



## Douglas County History Research Center Oral Histories

Oral History Interview with

**Billy Gean Ellis**

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**SUMMARY:** Billy Gean Ellis relates his work experience of eighteen seasons for the United States Forest Service as a seasonal fire lookout at the Devils Head Fire Lookout Tower, South Platte River District, Pike National Forest. Serving as an alternate Fire Look Out, in 1965, one day a week, he was introduced to the life of the lookout tower on Devils Head Mountain. In 1984 he was appointed the full-season fire lookout, Memorial Day to October, a position he held until 1999. Mr. Ellis returned for the 2002 season. His family joined him in at the mountain-top cabin for each of the seasons beginning in 1965, by packing in all necessities for back-country living. Training



YOUNG: Never dial your own.  
Okay, well let's do a little bit of background.

ELLIS: Okay.

YOUNG: Where did you grow up? How did you get into the forest service in the first place? Were you always in the woods bringing bugs home to Mama?

ELLIS: [*Laughs*] No, I was born in Dallas, Texas, in 1932, and I was raised there, back and forth with my grandparents who lived in the country. Always loved the country. Left there when I was seventeen, joined the military, the Army, was in the infantry. Went to Korea, served there, three different terms or tours, rather. Anyway, when I got out, well, I was married, had children, and had one daughter who was a severe asthmatic. The doctor there told us, he says, "You know, if I was you I'd move to Colorado Springs area." I had military benefits. That's the reason he recommended there. He said, "We don't tell people this because if we sent everybody to a certain area with certain, you know, diseases, why the hospitals would be overcrowded. She was severe, and he thought it would help it. So we decided we couldn't afford to live in the Springs. We wanted to live in a little town close by. So, we wrote to all the little towns around and got a few answers. Got one from Victor, Colorado, which was encouraging--\$35 a month for renting this house. So, we sent three months in advance, made arrangements and took off. At that time, we had six children.

When we got to Victor, no employment around there. Someone suggested the Forest Service. Said they had a Fire Bug Camp going, and they were hiring people for the summer. So, I went to Colorado Springs and put in an application. They hired me. That's the first time I heard about Devils Head. They said we have a fire tower in the district. I was working the South Platte Ranger District at Pike National Forest, and I worked in the Bug Camp all summer. Then the next year-- I was seasonal, just worked for the Forest Service in the summertime, and the next year when we started, well, I became an alternate Lookout. That was in '65 [1965]. Then got a job in the [Colorado] Springs and didn't come back until '84 [1984]. Became a full-time [Fire]Lookout [Ranger] in '84 [1984] up until I guess it was '99 [1999]. Yeah, 1999, which was a total of seventeen on the Tower, eighteen summers with the Forest Service, and then I went back again this last year, 2002, which makes it a total of eighteen summers at the [Devils Head Fire Lookout] Tower. So, that pretty well brings it up to date.

YOUNG: What did your family think about that, the first summer that you all lived up there? Or, did they live with you there?

ELLIS: Yeah, the first summer now, in '65 [1965] we were just up there one day a week, on Fridays. We took the entire family up, and they had a great time, loved it. They still remember it, of course. Saw a mountain lion while we there.

YOUNG: Your first summer?

ELLIS: Very first summer. The children were out in the yard, and they went screaming. My wife happened to be at the tower, bringing my lunch, and she went flying down the steps. The younger ones got inside and locked the doors. There was others locked on the outside. [E. *Laughs*] Luckily, the mountain lion took off the other direction. He went down in the meadow. That was the scary part. Never saw another one until this year. As we were leaving the campground one evening, just dark, well, one ran across the road. So, two in eighteen summers. Pretty neat.

YOUNG: What other wildlife has you seen close up?

ELLIS: Well, bobcat, fox, oh, one summer we had big-horn sheep up there.

YOUNG: Oh, really? That's unusual.

ELLIS: It is unusual. Never-- have pictures of them, have them in the Tower. It was pretty neat, and they got quite tame. People would take pictures of them.

YOUNG: --a taste for tourist food--

ELLIS: Yeah.

YOUNG: Bears. Did they hang around?

ELLIS: We had bears occasionally, and my wife has run into several on the trail coming up. Not many, but this past year now, since the Hayman Burn, it chased a lot of them out, I think, and brought them in here, and we had quite a few. We saw several. Had one at the door.

YOUNG: Knocking to come in?

ELLIS: [E. *laughs*] Tore the bottom part of the screen and he pushed away the little

septic tank cover for the-- I guess he could smell food in it. He pushed it aside, got his paws in it, then he got mud on the doors, too, and stuff. I thought it was a hiker, but it turned out to be-- [*E. laughs*]

YOUNG: Do they root through the septic tank? [*E. and Y. laugh*]

ELLIS: When I went—I realized it was a bear, but he didn't do anything else.

YOUNG: I'm surprised you don't see more, because we smell them on the way up there. Couple of spots that they live. They must know you don't leave anything around.

ELLIS: I always put my garbage in the freezer, and then when I go down, I carry it down. Try to discourage it.

YOUNG: That must have been tough, especially when the kids were little, hauling enough food up and--

ELLIS: But it was a lot of fun. Now the first year, of course, it was just one day a week. And, at that time, they had a little tow-goat you could use on the trail.

YOUNG: --like a real goat with a trailer?

ELLIS: No, it was a-- wide tires, was like a little scooter. They called them a tow-goat. That's what it is: a scooter. But, anyway, you'd use that to run up and down the trail. And, they'd use bikes and that sort of thing. I mean motor bikes and that sort of thing. So, it was a little easier then to get supplies up. But now, since they made it a National Recreational Trail, I think it was 1980 or '81 [*1981*], and since then it's strictly travelled by foot or horseback.

YOUNG: Right. Or a dog.

ELLIS: A dog with you.

YOUNG: Do people bring mules or goats or anything up?

ELLIS: Occasionally, I've seen people come up with goats with packs and llamas, and of course, horses occasionally. The Forest Service has used horses on several occasions

to bring supplies up. Lumber and that sort of thing. And water, there were several years we had water brought up in "cubies." This past year now, we used, we got a filter, the Forest Service did. It filtered it, and then we boiled it just to make sure, and the drinking water was great.

YOUNG: Is that from run-off?

ELLIS: Rain water. Catch in a cistern.

YOUNG: When there's rain.

ELLIS: We got down to about 2 feet and 11 inches.

YOUNG: How deep?

ELLIS: Oh, it's about 6 feet, something like that. Pretty good sized amount of water. Of course, we only used probably about five gallons a day.

YOUNG: That's great.

ELLIS: For two people. Now, when we came back the second time, had three boys still at home and a grandson that came up and stayed with us for several summers. The first year we was there, my wife stayed with me through September, and then put the kids in school down here. In fact, my youngest son went to the school here in Sedalia that summer. Just for that one month, in September. Then we went back, as soon as the Tower was closed, to Texas. We commuted back and forth those years until the kids got out of school. But, everybody carried a pack, everybody carried supplies, even our grandson. Of course, he wanted to. We put potato chips or a loaf of bread in his pack.

YOUNG: How old was he?

ELLIS: He started out, he was about three. But he would walk. We decided he had to carry his own weight, and he did, until his mother come to visit and then he would whine for her to carry him. But, he never asked for help until then. The boys, they all wound up working for the Forest Service. Two of them became Lookouts, one was a Hot-Shot, then my daughter [*the mother of the little grandson*], she worked, and still works for the Forest Service, by the way.

YOUNG: I think we may have met her.

ELLIS: I'm sure you have.

YOUNG: The summer after you left--

ELLIS: Probably. Her nickname is Dolly. Bronwin is her real name. For some reason, her next to the youngest son next to her, Bronwin came out "Dolly."

YOUNG: So she was always "Dolly."

ELLIS: So she was always "Dolly." One year, my son had a problem, and we took him to the hospital, the operating room. He had to be carried, they didn't want him to walk, so we carried him up on a stretcher.

YOUNG: Just the two of you?

ELLIS: Well, one of my sons and myself and, of course, my wife, we carried him up. After a few days, he had complications, so we had to carry him back down. Then, everything was okay, so we carried him back up. [*E. laughs*]

YOUNG: That was before Medivac [*medical evacuation*] helicopters.

ELLIS: But that was quite an experience.

YOUNG: Did the boys just stay—hang around all day or climb the mountains?

ELLIS: Oh, scared the living daylights out of us. They climbed all over those rocks. I'd caution them about it. They started using ropes to repel off, climb ropes. The ropes were tied, they'd be short ten or fifteen feet ropes, and I'd say, "You know these knots could slip, and we'd have a disaster up here." I told them, you know, "We're a long way from a hospital, and if anything happens we may not be able to get you back in time." But, anyway, we bought a good rope. Yeah, they scared the living daylights out of us. But they loved it. And they have fond memories of it. My youngest son came up this year, and he made the comment, "It's nice to be back home."

YOUNG: That's great. Do your grandchildren come up often?

ELLIS: The one grandson stayed with us several summers, and he was the only one that lived with us up there. The other grandchildren would visit, you know, from time to time.

YOUNG: Did they have friends come up to visit?

ELLIS: Yes, we did. We did have friends come up a couple of times. We sure did. The grandchildren didn't. I was trying to think if they had any friends—but I don't remember them have any friends come up.

YOUNG: Well, how big is that cabin inside? Is there just a big bunk room where you put all--

ELLIS: No, there's a small kitchen, and a small bedroom just big enough for a double bed. Little walking on each side, enough room for a little dresser. And, of course, the front room is big enough for—used to have two bunk beds on each side and a table and two large chairs.

YOUNG: Four kids could sleep without having to be on the floor.

ELLIS: Well, when we first got there—yeah, everybody had a bed. The bed we had was a three-quarter bed and just the inner springs, no mattress. After a couple of years, we asked the Forest Service if we could get a regular bed, and they said, yeah, they would. So the boys were a little older then and they carried up a bed. Then they replaced the refrigerator and stove, which was brought up by helicopter. They brought up the rest of the bed. We bathed in a small tub, a regular wash tub. It sprung a leak. It started leaking, so I asked the Forest Service if we could have a bathtub, meaning a tin bathtub. They said, "Well, how are you going to get it up there?" I said, "Well, we'll carry it." [E. laughs] They were thinking of one of those huge, iron---

YOUNG: --porcelain--

ELLIS: I thought, "No, no no."

YOUNG: [Unclear] So you carried the tin bathtub.

ELLIS: We carried the tin bathtub up.

YOUNG: That's the advantage of having big teenagers.

ELLIS: This last year we were up there, the Forest Service the year or two before, had got a shower. You know the plastic type that you hang up outside. You heat the water and pour in there, then about a couple of gallons. It works great.

YOUNG: It works great. Modern convenience.

ELLIS: Modern convenience.

YOUNG: Well, tell me about the handicapped accessible restroom—when that went in.

ELLIS: That was quite a joke. It's a compost outhouse, and it's a beauty. It's really neat. Yeah, it's for handicapped. We asked the engineer [*who*] worked for the Forest Service why do you have a handicapped [*accessible restroom*] when they can't get up here? They said, "Well, just in case." I guess the law requires that every bathroom be for handicapped, so maybe someone will carry somebody up there in a wheel chair--

YOUNG: Well, actually, one summer we did see a group of, I think, special education kids. One of them was a little girl in a jogging stroller. One of those with the big bicycle wheels. I suppose if somebody pulled her up, she could have used it.

ELLIS: Well, it's a nice one. Doesn't have much of an odor to it.

YOUNG: No, I always wait to go up there instead of the bottom. That's why we're so sad when you leave because we know the restrooms are locked. They redid the walkway and the grounding—that was in 2000 or before that?

ELLIS: At the tower. Yes, it was 2000 when they redid that. And that's real nice, makes it a lot nicer. And, they redid the catwalk, oh goodness, maybe ten years ago. Before that, it was quite scary. You had to be careful not to get too many people on it because the thing would move. Of course, no one was afraid, but--

YOUNG: Except you.

ELLIS: I would caution them—not too many on that corner there. Now, there's no problems, quite secure. You can get all of them you need up there. And, the old sign that's still at the bottom which they put there in '51 [1951], to caution people about

(unclear) at the tower, and they still leave it there which is good in certain respects, so you can control the crowds to a certain degree. If they get too many out there, I'm not worried about it.

YOUNG: They're not going to fall through. They might fall over.

ELLIS: Over. [*E. laughs*]

YOUNG: Have you had visitors that took too many chances and had to be airlifted out?

ELLIS: No, and helicopters can't land there. They keep thinking about clearing a spot, cutting some trees out, clearing a spot so a helicopter can get in there just in case of emergency. But they haven't gone that far yet. It could be done. They just haven't--

YOUNG: They could lower a basket or something.

ELLIS: Yeah, they've done that now. Well, the refrigerator and stove that we were talking about, and supplies, well, that compost outhouse was lowered by helicopter. It can be done. Yeah, they could do that if they had to.

YOUNG: Does that have to be cleaned out or does it just continue to disintegrate?

ELLIS: Yeah, once a week I clean the bathroom, the inside of course. Then, you rake it, keep it wet. Just like a compost pile. It deteriorates to the point, about once a year I'll get some of it out and spread it out, but it's almost nothing.

YOUNG: You don't have to file an EPA [*Environmental Protection Agency*] statement or something?

ELLIS: Oh, no. It's good for the environment. If you was using a lot of chemicals or something, you might have a problem--

YOUNG: Are people pretty good about honoring the sign?

ELLIS: Yeah. Not everybody, but I'd say 99% do. Every now and then, there will be a jar in there, bottle or glass or whatever. Somebody throws their personal belongings in there, and I have to get that out. That-- Of course, that's carried down below. I'll make a trip once a week down below.

YOUNG: Do the other Rangers, the ones that come on your day off, do they help carry trash or--

ELLIS: There's a few that will pitch in, but most of them-- I don't ask them. The ranger that was there two years before, it was just terrible.

YOUNG: That was the family with two kids in diapers?

ELLIS: Yes. Those. I guess they thought the helicopters were going to come in and carry it all out for them. But, I finally got it all down this year. All their garbage. It was unbelievable.

YOUNG: Have the tourists changed over twenty years? I mean do you see different kinds of people coming?

ELLIS: We've got more people now than we used to. A few years ago, twenty years ago less than 10,000 a summer that would make it to the top. Now, we get over 15,000.

YOUNG: Except for the fire [*Hayman Fire*].

ELLIS: Yes. This year was a bad year. I think-- I can't remember now-- maybe 7,000, close to 7,000, wasn't very many because we was closed-- Then a lot of people, when it did open up, was afraid to come back because of so many fires.

YOUNG: Oh, really?

ELLIS: Then, of course, you couldn't have a fire. A lot of people like to camp—that do camp, would like to have a fire. It's just part of camping out. So, they just didn't come.

YOUNG: Do people camp up at the top in the meadow there? In your front yard?

ELLIS: Yes. Occasionally. No fires are allowed in the meadow, not because of a fire hazard—well, this year it would be because of a fire hazard—but normally, if fires are permitted elsewhere, they're not permitted there because it's like a picnic area, and if you allowed fires, you'd have black spots all over. But, just on the other side, on both sides of the meadow, you can have fires.

YOUNG: Oh, you mean sort of down over the edge?

ELLIS: You know you come into the meadow there where you camp? If you go around those rocks to the west, there's a big area there, like a big meadow there.

YOUNG: Oh, really? Don't think I've ever been there. We're usually so intent on getting to the top, getting home.

ELLIS: Yeah, if you ever get the time, just go around. It's a pretty neat little area there. A lot of people camp there and the area down by Zinn [*Trail*] Overlook. You can have fires down in there. Then there's other areas back in there that you can get to.

YOUNG: You miss a lot by being the early morning crowd.

ELLIS: That meadow, at one time, was called Hell's Half Acre! Can you imagine that?

YOUNG: This seems like heaven!

ELLIS: I know it. Well, they say, at that time, they came up from Watson Park, that's where the Devil's Head Ranger Station was, and it was evidently a hard trip. They came up by horse. It was an all-day trip. When they got there, I guess--

YOUNG: In the previous landmarking [*application*] papers, in some places they refer to it as Hell's Half Acre, some as Devil's Half Acre, so I assumed it had been the Devil's Half Acre and then sort of evolved.

ELLIS: I don't know which name came first.

YOUNG: Is that an official National Geographic [*United States Geologic Survey*] designation or is it just what people call it?

ELLIS: Well, they call it—in those papers there, they'll have—it refers to Hell's Half Acre there, too. Also. So, I guess it was a pretty good trip going up that mountainside.

YOUNG: Which direction was that from? Watson Park?

ELLIS: Yeah. It started from Watson Park, but coming up the mountain itself, the trail starts there at the Zinn Ranch, used to be the Benson's old ranch, old homestead.

Benson is the first one that—him and a fellow named Miller built the first fire Tower. Well, it wasn't a tower—well, it wasn't a tower--

YOUNG: --a cage

ELLIS: They set up a fire-finder, a canopy over the top of it. They used that—that was in 1912, and I think in 19-- I don't know. It was put there in 1912. When they put—Helen Doud! Okay. That was in 1919. That was built the same year she got there. The enclosed tower. Then the tower we have there now was built in '51 [1951]. Army out of Fort Carson, 100 men and 72 mules. Took them all summer. To tear down what was there and to build a cabin and a tower and the steps, which was quite a job, and the trail that you come up on now. They built that.

YOUNG: Did they put in the basic metal stairs that are still there?

ELLIS: The Army did.

YOUNG: Those are the railings from '51 [1951]?

ELLIS: '51.

YOUNG: --replaced the steps since then?

ELLIS: Well, there are a few steps they've replaced. If you look at the steps they've replaced, they're a little thinner than the original. The originals are quite thick. Well, they're two inches.

YOUNG: Right. They are real 2 x 12s [2 inches by 12 inches].

ELLIS: Right. And the others are a little smaller. There are three trails that go up to Devil's Head. The first one came up the east side of Devil's Head, starting at Zinn's or Benson's Ranch at that time. That was used until the '30s [1930's]. Then the CCC [Civilian Conservation Corps] boys built a trail coming up the west side of the mountain.

YOUNG: That's what we think of as the "old trail."

ELLIS: Right. That came up the trail the same, up to a little bridge, and it continues on up. When the Army built it, they widened the trail and then it circled around from the

foot bridge.

YOUNG: Made it a little bit flatter and longer.

ELLIS: And not as steep. There are certain grades in the second trail that are a little steeper than other areas. Of course, that last one, there are spots in it that's quite steep, too.

YOUNG: Still, it's well maintained. You don't have to crawl.

ELLIS: They're putting in all those new timbers now. All those timbers were brought up by the Zuni Indians from Zuni, New Mexico.

YOUNG: Right. I saw the picture up in the Lookout.

ELLIS: That was quite a job. They're Firefighters, and they had them there for fires, but at that particular time there wasn't anything for them to do, so they put them to work carrying those timbers.

YOUNG: Those are not light.

ELLIS: No, they're not.

YOUNG: Are there any ghosts up there, any haunts around?

ELLIS: You know, I've never believed in things like that--

YOUNG: Any ghost stories?

ELLIS: However, if a person did, I'm sure they could really come up with stuff like that. Of course, the old saying about—I guess you know the story of the gold that's supposed to be buried up there.

YOUNG: Well, yes, I've heard --

ELLIS: Something like forty thousand dollars in gold coins or something like that. There's a story goes that back in the 1800's, latter part of the 1800's, a train robbery, and the posse evidently caught up with him near the Devils Head Tower area, and they

never recovered the money. I guess some of the outlaws came back years later after they got out of prison, but the money has never been reported found. But, you know, people still look for that.

YOUNG: Oh sure. It's a good excuse--

ELLIS: They'll come up and spend their summer vacation there, just looking-- And every year, people come up with metal detectors looking for that gold, and they'll quiz me as if I know.

YOUNG: Right. As if you know and you haven't dug it up yet.

ELLIS: [*E. laughs*]. Windy Pass. They'll ask me where Windy Pass is. I'll tell where that is, and that sort of thing..

YOUNG: Is that the one just over halfway up that's got a bench and a westward view between two rocks?

ELLIS: Windy Pass? It's on the east side of Devils Head. It's the first trail, coming up from Benson's old ranch, coming up that way. It's called Windy Pass.

YOUNG: There's one spot on the way up that we think should be called Windy Pass if it's not.

ELLIS: Right. My wife and I usually will sit down there and let the wind cool us off. If it's cold, you don't want to stop there.

YOUNG: Do you have names for the spots on the way up and down?

ELLIS: Well, we call the cement that has the railing in it, we call that the "Railroad Tracks." We'll refer—past the railroad tracks, below the railroad tracks, whatever. Of course, the foot bridge. That's about it along the trail itself.

YOUNG: Probably know it so well, you don't have to refer to any--

ELLIS: You know, a few years ago, my wife and I went up there in the snow. Big drifts of snow. Some of them over your head. In other areas, the ground was bare. You could walk on it, then you'd come to a big drift and you'd have to get through it. My

wife would ask me, "We should stop and get some snow shoes at the work center." I said, "Well, I don't think so, we've never needed them before." As we continued going up the mountain, I told my wife, "You're right. We should have stopped and got those snowshoes." And just below that Windy Pass area that we were talking about, the snow was quite deep there, and of course we were carrying packs which made us heavier, we'd fall through and we'd have to get up and struggle through it. Took us all day to get up to the Tower.

YOUNG: Was this in Spring?

ELLIS: In the Spring, uh-huh. This was either '98 or '99 [1998 or 1999]. I can't remember now. There was one gentleman, Scott Dalmos, who takes care of that area, he'd been up there and he knew how bad it was. He had warned us, said there was a lot of snow, but I just didn't pay attention. I wished I had of. So he knew what we were going through, and I called him when we got there, and he was amazed we had even made it. Then I called another supervisor to tell him, and he sort of blew it off. Thought we were exaggerating.

YOUNG: So, you invited him up?

ELLIS: No. I told my wife we should have had a camera to take pictures all the way up. We didn't. It was not a nice experience. There were some areas, we had to cut--we couldn't go the trail itself because it was so deep, the drifts were, we'd have to work our way around it. We'd have to find shallow spots. It was pretty neat. Quite an experience. Something my wife and I will never forget.

YOUNG: I guess not. You'll probably look back on it in July and August. Well, I'd like to look at some of the pictures, especially of the ladders. Because the section of ladder we rescued from there--

ELLIS: What they did, see on both sides here. They cut it in half. That's what you see is just half of the ladder going up. A lot of people thought that, you know, that they walked up that one pole, but--

YOUNG: Oh, I see—one half is in shadow in this picture.

ELLIS: Yes. This is wood here. This is small logs here. Up here is wood.

YOUNG: --actually steps.

ELLIS: Like a ladder going up.

YOUNG: So that really is part of Helen Doud ladder, not one of the later ones.

ELLIS: No, this is Helen Doud here. There's an earlier one here--

YOUNG: Right. That's the actual fallen tree, is it? That very first tree? It looks like it because it looks like there are still branches underneath.

ELLIS: But here's—on the other side—they used that to hold on to, but you can see over here a ladder going up.

YOUNG: Right:

ELLIS: There's a ladder here—steps—see the hand railing there?

YOUNG: Okay. So they really did improve it.

ELLIS: This here now is strictly a ladder.

YOUNG: Right. That was a hand-over-hand.

ELLIS: So this is earlier than this one. This is a later-- But the tree you're talking about was right over here, and it laid down here—through this crevice here.

YOUNG: Oh, so it wasn't in the same place as the steps.

ELLIS: No, it's just to the right of it. There's a cistern there now. An old cistern, the cement cistern? Well, it's right in there where that tree fell-- up that crevice into here.

YOUNG: I don't like heights. This is hard for me to talk about. This is looking--

ELLIS: You know those rocks just west of the Tower. Have you ever been over there?

YOUNG: No, I haven't.

ELLIS: When you get a little time, it's like a little trail going up. There are roots you hold onto to get there. This is the rock on this side, these are the rocks on the other side, and there's a big crevice here. In the Spring, this thing has got a lot of snow in it. This is the last snow. When all the snow is melted, you can still find snow in there. That's the last part.

YOUNG: You get there from the Zinn Trail?

ELLIS: No, it's behind the outhouses. You know where the old outhouse is?

YOUNG: Right.

ELLIS: Walk up that way. Then just on the other side of these rocks is that meadow I was talking about.

YOUNG: Oh, okay. Is that towards Pike's Peak?

ELLIS: Right. Well, Pike's Peak is more out this way. This is that rock just west, and over here is that—this here is just on those—well, right in here, you see those rocks here?

YOUNG: Those little square ones?

ELLIS: You see some trees-- goes down--

YOUNG: This is picture 42826A that we're talking about. --identify those – another old ladder.

ELLIS: Yes, well--but it's a lighter one. See up here?

YOUNG: Right.

ELLIS: Here's the cistern that they built. That tree that they was talking about was right in there. Up through here.

YOUNG: Still pretty old.

ELLIS: Yes, it's still old.

YOUNG: Flag pole looking north.

ELLIS: Denver's out in here.

YOUNG: Not nearly as much of it back then.

ELLIS: No. [*E. chuckles*].

YOUNG: Okay, these here.

ELLIS: Now, these are the cabins—this is the cabin that Helen Doud lived in.

YOUNG: It's not a lot different from the one now except the one now is a little bigger.

ELLIS: And, this one here—you notice the steps here?

YOUNG: Uh-huh.

ELLIS: Well, this is sitting about where the gate is going to the present cabin.

YOUNG: Uh-huh.

ELLIS: And over here is the cistern.

YOUNG: Right.

ELLIS: If you look right at that sign, over to the right you'll see a pipe.

YOUNG: Yes, I remember that.

ELLIS: It comes out of the cistern, so they had running water.

YOUNG: I see. So, this one was a little lower than the current cabin--

ELLIS: Right. The other one is a little higher up, of course, and--

YOUNG: And this little building out front, it looks like there's a--

ELLIS: Weather station.

YOUNG: Oh! So she had instruments in there.

ELLIS: They would take the daily water—if you had rain or that sort of thing. Inside these little things, you can get the moisture content of wood and that sort of thing. But, anyway, that's the weather station. They don't have that now.

YOUNG: I wonder if they've still got the date of those.

ELLIS: I don't know. I bet they would.

YOUNG: Who would have been the organization back then?

ELLIS: That would be Devils Head Ranger Station.

YOUNG: So the Forest Service would keep the data. They didn't do it for NOAA [*National Oceanic Atmospheric Administration*]--

ELLIS: No. --for fires and that sort of thing--

YOUNG: Oh! [*speaks to another person present*] This is—this a copy for Bill? All right. The hearing to finally put Devils Head on the National Registry of Historic Places is going to be on---see if the date is in there—right, there we go. We can write a note to your boss, if you'd like, and let you come to the—apparently, they submitted the application in '91 [1991] and then it got sent back for something and languished on somebody's desk for eleven years.

ELLIS: Isn't that something.

YOUNG: Yes. Now, there's a web site that I went to the other day that says it was put on the Register in '91 [1991]. But I think was that was the National Register of Historic Lookout Sites. There's a separate one of those.

ELLIS: Right. But, you know, that—getting on the Register saved the tower.

YOUNG: Oh, really?

ELLIS: They thought several times about doing away with it.

YOUNG: Short-sighted, in my humble opinion.

ELLIS: [*E. chuckles*] Because it's a national historic site, they couldn't do it. So that saved it.

YOUNG: Good.

ELLIS: Just in the nick of time, too, because they only had—they just did that, I think, in '91 [1991].

YOUNG: Right. I think that's when got on—they tried to get on the full historical registry, they did get on the Lookout Register.

ELLIS: It depends on the individual. You get-- Well, it's just like now, you know. You get some people that like certain things. Other people have no use for it. Some people like bicycles, and other people wouldn't touch it. [*E. chuckles*]

YOUNG: Some rangers like to have paint ball--

ELLIS: [*E. laughs*]. It just depends on the individual.

YOUNG: Picture of the porch?

ELLIS: This is the wash tub.

YOUNG: Is that the same wash tub you used?

ELLIS: I don't know if it's the same one, but that's the type I used. Then it sprung a leak. That's when the Forest Service got me one I could sit down in.

YOUNG: That's three people on the porch?

ELLIS: I don't know who it is, though. Looks like a lady and a man. I can't tell--

YOUNG: Now, are these photos that you have of your own--

ELLIS: [*United States*] Forest Service. We just got them from the Forest Service.

YOUNG: [*Conservation with another person*] Yes, if you would. I've got it on my calendar already. One of these—different side up.

ELLIS: They're getting ready to build the first enclosed tower.

YOUNG: Right, and all sitting on the post there.

ELLIS: Yeah.

YOUNG: I'm sorry, you say these are pictures that you have?

ELLIS: These are from the [*United States*] Forest Service.

YOUNG: There's the base of it---oh no, that might be the downhill shelter. You know, there's one picture that shows the--

ELLIS: This is the first one here. Here's the fire finder with the canopy over the top. This is the log structure there they got in out of storms.

YOUNG: Right. That actually protected them, did it?

ELLIS: Evidently so. They had a telephone in it. See the telephone wire coming into it there?

YOUNG: Right.

ELLIS: This here—they're building the first enclosed house. So, you've got the first one and the second one.

YOUNG: [*Quietly as if taking notes*] First and second.

ELLIS: The beginning of the second.

YOUNG: Who are those two people?

ELLIS: I have no idea who those are. The [*United States*] Forest Service just got a copy

of it.

YOUNG: I wonder if one of them is Kreutzer.

ELLIS: I have no idea.

YOUNG: This picture we've seen before with Helen Doud on the bridge, as it were.

ELLIS: Right.

YOUNG: Is that the very first enclosed one, from below?

ELLIS: Yes.

YOUNG: There was no catwalk then. You just went right in the door and that was it.

ELLIS: Right. But a lot better than the first one they had.

YOUNG: These photographic records, that's the pictures that the Forest Service has?

ELLIS: Right. These numbers here might give you some reference of what is there-- There's some of his numbers, but not all of them.

YOUNG: Right. Some of those first ones had numbers.

ELLIS: This here refers to—Hell's Half Acre—observed from Hell's Half Acre-- I thought that was pretty neat. It's a beautiful area.

YOUNG: 470000-- a far shot.

ELLIS: That's the tower now. That's the last tower.

YOUNG: Right. That must have been around the '50s [1950's].

ELLIS: Any time after '51 [1951]. They could have-- They're getting ready to build the first enclosed tower there. And here's the original—then here's--

YOUNG: This is a classic I've seen before. This is a side shot of the one--. 156467 is the

picture number. That's the one I think we see here-- Is that on the list?--

ELLIS: I tried to get some information from the South Platte Ranger District but wasn't able to get anything. So maybe by next year, I can get something. As soon as I get some info, I'll give you the rest of it.

YOUNG: That would be great. We've talked to the archeologist/archivist/historian, and his interest seems to lie in other areas than the history of Devils Head. Anything that you can pry-- This is picture, 19893A, a ranger at a fire finder. Could that have been Kreutzer? Did he have a fire finder? Was he--? This is just on a table. That must have been a chore just carrying the camera up.

ELLIS: Yeah.

YOUNG: Okay. Is this your children on the landing there?

ELLIS: No.

**END TAPE 1, SIDE 1**

**BEGIN TAPE 1, SIDE 2**

YOUNG: Still the old ladder propped up.-- Here's one looking down from the top?

ELLIS: Uh-huh.

YOUNG: I see. There's the little weather station.

ELLIS: Uh-huh.

YOUNG: As far as you know, nobody was ever killed by lightening before they got the grounded, modern tower up there?

ELLIS: Not that I know of. Of course, I don't know. Could have been.

YOUNG: They might not have told you!

ELLIS: [*E. laughs*] We've been real fortunate. As many people as come up--

YOUNG: Right. Now, that looks like what, five ladies at the tower?

ELLIS: Yeah.

YOUNG: "Helen and her friends" [*read from photo?*]. I think—I did a search looking for her under her married name, and it looks like she was still alive as late as 1971.

ELLIS: I've got it up at the tower. The year when she died. But she lived here in Denver. She was a member of a church. She had a daughter who died probably around fourteen, fifteen years old. Her husband died before her. She survived them all.

YOUNG: Now, this lady with the horse. Is that (her)?

ELLIS: That's Helen Doud.

YOUNG: That's her. And this is her with the saw?

ELLIS: That's Helen Doud.

YOUNG: I don't think I've seen that one before.

ELLIS: That's Helen Doud.

YOUNG: 42834A – timbers down--

ELLIS: [*Mumble*]

YOUNG: 42834A--

ELLIS: That's the one we were looking at. Fire tower from Hell's Half Acre.

YOUNG: Now, look, these days they probably would not have cut down a dozen trees from that one spot.

ELLIS: I'm just wondering what that was built for? --construction of another--

YOUNG: Was there a date over there? Could this be what they built her cabin from?

ELLIS: [*Mumble*] That's looking from the east over near the Zinn Overlook Trail.

YOUNG: If you didn't know the thing was there, you could hardly—wouldn't notice it.

ELLIS: See the--

YOUNG: [*Mumble*] I don't remember being able to see the mountains over top of the clearing there.

ELLIS: That's-- The tower is just back this way.

YOUNG: Right. The trees are taller. Maybe that's what it is.

ELLIS: And, thicker. More of them. Thinned out quite a bit since then.

YOUNG: A classic of her. These are the two you've got framed up there.

ELLIS: Yes.

YOUNG: And it's the same Fire Finder.

ELLIS: Yes. Well, an earlier model, but the same system.

YOUNG: Artifacts. Things like arrowheads or debris from earlier times, did you ever find anything like that? In the clearing or around?

ELLIS: No, I've never found an arrowhead.

YOUNG: Do you know if the Native Americans ever used that spot?

ELLIS: Yes. I'm sure a lot of them kept camp to observe. Especially on a clear day, you can see a long way.

YOUNG: They didn't have a telephone to tell what they saw.

ELLIS: They'd have to use smoke signals. Indians would get on high points, too, to look for buffalo on the plains. Trying to figure out where they were, that sort of thing. Of course, the buffalos would move in large masses--

YOUNG: So you could see them from that far away.

ELLIS: On a clear day. Of course, in those days didn't have any pollution.

YOUNG: True. There were a lot of clear days.

ELLIS: I'm sure the Indians were all over those places out there looking around. They were quite adventurous.

YOUNG: Indian Park is right below that, and I assume that that was a big gathering spot.

ELLIS: -- I've heard stories that the Indians would come there to fight. There were a lot of arrowheads found in that area.

YOUNG: More like a ceremonial fight or just a place that they argued over a lot.

ELLIS: No, it was just a place that they would meet and fight.

YOUNG: Sort of like Super Bowls?

ELLIS: Early man had peculiar things about warfare. Of course, they still do, but a little grander scale, I guess.

YOUNG: Well, listen, you had two weddings up there?

ELLIS: Yes, that I know of. One where they brought everything up, wedding dress, tuxedos and all that. I got a call in August one year and they said they were getting married the 15<sup>th</sup> of September and would like to use the cabin to change clothes in. I said, "Well, great. Come on up!" So they did. Married in the meadow, Hell's Half Acre. I had to tell them that.

YOUNG: They're still married?

ELLIS: They are. Yeah, they are. And they have a son from the marriage. That was quite neat. Then they came up to the tower after the ceremony and then went on down and had the gathering after the wedding here in town somewhere.

YOUNG: Guess they couldn't get everybody up there for the reception.

ELLIS: It was just those people that was involved in the ceremony was the only ones that were there.

YOUNG: No grandparents?

ELLIS: No, no grandparents came. They were probably at the reception, I guess. Then the other couple came up with a Judge and was married inside the tower.

YOUNG: Did you know ahead of time?

ELLIS: No, they just appeared and said they'd like to get married in the tower. I said, "Well, come on in!" I had to turn the radio down because it kept interfering with the ceremony. Then there's several people that's had honeymoons there. Fire Lookouts—honeymoons. One lady met her husband there. He was a Fire Lookout. She met him there one year. They were married the next year, and they both worked for the Forest Service the next year. Spent their honeymoon there at the tower. They came back a few years later. He worked somewhere in Ohio or some place like that. They were just sort of reminiscing. And I know of another couple that was married there, but their marriage was over before the summer was out.

YOUNG: Did they live there or just get married there?

ELLIS: No, they lived there. That's where they had their honeymoon. They had one child who was conceived there. But the marriage was over. I guess it was too much togetherness. [*E. laughs*]. And there's been other people that's had their honeymoon there that worked for the Forest Service and gotten married, would spend their first summer together there. But I know of two that had their—no, no, three that had their honeymoon there. One couple, her husband had some kind of disease, I forget now what it was, and she had to put him in a nursing home and he couldn't take care of himself or anything. Sort of sad. They had children, and I don't know what happened there—whether he's still alive.

YOUNG: Any children born up there that you know of?

ELLIS: Not that I know of. Had a lady that got close a couple of years ago. [*E. laughs*] She came up there and she was past-due. The baby was already due, and she, I guess, was desperate wanting to have that baby. She came up to the top, then went on back home, then a few days later had the baby. Then came up several months later--

YOUNG: Oh, and brought the baby!

ELLIS: [*E. laughs*] One morning--had a lot of different visitors— One morning I heard this gong, and I thought, “What in the world is that?” I thought I'd better go up and take a look.

YOUNG: Oh, this was from above!

ELLIS: I was in the cabin when I heard the-- Anyway, I went on up there and it was a fellow that was dressed in sort of a Hindu-type thing and had these blankets out on the rocks and they were having a sunrise ceremony. He had a couple there, and he'd chant these different songs and hit on the gong. [*E. laughs*]

YOUNG: They'd come up the night before?

ELLIS: No, they came early that morning. For some ceremonial—sunrise-- He said he was going to come back, he really enjoyed it there. But I never did—if he did, I wasn't there.

YOUNG: He didn't bring his gong. What about some other visitors, unusual people or occurrences--

ELLIS: Of course, every day you get different types of people, from all over the world. We'd get people, I guess, from every corner of the world. Most of them are from Colorado, of course. A lot of older people. People in their 80's come up there. I think 85 is probably about the oldest, or 86.

YOUNG: 86. I think Mary-- Well, actually I think there's an 87-year-old man on your list. Mary Cornish was 86 this summer when she came up.

ELLIS: Keep waiting for a “90.” It's amazing, though, how people can still-- the old

saying "If you don't use it, you lose it," I think there's a lot of truth to it. So, those people who can still climb it must be quite active.

YOUNG: Well, we, the Thursday Group, ran into a couple two years in a row, an older couple, who said "We come up here in the late summer, and we figure if we can make it to the top and back, we don't have to go to the doctor for another year." They were fun. One thing I saw on a web site for the Forest Fire Lookout Association—a place where people write in with questions. One of them was "Who is the oldest living lookout?" I believe there's a man in Pennsylvania who is 89, who's been doing it since after the Second World War. Think you'll try to break his record?

ELLIS: Gosh. I hope so. That would be neat. There's a lady in Montana who has been a Lookout for thirty-three years, this year. That one you can drive to. She was talking about making this her last year. She's in her sixties I think now. But you know, a lot of the Lookouts—I know by the time the season's out, I'm ready for it to be over, and I think I may not come back next year. But then the time you get through winter, and spring is going, you think, "Oh, no. I think I'll go back one more time."

YOUNG: I hope you think that every summer for a long time. And your wife loves it as much?

ELLIS: Oh, yeah. She's the one that got me the job. We have nine children. Four had left home, and we were living in California at the time. My wife and I were talking about it. She says, "You know all we do is work and take care of the kids, and they're growing up at a fast rate and they're all going to be gone here before too long. Almost half of them are gone now. We thought, well, why don't we spend the summer in the mountains—go up in to Idaho or Montana and just camp out all summer to be with the kids. So, we did. We sold everything we had except for the car. We went up there and spent the entire summer in the mountains. We had a ball! Then, of course, it was getting close to start the school, and I thought, "Well, we've got to get them out of here so we can get them into school." So we came to Colorado, and went to work, and then the next summer came around. We thought, "Well, you know, we did it once, let's do it again!" So we went to hike the Appalachian Trail. We did that for a couple of summers. Then someone was wanting to hike Pike's Peak. Well, they had a program, and still do, where you can be a campground host. You camp there free.

YOUNG: At Pike's Peak?

ELLIS: Well, in the [*Pike National*] Forest. We thought we could do that, and then on our days off we could hike and do that sort of thing. So my wife wrote to the [*United States*] Forest Service here. We knew Steve Vest who was the [*Fire*] Lookout, who taught me the Lookout business in '66 (1966). Told him what we planned to do. He wrote us back. My wife was the one who wrote the letters. He said, "You know, we've got a job open and it pays. Fire Lookout."

YOUNG: It's not just free camping, it actually pays.

ELLIS: We said great, so every summer we'd worked there and go back to Texas for school 'til the kids got out. After they was all finished, we all moved here. That's how we got started the last time.

YOUNG: So you knew the ranger that you subbed for that first year?

ELLIS: Yes. He had just got out of college. He had worked the summer before. I think he worked in '66 [1966] in Monument. They used to have a nursery there. He got his degree in Botany. The second year he was the Fire Lookout. That's how we met him. I was his alternate. Then, he got on full time with the [*United States*] Forest Service. He's retired now, just retired a couple of years ago. So, we knew him, and we wrote, my wife did. She referred to Steve Vest and a couple of other people that we knew, so they gave the letter to Steve Vest who happened to be in charge of the fire tower at that time. He was a Fire Boss. So, that's the reason he offered us the job.

YOUNG: What kind of things did he teach you that first summer?

ELLIS: Well, first thing is how to operate the Fire Finder, which was very important.

YOUNG: The main point of the whole thing.

ELLIS: Of course you had to know how to read the map and a compass. I already knew how to do that. Fire safety. Lightening safety. That was a big thing. Getting on the stool and that sort of thing, not touching anything, about the radios and the phones, not touching anything. When lightening would hit, there's a ground wire that is connected to the Fire Finder which would light up and glow. It had a blue glow on it, and a sizzling sound. You'd get an ozone smell from it, like a battery acid smell from it, when it hit. That would happen from time to time. At that time, there was two stools and when a storm would come over, he'd sit on one stool and I'd sit on the other. He

told me, "When lightening hits, it will sound like a loud explosion, but everything's okay. Just don't get off the stool." My wife was up there with me one day and I was telling her the same thing, and lightening hit that particular day. I said, "That's it. That's what he was talking about!"

YOUNG: Oh, that was the first time--

ELLIS: That was the first time lightening had hit with me in it. My wife was in the cabin one day and lightening hit and came down the stove pipe and knocked the front of the door open of the fire, and knocked ashes, and a blue streak came across the floor. She was luckily sitting on the other side. She had been warned about staying away from the stove and that sort of thing. Also, the rule book says don't have a fire going during a lightening storm, but it's hard to put out a fire when a storm is coming up. After that, she would have a fire in the morning, but getting close to noon, she wouldn't let them be going 'til late in the afternoon.

YOUNG: Did you cook on the wood stove?

ELLIS: No. Couple of times, we've heated stuff on the wood stove when the electricity was out. No, we always had the electrical stove. Now, when that cabin was first built, they had a wood stove. They didn't get electricity until later. It was built in '51 (1951), but it was just a few years later they got electricity up there.

YOUNG: So they had a telephone for a long time.

ELLIS: They always had a telephone. The telephone came up the east side of the mountain, and the wires are still there. People through the years have taken all the insulators off, but the wood that holds the insulator, you still find those nailed to the trees and the wires laying on the ground. It's all the way down the mountain until you get near the road, and from thereon people have confiscated all that. You can tell where the phone was on that side.

YOUNG: Were the kids ever with you in the tower when lightening struck?

ELLIS: Well, of course, two of my boys and my daughter and my wife became lookouts. Alternate Lookouts. They were up there when lightening hit. When they were small, or younger, the two oldest boys of the younger group got into a fight, and I had to go down and break it up and brought one of them up to the tower with me.

Because my wife had went to town for some reason, I forget now. I didn't want to leave them together. While we were up there, lightening hit. He still tells that story.

YOUNG: What a way to grow up! What did the kids do on rainy days when it wasn't lightening? Did they play indoors--

ELLIS: Yeah, they learned to do a lot of things. My wife is an artist, and they did a lot of needlework. She taught them how to do that. That's sort of hush-hush with the girls.--

YOUNG: My Dad used to do needlework—it is okay.

ELLIS: They did a lot of that. In fact, they still have some of that they did. They did some paintings. They learned to juggle. Two of the boys learned to juggle quite well. The youngest one can juggle just about anything. He'll juggle footballs or basketballs--

YOUNG: Did you do Forest [*Service*]kind of work in the Army?

ELLIS: No, I was in the Infantry, which is outside. The only thing I learned there to bring to the Forest Service, well, liking to be outside, enjoying being outside, plus the compass and the map-reading. That was about it. Everything else I learned, I don't think I've used—other than not being afraid to be in the woods and that sort of thing.

YOUNG: Any other stories or remarks, changes in the last 20 years?

ELLIS: Well, the population explosion out in the woods is really something. It's amazing how many people, how many houses you can see out in the woods now, whereas years ago there weren't as many. And, of course, that will continue with our growth population. I've always felt that the tower was quite useful. There are some people that feel it's not. But, we report a lot of fires. They'd eventually be reported by someone else, but then they would be larger. It's nice to be able to be on top of them. Then, too, a lot of people use us—this year during the Hayman Fire—I'd have people call me about how far the fire was from their home, where they lived and that sort of thing. Some people would call me several times a day. It helped them. I'm sure they felt better about it. At least they had someone to talk to.

YOUNG: Aren't you the relay between Pueblo and--

ELLIS: You know, years ago, when I first got there in '84 [1984], the communication problem, wasn't very good at that time, and I relayed all the time. People out in the field would call for license plate check or tag check, the law enforcement people, and I would call Douglas County or whatever county it happened to be in, to verify are these people okay, are they clear or whatever--

YOUNG: Because you were the one. Everyone could reach you even if they couldn't reach each other.

ELLIS: Right. Well, they couldn't reach something they wanted right then, the information they wanted right then. They couldn't get out. But now, they don't—very seldom do they use me for something like that because communication is so good. Well, everybody has cell phones whereas then they didn't. They can get to a certain point and with their cell phone get out.

At one time, I had a shooting. Somebody was shooting at somebody. There was an accident, somebody was pulling a trailer with horses in it and they went off the road, and they were wanting help. There was a fire going. Let's see, I think that was it. I called the fire in, then the shooting incident, I was calling the Sheriff's department and getting some help there, giving location and all that sort of thing, trying to get someone a tow truck to get over to get the horses and that sort of thing. Steve Vest finally came on and said, "Bill, is that fire getting any bigger?" [E. laughs] I told him, "No, everything's okay. It's less than a tenth of an acre." But anyway, they got people on the way to that one. That was quite something.

During the Buffalo Creek fire, communication, for some reason something went out, I don't know what the deal was, but I relayed all that day, all that night, all the next day, and the next night about 10:00 [p.m.] they got communications in. They called me and told me I could leave.

YOUNG: You could go to bed. What, do you have one phone on one ear and one phone on the other ear? Is that it?

ELLIS: Well, they're talking to me on the radio, and I'm calling Pueblo over here. And a lot of times, I use the radio to relay. Just depends on how—of course, with the phone, you don't have communication problems, line of sight and that sort of thing. That—then there was another fire, well, numerous fires-- But now, very seldom do they use me for something like that because communication is so good.

YOUNG: They probably all have the same radio frequencies.

ELLIS: And, of course, everybody has cell phones and that sort of thing. As far as that sort of thing, we've dropped way down. I had several awards for communication—relays and that sort of thing because of that. Luckily—you know some people are good at certain things—and I'm able to pinpoint fires, not every time but most of the time, and I'm able to pick them up real quick. The first year I was there, they were just amazed. Yeah, I got an award for that particular year. After that, they enjoyed me coming back. This year going back was a little different. The first year I got there, I drove up—Steve Vest knew me, so no problem there—but the fellow that happened to be head of the [*Pike National Forest*] Rampart Range area-- drove up in a little Volkswagon bug, stuff piled up on top of my car, three children and my wife. This fellow looks at me and looks at the kids and everything and he says, "I'm going to tell you something. We're not going to be able to help you. You're strictly on your own up there. If you need water or food or anything, you're going to have to supply yourself. We can't be running back and forth for anything." I said, "That's okay. We're able to take care of ourselves." I could see by the expression on his face, "Oh, I've got all kinds of problems!" So after the first year, they accepted us, and we were all right.

YOUNG: They probably begged you to come back after that. Sounds like a long and wonderful career. Well,-- can we invite you back if we have other questions?

ELLIS: Oh, sure. I'm long-winded at times--.

YOUNG: That's—it's all so wonderful. I'm sorry we didn't have the video set up. Usually, I do that so that if Barbara can't hear on the tape, she can see on the video, but it didn't work this time. These, you say, are [*United States*] Forest Service pictures. If we want to get clearer copies of some of those, we could probably get in touch with them.

ELLIS: These are all yours. Some of these are easy and others aren't so good. Anyway, I guess each bit of information you get is just that much more.

YOUNG: Oh, it helps. It really does—and then, well here, let's go over to--stop.

**END TAPE 1, SIDE 2 [*remainder of this side is blank*]**