

Life *in the* Valley

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From wasteland to forest: State park celebrates history

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APPEAL TRIBUNE

The park is the largest in Oregon. Sprawled on 9,200 acres of undulating, wooded landscape, Silver Falls State Park, just east of Salem, has gained notoriety for its “Trail of 10 Falls,” miles of paved trails and recreational buildings.

But as volunteers and staff noted during the seventh annual Historic Silver Falls Day, without the devotion of an intrepid photographer and 200 workers from the Great Depression-induced Civilian Conservation Corps, Oregon’s largest state park might never have existed.

Harvested land

“Back in the 20s and 30s, people just didn’t come up here,” recounted Sharon Lowrie, the park host.

The park almost didn’t receive forest protection. The verdant land, entrenched in the sloped hills of the Cascade Mountains, became a prime destination for the Silverton Lumber Co., which by 1913 had hauled 125,000,000 feet of logs to its Silverton Mill, reducing most of the area to stumps. The area was also ravaged by the Silverton Forest Fire, which in 1865 burned an estimated 1 million acres.

Then, Silver Falls found its own Ansel Adams: June Drake, a Silverton photographer who fought to preserve the area in the early 1900s.

Given the damage to the land, it was disqualified from consideration as a national park.

Undaunted, Drake gathered support from local business, chambers of commerce and the Oregon Highway Commission, until finally, on April 2, 1931, the Oregon State Park Commission deputized the first parcel of land into the Oregon State Park system.

During the Saturday celebration, little of the logging and wildfire past could be seen.

Lowrie says the Friends of Silver Falls and park rangers run a busy system of conservation: picking up garbage, maintaining the trails and 1,000-spot parking lots, and updating the old facilities.

“We’re trying to maintain it for generations to come,” Lowrie said.

The densely forested area is now filled with ferns, Douglas firs, Western hemlocks, vine maples, red cedars -- and songbirds, nesting in the branches of the moss-covered trees.

It is also chock full of another factor -- crowds -- something volunteers and staff attribute to another unique part of the forest’s history: the work of the Civilian Conservation Corps.



Tony Hendricks, of Sublimity, leads a draft horse logging demonstration during the seventh annual Historic Silver Falls Day at Silver Falls State Park on Saturday. June Drake, a Silverton photographer, fought to preserve the area in the early 1900s.

PHOTOS BY ANNA REED/STATESMAN JOURNAL

Civilian Conservation Corps

Even after the Silver Falls area was deputized into the parks system, the land remained largely undeveloped.

Then, in 1935, the area received the aid of 200 workers from the Civilian Conservation Corps, a program started by President Roosevelt to create jobs during the Depression. According to the Department of Forestry Forest History Center, CCC involvement in the state park wasn’t an isolated event. Many of Oregon’s lookout towers, guard stations and new tree groves were implemented by the crews.

At the Silver Falls State Park, the crews constructed the park’s buildings and spacious lodge, put in trails, developed rock walls and laid bridges. The work transformed the area, according to Forest History Center coordinator Alan Maul, who with his wife, oversaw the Historic Day’s exhibits.

“The level of involvement here is unique,” Maul said. “You didn’t often see them building complexes like this.”

Maul has been working to re-create

the history of the Depression-era group. Several years ago he started an archive to track down the names and locations of CCC workers.

On Saturday, he answered questions from many longtime locals, whose fathers and grandfathers were in the corps, and who wanted to trace their genealogy.

“I’ve had so many questions this year, so many people asking, ‘My father, can you tell me where he worked?’” Alan Maul said.

Nostalgia in the air

While the event focused on the roots of conservation and history, locals also celebrated other elements of the past, complete with an antique cars gathering, flint knapping, storytelling, horse-drawn wagon rides and a canoe ride over a waterfall.

The history was in the air, as well. The Roundhouse Band from the greater Salem area, brought back bluegrass tunes from the 1930s and 1940s in four-part harmonies.

“It’s a perfect backdrop for people

exploring the history,” said band member Ron Leavitt.

As the evening approached, silence couched in the space of the music, and the volunteers wrapped up the displays, to be preserved for another summer.

Inside the lodge, Diana Maul reminisced about long summer nights in her childhood, when her family used to drive through rural Oregon on vacation. They would pass by wigwam burners -- sparks shooting out of the tops of the wigwam -- and spot clear images of the vibrant logging and lumber community.

Now, she says that glimpse of Oregon life is fading.

“My kids won’t see that kind of thing,” Maul said. “They’ll have to hear it in memories or see it in photographs. Their kids won’t know it firsthand, the way we did. So preserving it -- is a treasure.”

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Brothers, from left, Ian Huskie, 10, Alastair Huskie, 6, and Shaun Huskie, 8, of Salem, tumble over each other during an old-fashioned game of tug of war during Historic Silver Falls Day.



Earl McCollum leads a guided hike for siblings, from left, Karen Parent, 9, Elisha Parent, 5, and Elsie Parent, 5, of Albany, during Historic Silver Falls Day.

School

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priority need, which is closing Eugene Field School.”

The permanent closure of Eugene Field School last month was the catalyst for change that is touching every school in town. Mark Twain, built in 1955 as a junior high, will be a K-2 school, while Robert Frost, built in 1971, will serve 3rd-5th graders. Rural K-8 schools are relatively unaffected.

Shuffling teachers, students and classrooms is a complex-enough job that the district hired a specialist to do it. Phil Appleton, a retired Army colonel and local parent, is contracted to complete the operation by the end of August. Twice deployed to the Middle East, he has set up and moved military encampments.

“The first thing I did was create a timeline,” Appleton explained. “I said, ‘We need to get a written plan now so that

teachers have a timeline.”

Affected teachers had until June 27 to pack their classrooms. “They did a great job,” Bellando said. “There will be some pay given to them when they unpack.”

Now the gym at the Schlador campus is full of boxes and furniture, labeled, organized and ready for move-in. Last week, while Graebel, the hired moving company, was busy unloading, sub-contractors worked in every wing of the middle school.

On the east wing, they’d turned the 1950s “multipurpose room” into a library and cafeteria by adding of windows and a separating wall.

Centurion Fire Protection from Oregon City was installing the sprinkler system. Outside the gym, ME Electric was pouring over wiring schematics.

Silverton Middle School’s main entrance will be on Schlador Street, east of the old high school’s front steps. Outside will be a new paver patio displaying the names of donors who responded to a short Mark Twain PTC campaign this spring. In two-and-a-half weeks, the club

gathered \$4,200 that will be available for staff needs.

“We wanted to involve the community in getting excited about the new school,” Rivoli said. “We want people to view it as a school, but also as a community place where they can bring their kids, and say, ‘Look, here’s my brick that my family put down.’”

Rivoli’s youngest child will be a high school freshman next year, but she plans to stay involved at the middle school.

“The transition can be really smooth and really wonderful as long as the adults jump on board, and they don’t emphasize the negatives but emphasize the positives,” she said.

Down the hall in the 1960s wing along James Street, large classrooms with offices sandwiched between them are getting new exterior doors to meet fire code. The wing’s breezeway has become a standard hallway with views of the courtyard. In northwest wing from the 1970s, very little improvements are needed, Bellando said.

What about the main 1939 structure at

the center of it all? Its brick-and-mortar walls make it beautiful but dangerous in an earthquake.

Contractors have already used steel beams to support the walls it shares with the 1950s, 60s and 70s additions. Three-hour firewalls will separate it from the parts of campus coming to life as a middle school, Bellando explained.

There’s little in the budget to pay for extras. For example, the cost of paint is included, but not the cost of labor, Bellando said. Custodians and other staff will likely be asked to focus their time on such projects; a local contractor has offered to help too.

What the Silver Falls School District is doing here -- retrofitting an existing building for long-term use -- is unusual to the point that “other districts are watching us,” Bellando said.

A scaled-back operation isn’t what the school board had in mind when it went out for a bond two years ago, but it’ll have to do for now: “This building has life left in it,” he said.