

Lookout Show `n Tell #1 - The First Fire Lookout

The very first firewatch lookout was probably in the Holy Land on Mt. Masada west of the Dead Sea. During the days of Christ, King Herod posted guards in towers as his enemies tried to burn his empire, 2000 years ago, so the Bible says.

The oldest lookout still standing that we've been able to trace, is the Tuztoromy Firewatch Tower in the city of Sopron, Hungary. Built early in the 13th Century, remodeled in 1681, it remains this famous resort city's major attraction... 700 years later!



Sopron, Hungary Fire Tower 1681-1955

The first in America was located in downtown Harlem, New York. A heavy duty iron bell tower and observation cupola was built in 1856, on a hilltop in what is now the Marcus Garvey city park. It had a full-time fire watchman for most of its first eighty years. In 1986 it was restored in a million dollar national historic preservation project, and stands today almost like new, at the ripe old age of 153.



Marcus Garvey LO, NY City since 1856

On a hilltop in downtown Helena, Montana, a firewatcher cab was established atop a wooden bell tower in 1869. It was fully restored in the 1980s with federal historic preservation funds also. As the two pictures below show, today it looks just as it did 140 years ago. The "Guardian of the Gulch" even has become the official emblem on the doors of Helena's city police cars and fire trucks.



Helena, MT fire tower since 1869



Helena, MT fire tower 2009

The Southern Pacific Railroad established a fire lookout on Red Mountain to protect their snow sheds in the northern California Sierras in 1878.

The first fire lookout strictly for the protection of American forests from wildfire was established in 1902 at a place called Bertha Hill in the remote backwoods near Headquarters, Idaho. A private timber camp cook, Mable Gray, mounted her pony on days following lightning storms after doing the morning dishes, and rode to the top of a small knoll, where she'd climb up a makeshift ladder and sit on a big limb 12' up a fir tree. When she spotted a smoke, she rounded up the crew on her horse. Two years later, in June of 1904, a flimsy pole tower took shape on the summit. And 107 years later, there's still a Bertha Hill Lookout; guardian of the million acre private Clearwater-Potlatch Timber Protective Ass'n.

Bertha Hill LO 1902



But, here's where it gets controversial... Some say that about the same time, a similar crude pole tower also went up in the woods near Greenville, Maine; another in Pennsylvania; and another in Massachusetts. Which was first?

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