

In the mountain's shadow

Remembering Mount St. Helens, before and after eruption

By **RON BALDWIN**
For The Astorian

ASTORIA — According to the Klickitat people, the creator had spoken. He was furious with his sons, who led his people to opposite sides of the great river.

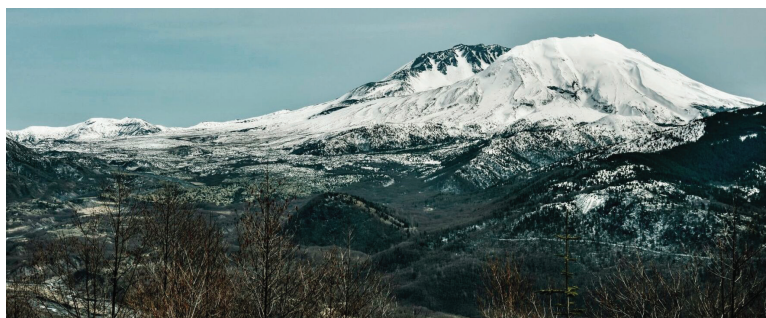
Wy'east and Pahto led warriors against one another over the love of Loo-wit, a woman who could not decide between the two. Seeing his people perish at the hands of their own kin, the creator flew into a rage, casting all three into stone in the form of the great fire mountains that dominate the horizon, so the legend tells.

The Cowlitz, Yakama, Multnomah and Chinook tribes gave their own names and stories to the towering peaks. When Capt. George Vancouver entered the Columbia, he gave two of them names that he thought would serve him best in the British Royal Navy.

Wy'east became Mount Hood, after Adm. Samuel Hood, and Loo-wit became Mount St. Helens after the ambassador to the Spanish court Baron St. Helens. Pahto, now known as Mount Adams, would wait another 70 years to take the name of the United States' second president.

Mountains have captured the imagination and awe of humankind since the dawn of time. Nearly every culture has ascribed some spiritual significance to the peaks in their realm. Often, a mountain serves as the setting of a creation story, or some physical manifestation of a spirit, god or goddess. For lower Columbians, Mount St. Helens is a constant presence, whether you can see the mountain or not. On a clear day, it can be seen from nearly anywhere on the river, sporting varied cloaks. It reigns over the landscape, silent and peaceful for now.

The catastrophic eruption of May 18, 1980, changed everything. The classic Cascadian dome, considered by many to be the most beautiful of the Cascade stratovolcanoes, was blown off in one of the deadliest and most destructive volcanic events in American history. This was not the first time the mountain



Ron Baldwin/Contributed Photo

A snowcapped Mount St. Helens.

had blown its top. Geologic records reveal many more, and many Indigenous tribes have told stories about its fiery events. Not many alive at the time will forget where they were when the mountain lost its temper.

Most lower Columbia locations had a dusting of fine, gritty ash, but the blast was to the north and the prevailing winds buried the lands northeast of the blast zone in as much as 5 inches of ash. The blast zone was devastated. Trees were incinerated in seconds and millions of logs from surrounded forests washed down the Toutle and Cowlitz rivers before filling the Columbia, along with a mixture of ash and pyroclastic mud.

Life downstream was forever changed. River commerce came to a stop for a time. The incalculable damage resulted in years of dredging, construction and countless human and financial costs before the Columbia returned to its pristine state. Having spent many school days in Longview, Mount St. Helens was always right over our shoulders, in winter dazzling white and in summer stripped and bare.

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 moun-

tain. 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 Seaquest State Park. Then Silver Lake, where I 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.

Bracing for a challenging fire season

By **KATY NESBITT**
For EO Media Group

SALEM — Despite a long winter and cold and wet spring, Oregon fire authorities are preparing for a challenging season.

During a press conference on Monday, May 16, Gov. Kate Brown highlighted the state's challenges — despite the state's rainfall the past two months, there are many places experiencing a "megadrought," with dry conditions expected to continue.

Early indications, Brown said, are that Southern Oregon and the east side of the Cascades along with the Columbia Gorge are especially vulnerable this year.

To alleviate some of the stress of extended drought and increasingly large wildfires, the Oregon Legislature passed Senate Bill 762 in 2019, adding funding for additional personnel and equipment, like air tankers and helicopters.

Brown claimed Oregon has one of the best response systems in the country, but the new funding will help keep resources from being maxed out when fire season arrives. The governor also stressed prevention to curb the outbreak of wildfires.

"Please be smart and careful when enjoying the outdoors to prevent tragic loss," she said. "Being prepared can mean the difference between life and death."

In the wake of fires that not only destroyed hundreds of thousands of acres of forest and rangeland, some of Oregon's recent wildfires, especially in September 2020, left thousands homeless. Brown asked that people stay informed through outlets like oralert.gov on fire activity and evacuation orders.

"If you are asked to evacuate, please just do it," she said.

Mike Shaw, Oregon Department of Forestry's fire protection chief, said the cool, wet weather of April and May are welcome respite from the drought and has helped put off fire season, but echoed the governor about the continued threat of wildfire across most of the state.

"We are in a very significant drought pattern, especially on the east slope of the Cascades and vast parts of Eastern, Southern and Central Oregon," he said.

According to maps predicting the national wildfire outlook, the season will likely ramp up in mid-July and be very active in August. Travis

Medema, chief deputy for the state fire marshal's office, said that is the same time period that competition for resources could be a problem.

"We are going to try and keep fires small and out of communities," he said.

The state has 305 fire departments and three incident command teams.

"We will work with local communities to bolster capacity when needed," Medema said.

With technology that predicts lightning and detects fuel moisture of grasses, live fuel like trees and dead and down material, Medema said fire crews can be pre-positioned in areas that are likely to have high fire activity.

While state and federal agencies have contracts with air support, the Oregon National Guard will also have two Blackhawk helicopters that can haul 500 gallons of water at a time and one Chinook that can fly with a 1,500-gallon bucket. National Guard troops will be trained and ready for ground support, as well, according to Maj. Gen. Michael Stencel, the adjutant general of the Oregon National Guard.

Andrew Phelps, director of the Office of Emergency Management, said there are several state agencies coordinating efforts for the upcoming wildfire season like Oregon Department of Human Services that works with nonprofits to provide shelter and food for those who are displaced and Oregon Department of Transportation that works with the Department of Forestry cross-training employees in fire fighting and snow removal. He said the state also has a mutual aid agreement with its neighbors.

"As seasons are longer and more intense, the agencies' roles are keeping people safe," he said. "We have a shared responsibility to prepare for emergencies."

The Department of Environmental Quality's focus is on smoke management, air quality and communication, said Deputy Director Leah Feldon.

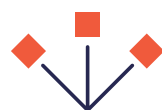
Tom Roick, DEQ air quality monitoring manager said the network of smoke monitors across Oregon is expanding. He said his department received money to install 20 new monitors. The information will be shared to through the state's air quality index on the OregonAIR app and <https://oregonSmoke.blogspot.com/>.

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Check in on a friend. Share your lunch. Offer to carry that. Grow a garden and give it away. Ask the tough questions. Then listen. Stand up for someone. Give someone a chance. Give yourself a break. Give to the arts. Start a movement. Start a scholarship. Welcome the new neighbors. Be patient. Walk a mile in their shoes. Donate shoes. Drop off dinner. Leave the last donut. Leave no trace. Take responsibility. Hold the door and your mind open. Endeavor to understand. RSVP. Smile. Hope for nothing more than kindness in return.



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