

Volunteer Fire Lookout Experience:

The Coronavirus Pandemic

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History 301 – Section 001: Infectious Disease and the Politics of Health

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This is my second season as a volunteer fire lookout in the national forests surrounding Los Angeles, California. For the sake of anonymity, I will keep certain details surrounding my tower and its location very general, alongside the organization I volunteer through. The goal of this paper is to provide a good source on the difficulties of operating a remote fire tower during a global pandemic, and the steps that myself and other lookouts at my tower have had to take. It is my hope that this document will help to provide future history students, or whomever else chances upon it, a different perspective of the pandemic.

In the 2019 season, I became a volunteer fire lookout in South California, and accrued the highest amount of volunteer hours of the new volunteers at just under 100 hours. I had attempted to join the program in 2018 but was unable to make it to the second training day due to a mountain road closure between my location and the National Forests' Forest Service HQ. My tower's season is considered year-round, but really comes down to closing whenever everyone stops signing up for shifts online – typically now in December and re-opens generally between January through March. The re-opening is accompanied by us “old timers” performing trail work to clear plants off the trail, re-clearing the tower's 60 foot fire break, and getting a chance to see all of our “co-lookouts” for the first time of the year – before the new volunteers had been trained. This would not be the case in 2020 however, as the ‘Rona<sup>1</sup> would cause the U.S. Forest Service Volunteer Coordinator to shut down the forest to all volunteer groups to prevent the spread of the virus in roughly January of 2020.

It is important that I detail the tower here to give you a sort of idea of the tower experience and geography. For us, we can get past two U.S.F.S.<sup>2</sup> gates and up a fire road to a parking area to start our hikes from – to get to the tower. For non-lookouts, folks have to hike 5.2

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<sup>1</sup> Coronavirus / Covid-19 slang – popular in the rural area I live in and amongst the lookouts.

<sup>2</sup> United States Forest Service

miles compared to our 2.6, and they gain about 3,800 feet in elevation compared to our 2,500 feet. The tower is both incredibly remote yet still able to view a dam and a sizable portion of the Interstate 5 freeway, yet the road to get to us is a dead-end and we only get about 200 visitors a year. The tower is generally only operated on weekends and holidays, though some folks like myself take the occasional weekday shift.

It would not be until June of 2020 that only our volunteer group would be granted permission to operate again, in part due to California's extreme fire season, though only under certain conditions. I was informed that my 'generation' of lookouts had been heavily cut down and that only some of us could operate the tower this year. Out of twenty 2019 folks in my 'class' of lookouts, only myself and three others had accrued enough hours to be considered experienced enough to man the lookout without a refresher course – we were informed in mid-July of 2020.

The restrictions placed on our organization were these:

1. No training new volunteers.
2. No refresher training
3. No online meetings.
4. A mask and face shield must be worn while hiking up to the tower.
5. The mask and face shield must be worn while operating the tower.
6. Gloves must be worn during the entire shift (roughly 12 hours.)
7. Volunteers are to disinfect the tower three times a day during our shifts: start, mid, and end.
8. Volunteers must disinfect the radio and Osborne device every time we used them.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> I believe our radios are Bendix Kings, they are portable ham Handie-Talkies – basically way up-gunned walkie talkies you require a license to use. The Osborne device is how we pinpoint fires on their bearing from us, which we

9. Volunteers cannot sleep in or on the tower bed.
10. Volunteers cannot assist injured hikers, or hikers experiencing an emergency such as heat stroke.
11. Volunteers cannot let visitors near the tower.
12. Volunteers cannot stock the water locker with water for visitors/hikers.
13. Volunteers cannot give water to dehydrated hikers.
14. Volunteers cannot provide hikers with medical aid items (such as bandaids.)
15. Volunteers cannot let hikers rest in or near the tower.

As you can see, these are some wild and extensive measures in some cases. Manning the tower would be even more difficult this year as well, as fires along the west coast became so prominent that every national forest in California was closed for the first time in some decades. I managed to get in one shift this season, right in August after we were permitted to return, and right before the four to six weeks of straight wild fires around Los Angeles, such as the Bobcat fire.

Though our understanding of Covid-19 is so much further than it was at the start of the pandemic, the restrictions placed on volunteers have not been eased in any way.<sup>4</sup> It is our hope with the first delivery of vaccines last week (or two), that we will be able to train new volunteers and reclaim the old-hands that did not have enough hours for this season, near season. It has been estimated that out of some thousand odd lookouts in California, only some 180+ of us have been able to take a shift – and only about six of us for my tower out of a normal forty. All the while, California has experienced one of its worst fire seasons in recent history.

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then estimate distance from us and radio in to Forest Dispatch. We are required to have the radios on or near us at all times.

<sup>4</sup> For instance, how long droplets stay active in the air, and the length of how long Covid-19 can live on certain materials. In mid-August the CDC declared that the exposure to Covid-19 on a hiking while passing another hiker was safely minimal even if both parties had masks off – so long as the trail was not crowded to a degree where you were never alone on the trail.

There is so much more I would love to write, but in the interests of finishing my finals, I will stop here. In ten years an earlier account of my impressions as a lookout will be released, written in May of 2020 it was submitted to the California State University – Channel Islands archives, under a “Plague Journals” assignment performed by two History 365 – Themes in World History courses. I hope those will help in your research – the full title of the group’s journal I was in was:

*The United States Navy in the 2020 Coronavirus Pandemic:*

*The incident of Captain Brett Crozier and the U.S.S. Theodore Roosevelt*

&

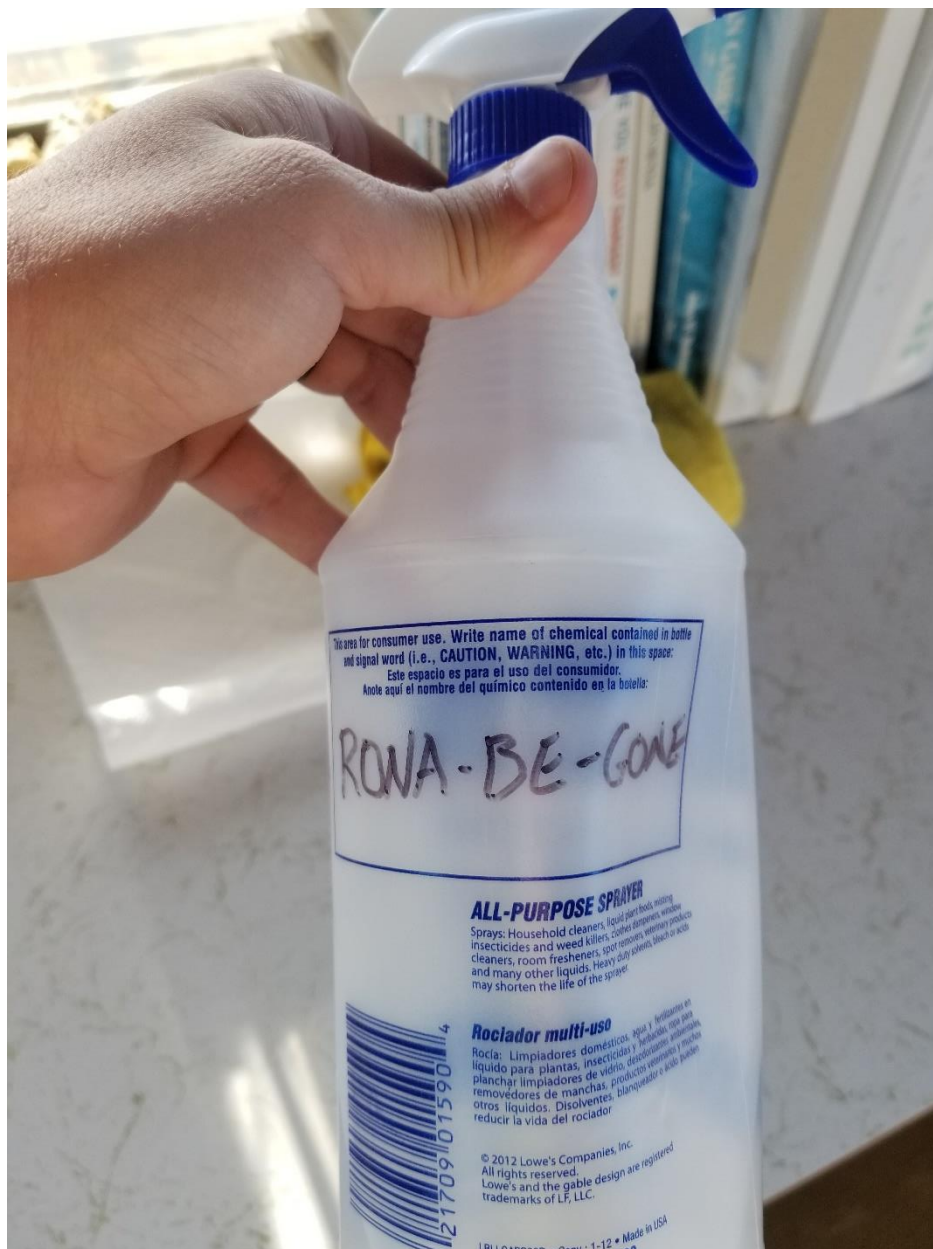
*The personal plague journals of history students at California State University - Channel Islands*

*Ranging on a variety of topics influenced by Coronavirus from February to May of 2020*





Our tower's Smokey the Bear hand puppet, dressed in Anti-Rona gear. On the note pad are frequencies for local radio repeaters that I was hitting on my Baofeng UV-5R, the smaller radio. The large radio to the top left is the U.S.F.S. radio we use. It was a good mug of tea to cool me down on a hot August day!



The tower's disinfectant bottle – I got the impression it was filled with hand sanitizer due to rubbing alcohol and other disinfectant shortages. Worst part was that it was a little sticky! The

humor was enjoyed by us all.