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## Watching fires, years roll by from Hogback

By Silandara Skydancer  
Staff writer

What is the last of its kind in Jackson County but of supreme importance to us all?

The Hogback Mountain fire tower.

R.C. Cole and his wife Ruth have been manning the Toxaway fire tower on Hogback Mountain for the past 28 years. They live beside the tower at 4,777 feet elevation.

Each day R.C. climbs up the tower's many steps to watch for fires while Ruth creates angels and other crafts and listens to the scanners, a job R.C. doesn't envy. "All the people talking at once can drive you crazy," he said.

R.C. Cole has been manning fire towers since he was 17 years old in the early 1940s. He once visited a friend who worked in a fire tower and became hooked on the job.

His first job was in a fire tower in the Great Smoky Mountain National Park where he had to tell them that he was 18 in order to be hired. Since that time, he has manned several towers in the Great Smoky Mountain National Park, and since 1971 has been at his post on Hogback Mountain.

The fire tower is a long way up, and even though Cole says that he once manned a tower with three extra flights, it's still quite a climb. But from the

top, the view is spectacular. On a clear day, you can see all the way from Mount Mitchell and Looking Glass Knob to the northeast to Lake Jocassee and Lake Hartwell to the south. Whiteside mountain is one of the closer mountain crests.

Once in the tower, Cole scans for fires. He can tell a controlled burn from a wildfire with a glance. The smoke from a controlled burn rises up in one place. "If it starts spreading out, it's got away from them," said Cole. A wildfire sends smoke out over a spread-out area.

Life has changed somewhat since R.C. and Ruth moved to Hogback Mountain. A gravel road used to be the only way from the highway all the way up to the tower. Now there is a paved one to two-lane road for all but the last mile.

A lot of property has been developed in the area in the last three decades, but it doesn't bother Cole.

What he finds most disturbing is the groups of young men who used to come up to the tower at two or three in the morning and drink and holler while climbing the tower to see what they could see. A high fence with restricted signs was erected about 12 years ago to deter such activity. For the most part, it has been successful.

The fire tower was built in 1934 and is bisected, by coin-



R.C. Cole on the job.

idence, by the Transylvania and Jackson county line.

It is fast becoming the last of its kind. Already, there are only a few manned fire towers left in western North Carolina.

The towers at Cowee Bald in Franklin County, Chambers Mountain in Haywood and Joanna Bald in Graham County are the only other manned fire towers in this region.

The fire towers used to be open eight months of the year from Oct. 1 through the end of May. They are now only open four months during fire season - from Feb. 15 to May 15.

Cole said that the towers have been closed and days cut back due to lack of money.

"They're talking about closing the rest of them except this one here," he said.

The thought worries him.

"Up here in the mountains, there are a lot of places nobody can see but from these towers," he said. "When it's dry, a fire can spread before you know it."

What will replace these manned fire towers?

"That's a good question," Cole said. Then he opened the hatch in the floor and climbed back down the 62 steps of his tower.