had some local drunks creating a disturbance and had pressed the mike on the radio to alert other towers to summon aid. Fortunately, before we went 10-7 (out of service) for the evening we learned the Lincoln County Ranger and the State Police were enroute to the tower to lend assistance. The very next day a locomotive belonging to Norfolk and Western Railway was dropping off cars at coal tipples on Ben Creek and Turkey Creek, both located in the vicinity of the tower, and touched off a series of fires due to a "hot-box" on one of the empty cars. The term refers to a brake locking, overheating and throwing off hot pieces of metal. I was pressed into duty recruiting fire fighters and fighting the fires even though I was still in high school.

I graduated from high school in the June of 1971; and all that spring made frequent trips to the tower and assisted with fire suppression efforts on numerous occasions as that spring was especially

dry. I also had attended the West Virginia Forest Industries Camp in the summer of 1970 following my junior year and learned of a new movie funded by the West Virginia Cooperative Extension Service that dealt with the extreme fire problem in the southern part of the state. I received special permission from my high school principal to miss class and traveled to surrounding schools and civic organizations delivering talks on fire prevention and showing this film during my senior year. The film is called "Time's Running Out" and is available on U -Tube along with my presentation on the history of its making.

After graduating West Virginia University, I was hired as a county forest ranger in Mingo County, one of the traditional "hot" southern counties in West Virginia, where fire occurrence was and is among the highest in the East. In that role, it was my responsibility to hire and supervise the tower observer at Mingo Mountain. The individual that I first hired, and who stayed with me the longest, was Andrew B. McClure or "Mac" as he was affectionately known. Mac was a retired coal mining engineer and crusty as could be.

Not too long after becoming a tower observer at Mingo Mountain, Mac got someone to drive him to Gilbert, about 12 miles away, to get a haircut. Mac decided to try Amos Hatfield, a barber who had a quintessential little shop in a converted one-room school in the middle of town. "Barber Amos" as he was known, was a character straight from central casting I swear. Each day he wore a starched white shirt, string bow tie, and green eyeshades. He was the epitome of a small-town barber. Barber Amos was also devoutly religious and used every opportunity to minister to the unsaved minions briefly held captive in his chair. Mac sat quietly throughout his first haircut. Afterward, Mac paid Amos, found his jacket, walked slowly to the door, turned to him and said, "Barber Amos, I came in to get a haircut, not a goddamn sermon! I won't be back." And he never did! Later, when I stopped in for a haircut Amos would always ask: "Bobby, is that old man still on the mountain? He's the pure devil!"

The first time I met Mac, he also cussed me out for leaving another observer's cabin in an untidy condition. We became fast friends on the spot. In the scheme of things, I was his boss, but he and I knew who the boss really was. Mac fast became a mentor and

taught me many things about work. Most important, he imparted a strong work ethic and a solid commitment to whatever your occupation. Mac had been a "company" man--a professional coal mining engineer, general foreman and coal mine superintendent. He possessed a degree of loyalty that I have seldom seen in others. He was willing to do whatever was asked of him and more. No small feat given someone who was well past 70.

He taught me a lot about life: how to drink (no more than two a day); the importance of eating "green stuff", which he attributed to his lifelong good health; and how to work hard but have fun and not take yourself too seriously. I knew I could always go to Mac's cabin and get a ham sandwich or a cup of coffee. We would talk and argue for hours about anything and everything . . . religion, politics, you name it. Our most enduring argument was over how to properly make a sandwich. Should the mayonnaise be put on the bread (me), or should the mayonnaise be spread on the meat (Mac)? That one ended in a draw. He loved hearing all my crude, off-color jokes.

Mac was well liked and respected among all of the other observers in the district. That got me in deep trouble once, although I was totally innocent. One day, Mac had trouble reporting a fire because other observers were carrying on idle gossip and Mac couldn't break in on the radio. So, he decided to do something about it. The next morning soon after signing on, his next radio conversation went something like this:

"Mingo to Blair." (the next closest tower).

"Go ahead, Mingo."

"Blair, my boss was up here this morning (I hadn't been near the place), and boy did he give me a good dressing down. Said I was talking on the radio too much and was tying it up so that other fire tower observers couldn't get fire traffic through!"

"You know, I got mad at first but after he left and I thought about it, HE WAS ABSOLUTELY RIGHT!"

In a sly, roundabout way, he had made his point and idle chatter decreased considerably afterward; but all of the observers in the district were mad as hell at me because they thought I had jumped on the old man whom they liked and respected!

Being a bachelor, Mac lived at the tower year-round, even outside of fire season, although that wasn't a requirement

of the job. One 4th of July weekend, Mac was alerted by two visitors to the tower that they had seen a small plane go down. Mac quickly climbed the tower and took an azimuth on the general direction of the crash site, estimated the approximate location, and notified the state police. The state police dispatcher then tracked me down and asked for my assistance. To this day I don't know how they managed to find me as this was in the days long before cell phones and computers; and I had not told anyone where I was going. I was on a date with a new girlfriend and certainly hadn't been dating long enough to introduce her to my family; but I didn't have much choice either because I didn't have time to take her to her home.

I rushed by to my parent's house (I was living at home at the time), hurriedly introduced my date, and sped away in my state truck! Mac's estimate of the location of the crash was so accurate that I was able to drive within a few hundred yards of it while state troopers hiked up the mountain side on a hot, muggy afternoon! By relaying messages on my DNR frequency to the state police via a county sheriff's office some 100 miles distant, I directed a rescue helicopter to the site. Because of Mac's quick thinking, the one individual we were able to evacuate by air survived; but the other two died at the scene. By the way, I eventually married the girl I had dropped off at my parents, and we still reminisce about the unorthodox manner in which she was first introduced to my family some 40 years ago!!

Another time, I was checking fire access roads in a remote location when my vehicle broke down. Rather routinely I radioed Mac at the fire tower, told him what had happened, and said I would be out of the vehicle a while because I was walking to a strip mine a couple of miles away to get help in starting my truck. The guys there were glad to be of assistance, but by the time we returned and repaired the vehicle, the district office had signed off the air so I did not bother to go "10-8", the radio code for in-service and drove home. About 9:00 p.m., that evening I got a telephone call from Mac. He was calling my wife to see if she had heard from me and was still on the radio trying to contact me to see if I was all right! I sheepishly apologized for not letting him know I was OK.

Mac and I went through 12 fire seasons together. His last, the spring

of 1979, was interrupted by several trips to the hospital, due to bouts with congestive heart failure. The only time I ever saw a chink in his crusty armor was when he confessed that congestive heart failure had killed his mother. Though he worried about his health after each episode, Mac would always return to duty. His sense of loyalty, I suppose, simply would not let him admit to himself that he was too weak to work. The end came at the last of April. Although fire season was officially still on the books, any real threat of a major fire had long passed because of the rapidly greening vegetation. I like to think he hung on to get me through the driest portion of the spring season. In a Charleston hospital, I fed him his last food, helped the nurse clean him, and watched him die. I wept all the way home. So strong were Mac's ties to his job, that at his funeral, it was his family's wish that we forestry personnel occupy the seats customarily set aside for family, and they relegated themselves to pews in the rear of the chapel.

One of those fire seasons was the spring of 1976, up until that time the worst spring ever recorded in West Virginia history. Our nine-county district ended with an even 1,000 fires! I had married the previous November and it was not uncommon for my new bride and I to pass each other during the early morning hours. She was on her way to work and I was just getting home to sleep for an hour or two and grab a quick bite to eat before going back out again. I was so exhausted most of the time that it was really dangerous for me to be driving. Railroad fires were still a problem and it wasn't uncommon for me to go the offices of the N & W Railway and hand out seven or eight citations at a time. The other railroad – C & O Railway – didn't have an office in the county. No problem! They had one line leading to a coal tipple. I would wait until they slowed down as they approached the tipple, flag them down and climb aboard and issue the engineer a ticket. I also missed my oldest daughter's 4th birthday party because I was trapped on a fire that had jumped a road that was my only escape route.

The observer that I hired to replace Mac was Ethel Trent. Ethel was a retired school teacher and for many years while she was still working, she told me she wanted to become my fire tower observer after she retired. Ethel arrived early one chilly morning in early December and before climbing the tower she

walked down to one of the pit toilets; slipped on frost coated leaves and fell breaking her leg in the process. She crawled up the hill from the toilet about 100 feet, across a road, up a set of steps and across the yard into the cabin and called me. I immediately telephoned for an ambulance and my wife and I made one of the quickest trips I ever made to the tower. Fortunately, she made a speedy recovery in a local hospital.

My last observer was Geneva Browning and her husband Glen. Geneva was the actual observer but Glen assisted in whatever needed done around the tower site. They had worked at another tower and were dependable observers. They became good friends too!

Mac, Ethel and Geneva were typical of the thousands of men and women who so devotedly gave of their time and energies to establish a meaningful level of forest fire control in our nation's forests. Because of their efforts, modern day America has never faced a timber shortage, or a shortage of any of the other benefits of today's well managed, productive forests.

I retired in 2015 and moved to North Carolina but before I did my work would occasionally take me to southern West Virginia. The cabin was gone but the tower was still standing although it could no longer be climbed. The road is no longer passable except by 4-wheel drive but it was still a nice hike to the tower site to reminisce and reflect whenever I could. We lost a lot when we did away with towers – that I'm sure of. Most importantly we especially lost that human touch that observers like Mac and countless others could provide to the public. The tower was a place to visit, to call and chat about a burning permit or to get information on game and fish laws and of course, to report a fire. Towers provided a sense of security to the public because they knew someone was there protecting their forests. It was the embodiment of forestry; at least in their mind. Now we foresters today set in our offices or attend professional meetings and constantly talk with each other about why the public doesn't like or accept us!!

*Beanblossom, a member of the Society of American Foresters, retired after a 42-year career with the West Virginia Division of Natural Resources. He is the volunteer caretaker of the Cradle of Forestry in western North Carolina. Bob has also served as the FFLA West Virginia Representative for several years.*