

During fire season in the White Mountains, all of our thoughts turn toward keeping the forest from burning down, keeping our beautiful surroundings, as well as our homes, intact. If the past winter has been dry, then we worry even more. We post warnings in every conceivable place so that everyone knows to be careful. Even a spark from the exhaust of a car could result in massive destruction by fire. It's part of living here. Sometimes the US Forest Service (USFS) will close down the forest to prevent human-caused fires. But one thing they always do (that they have been doing for decades) is they place guards in towers to watch over the expansive and precious commodity called the Apache Sitgreaves National Forest. These guards, I have learned, are called the "Summit Dwellers."

I met Allen Allen at the end of a hike that started from the long loop of the Los Burros trail and then leads to a spur trail up Lake Mountain. We hiked past the entrance of a dormant volcano that has filled in to form a bowl that, at one time, was a lake (the namesake) but it hasn't been filled with water for the past few years. It is now a beautiful meadow with tons of evidence of the abundant wildlife it attracts. Past the "lake," we continued hiking until the trail ended at the peak of the mountain where the Forest Service look-out tower is perched. I didn't think the tower would be open but, we discovered it was, and during our conversation with Allen, he told us that he did not start this year until the end of May and he was staying until the end of July. If you calculate the time, that is two months of sitting in a tower, day in and day out, keeping watch to help protect us from forest fires.

When I first stepped into the small metal box that forms his "one-room residence," after climbing several narrow steps up the enormously tall tower, the first thing I noticed was all of the paraphernalia: weather charts, weather instruments, pictures and papers with writing hung on every inch of space on the walls, writing on the windows and a large round, glass table in the middle, consuming most of the room. One sign I noticed in particular read "La Dolce Far Niente," which is Italian for something like "How sweet to do nothing." I thought it was pretty funny but doing nothing is not what Allen Allen does. He is a writer, an artist and a photographer, as well as a fire lookout, and he has some of the most spectacular evidence of the phenology of the White Mountains. He is passionate about keeping detailed weather information such as the daily temperatures, relative humidity, dew point temperatures, and the wind velocity and direction. He never tires of experiencing raw weather and other meteorological phenomenon. "It gives me a sense of awe and wonderment that never diminishes." he says.

Allen gives the dispatchers the weather about two to three times each day. "I am so interested in the weather that I look for where the high pressure and the low pressure set up in Mexico and Texas. Together, they spring up moisture to the four corners. Once it gets to the four corners area like this...where ever this high pressure sits is where you get moisture. Where ever the storm goes, I try to record it. Which way it's coming in, how much precipitation it gets...it's moving all of the time." He also watches the trees. "Not much has changed in this area since 1996," he says. He has counted 84 snags that surround the tower. "They didn't die of old age," he says. "They were hit by lightning five years ago." There was a tree close to the tower that was recently hit by lightning that he told me would eventually die also. When Allen sees lightning coming into the area, he calls dispatch when it is within a mile. He then closes all of the windows and sits in a chair with glass legs. "Nothing separates me from the earth and the tower." He says.

Allen has worked in the Lake Mountain tower for more than 21 years. "It's like going back in time, every time I come here," he says. "And I feel like I go back in time too." And it's true. There is neither electricity nor running water. He is from Tucson where he says, "You drive 90 miles an hour; everything is 90 miles an hour. Here, there is no TV...here, there is nothing. It takes five days to get used to sleeping alone; four days of eating my own food and three days of not seeing anyone. Five days total to get the hang of it." In his visitor's sign-in book, he has about four pages attesting to the number of visitors he gets during the fire season. Each page lists about 24 people that come from all over the world. He misses his wife, most days. He met her "on the claims," he states. He was diving for gold (in his claim in Nevada) and came up to check his Swiss box and saw a pretty girl sitting on the edge of the water with blackberries all over her face and hands. He waved to her and then went back down. "I came back up after 15 minutes and she was still there so I went over and introduced myself. She said "If you're ever in Tucson..." so I got a job in the Morence Mines and went to see her in Tucson. We fell in love." Allen has been married for 25 years. He tells everyone after selling his claim, "I found more gold in Tucson than I could have ever found in Nevada."

He is writing a book about sitting in the tower so that his readers will understand what goes on in his daily life as a fire guard and has about 200 pages completed. But he read me some of his poems, some of the prose that he sends every year through postcards that he sends to his friends and family. The one that really stood out was the one titled "Summit Dwellers." I recorded it, and although I may have misinterpreted a couple of words, I wanted to share it with my readers to give you an idea of Allen's passion for his days in the tower and his passion for art and the power of the written word. As he tells me, "I am a crafter of words, not a crafter of nails." He says "I can't torque my transmission or change my oil up here, but what I can do is write." So here is one of his writings, a kind of preview of the contents of his book because he says we are all summit dwellers, all ridge monks...

*Summit Dwellers, ridge monks, fire fighters. We are the smoke hunters, centuries of the fire clan, warriors of the Sitgreaves tribe, old-world keepers of the Coconino skies, Apache pines. Eyes glazed to the horizon and back. Quietly marking time. And I am called Ranger, first son of Big Sky Squinting — we are the long eyes seeing far.*