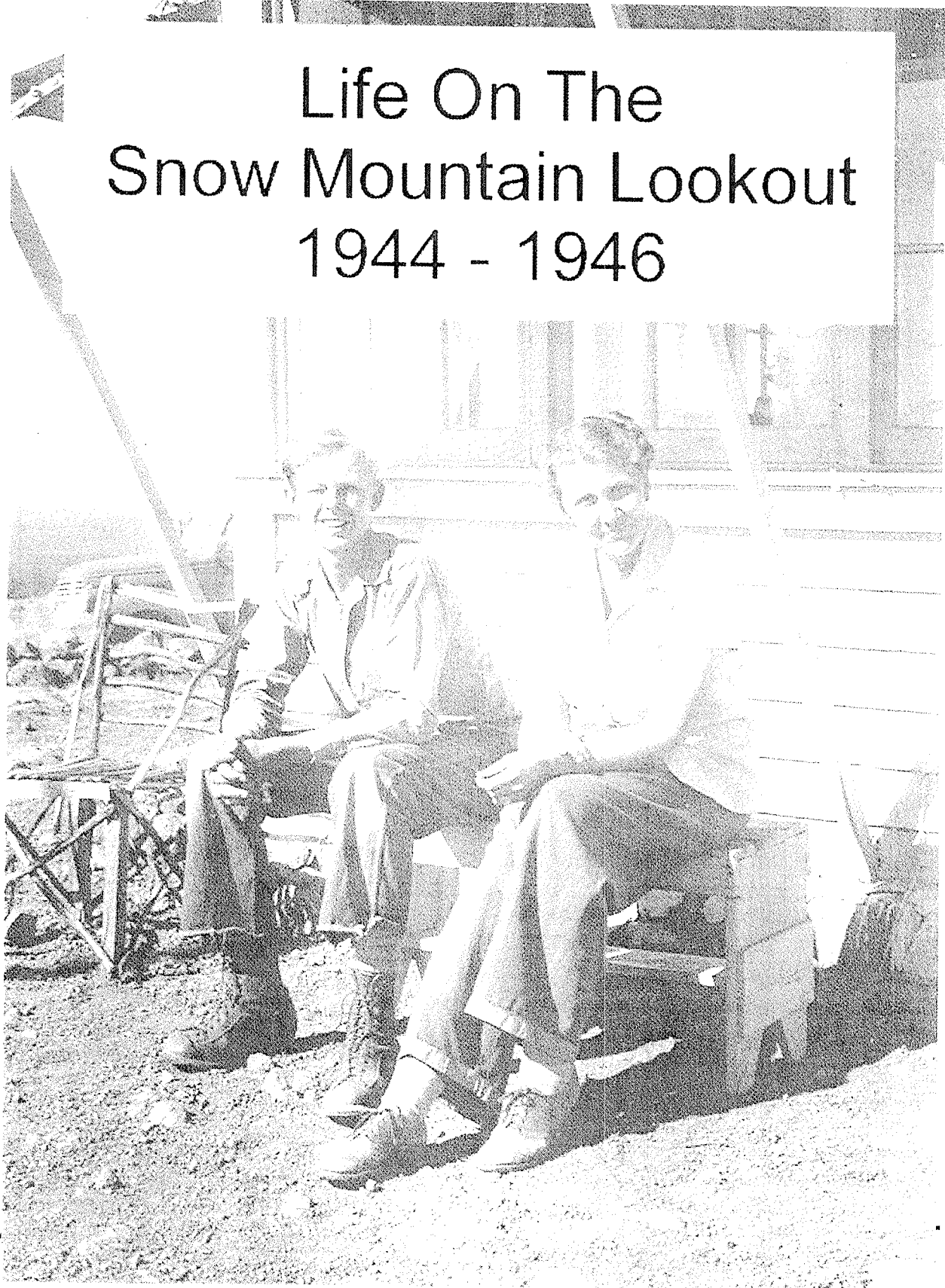


Life On The Snow Mountain Lookout 1944 - 1946



The following is a transcription of a handwritten cover letter received from Marjorie Grant Colpitts along with Chapter XIII, LIFE ON THE LOOKOUT, of her autobiography.

This document is located on the Ochoco National Forests main computer server at:
/fsfiles/office/och/photos/history/lookouts/colpitts.rtf

March 25, 2000

Dear Friends,

The poster and pamphlet arrived safely and have been enjoyed by many already. Thanks so much! What a lovely surprise after 56 years!

I'll send you a copy of one chapter of the autobiography I'm trying to finish. I don't type so I'll just have Doug print it off as is and you can use what you want and correct the typos.

Clive and Eleanor Ingalls may have told you that I am nearly 94. Alva and I bought a small farm on the McKenzie River, near my folks where we raised our daughter and I taught school 45 years. Alva was gone in 1964. When I was 85 I sold the farm and moved to Petersburg (Alaska) to live near my daughter and son-in-law, the Cronlunds. She is a retired school librarian and he is an Emergency Medical Technician in the Petersburg Fire Department.

I always kept in touch with Cranson Fosburg, the ranger, when I was on Snow Mountain. He wound up his career on the Mt. Hood forest. His big family are all grown and he is gone. In later life, after Mrs. Fosburg passed away, he married Helen Hughes, the Coos Bay teacher who worked in the office at Allison in 1944-46.

I would appreciate a picture of the present Snow Mt. Lookout. Mr. Fosburg told me about it. In 1986 I flew over the mountain with my kids but there was no building there at that time.

Thanks again,
Marjorie Grant Colpitts

CHAPTER XIII

LIFE ON THE LOOKOUT 1944 -1946

A chapter from the autobiography of Marjorie Grant Colpitts

Early in the spring of 1944 I began thinking of plans for the summer vacation. In 1942 I had come to Seattle and spent the summer working at the Bon Marche, taking classes at the University of Washington, and securing my new position in the Seattle schools. In 1943 I had driven my brother's car to him where he would be stationed at Fort McClellan, Alabama, for the duration of the war, and worked a month on the "bean chain" at the Eugene Fruit Growers where they were desperately in need of help.

Everyone planned to do something to further the war effort. I had always thought it would be fun to work for the United States Forest Service but had been discouraged by my brother, a career forester. He was a pretty chauvinistic forest ranger of the old school who thought women had no place in the woods. The scarcity of men to employ in 1944 led me to believe that this was my opportunity, so I applied, without success, at the Forest Office in Seattle. I then wrote to Cranson Fosburg, a Coos Bay friend, who had become a ranger in the Ochoco National Forest with headquarters in Prineville, Oregon. He had a lookout job for me and was also hiring Helen Hughes, a Coos Bay teacher and former co-worker of mine, to work in his office at Allison Ranger Station.

I was to go to Prineville as soon as school was out, attend fire school there, and then move to Snow Mountain, the highest peak in the Ochoco National Forest (7,000') overlooking the center of the largest stand of Ponderosa pine left in the United States at that time. I made a lot of plans, rigged up a suitable wardrobe, and borrowed a battery radio, a pair of field glasses, and a handgun.

My cousins, Gene and Betty Ingalls, hated to see me start off alone so they talked me into taking their boy, Clive, then fourteen, and his dog with me. They both worked and hated to have him alone in the city all summer. Mr. Fosburg approved this plan; Clive's folks would pay half of the grocery bill and he could help me they said.

We packed the car and drove to my folks' home on the McKenzie. It was an uneventful trip except that the poor dog kept getting carsick.

I left most of my city belongings at home and packed a lot of canned fruit and vegetables to take along. When we got to Prineville, we went directly to the Fire-camp at the Ochoco Ranger Station, on Ochoco Creek, on the old Ochoco Highway. There, Clive had a good time fishing and I had classes in compass and map reading, fire finding, taking the weather, and identifying aircrafts. This was wartime and it was feared that the Western forests might be targets. We slept in a bunkhouse and had good meals at the cookhouse.

River and its many tributaries. It was on this side that our spring was located, and it was here that banks of snow, in protected areas, hung on until well into August.

We lived by the sun, getting up at sunrise, and going to bed near sunset, being on duty twenty-four hours a day, seven days a week. Sunrises were often beautiful and it was then that we saw the most birds. We recorded the exact moment of sunrise and sunset all summer and it gave us quite a feeling of the changing of the seasons. Sunsets and evening hours were often the nicest part of the day. The tiresome winds died down, and the sunsets and evening shadows made the whole scene come to life. Purple shadows marked the stream beds, and canyons that looked level in the bright sunlight deepened and changed from minute to minute.

Any clouds made fantastic images and layers, and the smoke that often drifted in gave rich colors to the atmosphere. My black and white camera did not do justice to the scene. It should have been done in oils in deep purples, reds, and oranges. Mr. Fosburg, our boss, often made the trip up to take sunset-colored pictures, as he was making a collection of them.

We found a salt block in the garage and put it out in plain sight of the lookout to entice the mule deer to come up where we could watch them in the evenings. A huge horned owl often sat on a post at the corner of the house in the night. He was looking for golden-mantled ground squirrels, but they wisely did not come out at night. That summer we saw little of them because of Clive's dog. We saw one big elk going down our road, and we often heard coyotes calling across the ridges in the evenings. We even saw some young coyotes catching grasshoppers along the trail to the spring.

Clive and his dog ranged the hills days on end, exploring trails and canyons, visiting with shepherders, and sometimes being asked to go to a fire with Mr. Fosburg and the fire crew from Allison. He was a good lookout too, and often spelled me so I could get away from the phone and do a bit of botanizing. He made slingshots, hunted Indian artifacts, chopped wood, carried water, and trained his dog. There was an old tub at the spring, and he would fill it with water, leave it in the sun all day, and have his bath down there in the evenings. He even built a pair of wings of limbs and cardboard boxes and tried them out on a bluff when I was not looking. It was a wonder he didn't break an arm or leg that time.

In the evenings when there were no electric storms, we got fair reception on the little battery radio. We listened to the news and their good musical programs from Salt Lake. We often called other lookouts who did not have radios and played the programs for them over the phone. We visited with the other lookouts and became good friends with people we never did see face-to-face.

The thunderstorms were always dreaded. We were usually warned when they were expected. No matter how long I stayed on the lookout, I never outgrew the eerie feeling that I always experienced when I was right in the middle of an electric storm. The air felt charged, the wires to the roof turned bluish, and lights appeared on the stove top. The reports were deafening and we knew the phone was pulled off and we were on our own. It was especially disconcerting at night and I worried about Clive. I would get him up and dressed and insist that he stay on the glass-legged stool though he would rather have slept through it. We were warned never to go outside or get off our stools. Of course I was to

Soon it was time to return to Snow Mountain. Clive hoped to get work at the Forest nursery near Olympia although he was only fifteen, and sixteen was their beginning age. He planned to go that far with me and if he didn't get on there, he would go on back to Snow Mountain. I went in with him to apply, told the man in charge of his experiences on a national forest the summer before, and, as he was a big, strong-looking boy and workers were at a premium, he was hired. He worked there for several summers and made his own money after that.

I drove to Eugene alone, visited the folks, and went to fire school again at Prineville. When we moved to Allison, we found things quite changed. Bob Royster was the new fire boss, his brother, Ernest, was on the crew, and their mother had come to keep house for them in the crew house. Esther Meyers, a third Coos Bay teacher, had come to keep the Dry Mountain Lookout. A fourth little Fosburg had appeared and things were as busy as ever.

It was an unusually wet, early, season and lookouts were not needed yet, so Mr. Fosburg put us to work on "maintenance" so we would be on the payroll. We painted and papered the Ranger's home, painted the inside of Helen's house, and then went down to Dry Mountain to clean and paint that lookout.

That was quite a different setup from Snow Mountain. The lookout lived in a small house in the woods and spent her days in a high tower well above the forest floor. The flowers and shrubs were at their best and we thoroughly enjoyed our time there, even if we were warned that there were rattlesnakes in the area.

Wouldn't you believe it, dry weather came before they got to Snow Mountain, so I had to paint all of the inside of that lookout by myself, during the summer, as time permitted. It proved to be quite a job to paint the ceiling, all the cupboards and window frames, and live in it at the same time. Doing the floor two coats was especially tricky. I finally rigged up a catwalk of ladders and boards on sticks in the door and around the fire finder. I cooked up some food ahead and hoped that no company came.

When Clive and the dog were not there, the golden-mantled ground squirrels came out and I began to get acquainted with them. I put out bread crusts, but they always picked them up and ran for their holes so I tied them firmly to big rocks so they would have to stay and at least fill their food pouches while I talked to them. I then moved them closer and closer to me and finally tied them to my shoe. Soon the bravest ones would come up my pant leg onto my knee, and then onto the table while I chattered away to them. I tried different kinds of food and found that hot cakes were their favorite. I put out a plain piece, a buttered piece, and a piece with syrup, and they would always choose the piece with syrup first. One day I thought it would be fun to pet one. I grabbed him, he jumped, and to my horror I held the tip of his tail in my hand. I later learned that they have prehensile tails for just such emergencies.

That summer we had a bit more gas and since Clive was not there to carry water, I was allowed to drive down to Allison, after sunset, for my supplies, mail, and factory cans of water. If I had any water left, I would pour it out in the tin washtub. To my horror I returned one evening to find one of my fat friends drowned in the tub. After that, I always put a stick in the tub so if any fell in, they would be able to climb out, I couldn't lift the factory cans of

by my spring. The next day when Alva came by on his way to Paulina on business, he brought me a nice lamb roast, my first gift from him.

August 15, 1945, was V.J. Day and the Forest Service, along with the rest of the world, took a holiday. Ernest, Bob's brother, came up to repair my radio. He brought a big bottle and pretended to be very drunk; they tried everything they could think of to tease me. I was busy cooking for the big picnic that was planned for all of the force and neighbors. I made Zoom cookies off of the Zoom box. macaroni casserole with hamburger, cheese, and tomatoes from my latest grocery order, and took a plate of thin little green onions I had raised in a protected place near the lookout and watered with waste water. They were probably the only onions ever raised on Snow Mountain, and they made quite a conversation piece. I tried to raise cabbage, too, from plants Bessie Allison brought to me, but the deer ate them. I had asked Mr. Fosburg if I could invite Alva and he took me in the pickup. It was a joyous time; we ate, sang, danced, and really let down our hair. Alva took me home and we visited in the pickup until all hours. We compared viewpoints and found that we agreed on many important questions of life and the times. It was a day and a night to be remembered on Snow Mountain as well as the rest of the world.

In a few days Helen, the office girl, called to say that my folks were coming up for a visit. They got there on August 22, which was Alva's birthday, but he had to make a trip to John Day on business, so we planned a birthday dinner on the 23rd so he could meet my folks. He came and brought his old friend, Alex DeLore, and a birthday cake from John Day. We had a good dinner and visited until late. My folks enjoyed him as much as I did.

Things went along in much the same manner for the rest of the month; then it was time to go back to Seattle. The day before I left, Alva came for the day. We cooked dinner, did a lot of visiting, and settled many things. We surprised ourselves by how quickly we had become good friends and how naturally new thoughts and plans included each other. We agreed that it had probably been the best day of our lives. He came by the next morning while he was moving his sheep camp. We said goodbye and I moved down to Allison to spend the night with Helen and Esther, the Dry Mountain lookout from Coos Bay. It developed that she and Bob, the incorrigible fire boss, had developed an affair, and we visited and compared notes most of the night.

Mr. Fosburg was sure my tires would never get me back to Seattle so he made some tire irons and one of the men gave us an extra, old spare tire. We did have a blowout thirty miles from Prineville, but an accommodating rancher came along and helped us patch it and we got to the folks' place safely. There I got organized to go back to Seattle and had no tire trouble on that trip either.

It seemed pretty tame to get back to Seattle, and my "extra room" at Ethel Bell's. I had a new principal, Mr. Richardson, who turned out to be a real school man. My enrollment was somewhat smaller, and I had a good winter, if not too many letters from Suplee and the Rock Pile Ranch.

Alva planned to come to Seattle for Thanksgiving, but a bad storm made transportation from the ranch impossible. Alva's home ranch was located on the South Fork of the John Day on Wind Creek. To reach it from Prineville, one had to go seventy miles up the Crooked River on a gravel road to Paulina, then fifteen miles on a mud road to Suplee, and then fifteen more on a jeep road to the top of the canyon. This jeep road was only

Mr. Fosburg had excused me from fire school so that we could go on our honeymoon. By that time, the forty-hour week had come into being and I had a relief lookout each weekend. Mr. Fosburg let me order groceries for Alva's camp along with mine, and they were brought to Allison on the government truck. I would take them to Alva's sheep camp and spend the weekend with him, getting paid for being the camp tender of the sheep camp as well as the lookout.

Whenever he could talk anyone into being a relief herder, Alva would come up to the lookout. One evening we noticed many lights on the roads converging on Snow Mountain, and soon the neighboring ranchers and Alva's folks and friends drove up to the lookout, blowing their horns to give us an old-fashioned "shivaree". There were thirty-three of them, bringing treats of all kinds. It was a cold, windy night so we all crowded into that small room, built a fire, made coffee, served supper, and had a rousing, good time. As far as I know, that may have been the only shivaree ever held in a lookout, at least on the Ochoco Forest.

Since I did not have to leave early to get back to school in Seattle, we stayed on during the hunting season. Vera and Vern Smithley of Salem, old-time friends, came to hunt. The boys would go out hunting very early in the mornings and Vera and I would sleep in, but we had a hard time getting dressed after it got light, as hunters kept going by and peeking in. When they started home, they got nearly to the foot of the mountain when they discovered that one of my fat ground squirrels was a stowaway in their car. Knowing how much I enjoyed my wild pets, they turned around and drove clear back up to the lookout to let him out in his home territory.

My folks came up again late in the season. It had started to snow and we had to move down to Allison for the last of their visit. Though it was beautiful at the lookout they didn't want to get snowed in and cause a lot of bother. The snow was getting quite deep and the wires were all covered with icicles and deep frost. The Crew House was then empty so we camped there so dad could do more hunting.

Mr. Fry, School Superintendent of the Crook County Unit System, had heard that we planned to spend the winter in Suplee so Alva could wind up his business. He had not been able to hire a teacher for the Suplee School and kept calling to see if he could persuade me to teach it. Alva had warned me that the schoolhouse was not winterized and that the snow blew in and collected in the chalk trays so I was not about to work there. We had rented a snug house that belonged to Alva's aunt so I finally said I'd teach if the kids would come to our house. Mr. Fry was desperate so he agreed. He moved the desks and big sheet-iron stove to our living room, we made a playroom in the front bedroom, and we occupied the big kitchen and back bedroom. He hauled a lot of wood, brought us a blackboard, school books and a library, and we were in business. There were five pupils in the fourth, fifth, and sixth grades. School was getting started so late in October that they knew they would have to work to make their grades and they certainly did, taking work home every evening. They all rode to school on horseback and put their ponies in our barn. They spent most of their recesses roping fence posts or each other, but they loved it and often told me that it was the first time they had ever been able to take off their coats in school in winter. They continued this arrangement for several years until there were not enough pupils to have a school and they had to move to Paulina to go to school.