

# HOW I CAME TO INDEX

By Neil Carroll

*Editor's note: we have asked our Index locals to tell the story of how they came to Index. Neil shares his:*

My first awareness of the town of Index was in 1954 when I worked for the U.S. Forest Service as the lookout on Heybrook Ridge above the town. Although one couldn't see the town from the lookout, I was aware of its presence down at the base of the ridge. Thus commenced what turned out to be a 60+ year affair with the Index-Skykomish River region.

In the summer of 1954 I was a very young, inexperienced, skinny kid, 18 years old. I had just finished my freshman year at the UW, after emigrating from the dry lands of eastern Washington to the wet, green, lush region of western Washington and the Cascades. I had applied for a summer job with the U.S. Forest Service district in Skykomish. Summer jobs were scarce that year and I had little hope of landing one with the USFS, no experience or anything, but at the urging of a friend from high school I applied. Much to my surprise and joy, I received a reply in the mail that I was being offered a job in the Skykomish District as a fire lookout for the summer. I was completely blown over! In 1954 the job of fire lookout was to me about the equivalent of being offered a job as an astronaut (there were no astronauts in 1954) - very adventuresome, challenging, about as great as it could be to an 18-year-old kid.

I reported to the Skykomish District in early June. John Sarginson was the District Ranger, the "big boss." Norm McCausland was his assistant and the direct supervisor of the fire crews and lookouts. The entire crew of personnel in Skykomish was about 20-30 if my memory is correct. Many of us lived in a bunkhouse on the USFS compound in Skykomish.

The crew attended fire school near Mt. Rainier for a week, where we learned to operate a fire finder and run a lookout station along with elements of firefighting. After fire school we returned to Skykomish. The summer of 1954 was extremely wet and cool early on, so we didn't man our stations right away. Rather we cleared trails and



*Fire Lookout team using a Osbourne Fire Finder  
photo courtesy of University of Washington digital archives.*

maintained the old wire phone lines which were considered the primary means of communication at that time by the USFS. Two-way radios, military surplus, were just coming into widespread use. During this time, I remember learning how to climb poles and trees with spike climbers on my boots and a climber's belt. I also learned how to make a telephone line splice using a special tool.

After a couple of weeks on this work, mostly in the rain and wet, the weather turned better so I was sent out to my post on the Heybrook lookout. Norm McCausland went with me to show me the "ropes." We hiked up the trail from Highway 2, the same one that is in use today. It was more of an informal trail in those days. After the short hike from the highway (it did seem short and easy to me then at age 18) we came to the base of the tower. As we climbed up the several flights of stairs to the top, more and more of the magnificent mountain scenery came into view. Mt. Index and Mt. Persis, Bridal Veil Falls to the south, Mt. Baring and the Gunn Peaks to the east. They all seemed so close, so big and so beautiful. And this was going to be my home for the next 2-3 months or so! It was unbelievable to this kid from the dry wheat fields of eastern Washington.

I believe that the tower was considerably lower then, perhaps 30-50 feet or so. The lookout was in the midst of a huge logged-off area and the second growth trees were thick but still not as tall as the lookout house. Eventually, I was told, the lookout would have to be raised or perhaps abandoned as the trees would grow up and obscure the view. I believe that the lookout was raised to its present height in the 1960's using a helicopter to lift the house from the tower and then place it back after the tower was extended.

After Norm McCausland left and headed back to Skykomish, I continued to get settled in and familiarized with my new home and important landmarks. Contact with the Ranger Station and other lookouts in the district was by two-way FM radios, battery powered. There was an old telephone line, supposedly down and broken, connected to the North Fork Guard Station on the Index-Galena Road about a mile above the turn-off into town. The actual guard station building is long gone, but the property where it once stood is right behind the large U.S. Forest Service sign on the east side of the road. At the time I first occupied the Heybrook lookout the station was not manned. Just to experiment with the old crank-style telephone, the first night I was on the lookout I gave it a good crank which would ring the bell on the other end and picked up the ear piece to listen. To this day I'm not sure what exactly happened, but I'm sure that I heard a weak voice on the line say "hello, what do you want". After that, nothing. The telephone line was supposedly down and broken and no one was in the guard station. I tried a couple more times to make contact with whoever was at the other end of the line, to no avail. The phone line never was repaired that summer and our primary communication in the district was by two-way radios.

The summer of 1954 was a very damp, rainy and cool period. The fire danger was very low all summer. One of my duties as a lookout was to record weather data and keep a log book of my observations. I distinctly remember that there was not a single ten-day period in the entire summer that did not have measurable rain.

As a result of the low fire danger I was often called down off the lookout to perform various work projects around the district. It was during one of these periods when I actually visited the town of Index. I distinctly remember the General Store, the Tavern



*Heybrook Lookout photo from Google photos.*

and the Bush House (I don't think it was a hotel then, perhaps a rooming house). I was impressed by the nice houses, well-kept streets and yards. It was really a nice little town, in my memory. One of our work projects was up the North Fork Road which is now called the Index-Galena Road. The project was to locate, brush out and paint all of the section line survey markers along the road. These were placed along the road where a section line crossed the road. They were marked with a little tack showing where you were with respect to the survey grid. (There was no GPS in those days, only maps.) In the heavy, fast-growing brush of western Washington these survey markers (posts about six feet high) were usually difficult to locate. Trying to figure out which side of the road, how far from the road, as well as banks and boulders along the road, all made location difficult. When we found one, we brushed it out to make it visible from the road, splashed some USFS standard gray paint on it (with a good deal of spattering on us!) and proceeded up the road.

I don't think there were any fires that summer in the Skykomish District. The next summer, 1955, I worked as a lookout on Evergreen Mountain, closer to Skykomish, so I had little reason to visit Index.

In the summer of 1957 I landed a job with the Bureau of Mines in Seattle sampling and mapping old mines in the Cascade Mountains. One of the areas we worked in was the Silver Creek mining district, about 10 miles up the North Fork of the Skykomish from Index. Consequently, I visited Index many times that summer, buying food and supplies in the General Store, having a beer after a hot day in the field in the Tavern (I was of legal age by then). My impressions of the town were still favorable, nice little town, great scenery, good location.

The next summer, 1958, was also spent working for the Bureau of Mines, often in the Index, Silver Creek and Monte Cristo areas. In 1959 I graduated from the University of Washington and moved to California to pursue my career in oil exploration. Over the next 20 years or so I did visit Washington on many occasions for vacations, going on hiking trips and back-packing with my son Michael. We would drive up the North Fork and Silver Creek and I'd show him some of the areas that I had worked in 20 years earlier.

Many times, in my lengthy career as a geologist, moving about the country, traveling and working, when I'd get frustrated and rushed, I'd say to my wife, Janis (who passed away in 2012), "I

think I should quit my job and we should settle in Index." She would reply "I'm basically a city girl, I like Index but I wouldn't want to live there permanently. You can go there if you like, just send me the check in Seattle."

As I got closer to retirement, we realized that our desire was to settle somewhere in western Washington, near the Seattle area. So, in the summer of 1986, Janis traveled to Washington from our home in the New York area to look for a place to retire to in a few years. She looked at many places in the Cascade foothills, from Issaquah to Monroe and beyond. After a couple of weeks of this she called to tell me that she had found the "perfect place in you'll never guess where." When I asked where, she said "Index, and I know you'll love the place. It's got everything, river-front, lots of space, a modern year-round house that I like."

So, I flew out to Seattle in the next week or so and, after looking at a few other possibilities, we came to Index and the place Janis liked. It was a beautiful western Washington day and I was really taken by the beautiful setting and scenery of the place. After a little discussion we made an offer, a brief negotiation with the realtor, and we made a deal to buy the place. I think that was one of the smartest things I ever did. The Index place has given me and my family so much happiness and joy over the past 30 years that it was worth many times over the purchase price.

As my little family has grown to include a granddaughter, her husband (and maybe sometime in the future, her children) I am so glad that we settled in Index. Everyone in the family really likes the place and the town and loves to stay here, kick back and relax with the river running by and the Wall looming on the skyline.

I have been most fortunate to have reconnected with a former professional colleague, Roseann, and to have married her five years ago. She is an Idaho-Montana woman with a Washington background. She took to the Index place and the town immediately and loves it here. I feel truly blessed that she likes the place and the town as much as I do.

## Intro to Index Stories

The Index Wall newspaper is looking for your story for a new column. Two easy questions:

1. How/when did you first come to Index, and decide to call it home?
2. What keeps you here (or perhaps what do you love about it)?

Please share your story, it is a valuable part of our shared history. It can be short or long.

Invite your family members and neighbors to tell their experience too. They may be new or long-time residents, young or old, but chances are they have an interesting take on what it means to live here.

Send it to Sabrina at  
sabinagrafton@hotmail.com.

The Wall Editors will select one or two each month or so to publish in the paper.

**HAPPY VALENTINE'S DAY**