Smithsonian Folklife Festival

Donna Ashworth
Fire Tower Lookout
Woody Mountain Fire Lookout, Flagstaff, Arizona

Interviewer – Karen Fiore
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Karen Fiore: Okay, would you go ahead and tell us who you are and the date and everything?

Donna Ashworth: My name is Donna, with two N's, Ashworth. For half of every year for the last twenty-one I have lived and worked at eight thousand feet on Woody Mountain southwest of Flagstaff as part of the San Francisco Volcanic Field on the Colorado Plateau. This is July 21, 2003. I love the job obviously that I've stayed here this long. I love the privacy, the freedom, the space. My local community is birds, bear, there's a bear on the mountain, and a lion, elk, lots of elk, turkeys, wild turkeys. Now and then a bird comes into the tower, usually a hummingbird. Sometimes I have more insects than I would like. This year we have hundreds of thousands of ladybugs, which are not so cute when you have that many.

KF: How does that cause a problem?

DA: Not up here because they don't come up above the ground but they get into everything else. I go down to the cabin at night and I have two hundred thousand in the cabin that have to be swept out. The lookout down on Baker Butte uses a shop vac to get rid of her ladybugs before she goes down at the end of the day. This is a year of unusual infestation of ladybugs. Otherwise my community is the other lookouts. You just heard Baker Butte on my forest radio. She's talking with someone else. I hear her. I don't have to say anything to her. I hear probably about three hundred people on the forest radio. So when people say don't you get lonesome up here, oops, Elden just has - let's see what number he's going to, the lookout over here who's a thousand feet higher than I am sees a smoke. He has it at, no, I won't be able to see that. When I hear his numbers I know whether I need to get excited or not. Where was I? I was talking about other lookouts? Sometimes in the off season the women on the forest will meet for lunch in Flagstaff. We would meet with the men too but we're not sure they're interested. [Laughter] There are places where the lookout job is competitive, where you're trying to beat somebody else to a smoke. But we tend to treat cooperation as an earlier virtue than competition so we'll work together. If a smoke is closer to Turkey Butte than it is to me, I will probably call her on another channel and say what is that over there north of you, Sandy. She might not have noticed it but that gives her a chance to say I was just running that out, so that she won't be embarrassed. Your back is always somewhere. You're not looking the full three sixty degrees around. So we work as a team that way with what we like to think of as

lookout courtesy, lookout cooperation, and it makes us friendly. We work together up here.

KF: I have a question if there was a code that you used when you wanted to say something without the whole world knowing what you meant.

DA: Well, we usually go over to another channel that way but then a lot of other people will go over to the other channel too to find out what the secret is. [Laughter] So if there's just plain chatting or I laughed when you said that, we'll use cell phones. Didn't have a cell phone when I started up here twenty-one years ago and it's made a big difference in a feeling of friendship with the other lookouts. Or Elden will call and say, well, that smoke is just right out there and I'll say but I can't see it and we do this on the cell phone instead of tying up the radio.

KF: Let's go back to how did you come to be a fire lookout?

DA: I had been working as a high school English teacher and I was exhausted finally by all the people who were involved, plus all their parents, plus every newspaper columnist in the country who made me feel that everything that was wrong with America was my fault. And I needed to get away to a job that had more privacy, more freedom, more space, which I have up here. My job is to watch the forest, watch the land looking for smoke, but I live in the air and I can see sixty, eighty, a hundred miles. I live in the air with the weather. I have the best of what people are in their books, in their music. I'm not lonely because I have all these people whose voices I hear and I can always turn on the NPR radio that comes out of the local university so I know the news, at least what they broadcast. The job suits me perfectly. Some people come up to my little seven foot square tower and they look around at all of this landscape and they say, wow, this is really neat; I'd go crazy in a place like this, and it is confining. Judge Mangum down in town says if he were to sentence to do time in a space this small he would be accused of cruel and unusual punishment. But I can see so far in every direction. I can't move around a lot but I don't feel confined nor claustrophobic.

KF: How did this job relate to your childhood dream?

DA: Well, I always wanted to live in a cabin on the mountain and I certainly do have one up here. I'm about seven thousand feet. The mountain you see behind me is fourteen I think, thirteen, twelve, something like that. I'm a thousand feet higher than the closest town, a thousand feet lower than Elden whose voice is on the radio right now. I can, I don't know, it's complete freedom. I have to have something to do up here because I'll go weeks without seeing smoke. I might look around every fifteen minutes but until the storms begin or the people get into the forest there might not be any smoke. I have to have, every lookout has to have something to do. I'm free finally to do whatever pleases me during the day, read, write, practice my keyboard here, my little exercise keyboard, knit, think, lean out the window and talk to the trees, all kinds of things. The job is not for everybody. That doesn't mean that we're all loners up here because we tend to have

social contacts. It's just that people who stay very long as lookouts are satisfied to be alone and have things they like to do by themselves.

KF: How did you learn to do your job?

DA: By making mistakes. They handed me my radio, my binoculars, my wind gauge, and told me how to get here. And I needed to learn the landscape by myself by doing exactly the wrong thing, by listening to the other lookouts and seeing how they do it. In any job I think there's a local language and you need to learn the language if you're going to communicate with everybody else. Whether I think it makes sense or not, when I see smoke I should say fire flash, which feels silly to me, but it alerts the people in the supervisor's office downtown in the dispatch office and they get out the right piece of paper and say, go ahead Woody Mountain, so I can tell them. I communicate with Flagstaff with my little microphone here and a radio that weighs twelve pounds and is Korean War technology. But I've used it for twenty-one years now and I know how to change the batteries so I'm not interested in having a new one.

KF: Describe your typical day's routine.

DA: I come up usually at a little before eight every morning, look around to be sure whether there's smoke or not, measure the wind, measure the precipitation of the day before, pick up my microphone and go into service, Flagstaff, Woody Mountain in service, southwest five to ten, .02 precip, if I happened to have had any, and try not to say anymore than that. One important thing about the job is keeping your transmissions down to the fewest possible syllables so you won't tie the radio up, everybody else. I fill out the paperwork for the day, fill out my timesheet, then settle in to do whatever pleases me at the moment, if I just remember to look around for smoke all the time. It's not really a routine so much. I'm supposed to be up here eight hours a day. If fire danger is very high and especially if there are large fires other places and a lot of our people have gone off forest for other fires, they're very anxious to keep small fires small because they're easier to put out. So they might extend all the lookouts till dark if that's the case or I'll come up two hours earlier in the morning or don't take a lunch hour just in case something gets started and they can get on it right away.

KF: Who preceded you on this lookout?

DA: Oh, lots of people, mostly women. About half of our lookouts on this forest are women and older men. Younger men just don't take to it. They need more body movement than that I think. But older men like retired high school principals and things like that [Laughter] and women of almost any age are happier in the job. You know, I'm not sure I know who was the lookout up here before I was. Most people just stayed a year because the tower's only seven feet square and that was alright with me so.

KF: And how long have you been here?

DA: Twenty-one years, this is my twenty-first year. Obviously I'm not afraid of heights.

KF: What is the relationship of your job to the local community?

DA: I have very little contact with people in Flagstaff unless it's on my day off when I go in to do laundry and buy groceries. Sometimes they'll hike up the mountain and come into the tower and I'll talk to them a while, let their children see if they can find their houses in town with their binoculars. But as I said earlier, my community is the creatures who live around me and the other lookouts.

KF: I wanted to get at the fact that you are, because you're watching for fires, that's important to the community too.

DA: You bet, it keeps Flagstaff from burning down because the forest goes right up to the edge. I look down on twelve forest subdivisions. You can see a golf course down there on one of them. Usually I can't see the houses. Along that golf course, which is Forest Highlands, you can't see any roofs but they're there. I keep the in the forest communities from burning down too I hope.

KF: Let's talk about the wildlife.

DA: Ah, the bear you mean that I run into now and then? The lion whose kill I see now and then stuffed under a tree, a fallen tree. All the bugs, did I mention the ladybugs? [Laughter]

KF: Hummingbirds.

DA: The hummingbirds, ah, I keep feeders down on the ground and the hummingbirds whose brains are about that big know it. They know who fills the feeders and when the feeders are empty they come up here into the tower and buzz right in front of me. If I turn my face they'll go [making buzzing sound]. Okay. [Laughter] One day I was sitting up here reading and a hummingbird flew in and perched on the top of my book and looked at me for a while. I didn't move because I didn't want to frighten it. But I speak to them, hi, sweetie. And it flew around. It checked out the hinges on my glasses and it checked out the flowers on my cap and then it hovered right in front of me and I was trying not to cross my eyes and it came closer and closer till I could hear, feel the wind from its wings on my cheek and then very gently it put its bill into my left nostril. It felt like a darning needle slid right in and I laughed and the hummingbird disappeared, flew right out the window.

There's a, I don't want to sound sentimental or anthropomorphic but there does become an understanding with the creatures who live around. I look down on the backs of eagles. How's that for a romantic statement? The ravens will perch in the top of the tree next to the tower and I'm sure they're talking to me and I answer but I never can understand what they say. Elk and deer I see often when I'm on the mountain. Other wildlife, well, the wildest life I see up here is human. People ask me sometimes if I'm afraid and the

only thing I'm afraid of is other people. I know pretty much what a bear is going to do but I can't anticipate what humans will do so I try to screen visitors.

KF: This job appears to be solitary but how true is that in actuality? How many visitors do you get?

DA: I have very few, maybe two dozen all season, all summer. Elden gets visitors every day. Baker Butte down the rim has hundreds. Even on the 4th of July or Memorial Day or Labor Day I have very few visitors. Maybe it's because they know the more highly visible towers. I don't know. That's alright with me.

KF: How has technology changed your job over time?

DA: You mean in addition to the cell phone, which is probably the biggest change? I think most of us have solar panels now so we have a little electricity. The refrigerator on the ground and the little stove I cook on are powered by propane. But until I got solar panels so were the reading lights at night and I often read with a flashlight balanced on my shoulder. But I can have electricity that I generate myself, thanks to the intensity of the Arizona sun.

KF: Tell us about your shower.

DA: [Laughter] Next to the pump, it's an old pitcher pump with a handle, there's a garbage can painted black that I pour water into. With solar heat the water heats during the day and then I can go down to a little shower among the trees and gravity feed, turn a knob and stand there and shampoo my hair while I'm looking around at the trees, at the birds. It's as big a shower as you probably would have in town, just runs out of water pretty fast.

KF: How do you get your water?

DA: I have a thousand gallon tank underground outside. The Forest Service brings a tanker truck up a couple of times a year from town and pumps water into it. I don't use much, as you wouldn't on a boat, you know. When you have a limited amount of fresh water you don't use as much as you would in town.

KF: Why do you keep doing this job?

DA: [Laughter] That's a good question. After twenty-one years I know it. I can just look past fast and realize there's something wrong out there, you know. But I never get tired of it. It's always freedom. It's always beauty. It's always the drama in the sky and the drama of lightning storms and the noise of hailstorms on the on the roof, on the metal roof. It makes so much noise I can't hear myself talk. When I'm in town I can see only down the block and I miss the expanse of the view up here. In town I can't see any of Painted Desert; here I can see clear across it. I don't know. There's probably more reasons than

that for why I, besides it very hot in other places in Arizona in the summer and it's usually cool up here.

KF: Obviously this has given you time to do your book. Would you tell us about the books you've written?

DA: When I first came up to Woody Mountain and started studying the landscape I realized that most of the mountains around here are named for somebody. The Big Volcano is named for St. Francis of the Cece, which seems a little inappropriate. But there are names of people, Sitgreaves, Bill Williams, Agassi's, and I said here I am on a mountain that's just Woody. So I became curious about it and started looking in sources in town and discovered there was a John Woody around here in the nineteenth century, and began to try to find out other things about the mountains. Finally after eight years of answering my own questions, I couldn't find anymore answers so I just published the book at that point. I stopped and then—

KF: Which book was that?

DA: That was {Biography of a Small Mountain}, which you have here, with Sherry Mangum's cover on the front. But with all this just about the mountain and the people who have had contact with it I didn't have room to describe what it was like to be a lookout, what the experience is. So I did this one based on John Woody's first wife and lookout on the mountain and went back and forth from past to present, a hundred miles apart comparing that's against this ground. And then, well, one thing about the job up here is that I can say at the beginning of every season, well now I'm the only student I have and I know I'm interested. What do I need to know that I don't know, so I'll choose a topic. One year it was Chinese landscape painting. I studied that all summer with books from the university. And one year it was the history of western landscape art. So I did all that and I got everybody through the Hudson River School in Santa Fe and out here to the Grand Canyon and finally said where were the women. There were always more women in art schools than men but it's the men whose names populate the history of art. So I started asking around, older women, and asking were there any women painters out here at the beginning; yes, they'd say, yes, there were. So I wrote this book. The Center Panel of the Triptych is a woman who came here the first time in 1913 with Zane Grey and stayed the rest of her life. And the other two parts of the book are about women painters here. And one whole section is about the lookout tower again. I'm working on one now that has a contemporary lookout who is attempting to find out something about the development of medicine in Flagstaff over the first fifty years, with an emphasis on the doctor's wives because this lookout has been a doctor's wife. And it's been very frustrating. Most of the questions I ask nobody's asked before. Nobody's asked before and there are no answers for and I have to find them myself. But it can be satisfying to do that. I feel as if I'm in the resurrection business bringing all these women back to life.

KF: I want to know how do you do your research, when, how do you work around this?

DA: I have two days a week off. I go into town and do laundry and buy groceries and take my books back to the library and then I can check books out of the local library. The city library is good I think for a town this size and the university library and bring them back to the mountain. There are two places in town where I can read microfilm of the old newspapers, which helps. Flagstaff is a county seat. A county seat is a dandy place for doing historical research. If your father bought a black cow it's there in the courthouse. If your friend divorced her husband, the details are there in the county courthouse. If one of the doctors was sued for malpractice, the details are there. So I can often find a great deal; besides that there are good inter library loan services. While I was trying to do World War II I called inter library loan for all the old books that were written by doctors during the war. I mean World War I about what they called at the time shell shock, which was pretty horrifying given what we think we know now about malfunctioning brains. And those came to me and I could find out exactly what they thought they could do. Often they just shot those guys, the men who completely freaked out. They called them traitors and shot them. Is that horrifying? We don't do that anymore when people, when my brain malfunctions thank goodness nobody shoots me. [Laughter]

KF: Tell us about your best day on the job.

DA: My best day on the job is a day like this when the clouds are building up and there are shadows that cross the treetops and I know in an hour or so we're going to have lightning and thunder and that might make fires. My worst days on the job are during June when the sky is completely blank and empty and there are no clouds anywhere and won't be for weeks. Any fires that show up are going to be on roads because they're caused by people. That means the fire units on the ground can drive right to them and this time of year they're likely to have to walk in to the fire carrying water on their backs.

KF: That's more interesting?

DA: Oh, well, no, it's not. Well, it is for me to have these lightning caused fires and they seldom get very big here. We'll have some but even the big fires are usually human caused here, the big ones we have out here on Kendrick Mountain a couple of years ago, for example.

KF: I'd like to pause for a moment.

DA: Pause, please pause.

KF: Recording.

DA: Okay. This is most of the Coconino Forest. Every black circle here is around a lookout tower. Every tower had a three sixty degree compass drawn around it, which makes the black circle. So when, let me see, pull some of these loose. There are fishing sinkers on the back so that the pins will all drop in. Suppose I see a fire out here somewhere. Okay, so I see a fire out here at what would be ninety degrees on mine and I'm just going to pull this out here. Down in Flagstaff at the dispatch office they would.

Elden suddenly can see it so he'll give his number here and that will happen to cross right there. Kendrick up here can probably see it too and his reading will cross there and that's a fire at the airport because we've got all the lines crossing at the airport. In technical terms this is what we know as a cross. Maybe East Pocket will too but his cross runs just right straight out along Elden's. Can you see that? So it wouldn't be needed. Down in the dispatch office they have a map like this that covers the whole wall, so then when they get this kind of information from three towers they'll go on legal descriptions like Township Twenty, Range Six, Section whatever it is there, northwest of the southeast, and dispatch field units, ground units to that position. Now the problem can be when there's a strong wind blowing and you're looking across a ridge down here or this way, by the time the smoke shows up on the lookout tower it may be over here when the fires are really over here. So you always specify, this is top smoke, this is drift smoke. That's probably not where the fire is or maybe not where the fire is.

KF: I'm pausing for a minute.

DA: Okay. So now we have a storm coming at us right from the southeast [Laughter] and my cameraman here is a little apprehensive. It's building up fast and coming nicely and we might have some rain. The wind has already picked up. I don't see any lightning yet though, do you? We might.

KF: Okay, what would be lost if technology makes people unnecessary in spotting fires?

DA: Oh, technology, well, a satellite, for example, I hear people talk about using satellites to spot fires but would a satellite know that they lit off the dump down at the ranch, their dump? Would the satellite say, oh, that's the train coming out of Flagstaff and getting up steam? We have a plane that flies after a lightning storm but we're close to a population center here, Phoenix, and you can't know when people are going to leave their campfires active and you can't put up a plane all the time to catch that. So I think there would be a lot of experienced decisions that would be lost if they tried to. But actually I think lookouts are likely to be replaced not by technology but by pine bark beetles. [Laughter] If they kill off all our trees, those little bugs, there won't be anything to watch for smoke in.

KF: How should the U. S. Forest Service care for its historic lookouts?

DA: Care for its historic lookouts, we're suffering under budget cuts, annual budget cuts, which has personnel way down. The Forest Service has a problem with having enough money and enough personnel to do all its work. And here at these lookout towers out here in the weather all year long, year after year. My framework is metal. It gets by pretty well. East Pocket down the ridge here is all built of wood. It was built during World War II when there wasn't steel and it's really rickety. There just needs to be an annual budget to paint, to replace rotting wood, especially those towers that are on the National Register, as this one is. And I don't anticipate there will be any time in the future when, at least immediately, when those monies will be available. Most of the lookouts do what they can for their own towers. We'll ask for paint and we'll do the painting or we'll nail

things together. But serious maintenance like replacing concrete pylons, that's kind of hard for the lookouts to do on their own and the Forest Service needs to do that. Does that answer your question about maintenance?

KF: But why should a non Forest Service person care about this old thing?

DA: Care? This is my place. This is my mountain. I've been here for twenty-one years. No one has ever lived in the cabin but me. This is a very personal experience. I don't want this place to fall down. I'm making a joke of it but most of us feel very personal about our towers and want them maintained. [Laughter] Go ahead, ask me another one like that.

KF: Okay, how difficult is it to distinguish fire smoke and what forms does it take?

DA: Ah, well, color is the first guess. Dust is vaguely brown around here. Water vapor, which we call water dogs, a little grayer than the usual fire getting started and they behave differently. Water vapor will dissipate. Dust tends to do so too. It's smoke that will rise into the air like this one you can see over here. See how far beyond the fire the smoke is going. But sometimes you watch for a while before you decide what it is. It can be tricky. It's embarrassing to say false alarm.

KF: When there is a fire going on, what form does smoke take?

DA: That will depend a lot on time of day, temperature, wind. I've seen fire out here early in the morning when the air is cold and it's still kind of heavy, flow across this whole plateau and fall off the edge at the cliff as if it were water, get down into Pump House Wash, make a right hand turn and go right straight down into Oak Creek Canyon and into Sedona. But an hour later when the sun has warmed the air a little bit it will begin to rise and dissipate in the air up above. I've been up on Elden, which is a thousand feet higher, when the wind was blowing at fifty miles an hour and saw smoke down in town rising straight up because Elden is in a different air layer and there was no wind down there. A whole lot of things will influence smoke behavior. Here comes the wind.

KF: Tell us about other things going on here.

DA: Well, I have rocks I like. You want to put this on that sheet music over there? I try to weight everything down because it will be dead, dead air, and here's another rock, and suddenly a gust of wind will come through and blow a sheet of paper out and it will just float off into the distance until it disappears, that or drop down into the top of a tree. And I stand up here and urge it to fall to the ground so I can retrieve it, a little further, a little further down. I talk to a lot of things. I talk to the trees. I tell the trees things like I'll lean out the window if someone has done something funny on the radio and there's no one to share the joke with up here, I'll lean out the window and say to the trees did you hear what he just said. [Laughter] They don't answer but they might know what I'm talking about. You never know.

KF: Is there a lookout personality?

DA: Oh, I hadn't thought about that before. Um, good new question. [Laughter] The first thing I thought of was Chris McGill who used to be over here on the Carlsbad. She was eighty-something when they finally forced her to retire. She was so funny on the radio, really independent and strong. She went up to Round Mountain one morning and couldn't get through the door and she said send somebody up here and let me in; I'm out on a catwalk. Okay, Chris, we'll get up there with somebody. A few minutes later, I estimate my winds because I'm up here on the catwalk! Okay, Chris, we'll get somebody up there. The later, I'm having a fire and I'm having to estimate my reading because I'm still out here on that catwalk! [Laughter] You know that kind of personality. Most of us are a little more formal on the radio than that. We don't take orders well and you don't have anyone directing your day up here. You have to set your own, keep yourself on task, set your own tasks. That might be part of it, part of a lookout personality. Most people on this have stayed a long time. I've been here longer than anyone else on the forest at twenty-one years. But Shirley on Baker Butte has been there eighteen and Scott on East Pocket sixteen and all of us are a little more independent I think and less likely to take kindly to pompous, authoritarian behavior.

KF: What about being alone, is that part of it too?

DA: Yeah, I think so. Sometimes friends will come or relatives and spend the day but for the most part we're alone and we don't last long if we're not happy doing that, happy being alone. I like being alone. I feel more free and more myself because I'm not worried about whether I'm doing what I'm expected to do or behave according to culture's unwritten rules.

KF: So how do you manage your life? For instance, your diet? You're out here. You have a refrigerator. How do you vote or do you, I didn't mean to?

DA: [Laughter] Oh, well, voting is usually after the end of the fire season. They usually lay us off at the end of the federal fiscal year, which is the end of September, so we're down in town for major elections. And I get the news on NPR up here. I can eat whatever I want to day after day, meal after meal [Laughter] or not. Manage my life, well, the cell phones have made a big difference too because I can call relatives, call friends, talk if I need to with someone I know, or with the other lookouts after hours. What else did you mean by manage my life?

KF: I meant things that you ordinarily have to leave the house to go do, you're on a mountain.

DA: Oh, right, that has to be done on my days off.

KF: What about illness, unexpected illness?

DA: This is one job you can do when you're not feeling well. [Laughter] You know, I've got a cold or I'm achy all over and I can still come up here and just kind of lie around and do the job so I've had, thankfully, only one sick day in twenty-one years. But that doesn't mean that I feel well all the time; I can just come to work.

KF: What if you get a craving for something like ice cream?

DA: Well, I'm only ten miles from town, on a dirt road, but often it's just wait until my day off.

KF: Have you ever done that, run into town for a mocha latte or something?

DA: Yes, yes, I have. [Laughter] I'm embarrassed to say that but I have. How's our storm coming? Oh, look.

KF: It's getting closer.

DA: Yes, it is.

KF: Okay. You live near several earthquake faults. Have you felt any earthquakes?

DA: Oh, yes. Remember the big quake in California that blocked the road to Lake Arrowhead and Big Bear? I could feel that up here. And, of course, because people coming up the tower stairs make the tower vibrate and the first thing I did was look out to the shadow of the tower on the trees to see if someone was climbing the stairs and there wasn't. At night the cabin will sometimes creak and shake and the dog is in a panic to get outside. It surprises me to feel an earthquake in California here. But actually I have, the tower shakes harder in the wind, a fire finder will. It's not weather or natural, well, fire, a fire would because the wind is usually from the southwest here and a fire that started from the southwest would cut off my road if it were close enough, so I'd have to go off the mountain on foot. That's the only thing I worry about.

KF: Has that ever happened?

DA: No, no.

KF: Do you feel supported that someone would be thinking of you?

DA: Right, the Forest Service is pretty good about trying to protect structures and this structure is on the National Register. So they would probably try to get airplane drops up here, perhaps even attempt to evacuate me by helicopter, although I'm not sure a helicopter could land in the clearing. I might just have, you don't want to go down. Fire goes uphill fast. It heats the air and it can go [claps hands] just flash up the hill. Uphill of a fire is a dangerous place to be so if one was close I would be out and gone as fast as I could get out. [Someone on the radio: I just wanted to let you know, rain and lightning north of the peaks and also east and southeast of Flagstaff.]

KF: Here it comes.

DA: Right.

KF: I just saw a lightning bolt. Are there any ghost stories connected to the lookout?

DA: I don't know of one here. The only one I know about is not really a ghost story. It was the lookout down on Baker Butte, which had a still in the attic of his tower during prohibition [Laughter] and make bootleg whiskey and take it into Faison to sell. But that's not really a ghost story, is it?

KF: [Laughter] Not even close to a ghost story.

DA: There should be ghosts as many people as have been in structures at these stations over the years but I'm not aware of any.

KF: Do you feel there's anybody that is looking over your shoulder as you work?

DA: My father maybe. There's a sense of communication there that may just be wishful fantasy but it's very comforting. So no, I don't. The only one who's looking over my shoulder is the dispatcher down in Flagstaff. [Laughter]

KF: Who would you like to see do your job for twenty-four hours during a blitz of thunderstorms?

DA: [Laughter] Ah, let's see, George Bush.

KF: [Laughter] Oops.

DA: Oops. You, I would like to see you do it. [Laughter]

KF: Me?

DA: As frightened as you are. You know I hadn't ever even thought of that. That question is going to occupy me for quite a while now. Who would I like to see up here in this weather? It would have to be someone's who's not afraid but is excited. The lightning can be quite exciting. You don't look up at it the way you do when you're in town. You look out or down on the lightning. You have a different perspective of it and very aware of the power of it. I've seen lightning strike close like on the other end of the mountain and walked over there afterwards and found the tree it blasted to pieces and slivers six feet long into the ground like spears, thinking I'm glad I wasn't standing here when that tree got hit.

KF: Tell me again why we're safe in here.

DA: [Laughter] Because the tower is grounded. There's a ground wire from this, goes down to the ground. I've been struck often. I don't see those strikes. They happen above the roof. There's a bright halo all the way around, very bright and an instant sound that's louder than anything you've heard before and a sense of, there ought to be something we can do here, what should we do! Jazzed I guess is the word for it. You want to see my, oh, I set in the chair that has insulators. I close the windows down, lock them down all the way so that there won't be any air currents for bringing electricity in. I turn off the radio if there's time and usually there's time because you can anticipate where the lightning will be. It's usually out in front of the storm cell. And don't touch the walls because they're metal and sit in the chair with the insulators on the bottom and cheer. Although once I was the lookout over on the O'Leary, which is a live in tower, it has a little kitchen. She was baking a cheesecake and had an egg in her hand when the tower was struck by lightning and she jumped and the egg broke on the ceiling. [Laughter] But we're all struck, not daily but frequently during the season, sometimes two or three times in a single storm, enough so I don't feel threatened by it here. I hope you won't.

KF: Doing my best. The storm's coming in.

DA: Oh, look how nice and black that is. That means it's raining pretty hard over there. This one you can see through the rain over here so that's quite light. Sometimes it's white but usually it's black like that.

KF: And there's plane too.

DA: Yes, we sit here right above the airport.

KF: What were you doing on September 11, 2001?

DA: I was up here. I didn't see the television coverage till I went into town. I heard it on the radio and there was a sense of outrage. Okay, a good earthquake can kill more people than that attack on the Twin Towers did but there was still, this was deliberate. There were children on the plane and anger, anger, so all the time people were saying why do they hate us, I was thinking why don't they ask us why we hate them with all of this.

KF: Did you want to talk to somebody about it and here you were at work?

DA: Yes, yes, so I call my mother at night or something like that.

KF: I'm going to shut it off for a minute.

DA: Okay. Who would I trade places with? I wouldn't trade places with anyone. I can't think of a job that would suit me better than this one does. This is integral to my life, it's not separate from. Anyone in the Forest Service, drive around in a pickup truck and tell people they can't camp there, no, I wouldn't like that. Sit in the dispatch office all day with no windows depending on the lookouts to be the eyes, I wouldn't want that one. No, I like this. I can't imagine that I would ever. You know, it's like, it's like going back and

being seventeen again. You wouldn't do it for anything, although a couple of years ago I saw a photograph of myself at seventeen and I thought, oh, that was a pretty face. There was no experience in it, no knowledge, no learning, but I was pretty. I wouldn't be seventeen again for anything but I wouldn't mind looking seventeen. And the next morning when I got up I had a pimple. [Laughter] No, I wouldn't want, my radio is acting up, that's why I'm pausing. I wouldn't want any other job anymore than I'd go back to being seventeen again. This is perfect. One of our lookouts said I'd do this for just nothing if they'd buy my food.

KF: That's probably not a good thing to tell them.

DA: No, you notice I didn't mention the name.

KF: What I want to do is I want to change the tape because this next question—

[Beginning of Tape 2]

DA: Yeah, I think you're right. It's moving more to the north than this direction. But it's also developing into dark clouds right overhead.

KF: Oh, goody. [Laughter]

DA: Yeah. I think that's more likely to hit town than it is us. And look how broad it is, all the way across. We might get some of that down there instead of up here.

KF: How has being a lookout shaped who you have become and what you've accomplished?

DA: I have time to think and writing is a form of thinking. That's an ultimate luxury, isn't it, to have time? [Radio buzzing] I wish the radio would stop that. And in that thinking I've changed. I've time to sit up here and knit and make lists for myself. One year I thought Buddhist Fivefold Path was not adequate for me and I made up my own, which was useful. What do I think the proper steps are toward enlightenment, that kind of self indulgence, and as a result, I think I'm a nicer person. I'm more understanding. I certainly take a longer view physically and doing all this writing about history I have a longer view of humanity; granted it's only a hundred years but, or a hundred and fifty. That's good too. You need to develop compassion, acceptance, understanding. You keep asking me good questions that I hadn't considered before.

KF: Does having this job make you want to live longer, like two hundred years old or something?

DA: Oh, yes, there's so much yet to do. Even just doing the history of Flagstaff, which only dates from 1880, there are another twenty books out of that, the way I'm doing them, the fiction and the history. I'm very happy up here, happy in a physical sense, happy in my chest, and that certainly makes me more interested in living longer than

teaching high school did. I was periodically suicidal when I was teaching high school but here life seems to me just a treasure.

KF: I'm curious about how, and you don't have to answer this, how do you manage to have a marriage in a job like this?

DA: It worked out very well when he was Forest Service patrol, very well because I knew where he'd been during the day and he saw aspects of it that I didn't. He'd come home and I could say what was that going on out there, and there were a lot of good stories that came out of that. Now he's stationed in Phoenix and comes up every couple of weeks but we talk on the phone every night, which is another thing for which I'm grateful to have a cell phone. And I thought of the kind of person I would like to have up here in a lightning storm. My first thought, of course, was somebody who had never had the experience and was so self confident they needed to be humbled a little bit. But I think I would want someone who would see the wonder of it, the excitement, who would love it, instead of someone who would just think that he wanted to get out, so I withdraw George Bush. [Laughter]

KF: You're making me wail.

DA: Don't make the camera woman laugh. That storm is a good twenty miles wide. Oh, we're going to have so much fun.

KF: Why don't you tell us some animal stories.

DA: You want another hummingbird story?

KF: Yeah.

DA: One evening just about sunset I heard a splashing sound in the rain barrel outside and I went out and there was a little hummingbird that couldn't get out. It was in the water and the water was heavy on it's feathers it couldn't get out so I dipped it out and took it back into the cabin and patted it dry with a washcloth and blew on it to warm it up and took it to the door and it flew back to my shoulder. The sun had gone down by then and I put my hand up and it flew over and landed on my knuckle and stayed there all night, this tiny thing with its {thready 8:22} little feet. So I managed to get ready for bed and I got into bed, turned over at night, got up the next morning and it just stayed there and looked at me. They have rather large eyes for the size of the bird. And opened the door and held my hand up and it flew away into the sunrise. I've told people the story and they say, well, I just can't believe that, but I was there, I knew.

I see things up here I wouldn't see hiking I think. Once after hours I was walking with the dog down the forest road and dog ran over with the ears up and looked down and I got there just right after that and there was a frozen tableau, the dog, a doe with a fawn and another doe looking back up at the dog and at me. We all stayed there for a minute looking at each other and then the separate doe began to trot very slowly away. Well, the

dog followed the moving deer and the other deer and her baby stood there very quietly while the dog ran right past them and once the dog was passed they turned and went off in the other direction. Obvious cooperation and I thought who's the smartest animal here? Not the dog! [Laughter] They decoyed him right past.

But the only animal up here that I don't like to have much connection with is humans, specifically men who come alone. I had a man who stood right there in the tower one day and pointed his pocketknife at me and rubbed his finger back and forth across the blade, smiling all the time, with eyes as blank as a doll's. I said put it away. There was a moment there when he was deciding what to do and he folded it and put it back in his pocket. Since then I haven't let men alone come into the tower. I'm very sexist about it. [Laughter] But if they bring their wives and children they're welcome to come up and in, except for the man once. I heard voices coming up through the oak trees. When I looked down it was a man with a little girl maybe six or so and I was leaning on the tower with the window looking down. She looked up and I waved down at her and she waved at me and her father didn't notice. And all the way up the tower stairs he was talking and talking and talking and talking and sometimes you get lucky and there's a ranger up there and they'll let you come in. He never stopped talking. She never said a word. They got to the top landing and I opened the trap door and I said she can come in. I brought her in and closed the door on him. She and I had a wonderful time up here. I showed her how to use the fire finder and let her use the binoculars and then I let her go back and join her father. But I didn't want a man in there who talked all the time. I had a better time with the little girl.

KF: What about what we're seeing right now, this monsoon thing? Tell us about it.

DA: At first the word bothered me because I'd always thought of monsoon as being India. But it's a seasonal weather pattern. Here it's the heat of the southwest and moisture that comes up from the Gulf of Mexico, invisible, and often moisture that comes up from Baja, California. They rise as they approach the rim and sometimes converge and all of this, air is invisible unless there's something in it and in this case it's moisture that condenses, that rises all the way up here to the height of the peaks and then it starts to rain. Often you don't see anything in it until it gets there and tiny clouds will develop and grow out of nothing. It's not that the clouds move in. It's the moisture moves in but the clouds develop over the peaks and move out from there and often don't stop doing that until the weather patterns hundreds of miles away are finished.

KF: Tell us about the lightning.

DA: Oh, lightning, lightning strikes. Lightning has struck the tower here once and drilled a hole in the roof. But it doesn't, that's the first hole that was ever drilled in the roof in all the years the tower has been up here since 1936. Usually the lightning will strike and it goes down somewhere else. I've seen lightning strike the cabin right there which was far more impressive because it was just twenty feet away from me. Lighting strike trees around. Sometimes a tree will explode in a fireball and I think hot dog! And nothing happens; there's no smoke, no flame, it doesn't burn. So I'll see maybe twenty lightning

strikes around and only one of them will develop into a fire and they probably all have hit trees.

KF: Good story.

DA: Thank you.

KF: Tell me about the glow of the lightning patterns.

DA: Ah, it's like a bright halo all the way around. I don't see the bolt of lightning, I just see the light around me and a huge noise. It's very loud when the lightning strikes.

KF: Do you get special powers after that?

DA: [Laughter] I haven't thought about that but I bet if I concentrated maybe I could develop something here. That's an idea.

KF: I think I should go down and film that plaque.

DA: Oh, okay.

KF: Maybe one more shot of the peaks because they're covered with—

DA: Rain.

KF: Rain. In fact, you can't see them.

DA: Oh.

KF: There's smoke over here. Sorry, people that are going to be listening to this. There's Donna in front of her little house.

DA: Do you want to see some more of my resident wildlife?

KF: Yeah. Do we have to walk away from here?

DA: Well, you could come over here and film some of the ladybugs.

KF: Tell me about the ladybugs.

DA: They're beetles, carnivorous beetles. They bite. I speak from experience. And we're having this year a tremendous explosion of ladybug beetle populations. Look in here.

KF: Oh, my God. Tell us about the ladybugs again.

DA: They're everywhere. There are millions and part of them are in your house. They're cute one at a time but not when you have this many. Sometimes at the end of the day it takes me an hour and a half to sweep the ladybugs out of the cabin before I want to start doing dinner. And you're getting them all over you.

KF: Oh, that's disgusting.

DA: [Laughter] Yes, yes it is.