

Volunteer handcrafts signs to guide Northwest hikers

Finn among last to carry on tradition

By IAN McCLUSKEY
Oregon Public Broadcasting

Daniel Finn had long been a hiker, passing countless trail signs, stopping at some for direction. He'd notice some had been defaced by graffiti, and some even smashed or stolen by vandals. "Someone should do something about this," his hiking companions would say with dismay.

Finn agreed. He loved hiking in national forests, and the iconic brown trail signs with yellow letters had always been symbols to him of adventure and communion with nature.

When Finn learned that the U.S. Forest Service often faced limited budget and staffing to maintain the trail signs, he stepped up to help.

Finn had never made a trail sign before, however. He wasn't even very familiar with woodworking, but he volunteered to become a sign maker for the Gifford Pinchot National Forest.

The Mount Adams Ranger Station in Trout Lake, Washington, is one of the few that still has a woodworking shop, and Finn has become one of the last people to carry on the tradition of making the classic trail signs by hand.

"I struggled a little bit with it at first," Finn said, "but in time, it came to me."

Several days a week, Finn comes to the woodworking shop to make trail signs.

He picks up a heavy, rough-sawn plank of Oregon white oak and takes it to a large crosscut saw. The native hardwood species lends itself to durable signs. The wood is locally sourced and milled by a family sawmill just down the road from the ranger station.

Finn cuts off a length about 20-inches long from the plank. "You can't always tell by looking at the piece of wood that it'll make a good sign," he said, slowly turning the board in his hands.

He then takes it to the planer. Pushing the rough board into one side of the planer, it emerges from the other side with a spray of sawdust. Finn passes it through a few times until his board is smooth and ready for the letters.

Finn shuffles as he walks, moving significantly slower than he once did.

Growing up in the timber town of Molalla, he had been a hiker for as long as he can remember, exploring trails with his father. He started his career as a forester for Weyerhaeuser, replanting trees on Mount St. Helens after the 1980 eruption. He then worked for the flood control district in Longview, Washington. He continued to hike in the backcountry as much as he could during his career and had hopes of spending unfettered time on trails in his retirement.



Ian McCluskey/Oregon Public Broadcasting

The trail signs Daniel Finn makes for wilderness areas are made to look hand-hewn, with rough edges and left unpainted to weather naturally.

After 45 years in Longview, he moved to the small town of Trout Lake at the base of Mount Adams. He volunteered for the district ranger station with the idea of serving as a volunteer wilderness ranger in the summer season — the perfect retirement role to roam the vast forest around the mountain.

As Finn hiked, he noted that many trail signs needed to be replaced. He figured making signs could give him an indoor project for the cold and snowy winter. Then the next summer he could take those signs to their proper locations. "Unfortunately I had a mild stroke," said Finn. And then he had knee replacement surgery.

Physically unable to amble in the backcountry, Finn focused his efforts on sign-making.

Finn clamps the smooth board onto a flat work table with an unusual swing arm mechanism. He slides in small letter stencils; these are standardized size and font, known in the Forest Service as "ASA Series C letters," but recognizable to millions of visitors to national forests across the country.

This standard font has become indelibly paired with trail signs in national forests. It's simple, easy to read, and also seems to fit seamlessly into the rustic aesthetic of trails and campgrounds. This enduring design was intentional.

Origins of the iconic sign

In the early 1960s, the Forest Service decided it needed to replace a hodgepodge of signage with a consistent, uniform image. The agency turned to Virgil "Bus" Carrell. Carrell studied forestry at the University of Washington and became a forest ranger in the 1930s. He fought forest fires, went on search and rescue missions, served as the district ranger for Mount Hood's Clackamas River area, and was awarded the national "ranger of the year" in 1949.

When the Forest Service asked him to take on the task of inventing a standardized design for all forest service signs, Carrell teamed up with Forest Service artist Rudy

Wendelin, who had created the iconic mascot for wildfire awareness: Smokey Bear.

They came up with the now ubiquitous trapezoidal signs — with the standard brown and yellow colors — seen commonly in front of every ranger station.

The brown-and-yellow color scheme carries down to the smaller trail signs, like the ones made today by Finn.

Finn pulls up a chair, sits down and switches on his sign-making machine. It comes to life with a high-pitched whir. These days, most signs on public lands are ordered from manufacturers and made by computer-operated equipment. The machine at the Mount Adams Ranger Station is all manual.

By tracing the outline of the letters with one hand, the arm moves a spinning router blade on the wood. It is a concept dating back at least as long as the early 1800s, to a writing device known as a polygraph. Two pens would be attached to an articulating arm so that as one was moved, the other would follow in duplicate. The most famous user of this invention was Thomas Jefferson, who had one at his writing desk. Finn's router tool is essentially the same concept: as Finn moves a stylus inside the letter stencil, the router on the other side of the arm plunges into the oak board and carves out each letter.

Using the standardized letter templates, Finn's signs are almost identical, yet each piece of wood is slightly different, and each motion of his hands may swerve or shake just slightly. It creates uniformity, and yet retains a handmade feeling.

Finn switches off the machine, brushes the sawdust from the smooth wood and traces the edge of his freshly-carved letters with his fingertip. "Well, little fuzzy," he said, "but I'll put that through the planer and it'll smooth it right up."

Leaving it wild

In addition to the iconic brown-and-yellow signs, Finn makes signs specifically for designated wilderness areas. These use the same lettering, but are left unpainted, and allowed to naturally weather.

Finn goes an extra step, creating scallops along the edges. "In the old days, they would cut the signs out with an ax," said Finn. "That's why the wilderness signs are kerfed along the edges to make them look like they're hand-hewn."

To complete the authentic rustic look, he'll mount these onto hand-cut cedar poles, rather than the uniform four-by-four pressure-treated posts.

The Forest Service manual for signage recommends using signs around ranger stations, campgrounds and the popular trails to give people plenty of direction and useful information. In wild and undeveloped areas, though, it recommends using minimal signage to enhance "the hiker's feelings of self-reliance with respect to orienteering skills, self-discovery, challenge and solitude."

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