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COLUMN ONE

Their old flame: lookout towers

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A long, hot summer day in August is about to end — and so far nothing to report. Not even a car accident on Interstate 5. Fishing boats cut lazy trails in the blue waters of Pyramid Lake.

Just as John Cordi prepares to lock up the fire lookout tower perched on the top of Slide Mountain, he spots something on the horizon.

"What is that?" he shouts.

Smoke. A massive billow rising to the north.

Cordi, a stocky copier repairman from Signal Hill, has been a lookout volunteer in the Angeles National Forest for two years and has yet to spot a single fire.

Until now.

Fire officials predicted that 2006 would be a bad year in the local mountains. They were right. The Day fire, which broke out Sept. 4, became one of the longest-burning fires in California history and the Esperanza fire in the neighboring San Bernardino National Forest near Cabazon killed five firefighters. Most recently, a fire near Moorpark destroyed five houses and damaged several others.

From spring to winter, fire season in Southern California brings ominous uncertainty. Catching a spark before it becomes a tragedy remains the greatest challenge and lookout volunteers such as Cordi play a historic if slightly antiquated role in this era of cellphones, forest-monitoring satellites and infrared cameras.

Still, Cordi is undaunted. On this August afternoon, he picks up the radio receiver and breathlessly calls in the blaze. This could be a first. The dispatch operator tells him that the smoke had already been spotted by a firefighter who had seen it from his car. It was already being contained as Cordi watched.

Scooped again.

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May 17

For volunteers signing up for lookout duty, fire season begins mid-May in a stale Pasadena classroom sandwiched between a Pilates studio and law offices.

They are truck drivers, software consultants, retirees and construction contractors. For two days, they pore through training manuals and brochures produced by the Forest Service, which spends about $2,000 a year on the supplies and maintenance of the towers.

Their charge — the 650,000-acre Angeles National Forest — is a mountain range nearly the size of Rhode Island, with dense chaparral in the lowlands and pine and fir groves near the peaks. It forms a boat-shaped buffer between the Mojave Desert and the nation's second most populous metropolis.

Lookout towers in Southern California have been around since the late 1800s. During World War II, they served as posts for spotters, who scanned the skies for enemy planes, but by the 1980s many had either burned down or were dismantled. In states such as Washington and Colorado, the Forest Service still employs lookout personnel, but across the country the number of towers has dwindled greatly. About 70 years ago there were 8,000; today there are 2,000. In Southern California, there are no more than 18; only two remain in the Angeles National Forest.

Nationwide, volunteers put in hundreds of hours each year on these isolated peaks, refusing to let the remaining towers become anachronisms like the firehouse Dalmatian. Volunteers raise money, sell T-shirts, patches and books. They do it because they believe the safety of the forest shouldn't be left to a passing motorist with a cellphone or to a satellite orbiting 438 miles above the Earth. They do it because they can't bear to see these creaky, iconic towers disappear.

Back in the Pasadena classroom, local volunteers learn how to use a two-way radio and hand-held weather gauges and thermometers, and are introduced to the Osborne Fire Finder. This heavy metal, oval-shaped instrument was invented in 1911 and used widely in the 1930s when the Civilian Conservation Corps built most of the fire towers throughout the country. The direction and distance to a fire can be judged by aiming its crosshairs. It's reliable — but in the same way a slide rule is reliable.

When someone raises the question of safety — what to do if a fire threatens a tower — the Forest Service teacher says that the radio dispatcher would provide instructions.

There was good reason for the concern. The Angeles National Forest has lost 20 lookout towers over the last 30 years, nearly all to fire.

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June 1

The Vetter Mountain lookout tower is a tower in name only. It sits flat on a peak 5,908 feet above sea level at the southern edge of the forest and offers a Godlike view. To the south, radio towers protrude from Mt. Wilson. Mt. Baldy's smooth peak rises out of a haze in the east. Strawberry Peak

juts out of the western horizon and Mt. Pacifico dominates the northern skyline. From above, the undulating valleys and canyons below look like folds of wrinkled green felt.

Training instructor George Morey can see it all from the rectangular windows of this 71-year-old tower. Inside the 14-by-14-foot room, a brown, metal Army cot fills a corner. In the middle, a platform holds the Osborne Fire Finder. The cupboards are stocked with fire safety pamphlets and "Smokey Bear" coloring books. The electricity and running water were disconnected years ago.

Morey is a former truck driver who, along with his wife, Pam, heads the volunteer lookout program in the Angeles and San Bernardino national forests. He drove nearly two miles on a rutted, dirt road from the Angeles Crest Highway to get to the tower by 8 a.m. It was the start of a long shift that began with weather measurements, the flag raising and a status report to the dispatch center. Then the waiting began and the hours started to drag. Staring out at towering Coulter pines, Morey watched butterflies perform a flittering mating dance around the tower.

It was 13 years ago that a church friend persuaded him and his wife to visit a lookout tower in the San Bernardino National Forest. Avid hikers, the couple immediately saw the towers as a way to enjoy the outdoors while helping protect the forest. Since then, Morey has only spotted two fires in the Angeles Forest. But he says he doesn't mark success by the number of spotted fires.

"A good day in the lookout is no smoke," he says repeatedly.

At 5 p.m. he locked up the tower. Another good day.

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July 21

It was 80 degrees outside when a lighting storm rumbled in from the Mojave Desert toward Vetter Mountain. Kermit Eller, a 75-year-old retired engineer from Glendale, and two recruits watched the dark clouds approach and began to strategize.

To keep from being electrocuted, they would have to sit on chairs fitted with glass insulators on the legs. But there were only two insulated stools. They laughed about the predicament and decided to worry about it later.

Lightning poses a serious threat to the forest. Not only can it start a blaze instantly; a ground strike can also smolder in leaves and tinder for days before erupting into flames. In 2005, lightning strikes were responsible for nearly half of the fires in the Southwest, burning more than half a million acres.

At about 12:30 p.m., jagged streaks flashed like strobe lights above Mt. Pacifico. But no smoke. After a couple of hours, the clouds dissipated. The three were spared from having to draw straws.

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Aug. 5

The tower on Slide Mountain is the second remaining lookout in the Angeles National Forest. Built on the northern end of the forest, it stands on a peak, 4 1/2 miles from the nearest road, accessible only by a single-track, shrub-choked trail. Few volunteers are willing to make the trek.

The tower is an inhospitable steel-gray structure that looks like a prison guard tower. But the views make up for its cold exterior. The tower overlooks Pyramid Lake to the north and Los Padres National Forest to the west. The eastern horizon is dominated by hills of manzanita and scrub oak.

To avoid the daytime heat, John Cordi began his hike at 4:30 a.m. with the stars twinkling overhead. Cordi became a tower volunteer two years ago after finding a flier for a tower fundraiser at a bowling alley. He was 52, and he instantly fell in love with Slide Mountain. It was its isolation that appealed to him most. He and his wife have spent many summer nights here, counting the stars and watching the brake lights on Interstate 5 disappear over the pass at Gorman. He talks about the tower as if it were his child.

He climbed the 20 or so sturdy steel steps, unlocked the heavy padlock on the metal door and opened the tower. The first order of business was to grab a hoe and clear the nearby vegetation. It was a wise decision.

Less than a month later — on Labor Day — the Day fire erupted a few miles from the tower. No one staffed Slide Mountain on that day and forest officials said it was not clear whether a report from the tower could have alerted firefighters before the blaze grew out of hand. (Two months later, a lookout tower in the San Bernardino Mountains was similarly empty when the Esperanza fire broke out at 1 a.m. in a canyon southeast of Cabazon.)

As the flames approached Slide Mountain, firefighters wrapped the tower with a reflective aluminum sheet to block the heat. They grabbed the Osborne Fire Finder and flew it out on a helicopter.

For 29 days, the Day fire would consume this portion of the forest, earning its place in the history books as one of the longest-burning fires in the Angeles forest. It would scorch an area larger than the city of Chicago and for several weeks no one knew how much damage the Slide Mountain tower had suffered.

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Sept. 11

The Day fire had been burning for eight days — nearly 16,000 acres charred — and containment was a long way off. On this warm, sunny Monday, Kermit Eller was back on duty on Vetter Mountain. A huge gray cloud of smoke rose over the northwest horizon. With Slide Mountain in flames, Vetter Mountain was the only operational lookout in the entire forest.

But today, the Forest Service can dispatch airplane spotters equipped with heat sensing cameras that can spot a fire eight inches wide from 14,000 feet. Federal and state officials can also monitor infrared images from satellites that circle the globe four times every 24 hours.

The fact is that there are few forests in the country where smoke can go unnoticed. Consequently,

lookout towers are preserved primarily for historical and ceremonial reasons, according to Stephen J. Pyne, a fire historian and professor at Arizona State University.

"With technology helping the sighting and reporting, they are really a flagging tradition," he said. "But there is a culture to them. We ascribe certain values to them. There is a lore of the lookouts that enters into it."

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Oct. 20

Overnight stays are one of the fringe benefits of a volunteer and at 3 a.m. in the Vetter Mountain tower, something was stirring in the darkness outside. It had already been a restless night, the silence broken by the sound of creaking planks on the catwalk around the tower and rustling in the trees outside. The only light came from the stars.

Such moments would have been very familiar to the full-time workers who once staffed these posts around the clock. Like Ramona Merwin.

She was the widow of a Forest Service firefighter who died in 1952 of lung cancer brought on by years of breathing hot ash and smoke. The Forest Service offered her the lookout job out of respect for her husband and out of sympathy for her.

She lived here for 26 consecutive summers, raising two teenagers in the process.

In 1981, the Forest Service closed the tower when smog seeping in from the San Gabriel Valley made air pollution indistinguishable from smoke. Volunteers reopened it in 1998.

Merwin, 88, lives in a condominium in Palmdale. It made sense to stay overnight in the towers, she said, because that was when she spotted many illegal campfires.

But it was a little unnerving, especially with occasional prison breaks from a nearby work farm. "Your imagination can run away with you," she said.

Outside the window, the source of the noise materialized. Perched three feet away on a yucca plant, a huge owl gazed into the tower. It considered the scene for a moment then flew off with a screech.

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Oct. 28

As the sun began to rise on Slide Mountain on this cold Saturday morning, the extent of the fire damage was clear.

The rocks on the trail were etched in black, like charcoal briquettes. The unburned leaves on the scrub oaks were dry and crisp like potato chips. The charred branches of the manzanita trees looked like twisted black fingers, reaching for the sky.

Seven volunteers had met at 5:30 a.m. at a locked gate at the base of the mountain.

They wanted to see if the tower was still standing, and along with food and water, they took turns carrying the 55-pound Osborne Fire Finder up the mountain.

The eastern sky glowed pink and orange as they climbed the first hill. The silhouettes of two deer crossed their path.

The trail runs a circuitous route around the mountain.

When they cleared the last curve, the gray tower rose above the blackened peak, and Pam Morey exclaimed: "You are beautiful!"

The fire encircled the structure to within 30 feet but miraculously even the fiberglass outhouse — about 30 yards from the tower — had survived. They unlocked the tower and saw nothing was amiss inside.

"I thought the windows would be black," Cordi said as he stepped inside. "But it's in good shape."

They unloaded backpacks and after a short rest lifted the Osborne Fire Finder back onto its stand.

Cordi and another volunteer dismantled the flagpole to replace its brittle, knotted rope. Once finished, they raised the American flag and the Forest Service banner into the breezy morning sky.

Cordi looked up and smiled: "We're back in business."

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