

OUTDOORS

Volunteers work to preserve and restore historic McGuire Lookout

By Rebecca Nelson
Of the Tobacco Valley News

On July 28, from the top of McGuire Mountain in the Kootenai National Forest, the sky is blue and relatively smoke free. It rained the day before after a long dry spell and the air is crisp and clean again. A small volunteer crew is busy working on repairs of the vintage fire lookout tower.

After a few days of looking out at the smoky peaks and valleys below, the group is enjoying the scenery during pauses in their work. “This is the best view since I came up here,” says volunteer Greg Evans, who’s working on sealing from inside the cupola.

Built in 1923, McGuire was a working lookout for more than 20 years. After sitting idle for a long stretch, it was renovated a couple times between 1983 and 1998, and is now once again getting much needed attention, with special focus on preserving its historical integrity.

Project leader Chuck Manning instructs the three other volunteers on the best techniques. “One of the things we really try to do is not replace with new material unless it’s completely failed. We try to repair as much as we can,”

he says.

The structure had settled and windows were askew. Manning came with a pack crew in early July to remove them, to be reglazed and painted at the Murphy Lake Ranger Station. Then the structure was brought to level before the repairing, sealing and painting began.

There is much attention to historical detail. Even some of the still functional 1980s or 1990s era metal roofing pieces are now being replaced with vintage material which is “more in keeping with the original structure,” Manning says. They’ve rebuilt one windowsill with new wood and added a new threshold for the door, but overall the goal is to seal it as best they can while maintaining the historical integrity of the structure.

Evans jokes about some of the authentic repair techniques, filling holes with found wood, being what “Daniel Boone” would do.

In their heyday, before other fire-detecting technology began to supplant the need for them, there were around 5,000 staffed lookouts in the U.S. Now only around 300 are staffed, but hundreds more have been identified as having historical value and are popular destinations as rentals.



Volunteers with Northwest Montana Forest Fire Lookout Association help restore the nearly 100-year-old fire lookout on Mt. McGuire as part of a major restoration project. Rebecca Nelson photo.

McGuire lookout is a D-6 model, the first standardized style, prototyped on Mount Hood in Oregon around 1916. Popular through the 1920s, the square structure with pyramidal roof and cupola was eventually deemed inefficient and was passed over in favor of structures that combined a dwelling and observation compartment into one level. Very few D-6s remain in the northwest U.S., and only one other remains in the Kootenai National Forest, on Stahl Peak.

The Northwest Montana chapter of the Forest Fire Lookout Association began in 2013. Its members have been hard at work every year since during the brief season when high elevations are accessible. They have restored landmarks like McGuire lookout in coopera-

tion with the Forest Service, Department of Natural Resources and Conservation, and National Park Service. This summer the group has finished up work on Werner Peak in the Whitefish Range, has two more projects in the Libby Ranger District, and one in Glacier Park.

“It’s a win-win for the Forest Service, and a real benefit to the general public,” Manning says. “Our passion is to try to keep as many structures that are being used and have the potential of use from completely decaying to where the cost to revive them wouldn’t be worth it.”

For the McGuire project, grant funding covers the cost of the materials and a camp cook’s salary, while four volunteers including Manning at the helm complete the work. A pack train brought supplies along the

2.5-mile trail, and the volunteers set up their tents for the duration of the two week project. A canvas wall tent serves as the kitchen, and Luna the dog guards her cook and staked grounds.

The McGuire work crew consists of Evans, who resides in the North Fork and has been helping with lookout projects since 2013, Helen Tyree of Kalispell who began volunteering last fall, and Paul Perinchef of Minnesota, who just started. “I was looking for something to do this summer. I have an interest in lookouts and fire in general. I do some fire-fighting,” Perinchef says.

Manning, who is also the board chair of the NWMT-FFLA, says people who have carpentry skills and good do-it-yourselfers can be hard to find, but they appreciate anyone who is willing

to paint and scrape.

Before a career in construction, Manning served as a lookout for a season in the early 1960s. Now retired, he was among the group of volunteers who started the Northwest chapter. He became interested in restoring lookouts after he and his wife did a couple of volunteer lookout stints around 2012, his favorite being the remote Baptiste lookout in the Flathead National Forest.

He finds part of the job for the NWMT-FFLA requires being careful in choosing projects, and not overpromising.

“You want to fulfill what you’ve committed to and make sure it’s done right, so you make sure you’re building a good legacy for future generations to enjoy,” he says.



Volunteers work on the partially dismantled lookout cab. Rebecca Nelson photo.



Tents are staked with a clear view of mountains in every direction on a rare clear day in a smoky summer. Rebecca Nelson photo.