

Walk the Santiam Wagon Road and South Santiam River

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This is one of those places I've driven by hundreds of times (literally) and have never taken the time to stop. Whether on the way to Corvallis or the coast, I'm always in a hurry. I've seen the signs on Highway 20 and figured that, one of these days, I would stop — but I never did.

Finally, I decided to dedicate a trip just to check out the Old Santiam Wagon Road just a few minutes beyond Tombstone Pass. Most everyone who reads this column has hiked the Iron Mountain and Cone Peak Trails; but I wonder how many people, who — like me — have failed to go just a bit farther to hike this gem of forest trail.

The wagon road trail runs for almost 20 miles along the "newer" highway and can be accessed at various points. Today, however, we will focus on a round-trip of a 2.5-mile stretch at the lower end of this trail system. I actually hiked this trail in July but held off on submitting this article because Highway 20 has been closed for repairs for the last several weeks. Now that the highway is open again, it is time to think about this very nice little hike.

We parked at the lower end of the trail system, just above (east) of what used to be the Mountain House but is now a private residence. Back when the Santiam Wagon Road was in operation, it was a four-day trip from Albany to Sisters, and the first stop was at the site of the Mountain House. The second overnight stop was at Fish Lake, just west of the Santiam summit. The third stop was in the Cache Creek area, with Sisters the destination at the end of the fourth day.

There isn't a fancy trail-head sign or other information to mark the beginning of this outing. However, as soon as the Mountain House comes into view west of milepost 53, it's time to look for a pullout on the left (south) side of the road. There is a locked, green metal gate, a grassy area that will accommodate a few cars, and an excellent bridge across the South Santiam River.

Once across the bridge to the other side of the river, the trail — leading upstream — is clearly marked. This is a very well-maintained single-track trail that trends gradually uphill, as the route heads

upstream. The much wider historic roadbed, which the trail follows, is quite obvious as it makes its way through the forest.

At this point in the hike, it is clear that the area was logged sometime in the last century; and, today, the predominant trees are towering big-leaf maples draped with thick layers of moss. The principal understory shrub here is salal. With greener, larger, and more succulent leaves than the snowbrush and manzanita that we see here on the east side of the mountains, salal is common on the forest floors of the west side of the Cascades.

It was a warm day, but still quite pleasant under the dense forest canopy. There was some road noise along the way, but most of it was drowned out by the sounds of the river. Our goal on this day was to reach House Rock Campground, another of those frequently passed-by landmarks along this stretch of Highway 20.

As the trail heads upstream, the character of the forest begins to change somewhat. Specifically, some very large, grand old conifers begin to appear; and there are some magnificent old-growth firs in excess of six feet in diameter.

As the trail approaches House Rock Campground at a signed trail junction, a

spur trail to the left leaves the wagon road on its way to the campground. We followed that trail and crossed the river again on another nice bridge and found a well-maintained county park campground. Next, we crossed back over the bridge and followed the signs toward House Rock Falls, a distance of 0.3 mile, according to the sign.

On the way to House Rock Falls, the trail skirts along between the river and a giant rock that is as big as, well ... a house. There appears to be a small cave in the rock; but, in fact, a small spring has eroded the underlying soil, and what you are really looking up at is the bottom of the giant boulder itself!

We followed the signs to the falls and ate lunch near one of several scenic pools, one of which my friend felt compelled to jump into. We departed the falls via the same trail, but then took a fork onto another signed trail spur that eventually completed a loop bringing us back onto the Santiam Wagon Road for our return trip back down the original trail, upon which we began this hike.

This was a very easy, pleasant, riverside hike of about 5 miles in a beautiful forest; and we never saw another soul on the trail, except in the vicinity of the campground. To enjoy



PHOTO BY CRAIG F. EISENBEIS

This trail along the South Santiam River follows the Old Santiam Wagon Road through a lush westside forest a few miles beyond Tombstone Pass.

this hike, take Highway 20 west from Sisters, and stay (left) on Highway 20 at the Santiam "Y." Ignore the subsequent turnoff to Eugene

and continue straight on Highway 20 over Tombstone Pass. This hike begins about 10 miles beyond the pass summit.

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