

# OUTDOORS

## Who was Ray Benson?



Brandenburg snow shelter at Ray Benson Sno-Park. PHOTOS BY ZACH URNESS/STATESMAN JOURNAL

### And why is one of Oregon's sno-parks named for him?

**Zach Urness**  
Salem Statesman Journal  
USA TODAY NETWORK

Earlier this month I finished my final ski tour at Ray Benson Sno-Park, walked through a parking lot bustling with snowmobiles, snowshoers and children weaving through snowy forest, below volcanoes and to the doorstep of three backcountry snow shelters.

This has been a rough year for me and just about every Oregonian, but we are blessed to live in a place where a 90-minute drive brings you to a network of trails and shelters, the wildfires that shaped it and the volunteer groups that make it possible. But so far, I've neglected the man for whom the sno-park is actually named — Ray Benson.

I've written multiple stories about Ray Benson this season, including its trails and shelters, the wildfires that shaped it and the volunteer groups that make it possible. But so far, I've neglected the man for whom the sno-park is actually named — Ray Benson.

It's a fascinating story. Ray Benson, who would eventually lose both legs to diabetes, was a snow-

mobiler from Salem who helped establish the Mount Jefferson Snowmobile Club, at first to fight legislation banning snowmobiles in the backcountry and then to help form Oregon's sno-park system.

"My dad was a unique individual," said his son, Gene Benson.

Ray Benson, owner of Benson's Automatic Transmission Specialties, first discovered snowmobiling in 1968 on one of those rare days when snow covered the capital city. A friend drove an early-model Polaris over to his shop.

"My dad had tried downhill skiing but didn't really like it," Gene Benson said. "He liked mechanical things so he was really interested. He hopped on that snowmobile and they rode all over town, with the cops chasing them and everything. That was the day everything changed. Within a week we had our own snowmobile and away we went."

"As an amputee and later a double amputee, snowmobiling was the one thing he could do to get out into the mountains and get around in the winter."

#### A fight with Oregon political legend Norma Paulus

The creation of Oregon's sno-park system, including Ray Benson Sno-Park, is one of those unlikely stories in state history.

It began with a fight with one of Oregon's best-known politicians: Republican Norma Paulus. In the early 1970s, Paulus, who would eventually earn her party's nomination for governor, introduced legislation to ban or severely limit snowmobiles in the backcountry. She introduced the bills multiple times.

"One thing you have to realize is that Republicans of the 1970s were led by Tom McCall and they were essentially liberals," said Jim Moore, political scientist at Oregon's Pacific University. "They wanted responsible budgets and government, but they were very pro-environment so that kind of legislation from her doesn't surprise me ... even if it would be unthinkable from a Republican today."

The threat of outlawing snowmobiles galvanized the snowmobiling community. In 1970, a small group gathered at

Ray Benson's business. That day, they founded the Mt. Jefferson Snowmobile Club.

"When Norma Paulus decided she didn't like snowmobiles, we decided we had to get organized," Gene Benson said. "That's exactly what we did."

The snowmobilers successfully shut down Paulus' bills. They formed the statewide Oregon Snowmobile Association and turned their attention to another issue facing snowmobilers — finding a good place to park.

"Back in those days, the only place to park was those plowed out wide spots alongside the highway," Benson said. "It wasn't the best option."

The snowmobile groups set to work changing that. After working with the Oregon Department of Transportation to license snowmobiles, they came back with the idea of the agency plowing out parking areas for an annual fee. Agency officials liked the idea.

One of the first places a sno-park was proposed was Santiam Pass. Sadly, Ray Benson himself died in 1976, just one year before the sno-park program officially kicked off in 1977. The snowmobile group convinced the U.S. Forest Service

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## Getting to celebrate life's accomplishments in the outdoors



**Fishing**  
Henry Miller  
Guest columnist

Even heroes need a break, and I can't think of one who deserves it more than my brother, Jim.

Except for maybe my other younger brother, Steve. I call the pair of them half-jokingly, half grimly, "The Covid Kids."

Jim just emailed family members that he's retired after decades as a registered hospital nurse.

The slog of the past 12 months involved him dealing with a lot of people who are deathly ill or dying from COVID-19 related complications at a hospital where he worked in Santa Rosa, Calif.

Meanwhile, Steve, the youngest among the three brothers, soldiers on as a nurse at a Springfield hospital dealing with the same grim realities that now are in Jim's rear-view mirror.

Jim and I are closest in age of the five Miller siblings, and he has been a life-long fishing, camping and backpacking buddy.



Over the finish line, brother Jim gives the victory sign on his last day at the hospital in Santa Rosa during his retirement going-away gathering.

COURTESY JIM MILLER

The Millers cut a swath through piscatorial populations ranging from perch off the Goleta pier, trout and bass at Cauchuma Lake to brown and rainbow trout on the Logan River in Utah.

OK, full disclosure, not so much a swath; we caught a couple of fish over the years.

True to the Miller tradition, Jim said

that his first post-retirement acquisition probably will be a sit-atop fishing kayak.

In my case, it was an oar-powered one-person pontoon fishing craft.

The last time that we all got together, a family reunion at a rental house in Waldport, we all went clamming, a classic Miller gathering.

I frankly can't wait for us to get together again to relive the past, enjoy the present and look forward to the future.

All three of the Miller brothers have been vaccinated, or as I like to refer to it, we have our 'vaxports' to outdoor adventures.

So congrats, bro. You made it. Now I only have to worry excessively about one of you.

#### Relevant segue

It's time for clammers to "spring" into action as the first daylight minus tide series of the year creep closer after the winter of dark discontent, sea-level wise.

Case in point: Post-sunrise minus tides are March 30 through April 2, if you don't mind driving over in the dark.

Times and tides at Garibaldi on the north end of Tillamook Bay are 8:46

a.m., minus-.95 feet, on March 30; 9:32 a.m., minus-1.23 feet on March 31; and 10:20 a.m. minus-1.15 feet, on April Fool's Day.

On Yaquina Bay (Newport), it's shovel time at 9:02 a.m., minus-.9 feet, on March 31 and 9:56 a.m., another minus-.9 feet on April 1.

Farther south, on Alsea Bay at Waldport, there's a minus-.95-foot tide at 8:46 a.m. on March 30; minus-1.23 feet at 9:32 on March 31; and minus-1.15 feet at 10:20 a.m. on April 1.

Unfortunately for the gainfully employed, none of those days fall on weekends.

But the better is yet to come. There is a lower, kick-butt really, minus series from April 27 through May 1, the latter date falling on a Saturday.

Before heading out, be sure to check for potential closures online at State of Oregon: Shellfish - Recreational Shellfish Biotoxin Closures or by calling the recorded Shellfish Hotline at (800) 448-2474.

How excited am I about the arrival of daylight clam tides?

My cell phone has the Shellfish Hotline on speed dial.

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