

# Hand Lake hike includes a lesson in history

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There is more than one way to get to Hand Lake, and the first time I visited the site, it was near the end of a 10-mile hike. Today's version is a lot shorter and much more direct. The quickest in-and-out version is only about a mile round trip. For this hike, however, we took an interesting historical side trip around the lake for what was still a relatively short hike of about three miles.

The Hand Lake Trailhead is just a half hour from Sisters over McKenzie Pass. The trail plunges almost immediately into the southern edge of the Mt. Washington Wilderness, where the hiker experiences a dense, lush, mixed evergreen forest, complete with babbling brook ... and mosquitoes.

This a pretty flat trail that mostly trends slightly downhill on the way in. There are a number of downed trees across the trails on this hike that have not been cleared. After about a half mile, the trail reaches the Hand Lake Shelter, a rustic three-sided old structure open on the north side. Looking east from this spot, the very top of Mt.

Washington is visible above the lake and one of the many lava flows common to this area.

For this hike's walk back into history, continue to follow the trail north across the meadow and up a short rise to a well-signed trail junction. The trail signs are new and attractive but not very helpful, because all three directions point toward some variation of "Hand Lake." In any event, turn right (east) and follow the trail along and above the north shore of the lake.

Within about another half mile, the trail has reached beyond the lake and follows along the edge of the lava flow. The soil is very sandy here. Continue east, and the trail suddenly leaves the sand and takes off up a short incline. When the trail levels out again, keep a sharp eye out for a wide, flat passage on the right, carved across the lava flow. This is where the history lesson begins.

Nearly a century and a half ago, John Templeton Craig hacked and carved a primitive road through this country; and this slot through the lava was part of it — a segment that he carved out by hand.

Craig was an Oregon

pioneer in the truest sense of the word. He came to Oregon in 1852 and was a part of the Scott expedition in 1862 that ushered in a new era of travel between the Willamette Valley and Central Oregon. Although the Scott crossing of the Cascades was ostensibly a success, Craig would spend the next 10 years of his life seeking a better route.

Where others repeatedly failed, he finally succeeded in 1872. As president of The McKenzie Salt Springs and Deschutes Wagon Road Company, he completed a road over what is now McKenzie Pass. His historic road connected the Eugene area with what is now Sisters Country. The route he chose across this lava field was several hundred feet lower in elevation than Scott's route.

With the establishment of the Camp Polk Post Office near what is now Sisters, Craig was granted the mail carrying contract from Craig's Bridge to Camp Polk. His quest to faithfully deliver the Christmas mail in 1877 would cost him his life in a winter storm. In 1930, the Oregon Rural Letter Carriers Association erected a memorial to Craig at the site of his tomb, which can be visited



PHOTO BY CRAIG F. EISENBEIS

The summit of Mt. Washington can be seen above Hand Lake from the Hand Lake Shelter.

along the McKenzie Highway on the way to this hike, two miles west of the summit.

After crossing Craig's road through the lava field, we completed this hike by


simply turning right (west) and following the margin of the lava flow back to the lake.

There isn't an "official" trail

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