

Transcript of an oral history interview with Roy Lemons who manned the Signal Hill Lookout Tower in 1937 while working for the Civilian Conservation Corps. (CCC). The interview was conducted for Grand Canyon National Park by Michael Quinn in July 1995.

Roy Lemons:

I had 59 square miles out there that I had to take care of myself. I had a model B Ford truck. And the towers weren't grounded, so we had orders that if a storm came within 10 miles that you would evacuate the tower. So, we'd go down and sit in the truck at the base of the tower until the heavy lightning passed. But sometimes, the lighting would be so severe that you couldn't afford to wait that long, so, even during the heavy part of lightning, you take a run up that tower and scout out the area to see if you had a fire going.

Michael Quinn:

And, you had a radio to relay back?

Lemons:

No, there wasn't any radios in those days. (laughs) We had a telephone line on the tower. We had a hookup with a telephone line, but it was a party line. But we had priority. If anyone was on the line, and we had to get on, we had priority to get them off. We had interconnections between Grandview, Pasture Wash and the North Rim.

I'll tell you an interesting thing that happened that particular summer. I picked up a fire on the North Rim and I took a reading on it and it fell right on top of the North Rim fire tower. And I called Grandview and asked for a cross reading, and he comes across and he lay right on top of the fire tower. So we're trying to reach this fire tower on the North Rim and we can't get a response. So, I watched the fire for maybe a half-hour and it was increasing in size, so I called the rangers and they sent a crew out. I had no idea what had happened. But what had happened was this fire tower operator had smoked a cigarette and threw it out the window, and threw the switch on his phone, and took a siesta. (laughs) And so, when the fire crew gets out there, he's up there in that tower asleep, and they can't raise him, except by going up there. And this was a 90 foot tower as I recall, it was a very tall one. And, so they sacked him up, and he went home.

Quinn:

Was he a C[CC] too?

Lemons:

No, he was his own private individual working for the Park Service. But they hired him back the next year. So, I guess they punished him for that one goof-off, but they hired him back next year.

Quinn:
Did you live at the Pasture Wash Ranger Station?

Lemons:
Yes.

Quinn:
Did you have a separate building, or did they give you a room inside?

Lemons:
Well, I had the whole thing. I had all three rooms, the front room, the bedroom, and kitchen.

Lemons:
One time I went in to relieve the guy on Hopi tower. And there was a tremendous lightning storm. And I sat down in that truck, and man, I just got the feeling we had a lot of fires going on. So I ran up that tower in the midst of that electrical storm. And just about the time I got up there and started to look around, there was a bolt of lightning hit, and, of course, there is no way I can judge the distance it was from me. But it look like was about the size of a highway, and it was red, and it was pulsating, and, man, it hit the ground and it must have lasted a second or two. And it just scared the fire out of me, and I tore down that tower. (laughs) I decided that there was no point in looking for a fire. Boy, that thing was awesome! I stayed down in the car until the electrical storm passed and then I went back and checked it out.

But I used to sit up there in that Pasture Wash station and I never had any fear of lightning before that summer. But when the storm hits the canyon, in middle of the canyon, I've seen that lightning do all kinds of things. I've seen it come down out of a cloud 10 miles apart—at least 10 miles apart—come halfway the ground and move on a horizontal 'till it met, and then go down. And I have seen it come down out of a cloud and make a 180 degree turn and go back up. I couldn't believe all the things that I witnessed there that summer; I mean the way lightning strikes occurred. And it's really something. I had a fear of lightning after that, which I never had before.

Quinn:
Did you hike down the Bass Trail then?

Lemons:
No, I never did that. I couldn't leave the tower that long in the daytime.

Quinn:
Two of you living out there?

Lemons:

No, just me.

Quinn:

Was that pretty lonely?

Lemons:

It was. I came to town about every two weeks to resupply groceries.

Quinn:

So that was kind of a different way to finish your career there, being by yourself.

Did you miss the camp life? (CCC)

Lemons:

Oh yeah, yeah. Anytime you're by yourself, you know, it's kind of a lonely existence. But I really didn't seem to mind it all that bad. You are busy during the day, in fact, all day. So about the only thing you do is come in at night to cook your dinner and hit the sack. It had no radio or anything like that.