



Offbeat Oregon History: Our mild-mannered active volcano

Climbing Mount Hood is a big achievement. It's no Everest, but at 11,244 feet Oregon's highest not an insignificant mountain either.

But modern climbers making the final assault on the summit have one major psychological advantage over their fellow climbers of a century ago: They know with nearly 100 percent certainty that the thing isn't going to explode while they're standing on top of it.

Mount Hood, or Wy'East as the Native Americans call it, is an active volcano — something many Oregonians don't know. But the last time it expressed itself as such — a minor episode in 1907 involving steam and smoke, but no fire or lava — was outside the bounds of living memory. As far as anyone alive today knows, the mountain has always been just as it now stands — tall, serene, covered with glaciers and snow.

Such was not its reputation on March 19, 1894, when the officers of the old Oregon Alpine Club held an organizing meeting to plan a new climbing club. The club, to be called the Mazamas (after a Spanish word for a mountain goat), would be open only to people who had summited Mount Hood.

And later that year, on a blustery July day on which numerous would-be members backed out due to weather conditions, 105 intrepid climbers reached the summit, assembled there, held the first meeting of the Mazama Club, and were inducted as charter members.

That was at around 3 p.m. After that, as the weather started to look more threatening, they hastily canceled a planned "banquet at the summit," adjourned, and hustled back downhill to safer altitudes. The third-oldest mountaineering club in the country had been formed, and they were now part of its history.

Today, the Mazama Club remains active, with offices in Portland and a full schedule of outdoor skiing, climbing and trekking trips that thousands of people participate in every year. But although the membership requirement hasn't changed, the meaning of that requirement has.

Today being a Mazama means one is an accomplished mountain climber. But in 1907, Mazama Club members looking east from Portland at the smoking, grumbling mountain knew their climbs had been more than just a technical triumph — they'd been a successful braving of the earth's fire spirit. They'd climbed not just any mountain, but a temporarily quiescent volcano — one that could have erupted under their feet at any moment.

The last major eruption of Mount Hood happened before Lewis and Clark came to the West Coast, but not by much. Around the time the U.S. Constitution was being ratified, the mountain cut loose, sending smoke and fire into the sky, dropping a six-inch layer of ash all around the mountain and its flanks, and unleashing a torrent of pyroclastic material mixed with rocks, dirt and water from melted glaciers that roared down the Sandy River valley to the Columbia. This was the source of the deep "quicksand" after which the river was named several dozen years later.

This episode kicked off a spate of fiery activity on top of Oregon's tallest mountain that lasted a good 75 years. Oregon newspapers reported excitement on the mountain in 1853, 1854, 1859 and 1865.

The 1859 eruption is particularly interesting because, of course, that's the year Oregon became a state. It was also a very dramatic incident. According to a pioneer named W.F. Courtney, quoted by author Bill Gulick, "It was about 1:30 in the morning when suddenly the heavens lit up and from the dark there shot up a column of fire. ... For two hours as we watched the mountain continued to blaze at irregular intervals. ..."

So, less than 35 years before the Mazama Club's charter members made their plans to summit Oregon's largest peak, it had been belching fire into the night sky.

Today, every winter, thousands of happy Oregonians slide down the sides of Mount Hood on skis and inner tubes. (They do that in the summer, too — Timberline offers the only year-round Alpine skiing in North America.)

Every summer, thousands more set out to climb it. Mount Hood is the second most climbed mountain in the world, after Japan's Mount Fuji. (New Hampshire's Mount Monadnock gets more climbers, but is only 3,165 feet high. That's just 700 feet higher than Mount Constitution on Washington's Orcas Island, which gets many times more climbers than both Hood and Monadnock combined — many of whom pedal all the way to the top on bicycles. It all depends on one's definition of "mountain.")

Mount Hood is not the most technically difficult by a long shot, but it can be treacherous. Over the years, roughly 140 climbers have been killed on the mountain.

And yes, one of those was actually killed by volcanic activity, although not the kind one usually thinks of. In 1934, a fumarole — a crack in the ground venting hot volcanic gases — melted holes and caves in one of the glaciers on the mountain. A climber, coming across these caves, decided to explore them — and was overcome by fumes and suffocated inside. This climber remains the only person in state history to have been killed by a volcano in Oregon.

In the past several dozen years, there have been a number of small "earthquake swarms" at the mountain, reminding everyone that it's still alive and smoldering. Although any volcanic activity on Mount Hood will most likely be quite mild compared with the Mount St. Helens eruption, it is one of the more likely candidates for America's next volcanic breakout.

Which is an interesting thing to contemplate while riding inner tubes with the kids at Snow Bunny.



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Periodicals postage paid at Cottage Grove, Oregon.

Postmaster: Send address changes to P.O. Box 35, Cottage Grove, OR 97424.

Local Mail Service:

If you don't receive your Cottage Grove Sentinel on the Wednesday of publication, please let us know. Call 942-3325 between 8:30 a.m. and 5 p.m.

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