

HELMICK STATE PARK  
A CENTENARIAN'S GIFT  
TO THE  
STATE OF OREGON

In the fall of 1946 it will be a round century since the land embraced in Helmick State Park was segregated from the public domain as a part of two donation land claims and into the ownership of Henry and Sarah Helmick, husband and wife.

This small park is situated on Pacific Highway, 99W, Mile Post 69.64, five miles south of the College of Education at Monmouth. Its entrance is close to the south end of the highway bridge over the Luckiamute River. The Valley and Siletz railroad crosses the highway not far from the north end of the bridge. The park is located in Section 18, Township 9 South, Range 4 West, and in Section 13, Township 9 South, Range 5 West, W.M., Polk County. It is described by metes and bounds and contains 5.46 acres, of which 5.16 acres were a gift to the State by Sarah Helmick, a widow, and 0.30 acres were a gift from James and Amanda Helmick, to round out the tract to 5.46 acres. Both deeds are dated February 15, 1922.

The park area is west of the highway and some ten or twelve feet below its surface. It is practically level, adjoins the river and supports a number of large, old broadleaf maples, tall, grand firs (*Abies grandis*), with a few Douglas firs, western red cedars, and western yews. There are also some black cottonwoods, specimens of Oregon ash, wild crab apple and service berry distributed over the area. Collectively, these with some native shrubbery, form a delightful, sylvan retreat beside the well known Luckiamute, a tributary stream that has a place in the lore of this section of the Willamette Valley.

In the fall of 1945 it was noted that several of the larger grand firs had died. Their loss has been ascribed to the recent heavy flooding of the area. As some of the trees are aged, and had survived a number of excessive floods, it is

not likely this is the cause. The grandis is not a particularly long-lived tree, except under favorable, natural forest conditions, and does not long survive intensive use of any area it inhabits. Under such adverse conditions as pertain in a much used picnic area, they are vulnerable and quite likely to succumb. The area is fairly well grassed over, but this conifer shaded grass of forage type does not form a sufficient sod to resist being trampled over. Underbrush is not prevalent except along the river bank and in a small overflow run on the southerly side. As a whole the natural conditions are good, and the setting is an inviting one for a small park so conveniently located for the entertainment of the local people. It has long been a popular neighborhood resort.

HISTORY Helmick State Park has the distinction of being the first park area deeded to the State of Oregon. In the Quarterly of the Oregon Historical Society, dated December 1925, an article by Virginia Nesbit, tells us something of its origin, together with incidents of the life of the principal donor, Sarah Helmick ("Grandma" to all her friends and acquaintances), in whose honor the park was named. Her picture, taken shortly before her death at the age of over 101 years, adorns a page of the magazine.

"She was born in Mowckport, Indiana, July 4, 1823, the daughter of Mr. and Mrs. Peter Steeprow, and had twelve brothers and sisters. Her husband, Henry Helmick, was born in Germany, September 14, 1822. They were married at Burlington, Iowa, early in April 1845, starting for Oregon the morning after their wedding. With a covered wagon drawn by four yoke of oxen, they traveled in company with eighty other wagon and some one hundred forty people in the train; under the leadership of a Captain McDonald".

They reached Oregon in the fall of 1845. "The only serious mishap of the trip occurred when they arrived at Cascade Rapids, six months and three days after leaving Burlington, when a raft with all their goods broke loose and everything they possessed was swept away. Hearing of their plight a Mr. Ebberts of Tualatin Plains, came to their rescue and took them to his home, where they stayed all winter. This

is an instance of the helpful pioneer spirit that characterized most of the sturdy, valiant souls of the migrants who first ventured across the plains to establish homes in the Oregon Country. Early in 1846 Henry Helmick built the first grist mill in Salem,

In the fall of 1846 they located upon a 640 acre tract in two Donation Land Claims No's 41 and 60, situated on the Lucki&mute River. "The first year on their claim was a trying one; their diet consisting of boiled beans and wheat, with less than three pounds of meet for the entire winter". Yet, despite all the difficulties of an early trip across the plains and the many deprivations and vicissitudes of early pioneering life, Sarah Helmick lived beyond the century mark.

"September 12, 1924, when the West Side Highway was dedicated Governor Walter W. Pierce and other officials of the State, and 7000 people from the Willamette Valley, through which the highway runs, and in which Albany, Oregon, the home of 'Grandma' is located, came to honor her and pay tribute to the spirit which prompted the generous gift. Living near her in Oregon 'Grandma' has two children, six grandchildren and eight great grandchildren".

The road then dedicated is in places the route of the old "Territorial Road", once the established way of travel up this side of the Willamette Valley.

As related by Virginia Nesbit, the incident of "Grandma" Helmick's connection with the highway dedication ceremonies, was a circumstance that dramatically linked them with the early pioneering days of this Oregon centenarian. With her husband she had crossed the plains seventy-nine years before; and a year later, by canoe and on foot, had traveled the difficult ways of the day to reach the site of the then isolated donation land claim they had chosen to be their future home. In the long interval of her life in Oregon she saw travel evolve from the most primitive of individual effort to a modern highway that, in its long traverse from Canada to Mexico, passes the entrance of the park she gave the State for the use of the people or their guests. Few, if any, at the time of dedication, could then have said they had seen as much of Oregon's progress.


Her husband died in 1877. Before his death they had enjoyed a measure of prosperity, and with a sufficiency of worldly goods, she moved to Albany soon after, where she quietly passed away on December 23, 1924.

When the widely spread Camp Adair was being established for military training in 1942; the land adjoining Helmick Park was acquired, and negotiations for taking over the park itself were entered into, but later rescinded. Under the impression the park had become a part of the military reservation, troops on maneuvers had entered, and "fox holes" were dug here and there. During a period of excessive rain in March and April 1943, a considerable extent of the army training grounds and the park area were flooded. The flood water carried away one heavy, insecure table top, and invasion of the park by army vehicles just after the flood period, resulted in some disfiguring, surface damage. Prior to the flood, six iron framed resting benches that had been in the park for years, disappeared during the military occupation of the camp, and were not recovered. And recently it was noted that some one had used a table bench for fuel in the park stove. Insignificant losses, but indicative of what happened here and elsewhere. Any flood damage was, of course unavoidable; but the violation of open park hospitality and the willful taking or destruction of park property, was the inevitable result of the lack of help to properly care for the parks during the war-period.

PARK USAGE This park is naturally an inviting area and has been patronized for a score of years under state ownership. It has a fairly well grassed floor, there is ample shade and the river has a place for swimming. Even before the tract was given to the State it was popular with the surrounding people for informal gatherings and picnic parties, a feature of rural social life much less in vogue now than in former days. Due to the wide extent of family displacements because of the Camp Adair acquisition, use of the park greatly declined during war-time. However, the proposed post-war rehabilitation of the park will restore its former popularity, and citizens of the undisturbed neighborhoods will again eagerly seek it out for their pleasurable picnic outings.

IMPROVEMENTS There is a good entrance road, eight heavy, benched tables an outdoor stove and pit latrines. The water supply is from a quicksand well, with an old fashioned hand pump. All the work done was by highway department maintenance forces, or state park traveling crews.

The situation of this park in the midst of a stabilized agricultural community assures its continued future use, and fully justifies a somewhat modernized rehabilitation, in keeping with its prestige as Oregon's first deeded state park.

  
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W. A. Langille  
State Park Historian


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December 6, 1945

HELMICK STATE PARK

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR BETTERMENT PROJECTS

A central three-way stove should be constructed for picnic area. New tables constructed. Toilets repaired and painted. Spring developed on stream bank. Swimming pool developed in stream by construction of fish lattice dams. Additional acre upstream from park boundaries should be acquired for within this acre is located spring and swimming pool. The gradient of the park approaches should be eased thru the construction of longer approaches. This park is subject to overflow every winter and all permanent structures should have extra foundations. The major trees of the park have passed their peak and new ones should be planted to take their place.

  
S. H. Boardman  
State Parks Superintendent

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