

Kelso Legacy

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The legacy of Minnesota's Wilderness Fire Towers lives on in the Boundary Waters Canoe Area Wilderness (BWCA). The towers are gone but the trails to those towers remain. The paths to Angleworm, Arrow, Kekekabic, Sioux River, Kelso Mountain and Norway became part of longer wilderness hiking trails.

Consider the trail to Kelso Mountain. This unique trail requires wilderness travel both by canoe and by foot. The trip can be completed in one easy day.



A visitor begins at the public Forest Service landing on Sawbill Lake. Prepare for 2 short portages, 5 miles of paddling and a 1 ¼ mile hike.

Often in the BWCA the visitor must carry, or portage, the canoe and gear over a path between two lakes to continue the journey. The portage from Sawbill to Alton Lake measures 30 rods or 495 feet. The second portage from Alton to Kelso measures 10 rods or 165 feet. By tradition maps report the lengths of canoe country

portages in rods (16.5 feet), an old surveyors' measure.

A 1 ¼ mile walk brings the hiker to the top of Kelso Mountain. (Please note! 'Mountain' in Minnesota designates a mere 2100 to 2301 foot elevation.)

In her book "Sawbill: History and Tales", Mary Hansen sketches some construction details of the Kelso Mountain Tower.

Ranger Leslie S. Bear hired Horace Stickney -- a logger, shop owner in Schroeder and later county commissioner -- to help him haul the 100-foot steel tower sections to Kelso Lake. Stickney, an expert in handling horses, dragged the steel sections of the tower nine miles to the site. The General Logging Railroad delivered the sections as close to Kelso Mountain as possible. Mr. Stickney moved the materials in January which allowed him to use the frozen lakes as ice roads. This operation probably occurred in January of 1927 and took 10 days. (Sawbill, pg 209).

Julius Baske first staffed the tower as lookout man. For many years Vivian Johnson of Schroeder, a small town on the shore of Lake Superior, served as tower lookout. Vivian hauled in all her own supplies. She canoed across Sawbill Lake and portaged into Alton Lake. She then loaded supplies back into the canoe, crossed Alton and made the shorter portage into Kelso Lake. Once across Kelso, at the trailhead, she would carry her load the 1 ¼ miles to her cabin next to the 100 foot tower.

Railroad portages aided Vivian's efforts. Steel rails laid to a narrow gauge on ties supported a wooden box on iron wheels. The user loaded supplies, boat or canoe on the 'cart' and pulled it with a rope



along the rails over the portage. These railroad portages have long since disappeared although a discerning eye can still find signs of them.

I hiked to the Kelso Mountain site in July of 2009. I found the often photographed outhouse with oddly gabled roof. Rot has opened the floor to the pit below. Visitors had arranged various artifacts around the hole in the outhouse bench. Other debris remains on site: metal oil drum bed springs, metal storage box. I found only the anchor pads of the old tower.

It appears the rangers brought down these wilderness towers with charges attached to the legs. When toppled, they disassembled the structure as best they could and pulled the pieces back into the brush. What took teams of horses 10 days to deliver, the Forest Service rangers where not about to haul out on their backs. Wilderness legislation forbids anything as modern and mechanical as helicopters.

I searched for the metal at Kelso, but the July foliage and thick brush hid them well. I have found the old towers at other BWCAW tower sites.

The summit of



Kelso Mountain provides no grand view of the surrounding wilderness forest. Trees and brush now obscure any view on the relatively flat topped hill. Perhaps this absence of a spectacular view explains the reluctance to promote this trail.

However, a glorious splash of flowers called Sweet William, in full bloom, greeted me that early July afternoon in 2009 as I crested the hill. They grew profusely from cracks in a large expanse of bare rock.

"Sweet William," Mary Hansen muses in her book, "are sometimes the only remnant of an old homestead." They remind us of neighbors gone.

This old fire tower site contains a few other reminders of human habitation: a bear-clawed outhouse, deteriorating cans, a rusty bedspring, and empty oil barrel mostly hidden in the brush. Scraps of civilization still remain at this spot in the Canoe Wilderness, but none as beautiful as the flowers. Luckily I visited the site during the height of their blooming season.

Rangers dismantled the tower, burnt the Lookout Tender's cabin to aid return to wilderness but after 50 years the flowers continue to bloom.

During a quiet time sitting among the flowers eating lunch, I imagined the summer life of Vivian Johnson, who by day watched for smoke from the tower, and by night slept in the small cabin at its foot miles from civilization in a road less wilderness.

Volunteers struggle to keep this trail open. The Forest Service has removed this trail from their list of active trails and is reluctant to return the designation.

President Clinton approved this trail as a Community Millennium Trail in January of 2001. The petition nominating the trail for this designation argues that the

Kelso Mountain Trail 'connects people to their land, their history, and their culture.'

Although the Forest Service has not returned Kelso Mountain to its list of designated trails, I found the trail well maintained in the summer of 2009. Volunteers, under the guidance of the Forest Service, help keep this old 'tower trail' open.

Further, a further mystery awaits the Kelso visitor. Across the stream from the Kelso trailhead the visitor will see a dolmen-like object. A large boulder, 4 to 5 feet tall and 8 feet long rests on three smaller stones elevated off the rock ledge beneath. Some maintain the last glacier dropped it on its dainty rock feet. A Minnesota Department of Natural Resources archeologist, Doug George, however, says it is not a glacial errant but a 'culturally placed rock'. (Angela



Anderson) Others suggest the Vikings left it as a monument to their visit or perhaps a navigational aid in the 5th century. (Hunt for the Viking Dolmen) Still others suggest the Ojibwe, Sioux or even earlier cultures created it.

Me? Of course I really don't know for sure, but I wonder. I

wonder about a woman, assigned to the Kelso Lookout, perhaps with mischievous, energetic and bored children visiting. The low fire condition lets her step down from her duties. She has tended the flowers, swept the cabin clean, and the fish refuse to bite. She looks across the stream at the large boulder on that ledge across the water and the smaller stones as the youngsters beg for something to do! I wonder

1. Visit to Kelso Mountain: an [Illustrated Map](#)
2. Map of current and former [Minnesota Fire Towers](#)
2. Hiking the Boundary Waters: [the Kelso Mountain Trail](#)
3. Sawbill: History and Tales, Mary Alice Hansen, [Sawbill Press](#), 4620 Sawbill Trail, Tofte, MN 55617, 2005
4. [Proposal to USFS](#) to reopen the Kelso Mountain Trail
5. [Return the Kelso Mountain Trail](#) to the USFS inventory
6. [Document log](#)
7. [BWAC continues to advocate](#) for the return of the 1.25-mile Kelso Mountain Trail to the Forest Service inventory.
8. Kelso River Route: The [Hunt for the Viking Dolmen](#)
9. [Hike to Kelso Mountain](#) via the Kelso River, October 2000, By Angela Anderson, Minnesota DNR