

HOW MABEL GRAY BECAME THE FIRST (BUT NOT THE ONLY) LOOKOUT

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It all began in 1894. Placer miners had extracted every bit of gold from the bottom of Idaho's Clearwater River. Idaho Governor William J. McConnell, who lived in Moscow, Idaho and is buried in the Moscow Cemetery, hoped the state's next valuable commodity could be the abundant supply of high-quality virgin western white pine growing near the Clearwater River (fig. 1).

McConnell invited three men to assess Idaho's potential to strike it rich in lumber, which he called "green gold". The Clearwater's dense stands of western white pine amazed logger Theodore Henry Fohl, and timber speculators Charles O. Brown and his son Nathaniel. But the hopeful entrepreneurs didn't possess the finances to develop such a large undertaking.

Frederick Weyerhaeuser's Syndicate of fifteen companies controlled everything timber- and lumber-related along the northern Mississippi River. Brown was aware that the timber barons were rapidly depleting Minnesota's supply of the eastern white pine their businesses depended on. He advised the men to invest in Idaho's bountiful forests.

Syndicate member Edward Scofield soon sent his son George to scout the Clearwater forests. George returned with such an enthusiastic report that Scofield immediately sent cruisers and surveyors to establish boundaries around the best stands.

James J. Hill, director of the Northern Pacific Railroad, had a federal land grant to construct a rail extension in Washington state, but the project had never materialized. In 1891



Fig. 1
Large White Pine Trees. Two men look at the camera through a stand of white pine trees. Courtesy of the University of Idaho Special Collections.

Weyerhaeuser had tried to purchase Hill's 40 million acres of prime old-growth timber, but his Syndicate partners refused to meet Hill's asking price. Weyerhaeuser was forced to look elsewhere for the resources he wanted to expand his empire. Scofield's report on the Clearwater's "green gold" was music to Weyerhaeuser's ears. His Syndicate purchased large swaths of Clearwater timberland. And Weyerhaeuser purchased 50 thousand acres of the highest quality timber for himself.¹

1 "January 18, 1900: The Courage to Risk," Weyerhaeuser, accessed February 24, 2026, <https://www.weyerhaeuser.com/company/history>.

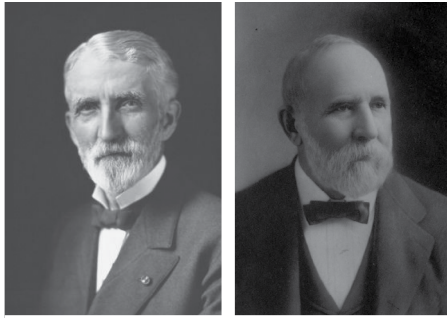
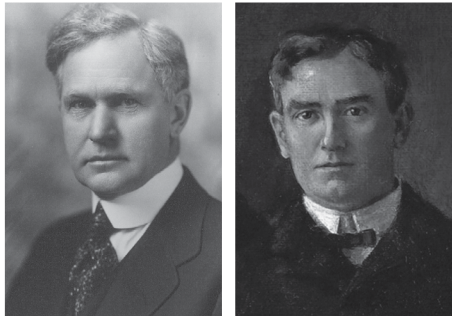


Fig. 2-3
Entrepreneurs of Idaho's
"Green Gold."
From left: Edward C.
Scofield, Frederick
Weyerhaeuser.

Fig. 4-5
From left: Charles A.
Weyerhaeuser, Henry
Turrish.



That November of 1894, Weyerhaeuser and his son Charles arrived in Idaho with John A. Humbird. They organized the Clearwater Timber Company in Pierce City with a capitalization of \$500 thousand. And they hired Charles O. Brown at \$150 a month to act as their local agent. Brown acquired more than 200 thousand additional acres for Clearwater Timber.²

Canadian-born timber speculator William M. Deary and Henry Turrish, of Wisconsin Log and Lumber, had formed the Northland Pine Company of Moscow, Idaho. In 1901 Northland purchased land in the Clearwater, Potlatch, and Palouse River drainages for the Weyerhaeuser Syndicate. Then Turrish and the Syndicate merged their extensive holdings.³

Northland Pine and all its assets were incorporated in March, 1903 as the Potlatch Lumber Company. The Syndicate provided \$3 million to construct a mill, said to be the largest in the world powered by steam, next to Weyerhaeuser's company town of Potlatch (fig. 6).⁴

2 "Clearwater County Is 'Rich' in Its History! Logging," Clearwater Historical Society, accessed February 24, 2026, <https://clearwatercountyadventures.com/clearwater-county-history>.

3 "Potlatch Company Records, 1901-1979: Historical Note," Orbis Cascade Alliance, accessed February 24, 2026, <https://archiveswest.orbiscascade.org/ark:80444/xv16764>.

4 "A Brief History of the Potlatch Lumber Co.," University of Idaho Library, Potlatch Lumber Company Photograph Collections, accessed February 24, 2026, <https://www.lib.uidaho.edu/digital/plcphotos/browse.html#871>.



Fig. 6
Potlatch Mill & Town, 1940. Courtesy of the University of Idaho Special Collections.

The Weyerhaeusers and their Syndicate now owned most of the Clearwater country's private timberland. They focused their efforts on building sawmills and railroads to enlarge their empire. They made no effort to develop, or organize, or provide resources dedicated to fire suppression on these lands, perhaps because it hadn't been an issue to protect their valuable, combustible timber assets in Michigan's and Minnesota's rainier climate. Or perhaps they believed there would always be more trees.

Theodore Fohl managed the Clearwater Company's timberlands. He'd set up a small cruiser and trail development camp down the east slope of twin-humped Thunder Mountain in charge of cruiser Bob Gray. Fohl had taken it on himself to protect the company's trees from going up in smoke. Sources report that beginning in 1900 Fohl's cruisers used Thunder Mountain as a detection point to spot fires.⁵

The summer of 1902 was unusually hot and dry. Fohl ordered his crew to cobble together an improvised ladder on a hemlock snag that still stood on top of Thunder Mountain after the fires of 1885 and 1887. The men also built a small platform on a branch 15 feet off the ground.

Mabel Gray, Bob Gray's sister, was Clearwater's camp cook. The story's told that every day Fohl had Mabel hitch up her

5 Zac Carscallen, "Potlatch Lumber Mill and the Company Town," *Intermountain Histories*, 2018, accessed February 24, 2026, <https://www.intermountainhistories.org/items/show/112>.

pony after she fed the crew breakfast, and again after dinner, ride one-eighth of a mile up Thunder Mountain, climb the snag, sit on the platform, and “look out”. Mabel Gray is recognized as America’s first fire lookout.

A photograph dated 1902 shows two crewmen, one possibly Mabel’s brother, helping her climb onto Fohl’s lookout tree (fig. 7). Mabel’s wearing a long-sleeved blouse and a calf-length skirt that looks to be split for riding. Her footwear looks like riding boots and a broad-brimmed hat may be hanging



Fig. 7
Mabel Gray Climbing
her Lookout on Thunder
Mountain, 1902. Cour-
tesy of the Fire Lookout
Museum.

around her neck. Stories tell that if Mabel spotted smoke from a fire, she sounded a whistle or fired a shotgun to alert the crew, then rode her pony, seen in the background, to inform the crew of the location of the danger.

I’d like to consider this story more closely. Mabel likely rose at first light to prepare a hearty breakfast for the crew. She split kindling and started a cookfire. She walked to the springhouse down by the stream, portioned off bacon from a slab hanging inside, and spooned up some sourdough starter. Then she gathered eggs from the chicken coop.

Back at camp Mabel built up the cook fire, put on coffee, mixed and kneaded her bread dough, and set it in a warm spot to rise. She cut thick slices of bread she'd baked the night before, and spread on jam she'd made from last summer's huckleberries. Then she cooked breakfast. The crew ate and headed out.

Mabel fed leftover scraps to the chickens and the camp dogs, washed and dried the plates and cups, then stacked them in a cupboard. She hung out the washcloth and towels to dry.



Fig. 8
Bertha Hill Lookout,
1906. Courtesy of the
Fire Lookout Museum.

She walked back to the springhouse to gather ox tails, carrots and tomatoes she'd harvested from her garden, and potatoes and beans.

Back at the cook tent Mabel filled a cast iron kettle with water she'd carried up from the stream. She restoked the fire, hung the kettle, and added the meat and vegetables to stew. She put the bread dough into a Dutch oven, and laid it in the coals to bake.

The photo shows that next Mabel changed into riding gear, hitched her pony, and rode up Thunder Mountain with two

crewmembers pulled off their jobs. The men helped Mabel climb up the lookout tree where she sat and looked out until they returned to help her down.

Back at camp Mabel changed into cooking clothes, set the table, and served dinner. She cleaned up, changed back into her riding gear, rode back to the lookout tree with two crewmembers, climbed the tree, and sat and looked out again until the men arrived to help her down.

Back at camp again she unhitched her pony and relaxed with the crew. Then she went to bed to rest so she could do it all again the next day. Really?!

Theodore Fohl likely managed his crew as capably as he managed Weyerhaeuser's timber assets. I think if Fohl did send Mabel to the lookout tree twice a day it was only for a good reason. Mabel Gray was, beyond doubt, a strong, self-confident woman. I think she agreed to sit for hours in that tree in the hot sun and wind only when the probability of fire existed, mostly after a thunder storm. I think Mabel agreed to be America's first fire lookout because Fohl made it clear that her work was valuable and appreciated. And I think Fohl sent two crewmembers to help Mabel safely climb up and down because he knew that good lookouts, like good cooks, are hard to find.

Later that summer, on September 8, 1902, wildfires ignited on the Oregon side of the Columbia River Gorge. Strong winds blew embers across the river and ignited nearly a dozen fires in Washington's southwest foothills. The winds converged the small fires into a tornadic blaze and pushed the inferno 30 miles in 36 hours. The fire raged unchecked for five days in Washington's Mount Rainier Forest Reserve and consumed more than 238 thousand acres containing 12 billion board feet of timber. Two small towns in Clark County were ravaged. The fire reached the town of Yacolt, blistered the paint on its buildings, shifted to the north, and burned itself out.

Horace Wetherall was one of two rangers who worked for the General Land Office in the more than two million acres of the Mount Rainier Reserve. Horace later reported that he'd spotted a fire that September day, but he took no action and let it burn. He said his pride still bore the brunt of a reprimand he'd received weeks earlier for spending money to hire a fire crew to put out a blaze.

Fig. 9
"Taken 75 years after the Yacolt fire, this photo shows the desolation still left behind. The fire spared Yacolt, which bears its name, but blistered the paint on the village's buildings."
Source: Clark County Historical Museum.



The General Land Office had no organized system to fight the Yacolt Burn, or any wildfire. Loggers and residents were on their own to control blazes or flee for their lives. At least 65 people were reported to have died in the Yacolt Burn, 27 in Oregon and 38 in Washington (fig. 9). In 1903, reacting to the deadly Yacolt Burn, Congress doubled the Land Office's still miniscule firefighting budget to a mere \$4,072.⁶

In July, 1905 the lightning-caused Harlan fire raged through Weyerhaeuser's white pine forest near Pierce City. Perhaps Mabel Gray was on her lookout and alerted Fohl to the smoke. Records tell that he rounded up 16 men in Orofino to fight the blaze that destroyed the homestead of fur trapper John Paxon Harlan and about 80 acres of timber (fig. 10).

That August the areas timber companies met and agreed to assess themselves on an acreage pro-rata basis to fund fire suppression and to provide an organized fire protection force to work on whatever property where fires occurred. They formed the Clearwater-Potlatch Timber Protective Association with Fohl as Chief Fire Warden. The following year the districts

6 Douglas Scott, "Remembering the 1902 Yacolt Burn," Clark County Talk, 2017, accessed February 24, 2026, <https://clarkcountytalk.com/2017/07/24/yacolt-burn-history/>; David Wilma, "Yacolt Burn, Largest Forest Fire in Recorded Washington History to That Point, Rages for Three Days Beginning on September 11, 1902," HistoryLink, 2003, accessed February 24, 2026, <https://www.historylink.org/File/5196>; Martin Middlewood, "Clark County History: Yacolt Burn," The Columbian, 2021, accessed February 24, 2026, <https://www.columbian.com/news/2021/dec/19/clark-county-history-yacolt-burn/>.



Fig. 10
John Paxon Harlan
Homestead, Pierce City,
Idaho, c. 1902.

split into the Potlatch and the Clearwater Timber Protective Associations.⁷

1906 was Mabel Gray's last fire season as the lookout on Thunder Mountain. No records exist that she ever spotted a smoke, but she and Fohl must have found purpose and value in her effort for her to have climbed that lookout tree for four fire seasons.

That summer the Clearwater Timber Protective Association built a crude 14-foot-tall open pole platform atop three cut-off fir trees about 100 feet south of Mabel's lookout tree on Thunder Mountain, now renamed *Bertha Hill*. A full-time lookout manned this platform. By 1908 the Association had 75 forest patrolmen who extinguished 350 fires.

Bertha Hill Lookout is widely recognized as the first fire lookout in the nation. The fifth tower, built in 1918, was enclosed with glass windows and lasted for thirteen years. The current tower, built in 1958, stands as our nation's longest operating fire lookout site. And, like Mabel's perch, the lookout is currently staffed only on an emergency basis.

Back in the 1860's Theodore Roosevelt rubbed elbows with the intellectual luminaries of New York City: editor and poet William Cullen Bryant, soldier and businessman William Tecumseh Sherman, Supreme Court justice John Jay, landscape architect Frederic Law Olmstead, artist Sanford Gifford, and wallpaper entrepreneur James Wallace Pinchot. The economic boom that followed the Civil War had consumed 75 percent of New York State's once forested lands. These gentlemen of privilege roamed the Hudson River Valley, the Adirondacks, and the Catskills in search of unmolested, pristine vistas. They sponsored landscape

7 Lenta Hall, "Clearwater-Potlatch Timber Protective Association (C-PTPA)," Clearwater Tribune, 2024, accessed February 24, 2026, https://www.clearwatertribune.com/news/top_stories/clearwater-potlatch-timber-protective-association-c-ptpa/collection_fa86f8f2-1249-11ef-a957-bf5a3e6ed843.html.

artists who produced romanticized renderings of New York's mountainscapes. And they erected monumental venues to display the art to influence the viewing public that, unless conserved, these precious woodlands might be lost forever.

In 1901 President Theodore Roosevelt, now a committed conservationist, announced to Congress that the United States' burgeoning forest reserve lands would be better managed in the Department of Agriculture's Bureau of Forestry under Gifford Pinchot, James Wallace Pinchot's son, rather than in the U.S. Department of the Interior's General Land Office. Until that year the General Land Office had no organized system to fight wildfires and had spent a total of \$2,036 fighting 48 wildfires throughout the west. The House defeated Roosevelt's proposed transfer bill in 1902.

It took Congress from 1901 to July 1, 1905 to approve the transfer of 63 million acres of public forest reserves to the Department of Agriculture. Gifford Pinchot renamed his organization the United States Forest Service. Over the next two years Roosevelt placed 141 million more acres into forest reserves under care of the Forest Service.

Colorado's Congressional delegation, identified as the most rabidly anti-conservation contingent in Congress, questioned whether the federal government possessed the constitutional right to hold public lands within the borders of new states in perpetual ownership under municipal sovereignty without consent of the state. Oregon Senator Charles W. Fulton introduced the Fulton Amendment as a rider on the annual agricultural appropriations for 1907. If passed, the amendment would cede the power to create additional forest reserves in Washington, Oregon, Idaho, Montana, Wyoming, and Colorado solely to Congress. The bill would also change the name of forest reserves to national forests to emphasize that the forests were to be used and not preserved. The bill passed and was scheduled for ratification on March 7, 1907.

Roosevelt and Pinchot had just enough lead-time to skirt the upcoming limitations. Pinchot and his assistant blue-penciled boundaries of new national reserves onto maps. A proclamation was prepared for each new addition under the presidential powers provided in the Forest Reserve Act of 1891. Roosevelt signed the documents as soon as they were laid on his desk. In two days, on March 1st and 2nd, 1907, Pinchot and Roosevelt established 17 new or combined forest reserves containing

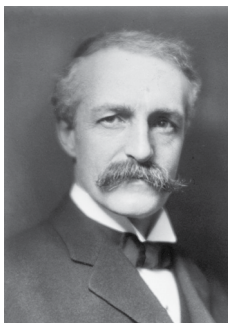


Fig. 11
Gifford Pinchot, First
Chief Forester (1905-
10).



Fig. 12
Henry S. Graves,
Second Chief Forester
(1910-20).



Fig. 13
William Buckhout Gree-
ley, Third Chief Forester
(1920-28).

over six million acres inside the six soon to be closed off western states. The press dubbed the newly protected forests as the “Midnight Reserves.”

In 1908 Pinchot organized the national forests into six autonomous regional districts. He promoted William Buckhout Greeley to supervise District One, established May, 1907 from the predecessor Northern District, and headquartered in Missoula, Montana. District One comprised 22 national forests in Montana, northern Idaho, northeastern Washington, northwestern South Dakota, southwestern North Dakota, northern Michigan, and northern Minnesota, and spanned 41 million acres.

Greeley had discovered a like-minded timber protectionist in George S. Long, Weyerhaeuser Timber Company’s general manager in Tacoma, Washington. Long had formed the Washington Forest Fire Protective Association after his company’s extensive losses in the Yacolt Burn. The two joined with lumbermen in Idaho, Montana, Washington, Oregon, and California to form the Western Forestry and Conservation Association.

In January, 1909 Long invited Greeley to a lumberman’s conference in Spokane, Washington. By June Greeley had negotiated agreements with forest protection associations throughout District One. But Pinchot disapproved Greeley’s proposed alliances because he didn’t trust the motives of lumbermen he viewed as profiteers.

Roosevelt declined to run for the presidency again. William Howard Taft, his hand-picked successor elected in 1908, was not a committed conservationist. He forced Pinchot to resign on January 7, 1910. Pinchot's associate, Henry S. Graves, Dean of Forestry at Yale University, stepped in as the new head of the Forest Service. Graves maintained that a fundamental principle in fire protection was to have one man or corps of men responsible for detecting fires early so they could be promptly attacked. Graves now permitted Greeley to institute his program of co-operative private/public firefighting. District One signed agreements with four timber protective associations in northern Idaho, plus three companies in western Montana.⁸

Greeley had acquired an organization poorly schooled in large scale firefighting because good weather had reigned over the northwestern portion of District One for half a decade. But in the summer of 1910 little rain fell in Montana's Lolo and Idaho's Coeur d'Alene forests. By July the forest floors in District One crackled underfoot with explosive tinder from the drawn-out drought, earlier in the season than anyone had ever experienced.

The "Monthly Weather Review, Climatological Data for August, 1910, in District No. 12, the Columbia Valley" reported "...the month of March was the driest since the beginning of authentic records in 1894; in April and May the precipitation was deficient by about 20 percent; June broke all records for dryness during that month; in July the rainfall was one-half normal; and August was the driest month of any name in the history of the service in Idaho. The normal precipitation for the state for the 6 months beginning with March is 7.94 inches; during the current season the fall averaged 4.61 inches which is about 58 percent of the normal." Frequent fires broke out next to construction zones along the Chicago, Milwaukee, and St. Paul rail lines. Bone dry winds incited sparks into explosive blazes.

Greeley's timber allies influenced the Secretary of Agriculture to permit Greeley to exceed his emergency budget to bolster District One's undersupplied defenses. Greeley cleared local hardware stores of axes, mattocks, shovels, crosscut saws, wash-boilers, tubs, coffee pots, and frying pans. He also hired 300 temporary firefighters from local employment offices and trained his rangers how to fight the fires with crews of up to 50 men.

⁸ Nancy Hammond, *The Last Lookout on Dunn Peak* (Pullman: Washington State University Press, 2023).



Fig. 13
Temporary Firefighters Camped Near
Avery, Idaho, August 1910.

Heavy smoke clouded the district's interior forests. Records show that because his men could no longer distinguish smoke coming off a new fire from smoke already hanging in the air Greeley withdrew his lookout and patrol system.

In his book "Fire Lookouts of the Northwest", Ray Kresek corroborates that Greeley had emulated Theodore Fohl's lookout. Beginning in 1907 and until the Great Fires of 1910, Greeley operated 12 lookouts in District One; three in Idaho, seven in Montana, and two in Northeast Washington. Following the fires, District One had 34 new lookouts built by 1915, and the area's timber protective associations had 17 (fig. 13).⁹

In 1912 the Klamath National Forest, mostly in northern California, built a rough-hewn log cabin, equipped with a telephone, on top of Klamath Peak. On June 1, 1913 Supervisor McCarthy hired Hallie Morse Daggett as a Forest Guard to work a four-to-seven-month tour of duty at *Eddy's Gulch Lookout* station. The lookout perched at 6,444 feet in elevation and was a three hour hard climb with pack animals. Hallie Morse Daggett is recognized as the first woman to serve as a U.S. Department of Agriculture fire lookout.

Hallie had learned to ride, hunt, fish, and shoot growing up in the rugged Siskiyou Mountains. McCarthy later wrote that the two candidates who had applied before Daggett were pathetic,

⁹ Ray Kresek, *Fire Lookouts of the Northwest*, rev. 3rd ed. (Fairfield, WA: Ye Galleon Press, 1998).



Fig. 14
Hallie Morse Daggett. First Woman
Forest Service Lookout.

and although Daggett was no gentleman, he hired her because she had “all the requisites of a first-class lookout”. He saw Daggett as a wide-awake woman, 30 years old, thoroughly familiar with every foot of the district, totally devoid of the timidity ordinarily associated with her sex, a perfect lady in every respect, her qualifications for the position vouched for by all who knew her aspirations, and was an ardent advocate of the Forest Service. Daggett’s sister Leslie brought up supplies and mail every week from their home nine miles away. Daggett worked at *Eddy’s Gulch Lookout* for fourteen years.

Unlike Mabel Gray, Daggett quickly became a celebrity (fig. 14). A 1914 article in the *American Forestry* magazine wrote, “Few women would care for such a job, fewer still would seek it, and still fewer would be able to stand the strain of the infinite loneliness, or the roar of the violent storms which sweep the peak, or the menace of the wild beasts which roam the heavily wooded ridges.”¹⁰

10 Gail Jenner, “Hallie Daggett: A Woman of Uncommon Fortitude,” *Prairie Rose Publications*, 2016, accessed February 24, 2026, <https://prairierosepublications.blogspot.com/2016/12/hallie-daggett-woman-of-uncommon.html>.

In 1920 William Greeley became Chief of the United States Forest Service. He acquired land to create national forests east of the Mississippi. He continued his commitment for the Forest Service to cooperate with private, state, and other federal agencies. And the Forest Service built staffed fire lookouts in every state at the time, except Kansas. The greatest concentration of lookouts was constructed to protect the north Idaho and western Montana forests ravaged by the Big Burn on August 20-21, 1910, the largest and deadliest of the Great Fires of 1910.

Today, lookout towers staffed full-time in national forests are nearly extinct. Their survival depends, as it has since 1902, on whether human fire lookouts are pertinent alongside today's high-tech fire protection systems. Will papers presented at future lookout seminars remember not only the name of America's first lookout, but also the name of the last?

Nancy Sule Hammond, Winter 2024

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