

OREGON

How state parks evolved from roadside picnic areas into iconic natural landmarks

BY JAMIE HALE • The Oregonian

Oregon’s first state park isn’t much. There are no waterfalls, no sweeping views, no interpretive center or historic buildings. Unless you happen live in the area, or are driving past and need to rest, or are collecting state park experiences like rare coins, there’s not much reason to stop by.

One thing Sarah Helmick State Recreation Site does offer is a sense of contrast. It makes you wonder: How did Oregon state parks go from practical roadside picnic areas like this, to the iconic natural landmarks that we now adore?

This year, the Oregon Parks and Recreation Department celebrates the 100-year anniversary of that first state park, taking the opportunity to reflect on the past and consider what parks might look like in the future.

During the last century, one thing has become clear: Parks are an integral part of the Oregon experience, woven into the fabric of our state identity like nothing else.

Auto parks

When 98-year-old Sarah Helmick donated her family’s land to the state of Oregon for a new recreation area, she didn’t contact the state parks department to do it — no such department existed.

In 1922, parks were the purview of the State Highway Commission, which had recently been empowered to acquire land alongside highways for conversion into recreation areas known as “auto parks.”

The advent of the automobile meant more highways across the Pacific Northwest, and subsequently a need for places to stop and rest during road trips.

Christy Sweet, historian and preservation specialist for the Oregon Parks and Recreation Department, said parks were initially envisioned as just places to stop for a picnic, a restroom or maybe a good view.

“The whole camping idea wasn’t in the state parks at all,” Sweet said.

Neither were the concepts of hiking, mountain biking, kayaking or rock climbing. In fact, one of the parks’ earliest champions, Samuel H. Boardman, stood staunchly against using parks for recreation at all, Sweet said.

In 1929, Boardman was tapped to helm the new State Parks Commission, which quickly grew the state park footprint from 4,000 acres to 66,000. Under his leadership, the state purchased land that would later become Silver Falls, Oswald West and Ecola state parks, among others. He bought defunct lighthouses that are now iconic landmarks and snatched up surplus military land. His impact was enormous, but Oregon’s state parks remained places to stop and look, not to stay and explore.

In Boardman’s opinion, state parks were meant to be preserved from human impact, and camping was therefore heretical, Sweet said. That changed almost immediately following his retirement in 1950; two years later, Oregon’s first state park campgrounds opened at Silver Falls and Willowa Lake. People flocked to the new campsites, and within 10 years, some 44 additional campgrounds were developed and constructed around the state.

“It seems to me that peoples’ views of how they want to ex-

perience nature and history changes over the years, and state parks change as it goes along,” Sweet said.

The years following World War II saw an increased interest in outdoor recreation, buoyed by the recent standardization of the five-day workweek and the growing middle class. Oregonians suddenly had time and money to explore the state’s natural beauty, and state parks offered easy access and amenities to do just that.

Oregon state parks also benefitted from the environmental movement of the 1960s and ‘70s, which saw a surge in support of ecological causes, especially among the burgeoning counterculture rooted locally in Portland and Eugene. From hippies to hunters, everyone seemed to love their local parks. The only issue was to fund the upkeep of these beloved places.

As part of the State Highway Commission (which was later folded into the Oregon Department of Transportation), the state parks program was funded primarily through Oregon’s gas tax. In 1980, voters approved a constitutional amendment that limited the revenues of gasoline and highway user tax money, shifting park funding to the state’s General Fund and leaving it more susceptible to economic fluctuations, like the early ‘80s recession.

In 1989, the state legislature created the Oregon Parks and Recreation Department, officially cleaving parks from ODOT, but chose not to designate a source of funding, leaving the new department hanging in the wind. No new parks were created, the maintenance backlog grew and some parks contemplated shutting down.

Anecdotes from those years come in various shades of desperation. In one, park rangers planed down old highway signs to make picnic tables. One state park sold Beanie Babies in its



A visitor takes a selfie in front of Lower South Falls in Silver Falls State Park.

Jamie Hale | The Oregonian

gift shop, purportedly raising \$100,000 in a year. Managers at a coastal park allegedly considered selling lots for condos, but never got around to it.

“They were looking at any source of funding,” Sweet said. “During the ‘90s it was a terrible time.”

In 1998, the parks department finally found relief after voters overwhelmingly approved a ballot initiative that sent a portion of state lottery funds to parks and beaches. The Oregon Lottery remains the primary source of funding for the Oregon Parks and Recreation Department today, along with recreation fees and RV registration fees.

With funding in hand, the department began to address long-neglected maintenance issues and once again began to build new parks. Between 2005 and 2018, the department created eight new parks around the state, including L.L. Stub Stewart in the foothills of the Coast Range, Cottonwood Canyon in the high desert of north-central Ore-

gon, and Iwetemlaykin in the Willowa Mountains.

Instagram famous

Peter Marbach stood in the halls of the Oregon Historical Society museum, reminiscing about his photos that hung in an exhibit on the walls. To celebrate the state park centennial, the historical society commissioned Marbach to drive around and document as many parks as he could, displaying his photos as part of an exhibit called “A Century of Wonder: 100 Years of Oregon

State Parks.”

“How lucky are we to live in a place like this?” Marbach said, eyeing his photos of beaches, waterfalls, mountain snow and desert wildflowers. “It’s pretty miraculous, just that foresight that (Oregon) leaders had to do this, to make it possible for us.”

One thing that makes Marbach’s exhibit so striking is how familiar the pictures have become. Social media feeds are now flooded with photos of Smith Rock, Silver Falls and the many scenic parks on the

Oregon coast, as more and more people drive out to visit them.

In 2010, state parks drew a total of 41,498,739 day-use visitors statewide. In 2016, those numbers surpassed 51 million, and by 2022 they eclipsed 53 million people.

Park officials have attributed the recent popularity to a variety of factors, like the increase in population and difficult economic times. One factor that can’t be ignored is the power of social media, particularly the photo-sharing app Instagram, which debuted in 2010.

Pull up Instagram and you’ll find hundreds of accounts sharing beautiful pictures of Oregon’s natural places, sending them to the feeds of millions of people. State tourism agency Travel Oregon has some 367,000 followers on the app, more than eight times the following of Gov. Kate Brown. The Oregon Parks and Recreation Department has a nice audience as well, with more than 71,000 followers.

In 2021, a total 1,124,340 day-use visitors and 76,079 campers stopped by Silver Falls, making it one of the busiest outdoor recreation areas in the state.

“I think we’re just on peoples’ list of places to see when you come to Oregon,” Gilliland said. “We’ve probably had somebody here from everywhere in the world.”

OBITUARY



Paul E. Sobel

April 25, 1923 - July 29, 2022

Paul E. Sobel, a resident of Bend, passed away on July 29, 2022 at the age of 99. He was born to Eva and Charles Sobel in Chicago, Illinois on April 25, 1923.

Paul served as a Lieutenant with the U.S. Army Air Corps in World War II as a Navigator in a B17 Flying Fortress with the Eighth Air Force. He completed 35 active missions over Germany and France and was awarded many medals, including the Air Medal with five Oak Leaf Clusters. In 2016 Paul was bestowed the French Legion of Honor for his service to France during the WWII Battle of the Bulge, by the Honorary Consul of France in the Northwest, on behalf of the French President. Before serving, he attended The University of Illinois, and upon his return attended the University of Michigan and Millikin University in Decatur, IL where he received a B.S. in Industrial Engineering.

Paul and his wife, Edee, celebrated their 73rd wedding anniversary in June of 2022. Paul owned several Manpower Inc. franchises and later served as a consultant to Manpower International. He was active in many environmental and humanitarian causes, and taught solar and alternative energy at the University of Wisconsin Parkside and at various community colleges in Oregon, Wisconsin, and Arizona. Paul was a 32nd degree member of The Scottish Rite Masons, and as a 13 year old was the youngest Eagle Scout in the City of Chicago.

In 1997 Paul and Edee moved to Arizona from Wisconsin, where they wintered while spending summers in Sunriver in their passive solar home that Paul proudly designed. They moved to Touchmark in Bend full time in 2014.

Upon retirement, Paul gave many speeches about the Eighth Air Force and other passionate causes. He was an avid tennis player, runner, and biker who attributed his health and longevity to staying active mentally and physically.

He was a devoted and caring family man who was loved deeply by his family and will be missed by all who knew him. Paul is survived by his loving wife of 73 years, Edith M. Sobel (Meyer), three daughters: Linda Roberts (Ron) Highlands Ranch, Colorado, Laurie Lubliner (Rob) Portland, Oregon, Jan Ellen Long (Ken) Vancouver, Washington, six grandchildren and their spouses, eight great grandchildren and a niece and nephew.

Contributions can be made to: Partners In Care Hospice, 2075 NE Wyatt Ct., Bend, OR 97701; Planned Parenthood Columbia Willamette, Attn: Development, 3727 NE Martin Luther King Jr. Blvd, Portland, OR 97212; or the Environmental Defense Fund, PO Box 98051, Washington DC 20077-7004.



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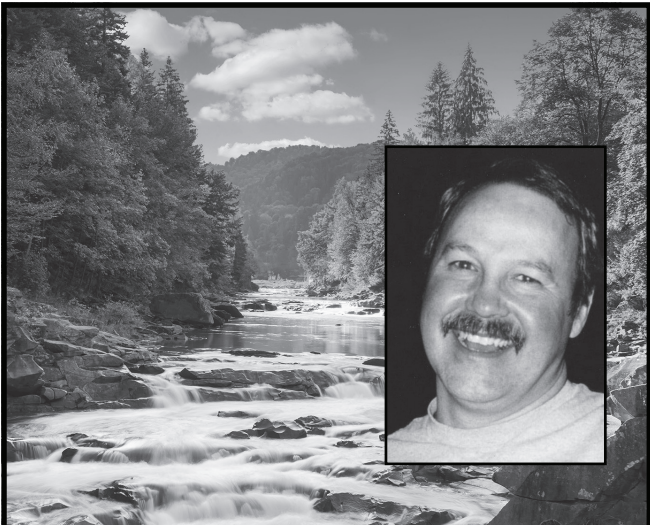
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OBITUARY



MICHAEL J GWINUP

May 18, 1954 - March 31, 2022

Celebration of Life

September 10th at 2:00 pm
Unitarian Universalist Fellowship
601980 Skyline Ranch Rd.
Bend, Oregon 97703

Join us to celebrate the life of Michael Gwinup.
Beloved husband, Dad, Papa, and Friend.

DEATH NOTICES

Carolyn Louise (Blakely) Nelson

of Bend, OR
June, 3, 1930 -
August 16, 2022
Arrangements: Niswonger-Reynolds Funeral Home
Bend, Oregon 541-382-2471
Services: Memorial service at 2PM on Friday, September 16, 2022 at Niswonger-Reynolds Funeral Chapel (105 NW Irving Ave., Bend, OR)

OBITUARY DEADLINE

Call to ask about our deadlines
541-385-5809
Monday - Friday, 10am - 3pm
No death notices or obituaries are published Mondays.

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