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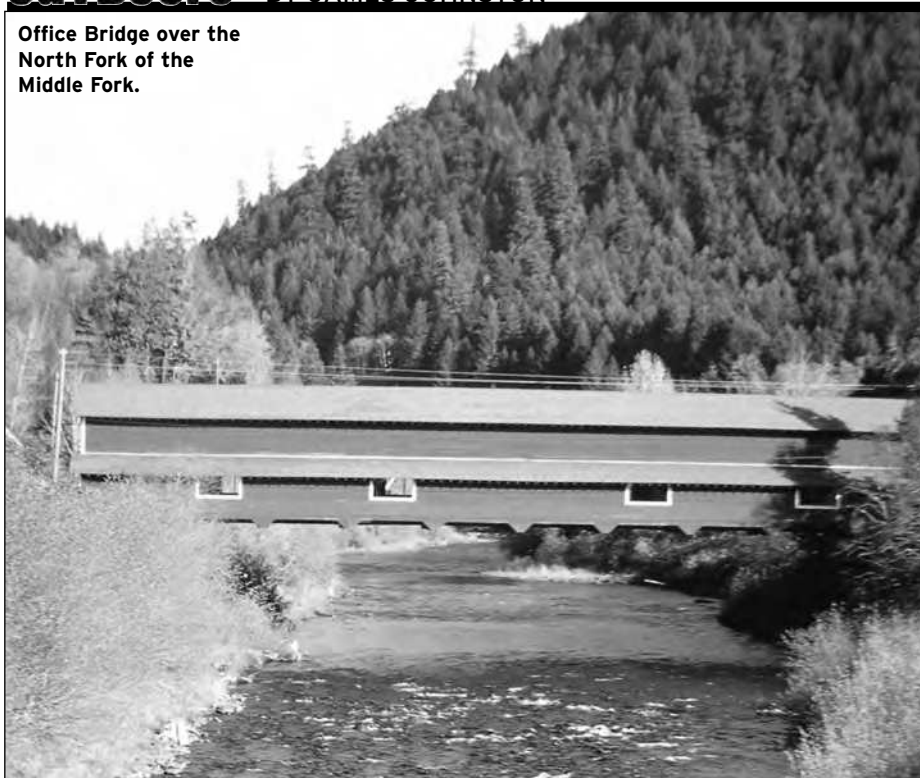
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OUTDOORS

BY JAMES JOHNSTON

Office Bridge over the
North Fork of the
Middle Fork.



JAMES JOHNSTON

Road Trip

If you gotta drive, drive the Aufderheide.

National Forests make up half the land area of Lane County, and the entire eastern third of our county is managed by the 1.7 million acre Willamette National Forest. It's public land — land that all Americans own, but residents of Eugene/Springfield get to enjoy it the most.

The best way for people to experience the Willamette is to do a day hike or backpacking trip on the 900 miles or so of trail found in the Lane County portion of the forest. But if you're hosting relatives from out of town, have small children, or just want to see a big chunk of scenery in one day, plan for a day driving the Aufderheide Memorial Drive, one of two National Forest Scenic Byways found on the forest. The drive is a 150-mile round trip from Eugene, with plenty of short hikes and points of interest to get you out of the car along the way.

You can easily spend a day or even two making the trip, but most people will want to give themselves six hours or so. To get there take I-5 south from Eugene/Springfield for approximately three miles. Take the Oakridge/Klamath Falls exit (Exit 188A). Stay to the left onto Hwy. 58. Take 58 for approximately 31 miles. Just before the Middle Fork Ranger Station, take the sweeping left at a sign for Westfir. After less than half a mile, cross a bridge over the Middle Fork and take a left at the T-intersection. After 1.75 miles you come to a four-way intersection in the village of Westfir.

You can pick up an audiotape tour of the drive at either the Middle Fork Ranger Station or the Westfir Lodge Bed and Breakfast (it's easy to find). Simply return the cassette at the McKenzie or Blue River Ranger Station on your way home.

The first sight is the covered bridge at Westfir, called the Office Bridge. At 180 feet in length, it's the longest covered bridge in Oregon. Continuing straight at the four-way intersection, you'll follow the congressionally designated Wild and Scenic North Fork of the Middle Fork Willamette River. In eight miles, on the right, there are some signs with interesting information about turn of the century railroad logging. Past the sign, the road takes you through a scenic rock-lined gorge.

About 27 miles from Westfir, pull off on

the right and take in Constitution Grove, a very short and gentle loop trail through a 200 year old forest. The loop was created in 1987 to commemorate the signing of the Constitution, and the trees — all roughly the same age as the Constitution — bear plaques engraved with the names of the original signers. The loop intersects the North Fork trail at two places. Hiking counter-clock wise on the Constitution loop, ignore the first North Fork trail intersection, but consider taking the next intersection heading upstream. This easy path will take you past monstrous old-growth Pacific yew and western red cedar before you lose the trail in a swamp in about a mile.

Back in your car, the road will soon make a sweeping turn to the north. There's a partially hidden pull-out to the right at mile 30 that makes a good spot for a picnic. You'll also find a trailhead for the Shale Ridge trail, a fantastic hike through the Waldo Lake Wilderness that takes you to Moolack Lake and eventually all the way to Waldo Lake itself.

From here, the Aufderheide climbs steeply to a 3,600 ft. summit at the Box Canyon Camp at mile 32. There are trailheads for several different hikes into the Chucksney Mountain Roadless Area. Box Canyon camp has a replica of an historic fire guard station and several buildings constructed by the Civilian Conservation Corps dating to the Great Depression.

Leaving Box Canyon behind, the Aufderheide descends along Roaring River, before meeting the South Fork McKenzie River. The South Fork section is like a tunnel through miles of spectacular old-growth forest. To the east is the French Pete arm of the Three Sisters Wilderness, protected by Congress in 1984. French Pete and Rebel Creek campgrounds are your jump-off point for trails of the same name, both highly recommended. There're lots of great camping and picnic spots before Terwilliger Hot Springs at milepost 51. The springs are almost always overcrowded.

From Terwilliger it's just seven miles or so to a junction with Hwy. 126 and a 45-mile trip back to Eugene. Be sure and ride your bike to work for a week to make up for the long drive!

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