

On guard for fires:

She climbs into the clouds

By RUTH WALSH
News-Topic Correspondent

If you want a change from the ordinary, and you don't mind heights, go to work with Dorothy Dellinger.

To get to her workplace, you'll have to climb 100 steps. When you reach the top of the Hibriten Mountain watchtower, you'll be at an elevation of 2,600 feet.

Dellinger is the watchtower keeper during fire seasons in spring and fall. As tower keeper, Dellinger walks regularly up and down the wooden steps into often gusty winds.

The watchtower is centrally located in the district. From its windows, Dellinger and any brave visitors can see sections of Burke, Alexander, Wilkes, Avery and Watauga counties.

"I work for the State Forest Service," she said. "My work lasts for six months out of the year, depending on the length of the drought season.

"When there's a fire, we all work together — forest rangers and volunteer crewmen. The volunteers have other jobs and are all dedicated people."

Dellinger sometimes communicates with rangers and volunteers by two-way radio.

"If I can't reach the rangers by telephone, I use radio."

In the high outpost, windows on each side give her a panoramic sweep of the countryside.

"This work requires much concentration. I scan with binoculars. Fall is my favorite time. All seems peaceful and quiet below and I love the multicolors of the trees.

'When you get up in a firetower and see how many trees and how much land we have, it's a beautiful feeling.'

Dorothy Dellinger

"In the spring I feel that I should be at home housecleaning."

The view is spectacular, she agrees, but sometimes it is easy to forget when a fire sparks.

"Sometimes everything is perfect and we don't have a fire. Then, suddenly we have three or four going. These are stress times. We absolutely feel responsible for the whole county..."

Dellinger has worked at the tower since October, 1972. Although she had never had any similar experience, she put in her application for the job when she heard about an opening.

"I didn't know if they would hire a woman for a job like that or not." She found out there was a woman employed in a tower in Alexander County.

"I don't know if they have ever had a lady working at the tower."

Work in the tower is demanding.

"I get mentally tired. Working four hours up there is like eight hours on the ground."

"When I go to the tower to

work, I have to take everything with me I'll need all day. I'll repeat that walking up or down is no easy task; going up saps your energy.

"It's often cold and windy. When the wind really gusts, it's like sea waves and you just don't come down."

Is she ever afraid?

"I don't get scared but it takes a lot of nerve to do this work. On a windy day I feel like the tower is taking off. It's so terribly cold and windy at times, I can hardly hear the radio."

Dellinger said the Forest Service has its own service directory and utilizes different codes.

She uses maps, a state radio and various measurement equipment to zero in on the location of a fire.

"There are two types of fires: loose fires and controlled fires. When there's a loose fire, I call the county ranger. He or his assistant go and check it. They call me back. If there's a need, I call in extra help.

She recalled a bad fire that broke out near Valdese on a Good Friday. "We were under great strain and stress.

"When there's a controlled fire, I report it to the rangers.

"They have to check every smoke and advise people to put them out."

But all in all, she says, working at the tower is rewarding.

"When you get up in a firetower and see how many trees and how much land we have, it's a beautiful feeling. Looking out over the ranges makes you realize fire control is very important."