

Memories from a Lookout Tower – An interview with Clarisse Carroll.

Clarisse Carroll served as towerwoman in the Georgia Tower for 20 years. Her sister, Nellie Needhamer, manned the Paoli tower. Mrs. Carroll was interviewed in the 1990's, and though over 90 years old, remembered much of the days she spent in the tower.

Clarisse admits she had not originally been hired for the job. When the Carrolls bought the farm adjoining the fire tower location, Mrs. Carroll recalls Austin Easley, from Fire Headquarters talked her husband Clinton Carroll into taking the job of towerman. After a few days of solitude and the knowledge that he should be combining his beans, Clarisse said her husband asked her to take his place. She loved the job from the first day. When Mr. Easley came by and found her in the tower for the third time, he said she was doing a good job so might just as well take over. Clarisse said, "That was it. The rules were not as strict then as now. I didn't 'notify' anyone that I was taking over the job of towerman. I just did."



Clarisse Carroll, shown here in her tower, explains her State uniform was a forest green skirt and blouse, a belt, and an Indiana insignia on the left shirt sleeve. Later she got permission to wear slacks since "they were nicer and there were often firefighters assembled below the tower and the wind is no respecter of situations."

Clinton Carroll, Clarisse's husband was the county fire warden for many years. When she spotted a fire, she would contact him by radio and he would gather the crew and bring the fire under control. She explained it was also his duty to do the fire report, estimating the acreage, cause, and damage.

The towermen were expected to keep a daily diary. Clarisse has carefully kept some of her tower diaries. On the cover was the name, title and Forest District. The first page gave the instructions:

THIS DIARY is to include record of travel, work done, observations made, meetings attended, summary of conferences held, names of persons contacted, number of hours spent on each project recorded as accurately as possible. Use reverse side of page if necessary to complete the record for the day.

Mrs. Carroll's first entry in this diary was October 19, 1950.

October 19, 1950: Towerwoman - 8 hours
9:00 AM came on duty
10:38 saw smoke. Soon went down.
12:00 Took humidity. Ate dinner.
Saw five smokes today. No bad fires.
5:00 PM Took in flag. Closed tower. Took humidity test.

October 21, 1950, Towerwoman – 8 hours
9:00 AM Opened tower, raised flag and checked telephone
10:30 Jackson State Forest reported a fire at Shawswick Twp. Sent 3 runs on it.
10:40 Mr. Easley called about the same fire.
10:48 I called Mr. Fortner to go on this fire. He had already gone.
10:50 Saw a black smoke.
10:55 Mr. Fortner called. Couldn't find fire.
11:15 Another smoke. Called another fire fighter.
11:20 Smoke. Sent smoke crew. Brush fire.

Clarrise Carroll recalls on clear days, she could spot a smoke 15 miles away. If she continued to see smoke after 15 minutes, she was instructed to report it. Clarrise recounts stories about fires in her area. One of her favorites:

“One summer day when we hadn't had any rain for ever so long, even wells were going dry. I saw smoke flare up and when I got a cross shot on it, I knew the people whose place it was on. I called. The woman answered the phone. She said she would see about it. I could see it didn't get very big and was soon under control. After awhile, she called me back and told me that their well was dry and they had been hauling water for days. Her husband had gone to town with the car, and the water bucket was empty. The tractor radiator was dry but she said, "I had just set a pot of potatoes on the stove to boil, so I drained the water off the potatoes, poured it in the tractor radiator and plowed around that fire.”

Clarisse shared wisdom she learned as a towerwoman, in how to read smoke: “If the fire comes up and points, it is contained; when it spreads in a circle, it is out of hand and is brush or broom sage; wood smoke is white with a blue tint and pine causes black smoke. A house or leaf fire can be told by the color of the smoke and the way it acts.”

She also remembers, "When you stand in the tower and survey the beautiful earth, you feel as if you were next to heaven."

Clarisse worked in the Georgia Tower from 1950-1970. Her tower was dismantled in 1972. Here she is shown in 1995 on her farm near the old tower site.

