

AZALEA STATE PARK

A
CURRY COUNTY
FAIRYLAND OF FLOWERS

by
W. A. Langille

In the southwest corner of Oregon is Curry County. Brookings, five miles north of the Oregon-California line, and housing some three hundred people, is the metropolis of this salubrious section of the state. Eighteen or more years ago, a large sawmill was in operation here, sawing redwood timber cut on Smith River in California and brot in over a logging railroad. The lumber was shipped by steamer to California ports. Operations ceased in 1925.

Azalea State Park, which adjoins Brookings, was acquired in October, 1937. Including the approach road, the park has an area of 23.30 acres, described as being in the southwest quarter of the northwest quarter of section 5, township 41 south, range 13 west, Willamette Meridian. It is a portion of the original Augustus Miller Donation Land Claim No. 37, patented April 27, 1874. The approach road was once the pack trail of the romantic mining days of the early fifties, and later the tortorous coastal wagon route from California to the Umpqua and Willamette Valley settlements.

This delightful park lies on the northerly outskirts of Brookings, occupying a modest eminence from which, altho only some two hundred feet above tide, there are pleasing outlooks. To the south and southwest there are vistas of the ocean and the fertile, low-lying shore lands that once yielded, and will again yield, quantities of high quality flower bulbs that went to gardens far and wide away. The picturesque, pastoral hills that parallel the coast are visible for miles to the north and, to the south, well

into California.

In the foreground, the park land slopes southward to the Coast Highway, which leads thru an alder covered depression to the visible Chetco River Bridge, as the crows fly, but a quarter mile or so away. For some distance above the bridge there are pleasing glimpses of this beautiful, laurel fringed river, which derived its appropriate, euphonious name from the once numerous tribe of Chetco Indians who laid claim to its waters and all the contiguous lands in the vicinity of the park and to the sea.

Eastward, and bordering the river side of the park, is the new Forest Service road that leads up the north bank of the Chetco which, for a distance, utilizes the abandoned grade of the California Northern Railroad that brot the redwood logs to the Brookings mill. This road marches up the river thru splendid groves of large and tall California laurel-Umbellularia-californica, locally known as Oregon myrtle, or perhaps Coos Bay myrtle, thence on up stream a few miles farther to Oregon's only living group of native redwoods (*Sequoia sempervirens*) which marks the present northern limits of this noble tree, that once grew over much of the land that is now Oregon and Washington. This remnant of a once vast forest is located in the foothills of the tumultuous mountains called Siskiyou, which bear the geological distinction of being the first island of land to rise from the ocean, in the entire Oregon Country, between the present seashore and the Blue Mountains.

In the near vicinity of the redwood grove, is Mount Emily, 2,721 feet high, where the Japs, on September , 1942, dropped from a lone airplane the first enemy, incendiary bombs that ever fell upon United States soil.

This small park embraces, and is made famous, by a remarkable showing of native azaleas - *Azalea occidentalis* - that went unheeded and unheralded, until acquired by the State Highway Commission, thru its parks

department, to be perpetuated for the edification and pleasure of the public. It was the keen perception of S. H. Boardman, State Parks Superintendent, for the unusual, esthetic values in nature, that unveiled the obscurity of these flowered acres and revealed their challenging beauty to flower loving people, who find here one of nature's most exquisite and inspiring native gardens. One that had lived and lived, to flower, fade and be reborn again and again, and yet again, in the long, unchanging years that have marked the centuries of their existence.

The introduction of this wonderful field of wild azaleas to the general public, with its suitable dedicatory exercises and attendant ceremonies, was conceived by W. L. Crissey and Elmer Bankus of the Brookings Chamber of Commerce. It was the initiative and enterprise of this organization, coupled with the wholehearted support of the citizens of the south part of the county that made the day a success. Invitations were sent to state-wide organizations, officials and notables. The Oregon press was cordial and California papers as far south as San Diego heralded the coming event, with the result that Garden Club members and many other nature lovers gathered at Azalea Park on May 21, 1939, to be the first assembly to do honor to Azalea Land.

The day was gently showery, as spring days are apt to be in Curry County, the azalea blooms were in abundance and at their glorious best, to the great delight of the many surprised and enthusiastic visitors, who were happy that they had seen the splendid showing of wild azaleas and pleased with the friendly hospitality extended by the sponsoring organization and the community. The affair was ended with a banquet in Brookings, at which the "piece de resistance" was one of Curry County's delectable, mast-fed wild hogs, barbecued by experts to exactly the right turn. At the conclusion of the ceremonies it was suggested that this azalea festival be made an annual fete. This was met with ready assent by the sponsors and it was there and then resolved that the yearly flowering of the wild, park azaleas would be made the

occasion of an annual festival in their own flower kingdom. This plan has since been interrupted by the inhibitions of the war effort, but it is the intent of the sponsors to revive the fete whenever circumstances will permit.

Azalea is a flower show park, in an outstanding floral section of Oregon, which was selected for its wonderful display of indigenous azaleas that have a history. Some of the authorities modestly assert they have weathered sun and storm for at least one hundred fifty years. Others aver they have attained to even four hundred years of continuous life. In either case it is a remarkably long period of time for shrubs of this type to have survived the vicissitudes of long and close native occupancy and, for nearly a century, the hazards of fire under the white man's careless stewardship. Many of the shrubs are eight to ten, or even more, feet in height, often with branches of equal or greater spread, that are pleasingly artistic in their frequently grotesque distortions.

While botanically they are distinctly of the variety, *Azalea occidentalis*, in the park showing they are apparently natural hybrids. This hybridization is deemed to be the result of their long period of isolated commingling, believably revealing itself even in the foliage, which varies thru many intermediary shades of green. This leaf shading is matched by a fine distinction of flower coloring, ranging from pure white to a tinted white and thru delicate shades of pink to a lovely deep rose.

While it can well be said that in this genial, humid climate azalea flowers can be found in secluded sheltered spots thruout the year (azalea blooms were picked in the park in mid-January, 1943) the seasonal blossoming begins in the early spring and continues until mid-summer. The perfection of mass flowering is attained across the middle of May. It is then this enchanting, centuries old wild garden is a gorgeous, alluring riot of colorful, sweet scented beauty, that has been pronounced by competent

authorities to be the handsomest and most impressive showing of native azaleas anywhere within the whole United States. As if not satisfied with their glorious flowering, the azalea shrubs prolong their attractiveness with brilliant hued foliage of lingering loveliness.


The central portion of the park holds the choicest azalea shrubs. Here are to be seen the finest flowers and, in season, it is enriched by a massed carpet of unbelievably blue violets that add another touch of delight to this floral bower. Despite the unusually wet winter of 1942-'43 this central area was cleared of entangling vines and unwanted shrubbery by a skillful, ardent lover of the beauty in nature, to the great improvement of the park, making it possible to wander at will thruout this beautiful rustic arbor. Here and there thruout the area, are groups of young Douglas firs, with an occasional spruce sapling, its bluish foliage in striking contrast to the light green of the firs. Too, there are infrequent, picturesque, veteran Douglas firs, limbed almost to their bases, with wide spreading lower branches, drooping almost to the ground, offering shade or improvised shelter over resting benches that were designed and made by state park forces, Hewn from logs of the beautiful native laurel wood.

A long the northerly side of the park, a small stream flows beneath a canopy of leafy alders and stalwart maples, shading substantial, benched picnic tables, which have also been cut from the attractive, intricately patterned laurel wood. Next to the wealth of flowers, these unique and impressive laurel-wood park fixtures, by the master craftsman Fowler, are the cynosure of all visitors and they incite much favorable, often covetous, comment. There are three picnic stove shelters, water is piped in from the Brookings supply system, and other conveniences are present and available to assist in making a visit there, at any time, one of pleasure that will be long remembered.

Created a round a most unusual growth of wild, flowering azalca shrubs

which have attained singular distinction for their extraordinary age and richly elegant blossoming, these features have made of this park an unique area, with a strong appeal to the flower loving public. Even seasoned travelers find here a place of appealing native floral beauty in an attractive setting, and numerous letters have been received in its praise. Typical of these expressions was a letter from a prominent New York florist and nurseryman which, in part, said: "I chanced to drive off the main highway to visit the Azalea State Park at Brookings. I must say it is one of the most beautiful places I have ever seen. I shall surely not miss any chances to tell friends visiting Oregon to be sure to stop off and see it, and will certainly make it an objective on my next trip to the coast." Similar letters from others that come from up and down the entire nation have been received, mentioning the pleasure the writers experienced upon visiting this azalea garden.

No one traveling this portion of the Oregon Coast highway in flower season, should miss the opportunity for a short diversion into this Azalea Park for a glimpse of its floral splendor. The flowers are well worth while and the peaceful restfulness of the surroundings is an added inducement to tarry in the presence of their sweet scented loveliness.


W. A. Langille
State Park Historian

CONCLUSIONS

It has been noted and frequently commented upon that, generally speaking, private properties along the main highways in California present a neater appearance than like properties in Oregon. This unfavorable comparison is not new or recent, but has persisted for a number of years, and there must be some grounds for such a common observation. There is, of course, no public remedy for private neglect. However, public grounds should be kept so as to escape such criticism.

Some eight or nine years ago, at the sides of the highway on the California side of the border line, the immediate surroundings had been tidied, and neat beds of flowers had been planted and cared for within the right-of-way. This was in sharp contrast to a tangle of weeds, vines, and a generally unkempt appearance on the Oregon side. All this may have been changed since then, but it leads to the thought that if these contrasting conditions still pertain, even a modest improvement could be made at the Coast Highway entrance to our state that would give travelers a better impression than is now conveyed by their first glimpse of Oregon in crossing the state line.

We all know how first impressions, even wrong ones, often persist. If this gateway can be dolled up so as to create a good first impression upon those who enter Oregon by this route, it would reflect itself in the visitors' viewpoint and attitude toward other features of the state's attractions. Undoubtedly, a pleasing, landscaped Coast Highway entrance to Oregon will pay dividends.

Azalea, being the first state park encountered when north bound on the coastal route, its distinguishing features should be brot to the attention of visitors in more detail than a directional sign offers. Its seasonal flower showing, together with the opportunity for a quiet rest should be

displayed.

The great improvement made in the appearance of Azalea Park during the past winter was well worth while and this new standard should be fully maintained in the future.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The enlargement of the picnic area for the accommodation of group gatherings such as the Grange or similar organizations of the Brookings district. The picnic area should be enlarged along the creek where the present picnic area is located. A tree screen should always protect the park proper from the picnic area.

The hill slope terminating at the road should be planted to azaleas as a large portion of this area is devoid of plants.


Alder and blackberry had taken over the area before it became a park. Since becoming a park, a continuous battle has been carried on in the elimination of alder and blackberry vines from the azalea plants. This battle will have to be carried on constantly.

On the side hill is a spring. This spring can be developed for the general benefit of park patrons and should be listed in the general development of the park. More benches made of myrtle can be advantageously placed in the park.

An extension of the water system strategically placed for fire fighting purposes should be an early development.

Road and parking area rocks defining the two areas should be replaced with large rocks, the present rocks being "splinters" left over from the construction of the latrine.

Azalea plantings should be made on both sides of the road starting at the High School and terminating at the park entrance.


S. H. Boardman
State Parks Superintendent
March 30, 1944