

Lonely at the top

► Isolation part of the job for veteran forester

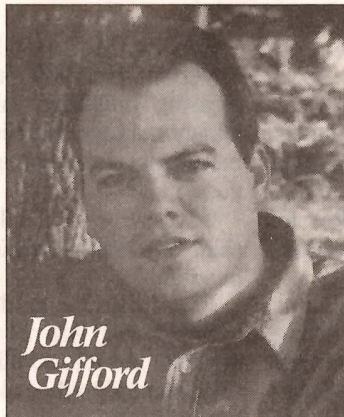
By **John Gifford**
For The Transcript

Some people take elevators to work; Judy Farley takes the stairs. Most mornings for the past 21 years she's climbed the 15 flights leading to her office, 100 feet in the sky. Judy works for the Oklahoma Forestry Service as a forest tower observer, and from her elevated perch, overlooking southeast Oklahoma's Ouachita National Forest, she scans the treetops for smoke.

Her objective, of course, is to identify forest fires and then help contain them by guiding fire crews to their locations. Once smoke is sighted, Judy notifies an adjacent tower observer, who may be 12 or more miles away. The two then take compass readings, and through a process of triangulation, the fire's precise location is determined. The next step is to dispatch a forestry service fire crew, which, along with the aid of the nearest fire department, will work to extinguish the blaze. And these fire crews need all the help they can get.

Pat McDowell, of the Oklahoma Forestry Service, states that in 2002, 1,229 fires were reported in the agency's protection area in eastern Oklahoma. Though these fires burned a total of 31,625 acres, they represent only a small percentage of the total fires/acres burned throughout the state that same year. And while these figures may seem disturbing, Judy Farley admits that, fortunately, things aren't what they used to be.

"When I first started 20 years ago, there were a lot more fires," she said. "And a lot of



them were set by arsonists."

Still, a fire could come at any time, and this possibility keeps Judy in her office atop the Jadie fire tower, near Haworth for most of the year.

"Fire season starts in January and runs through April 15th," she said. "We don't receive much rain during the winter, so the forests are really dry."

The veteran tower observer said that late summer is another time of high fire danger, and this period lasts well into autumn. In fact, the month of May is about the only time when Judy and the other tower observers can afford to relax and take a vacation.

"We're less likely to see any forest fires in May because everything is greening up then," she said. "We usually have some rain then, too, and that helps."

So what's it like working out of an office 100 feet in the sky? "I can't even guess how far I can see," said Judy. "At least 25-30 miles on normal days. Where my tower is located, I am 2 miles from the Arkansas line and 17 miles from the Texas line. So naturally I see into Arkansas many miles. I also see fires in Texas all the time. You can see for a long, long way."

But such a lofty perch isn't for the faint of heart. After all, there's the Oklahoma wind to contend with.

"March is the windiest

month, but last December was really windy," said Judy. "When I was putting up Christmas lights on the tower, it felt like I was riding a freight train. It vibrates and even roars up here. The towers are strong, though, so it doesn't frighten me or anything, it's just that you really have to hang on when you are climbing the tower."

Admittedly, there are few who could endure an eight- to 10-hour shift in the fire tower; those who could make a career of it are even more uncommon. And as one of only four FTOs employed by the Oklahoma Forestry Service, Judy is indeed one of a dying breed.

"Our job is slowly being phased out," she said. "Whenever an observer dies or retires, there's no one there to fill their position in the tower. Not long ago we had eight tower observers. Now we're down to four."

Taking the place of these eagle-eyed observers are airplanes and their pilots. Currently, Judy's region has one pilot making two patrols daily, and more could be on the way in the future.

Despite this, Judy is quick to point out a major benefit of the traditional forest tower observer.

"Having someone man the forest from a tower is still more cost-effective," she said. "Southeast Oklahoma is too large a region to patrol with a single plane."

And still, there are fires, even though their numbers have dropped over the past two decades. For Judy, this reduction may be one way for her to measure the efficacy of her 21 years of service to our state and its forests.

"I teach fire safety and prevention to children in the third and fourth grades," she said. "The kids I taught 20 years ago are adults now. Maybe my lessons sunk in."