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Hickory Ridge Lookout Tower

Hoosier National Forest

FS-R9-053 - 10/2015

The Hickory Ridge Lookout Tower, now standing guard over the Charles C. Deam Wilderness was once a sentinel built to protect a fledgling forest from wildfire. Today, it stands as a tribute to its builders; the last lookout tower remaining on the Hoosier National Forest.

The Hickory Ridge Tower was built in 1939 by the Civilian Conservation Corps (CCC). It was manned and used for fire detection until the 1970's. It is 110 feet tall, made of steel, with a 7 foot square cab and 123 metal steps. Originally there was a house or guard station, a latrine, and a garage built on the site. All but the tower have now been removed.

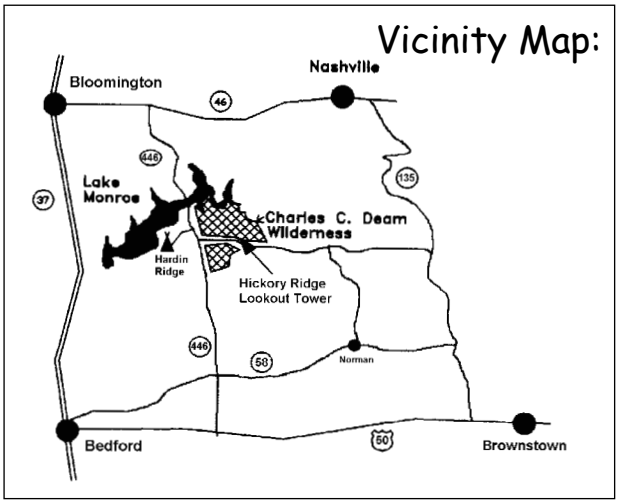
Early lookouts were simple perches in the crowns of tall trees or merely ladder steps nailed to a tall tree so someone could climb up and look around. By the 1930's, the tower's design had been perfected and most were uniform. At their peak in 1953, there were 5,060 towers in the nation, eight on the Hoosier National Forest. Their cost ranged from $960 in 1931 to $9,273 in 1964.

Inside the tower's cabin, entered through a hinged trapdoor in the cabin's floor, was an alidade on a podium. The alidade was a circular map with the fire tower location in the center and compass directions around the edge. Attached to the map was a swivel range finder with a sighting wire. When smoke was sighted, the towerman lined up the sighting wire with the smoke. By plotting the intersection of lines of sight from different towers, the precise location of the fire was determined. Sadly, the alidade has been removed from the Hickory Ridge Tower.

A telephone or radio was then used to report the fire and dispatch crews. It was common for the lookout towers, usually built in remote areas, to be the first sites in a rural area to get a telephone or radio, and served as the area's link to the outside world.

The CCC

The Civilian Conservation Corps (CCC) was the most successful of all Roosevelt's New Deal programs of the 1930's. It employed men during the Great Depression era and put them to work in a variety of



services. The U.S. Army ran the CCC camps, but it was the U.S. Forest Service who put them to work. On the Hoosier, the CCC crews fought fire; planted trees; developed fish and wildlife habitat; and constructed roads, bridges, campgrounds and lookout towers. During the early days of the Hoosier, the CCC served as the primary work force for a skeletal crew of foresters. The CCC camp, located in Kurtz, not only built the lookout tower at Hickory Ridge and Dutch Ridge, but also one at Trinity Springs. They reconstructed the Tower Road, the Maumee Road, and the old Dutch Ridge Road (now Highway 446). The rock to build the roads was quarried from what is now Blackwell Pond. They also built several new homes for local residents who lived in substandard houses.

The Towermen

Doyle Fleetwood was the first towerman. He began work in the tower in 1939 and he and his wife Marie lived in the house near the base of the

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tower after it was built in 1942. Fleetwood worked as the towerman for 5 years.

Raymond Axsom manned the Hickory Ridge Lookout for most of the remaining years it was in use, staying in the tower during periods of high fire danger. When he wasn't on duty in the tower he help survey land lines, mark timber, route signs, and do maintenance work on the Forest. Axsom had a farm just 2 miles from the tower so never chose to live at the tower site.

Many towermen were local farmers recruited to man the towers during high fire danger. At least two of the towers however, were "manned" by women, the wives of the men originally hired to do the job. According to Clarisse Carroll, former lookout on the Georgia Tower, when her husband tired of working in the tower, he just gave her the job. She recalls, "The rules weren't as strict as they are now, I never told anyone I was taking over. I just did it."

To climb the tower today would give the impression that it might have been a lonely life living at the base of the tower. But at the time the tower was built, there were 80 farms and homesteads in the area.

From the top of the tower, you would have seen several homes, including a one room log cabin across the road where a family with six children, chickens and hogs lived. Near Blackwell pond you could have seen a one-room school; and a general store stood at the junction of the road to Maumee. You would also have been able to see a grist mill, two taverns, a blacksmith shop, and many open fields.

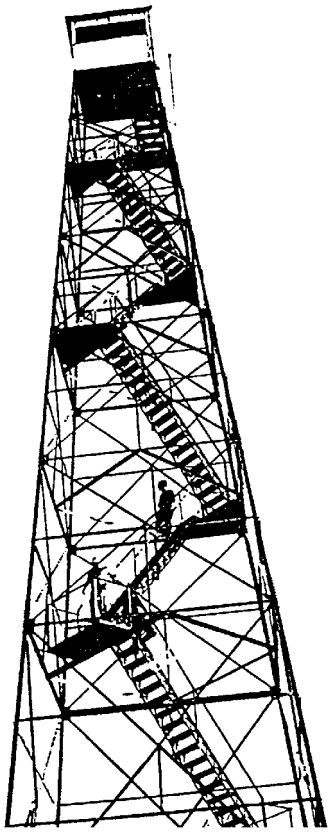
During periods of high fire danger, a small crew of fire fighters were stationed at the base of the tower. When the towerman spotted smoke, they were immediately dispatched to put it out. Axsom recalls periods when there might have been 4-5 fires start in a day so the fire fighters were kept busy.

He recalls the worst fire in the Hickory Ridge area in his memory was in 1952. An old man was burning off his garden plot on a windy day. The fire got away from him and spread into the woods. Before it was out it was to burn over 2,000 acres and spread for about 6 miles. He said the fire had flames 30-40 feet high but was stopped within a half mile of the Hickory Ridge Tower.

As frightening as the fire was, Axsom said the time the tower was struck by lightening with him in the top was worse. But he was the most frightened when an unexpected storm hit with high winds. Since towers had been known to blow over he had quickly started down. But the wind got to blowing so hard he said he had to sit down and wrap his legs around the stairway to keep from being blown off the top, he added "that's the only time I was REALLY frightened!"

A New Purpose

Over time, the open farmlands around the tower have reverted to Forest. Raymond Axsom is now gone, and the house near the base of the tower was moved to a farm south of the Wilderness area. Today the tower serves visitors to the Charles C. Deam Wilderness by offering them a panoramic view of the Forest and Lake Monroe.



Please Be Careful:

If you choose to climb the tower, please be careful. The steps may be slick in rainy or icy weather. Stay out of the tower in high winds or during storms. It is a strenous climb to the top, know your limitations, climb slowly, and use the handrails.

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