

# LOCAL, STATE & REGION

## How Portland ended up with what is officially the **WORLD'S SMALLEST PARK**

BY SAMANTHA SWINDLER • The Oregonian

**E**arly on St. Patrick's Day, Daniel Misner, a horticulturist with Portland Parks & Recreation, visited Mill Ends Park to re-landscape the entire grounds. It took less than 10 minutes.

This is no surprise to Portlanders familiar with Mill Ends Park, located on a traffic island in the middle of Naito Parkway at the intersection with SW Taylor Street. With a total area of 452 square inches, Mill Ends holds the distinction of being the World's Smallest Park, a title formally bestowed by the Guinness Book of World Records in 1971.

"One of the biggest challenges is ... it's in the middle of a roadway," Misner said. "We do have to replace the plant material on a regular basis due to traffic not being able to stay in their lane."

The park has seen many changes over nearly seven decades. Not only because cars regularly run over it, but because as the street itself has been redesigned and repaved, so too has the park, whose founding has become a bit of local lore.

Over the years, signs — homemade and official — have appeared and disappeared, along with plastic dinosaurs, toy soldiers and Christmas ornaments on the park's usual lone, diminutive tree.

"Because the public cares so much about this park and they love it so much, we often get a lot of guerrilla planting that happens with material that we would prefer not to have in there," Misner said.

On April 20, 2018, for instance, someone planted cannabis in the park. The city of Port-



Oregon Journal via The Oregonian

**The original caption for this Oregon Journal photo when it ran in the March 7, 1954, Oregon Journal was: "CIVIL WAR set in recently when smallest rose garden in nation was planted in safety island in front of Journal building. Commissioner Ormond Bean (right) argues it should be named 'Envoy park,' while Dick Fagan center maintains it should be titled 'Mill Ends,' for his column in the Journal. George Gutfleisch, Roses for Portland head, supports Bean."**

land kindly requests folks don't do that.

"We always come out here on St. Patrick's Day, just to clean it up and dress up the park because it does have that lore about it," Misner said. "Many people don't know Mill Ends is home to the only leprechaun community outside of Ireland."

Oh, did we forget to mention the leprechauns? Mill Ends Park was named by the late Dick Fagan, a reporter who worked for the Oregon Journal newspaper throughout the 1940s, '50s and 1960s.

Bill Fagan said his father was an Iowa native who came out to Portland to work for the



**LEFT: Daniel Misner with Portland Parks & Recreation adds red hook sedge beneath the Vanderwolf's Pyramid limber pine tree at Mill Ends Park.**  
Samantha Swindler/The Oregonian

News-Telegram. When the paper folded, he joined the Oregon Journal, where he was an assistant editor and had a regular column called Mill Ends, named for the scraps of lumber left over at a mill.

"Mill Ends means bits and pieces," said another son, Pat Fagan, "so he'd pick up a lot of quips and things that were happening in the neighborhood or in town and put those in his column."

Legend has it that Fagan's office window at the Journal looked down on what was then Front Avenue, and today is Naito Parkway. In his line of sight was a spot where a streetlight had been planned but was either removed or never installed. The concrete skirt remained around the hole, which was an eyesore filled with weeds.

In one version of the tale, Fagan reportedly caught a leprechaun and was granted three wishes. He asked to have many children — there were five kids in the family — to have the leprechaun write his column, though Fagan still had to type it himself, and to have his own park, which was a 2-foot-wide hole in the ground.

A slightly more official source, the city of Portland's Parks & Recreation Department website, says Fagan established the tiny park on St. Patrick's Day 1948. And while that date has been widely reported, it doesn't appear to be true.

"Fagan, TV personality and sometimes newspaper man, stood at the north end of the traffic island and surveyed the rolling expanse of splendid soil that makes up Portland Envoy Park," the Oregon Journal reported on March 7, 1954.

"That's where the green work (for which there is no commercial spray available) of envy must have put in its appearance, for Fagan then and there began claiming it (with all the flowery gesturing of Columbus landing on the New World)

in the 'Name of Mill Ends.'"

This connection to the true founding date of Mill Ends Park seems to have first been reported in the 2014 book "PDXcentric," written by Scott Cook and Aimee Wade. Wade also dug up a 1955 letter from the superintendent of parks who confirmed the entire thing was a "stunt to publicize 'Rose Planting Week'" dreamed up by the Oregon Journal.

Over time, the rose bush was replaced with other flowers, plants and leprechaun-themed amenities.

"(Fagan) is still the definite founder of this. He is in that first photo," Wade said. "He was just doing it for a different reason than meeting a leprechaun. He was trying to keep the title of the City of Roses, and that's so much more important."

However it started, the tiny park became a popular Portland point of interest due to Fagan's regular column writing.

Dick Fagan became ill with lung cancer and died at age 58. Just weeks before his death in November 1969, a special proclamation was made, signed by Gov. Tom McCall, honoring him "for his contributions to the livability of the city of Portland and Oregon, exemplifying fun in good taste, and particularly for his foresight in establishing the original Willamette River-Harbor Parkway, known as Mill Ends Park."

The park continued to be celebrated after Fagan's death. In 1976, the spot was officially adopted as a park by the Portland Parks & Recreation department.

And every St. Patrick's Day, in what is most likely not a city-sanctioned event, the descendants of Dick Fagan still gather at Mill Ends Park to raise a toast in his honor.

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