

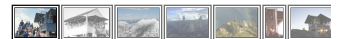
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Destroyed Little Snowy Top lookout provided shelter, memories to many

Sun., Dec. 4, 2016



The Little Snowy Top fire lookout, built between 1930 and 1933, was restored over several years starting in 1988 by volunteers from the Spokane Mountaineers, Back Country Horsemen and U.S. Forest Service. (Rich Landers / The Spokesman-Review)

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The cabin stood tall in the wilderness of northeastern Washington to combat wildfires and shelter visitors for 84 years.

Then, after surviving countless powerful lightning storms, several forest fires, hungry bears and wood-gnawing rodents, the Little Snowy Top lookout burned to the ground on on Sept. 3, likely because someone was careless with the small wood-burning stove.

Destruction by carelessness is not a fate Salmo-Priest Wilderness advocates would have expected for this special room with a view. Nine miles of rugged trail had to be trekked by foot or horse to reach it, generally keeping out the riffraff.

“It was raining, nasty crappy weather that day,” said Jonathan Welch of Oldtown, Washington.



He had been camped with friends near Salmo Mountain where there's an out-of-service fire lookout accessible by road.

"We'd been glassing the area with binoculars the day before looking for animals and had seen the lookout on Little Snowy Top Mountain," he said.

Camped near the Salmo Basin Trailhead, Welch was bordered on three sides by wilderness in the Colville National Forest 3 miles west of the Idaho border.

"Then, when the fog and weather cleared we went back up high to the Salmo Lookout to do some more glassing and my buddy was looking over toward Idaho and said, 'Where's that other lookout?'"

"I said, 'It's not there!'"

"He said, 'It's there, but it's on fire.'"

They used a mobile phone to report the blaze to authorities.

Gary Weber, assistant Dispatch Center manager for the Idaho Department of Lands, confirmed that the fire was first reported that afternoon. Because of the wet weather, none of the surrounding area on Little Snowy Top was burned, he said.

Perhaps hikers had overstoked a fire in the small stove to dry wet clothes.

"It's a pretty sad deal," Welch said. "I've spent a lot of time in there over the years."

"I couldn't wait for my daughter to get old enough to bring her in there. But some knucklehead has taken that dream away either on purpose or by negligence."

The lookout, equipped with little more than a stove, table and bench, was open to all visitors on a first-come basis. It was a welcome dry refuge in a storm.

Two young men reportedly had headed into the wilderness from the Salmo Basin Trailhead before sunrise that morning, Welch said.

A Forest Service recreation staffer interviewed a man and woman who had hiked out of the wilderness with two Labrador retrievers, said Chris Roberts of Cheney, who was camped at the Salmo Basin Trailhead that weekend.

"The couple admitted they were at the lookout with a fire in the stove, but they said they'd put it out," Roberts said.

Little Snowy Top Mountain is 2 miles south of the U.S.-Canada border on the Shedroof Divide in Boundary County, Idaho. The cabin was the only remaining 1930s vintage groundhouse L-4 lookout in the Priest Lake area of North Idaho. It was built before Congress designated the Salmo-Priest Wilderness in 1984.

It was decommissioned as a fire lookout by the U.S. Forest Service in the 1960s. The structure was listed on the National Historic Lookout Register in 1995.

In 1988, volunteers from the Spokane Mountaineers and the Priest River Back Country Horsemen assisted the Idaho Panhandle National Forests in restoring the 14-by-14 foot cabin.

The lookout was in dismal condition when the volunteers arrived and a helicopter delivered materials. Years of wind, snow and sun had combined with the force of a sandblaster to remove the paint. ➤

It sagged in the middle and bulged at the sides.

Woodpeckers had bored through the siding; marmots and packrats had gnawed through the floor. Storms had shattered windows.

Evidence remained from 1951 when a grizzly bear that broke in and chased the lookout staffer into the rafters.

In 1952, a 19-year-old college sophomore, M. Rupert Cutler, worked the summer there as one of the solitary sentinels who formed the backbone of the forest protection system.

“I am brokenhearted to hear that the Little Snowy Top lookout cabin has been burned down,” he said after learning^g about the incident this fall.

Cutler, a Michigan native, was perhaps the last paid full-summer fire lookout attendant at Little Snowy Top. The job was one of the stepping stones to high-ranking positions overseeing the land and environment.

He worked with the National Wildlife Federation in the 1960s, earned a PhD from Michigan State and was named assistant secretary of agriculture for conservation, research, and education under President Jimmy Carter in 1977.

When he was the senior vice president of the National Audubon Society in 1982, Cutler had a chance to revisit the cabin with Idaho Panhandle National Forest Deputy Supervisor George Davis, two Audubon board members, and some British Columbia foresters.

They had stayed overnight at Boundary Lake and had hiked into British Columbia after a new snowfall to see three Selkirk woodland caribou. The Audubon Society was lobbying to have the species placed on the endangered species list, which later occurred.

“We had lunch on Snowy Top –fantastic, and I looked longingly at Little Snowy Top,” he said.

Last year, a friend and private aircraft pilot flew Cutler over the wilderness “so I could pay my respects to the lookout where I spent the summer of 1952 as a GS-3 fire control aide,” said Cutler, who lives in Roanoke, Virginia.

He said he was employed by the U.S. Forest Service, working for Sullivan Lake District Ranger Carl Wetterstrom.

“What a memorable summer that was, with mule deer and mountain goats at the salt block near the door, pikas scrambling across the rock fields, goshawks flying overhead – and the hectic dry lightning storm nights, trying to keep track of the lightning strikes to be called in the ranger station the next morning.

“And the hike out in September, past the pair of great gray owls and the porcupine still guarding its deceased mate near the trail. We had killed it while clearing the trail to the lookout in July.”

An era was ending.

“I must have been one of the last to man that lookout,” Cutler said. “I think aerial patrol took over soon afterward. I know my assignment there was expensive considering the string of eight mules and a packer on horse that packed in my food and gear at the start of the season.”

When the fire was reported on Sept. 3, a fire crew helicopter was dispatched to Little Snowy Top but initially turned back because of weather, said Martin Badertscher, Idaho Panhandle National Forests patrol captain in Coeur d’Alene.

“Once we got the call, we had Forest Service law enforcement, recreation staff and the Border Patrol hit the trailheads,” Badertscher said.

“We caught up with a handful of folks at the trailhead or coming out and gained little bits and pieces of information at that time. The next day we went up and did the investigation. Five days later the fire marshal was able to get there as well.”

Neither a cause nor the individual responsible has has been pinned down, he said Tuesday.

“If it were determined to be arson, there would be criminal consequences,” he said. “If it was negligence, it could be a civil issue.”

“The structure itself was simple and not of high monetary value. But it’s a historic site that meant a lot to the public. Our archeology staff would have a role in determining value.”

“I am sorry for the hikers in the region who won’t be able to use the cabin,” Cutler said. “And I’m angry and sad about the vandalism that took place there.”

When The Spokesman-Review reported the Sept. 3 fire, one online comment hinted at what the loss entails.

“At the least I wish they could have saved the register where visitors left their names and notes about their stay,” he said.





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