

# Mountain: Life downstream was forever changed

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Spirit Lake, lying at the base of the mountain, was a summer destination for kids from all over the Northwest for decades. Scout troops and recreation groups had regional camps there, in addition to a host of public and private campsites and lodges. The shores and close waters were loaded with canoes, rafts and floats. In the evening, campfire smoke mingled with singing, laughter and scary stories over hot dogs, marshmallows and hot chocolate.

This spring, two events spurred me to take a day drive to the mountain. First, to celebrate the 50th birthday of my Volkswagen bus, and also to reminisce about an adolescent foray to the mountain in 1972.

It's a great day trip for those living on the lower Columbia. From U.S. Highway 30 and Interstate 5, head toward Kelso before turning east at state Route 504 near Castle Rock. In the 1970s, Spirit Lake Highway was a twisting, narrow road often traveled by logging trucks. After the blast, the road had to be rebuilt for years, since much of it was simply buried. Today it's a pleasant drive of long curves and grades.

The names swirl in my memory as I drive, first Sequest State Park. Then Silver Lake, where I

**STANDING ON THE RIDGE THAT BEARS HIS NAME AND GAZING INTO THE MAW OF THE CRATER, YOU TOO MAY SWEAR YOU CAN HEAR THE LAST WORDS OF DAVID A. JOHNSTON, THE VULCANOLOGIST WHO PERISHED THERE IN THE DISASTER, 'VANCOUVER! VANCOUVER! THIS IS IT!'**

nearly drowned while learning to water ski. The town of Toutle, home of the Toutle Lake High School Fighting Ducks. Kid Valley Store, where everyone stopped to get that one thing they forgot. My one disappointment in the trip was to find a "Road Closed Ahead" sign at the turnoff to Tower Road. Before the eruption, two places on this road were the old swimming holes of

every youth within 50 miles. The Tower Bridge, with its pools and cliffs, entertained young and old alike with cold, crystal clear waters and wind protected beaches, all just a few miles from town.

Upstream of the bridge was Hollywood Gorge, where a locomotive once plunged off a trestle into the river, a 1930s film stunt. Downstream was another favorite swimming hole. Though the river still flows through these places, they are forever changed since the eruption. Once past the town of Toutle, the highway begins to rise quickly in elevation.

Above Toutle, Washington 504 is a seasonal highway, closed and unplowed from November until May. In the summer, the road is open all the way to the Johnston Ridge Observatory, which offers spectacular views of the crater. The observatory is open to the public in the summer through late fall, and is the trailhead of many hiking routes. From every viewpoint, it is apparent that the forces entrusted with management of Mount St. Helens made the right decision early, to just leave it alone.

Standing on the ridge that bears his name and gazing into the maw of the crater, you too may swear you can hear the last words of David A. Johnston, the vulcanologist who perished there in the disaster, "Vancouver! Vancouver! This is it!"

Ron Baldwin

A snow capped Mount St. Helens.



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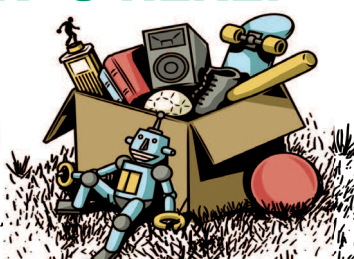
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