

Rebecca Harvey Was The Lady in the Tower

Don't you get lonesome?

Written by **Dan Whetzel**
Photography by **Lance C. Bell**

Are you bored? Do you get breaks? Don't you get lonesome?

These are a few of the questions that Garrett County resident Rebecca Harvey answered for more than two decades as a lookout at the Thayerville fire tower near Deep Creek Lake. Rebecca's answers and reflections provide valuable information on a service that has disappeared in Maryland and has become increasingly scarce across the United States. Once plentiful, fire towers have been removed, converted to other uses, or abandoned, thereby making them structures of historical interest. And it is the memories of lookouts like Rebecca Harvey that help create and maintain the historical record of a valuable public service.

Maryland's fire tower program began in 1906 under Fred Besley, Maryland's first State Forester. The purpose of the building program was to protect the state's forest resources by placing personnel in key positions to prevent fires. The first 100 foot steel tower and accompanying wooden cabin went up in 1915, and by 1944 there were 34 towers in operation across the state. Each tower was built on a summit and had a person called a "lookout" who would survey the surrounding landscape for the early detection of fires. From the lookout's vantage point even small wisps of smoke could be detected, thereby saving valuable time in contacting responders on the ground whose job it was to suppress the blaze. Lookouts were housed in the small wooden cabins equipped with radio services and mapping systems. The cabins seemed to fascinate



Rebecca checking her weather station.



hikers and other visitors who would stop by the remote locations to chat with the lookouts.

Rebecca Harvey began duties as a lookout for the state of Maryland in 1972 and remained on the job until 1993, when the tower was officially closed. Her work schedule was not a conventional one. Normally the fire season started in February and lasted until early June when the forest turned green. Work resumed in October and continued until snow cover again reduced the risk of fires. The daily work schedule also varied according to the

weather. "We worked on pretty days but stayed home on rainy ones," recalled Rebecca.

While work days varied, the daily routine inside the cabin remained consistent across the region. Lookouts first checked to see if ground patrolmen were in the area and logged onto communication channels. A call to other tower lookouts, to check their status, was also placed early in the day. Rebecca's routine included an additional call to the B&O Railroad in order to confirm the schedule of east bound trains because fires could be sparked by the locomotives in dry weather. Using binoculars, the lookouts continuously surveyed the landscape looking for wisps of smoke. Through experience they learned to interpret the

different shapes of smoke columns. According to Rebecca, “If the fire was confined (in a barrel or chimney), the smoke column would go straight up. If the fire was burning in the woods, I would see smaller puffs of smoke. I also had to know when the farmers were spreading lime on their fields because it created dust that looked like smoke.”

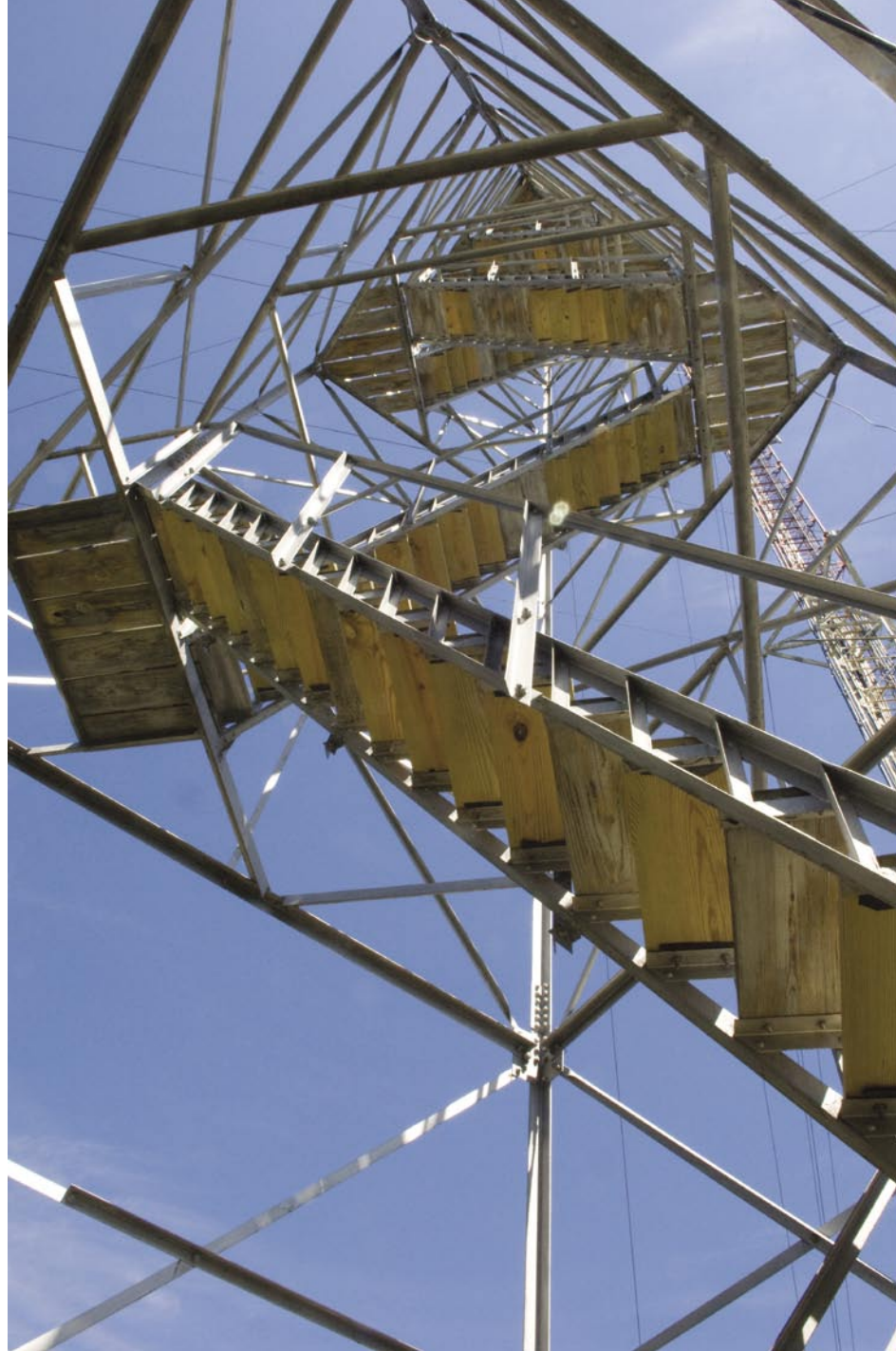
Every fire report was relayed to personnel on the ground, along with a written entry indicating the time of day and weather conditions. In the early days, the lookout determined a fire’s location by using a wooden map that was normally suspended by ropes from the cabin’s ceiling. The lookout lowered the map as necessary and used a system of strings and pins to cross reference the location of the fire. According to Rebecca, this map system ended in the 1940s.

A work day could often be extended depending on circumstances and permission to leave had to be granted before lookouts were dismissed. According to Rebecca, “Everything had to be safe and clear before permission to leave was given.”

Fire towers began to be decommissioned in the 1950s as new technologies were developed. It was believed that radios, satellites, aircraft, and citizens’ reports could take the place of the traditional lookouts. All these newer technologies have their drawbacks in the early detection of fires and Rebecca believes the traditional lookouts provided better protection of forests. “The old way of preventing fires is the way to beat fires. Everybody knew what class of day it was and we worked together to do our jobs. I guess we worked our way out of business because of doing such a good job.”

Fire tower lookouts have interesting experiences and stories to tell and Rebecca is no exception. Ironically, the most frightening event she witnessed occurred over water when a 100 foot water spout, sounding like a train, roared across the Turkey Neck section of Deep Creek Lake toward the Thayerville tower. “I didn’t know where it was going or what it might do. Thank goodness there were no boats on the lake. It just went straight up in the air and was gone. That was the most frightening thing that happened to me.”

Visitors were not unusual at the Thayerville Tower but the most memorable one was from Switzerland. While engaging in a conversation, Rebecca told Smokey



It’s a long way to the top... *only 109 steps (120 feet)*

the Bear’s story to the Swiss visitor and presented him with the bear’s patch from her coat. The next day the visitor returned with a postcard of his hometown in Switzerland.

And there was the time two boys brought a large dog named Coco into the tower for a visit. When it was time for the visitors to leave, Coco stretched out for a nap and wouldn’t budge. Following the nap, Rebecca had to carry Coco down the steps while the two boys kept talking to him, so he wouldn’t be frightened.

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The most frequent visitors to the tower were campers. "People would bring me supper and invite me down to picnics in the evening. It was very nice."

Another satisfying part of the job was being outdoors. "There was a lot of wildlife that came around every day, and I liked that." In looking back on the two decades of service, perhaps the most memorable and rewarding part was the friendships of colleagues in the fire fighting business. "We were like a ball team, we all worked together."

As for the typical questions about boredom, breaks, and loneliness; "I never got bored, I stayed busy all the time, there was always something going on." And breaktime? There were no extra workers to provide for that benefit. "You went from ten o'clock in the morning to whenever the fires were out or whenever you got released by the fire manager." Lonesome did not describe her job either, "People would visit on weekends and I could always look at the animals under the

tower, like turkeys, deer, or an old groundhog. I am glad that I worked in the tower when I did. I really enjoyed my job."

The Thayerville fire tower was moved from its original location and is now located within Deep Creek State Park; it is currently referred to as a forestry tower. According to Barbara Garner, who has been studying Maryland's fire towers since 2005, there are 46 sites in the state where fire towers are still present or were once located.

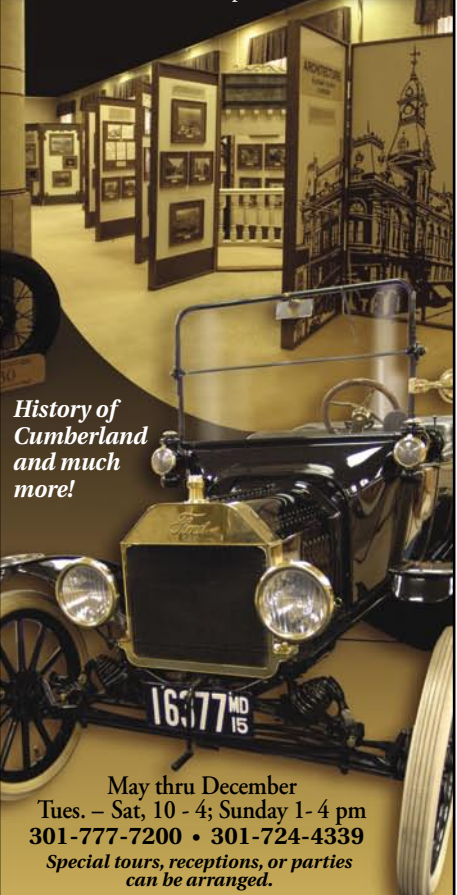
The Thayerville tower can be accessed by a public hiking trail. Through a partnership with Maryland Forest Service, Maryland Park Service, and the Western Garrett County State Park Volunteers, Inc., interpretive hikes to the top of the Thayerville Fire Tower, are now offered periodically. On weekends, check with the Discovery Center, 301-387-7067, for the scheduled hikes or visit <http://discoverycenterdcl.com>.

Allegany County Museum

81 Baltimore St., Downtown Cumberland

2008 Calendar of Events

- May 10** **Antique Discovery Show**
Weschler's of Washington, DC. *Identification and appraisal of antiques, collectibles, etc.* 10 am
- May 15** **Allegany Co. Museum Opens**
- June 14-15** **Heritage Days Open House**
Special tours and exhibits. Sat. & Sun. 10 am - 4 pm
- June-Sept.** **"Friday After Five"**
Friday evenings 5-9 pm
- July 12** **Canal Fest/Rail Fest**
Antique Car/Truck Show
Model canal boats & trains, etc.
- Sept. 20** **8th Annual Ford Model T & Model A Car/Truck Show**
100th Anniversary Model T
- Nov. 10- Dec. 14** **Festival of Trees** 12 - 4 pm
- Nov. 28** **Holiday Open House**
Special decorations, quartet, carols. Fri. 5-9 pm
- Dec. 4, 11, 18** **Santa Claus Visitation**
Mr. & Mrs. Claus, carriage rides, photos, treats, etc. Free 5-9 pm
- Dec. 31** **New Year's Eve Open House**
Music, exhibits, refreshments. Wed. 9-12 pm



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