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Oregon State Parks Centennial Essay

Introduction

The Oregon State Parks system celebrates its centennial in 2022, a century after Oregon Trail pioneer Sarah Helmick donated land for the first state park (Sarah Helmick State Park, near Monmouth). In 1913, the Oregon State Legislature created the Oregon State Highway Commission, taking the first step toward creating state parks. In 1947, the Commission created a state parks unit, which in 1963 the legislature authorized to “obtain and develop scenic and historical places.” In 1989, the legislature created the Oregon Parks and Recreation Department, and in 1998, voters decided that 7.5% of Oregon Lottery revenue would be dedicated to state parks. Today the Oregon State Parks and Recreation Department (OPRD) hosts 42 million visitors a year.

The centennial of Helmick’s gift is a time to celebrate the parks’ many one-of-a-kind stories. The stories range from the profound, like the beach bills that preserved Oregon’s coast for public use, to the wacky, like daredevil Al Faussett’s 1928 boat trip over a 184-foot waterfall at Silver Falls State Park. Sublime, silly, significant – the state parks’ stories are the stories of Oregon.

OPRD’s mission is “to provide and protect outstanding natural, scenic, cultural, historic and recreational sites for the enjoyment and education of present and future generations.” Oregon’s scenic wonders and cultural artifacts, its history and its places to play are inseparable. For example, at Oswald West State Park, hikers can climb forest cliffs, admire seals sunning on the beach, and, sometimes, discover clumps of beeswax from a shipwrecked Spanish galleon that explored the Pacific Northwest in the 1700s. Scenery, recreation, history — the parks present them all.

Regions

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Silver Falls State Park is considered a gem of the park system. Shown here is Lower South Falls. (Oregon State Archives scenic photo)

Southern Oregon
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South, Central and North Coasts

About the Writer

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Oregon State Parks Essay: Portland/Columbia Gorge

In 1850, President Millard Fillmore appointed John B. Preston to be the Oregon Territory's first surveyor general and tasked him with creating detailed maps of the region. The next year, Preston set a cedar stake in what is now Willamette Stone State Heritage Site in Portland's west hills. This spot, where the Willamette meridian and the Willamette baseline cross, is the origin point for all maps and surveys of the Pacific Northwest. In 1988, the federal Department of the Interior memorialized the spot with a steel marker and a brass plaque.

Milo McIver State Park

"There was a lot of pot smoking and skinny dipping, but nobody was killed." That's how Governor Tom McCall summed up Vortex 1, Oregon's version of the Woodstock music festival. In the summer of 1970, Vietnam War protests were growing increasingly violent, and President Richard Nixon announced plans to attend the national American Legion convention in Portland. Anti-war activists planned to disrupt Nixon's visit. The FBI predicted rioting. One small peace activist group, The Family, offered up a free solution, that with the Governor's office's sponsorship, they could put on a rock festival during Nixon's visit. McCall's office agreed, and green-lighted a week-long festival at Milo McIver State Park, 30 miles southeast of Portland. Approximately 50,000 people partied along the Clackamas River, without incident. The Oregon National Guard patrolled the park with a light touch. Nixon cancelled his visit, and there were no anti-war riots. McCall later said, "It was the damnedest confrontation you'll ever see."

Willamette River Greenway

Also in the 1960s, Oregon turned its attention to the 187-mile Willamette River, which runs north from the Cascade Range east of Springfield into the Columbia River. For decades, industries and municipalities clustered along the Willamette River's ports dumped sewage, industrial waste, and other pollutants into the river. Trains started running through the valley in 1871, followed by roads and eventually the I-5 interstate highway, and by 1960, the Willamette River was neglected, abused and badly polluted. The Willamette River Greenway, a water trail strongly championed by governors Bob Straub and Tom McCall, was created to restore and protect the river. Oregon state parks, working with cities and counties bordering the river, bought, traded, rented and accepted gifts of land to create the



The Willamette River from the Sellwood Riverfront Park in southeast Portland with downtown Portland in the background. (Oregon State Archives scenic photo)

greenway, which includes docks for boats, local and state parks and campgrounds. State parks river rangers patrol the river with boats, surveying and repairing properties.

Columbia Gorge

“The \$100,000 Outhouse” was the inelegant nickname for a majestic rest stop overlooking the Columbia River Highway. The highway, considered a technological jewel when construction began in 1913, winds up and around Crown Point, a cliff overlooking the Columbia Gorge. Engineers chose Crown Point as the site for Vista House, a three-floor, octagonal building under a dome roof with public restrooms. Queen Marie of Romania visited Vista House on November 4, 1926. As she and her lady-in-waiting privately used the basement restroom, a crowd of press and dignitaries waited in the corridor when an Oregonian photographer called out, “Listen for it, folks! A royal flush!” The building, now a museum, is a popular observation point in the Crown Point State Scenic Corridor.



Vista House in the Columbia Gorge received an unfortunate nickname by its critics. (Oregon State Archives scenic photo)

White River Falls State Park

Heading east, White River Falls State Park near Maupin is all about water; its 90-foot waterfall feeds into a now-deserted hydropower plant. The plant channeled the waterfall into a turbine-filled powerhouse which, from 1910 to 1960, provided electrical power to Wasco and Sherman counties. Originally built in 1902, the facility provided power for the Wasco Warehouse Milling Company’s flour mills in The Dalles. The company built a small grist mill near the falls, along with four company houses for workers. The massive rock-and-concrete structure, the turbines and remnants of the grist mill are still there.

Columbia River Highway

A message scratched into a rock wall inside of the Mosier Twin Tunnels, east of Hood River on the Historic Columbia River Highway State Trail, tells the story of early automobile-era transportation. The trail is three individual paved paths along parts of the historic Columbia River Highway, the first road to connect Portland with The Dalles. Today, hikers and bicyclists can travel through the Mosier Twin Tunnels, where a blizzard trapped 10 cars full of travelers on November 19, 1921. The next day the travelers, except for Charlie Sadilek and E.B. Martin, hiked through the snow to Mosier, where they stayed until a barge could take them and their cars to Portland. Sadilek, who was headed for Portland after hunting for geese, and Martin didn’t want to leave their cars, so they stayed in the tunnel for 8 days, living on Sadilek’s geese, Martin’s apples and the other travelers’ whiskey. The hardy pair etched “Snowbound, Nov. 19 to 27 – 1921, Chas. J. Sadilek, E.B. Martin” before being rescued and headed to Portland.

Oregon State Parks Essay: Central Oregon

Oregon's State Parks, like all of Oregon, sit on the homelands of Native peoples, and many of the parks invite visitors to appreciate and learn about how different Native peoples thrived in diverse landscapes. Fort Rock State Natural Area, an ancient volcanic crater, sprawls in the high desert of south central Oregon. From a distance it looks like a military fort. Ancestors of the Klamath and Northern Paiute people used this site, leaving behind sandals made of sagebrush bark; some of those sandals date to almost 11,000 years old, making them the oldest footwear in the world.



Fort Rock, in the desert of northern Lake County, has both cultural and geological significance. (Oregon State Archives scenic photo)

Another example of the long presence and deep complexity of Native cultures can be seen at The Cove Palisades State Park, near Madras. The Crooked River Petroglyph, an 80-ton sandstone boulder, is covered with intricate symbols and drawings, etched into the rock by unknown tribes. When the Round Butte Dam was completed in 1965 creating Lake Billy Chinook reservoir, it looked like the reservoir's water would submerge the petroglyph. Instead, park staff moved the boulder to higher ground, where its message endures and waits to be decoded.

Oregon State Parks Essay: Eastern Oregon

Travelers crossing the Oregon Trail in oxen-drawn wagons in the 1800s were happy to stop at the site of Emigrant Springs State Heritage Area near Meacham. They were able to refresh their dwindling water supplies and finally relax under shade trees. The focal point of the park is an Oregon Trail memorial, which President Warren G. Harding dedicated on July 3, 1923. Thousands of people crammed into the park to see the president. Members of the Cayuse, Umatilla and Walla Walla tribes marched in the Meacham parade, and the Cayuse tribe adopted President Harding and first lady Florence Harding.



Lake Owyhee State Park sits in the rugged terrain of southeastern Oregon.
(Oregon State Archives scenic photo)

Iwetemlaykin State Heritage Site near Joseph, Oregon, is part of the ancestral homeland of the Nez Perce Tribe and is sacred land to the Confederated Tribes of the Colville Reservation and the Confederated Tribes of the Umatilla Indian Reservation.

After years of fighting and negotiations, the federal government sent troops, led by General O.O. Howard, to eject members of the Nimi'ipuu or Nez Perce tribes, from the Wallowa Valley in the northeastern corner of Oregon in 1887. Heinmot Tooyalakekt, widely known as Chief Joseph, led his band of approximately 750 Nez Perce men, women and children on a daring escape. For more than three months, the Nez Perce evaded the army, only to surrender less than 40 miles from the Canada border on October 5, 1887.

Farther south, Lake Owyhee State Park sits below Owyhee Dam, which was the tallest dam in the world from its completion in 1932 until 1934. Lake Owyhee is named for three Hawaiian fur trappers who disappeared in 1811 while exploring the region; "Owyhee" is a phonetic spelling of "Hawaii." The dam workers' residential housing was turned into a Civilian Conservation Corps camp during the Great Depression. In 1942, the federal government turned the camp into a detention center for Japanese-Americans, interned in wartime concentration camps in Idaho and Colorado. The detainees were sent to the area with their families to harvest crops. The area surrounding Lake Owyhee State Park was the center of a thriving community of Basque immigrants from the 1880s to the 1940s. Most Basque immigrants to Oregon initially herded sheep or worked in the cattle industry until after World War II, when many families moved to Oregon cities.



Pete French built a cattle empire in southeastern Oregon and trained horses in this round barn. (Oregon State Archives scenic photo)

In the southeastern Oregon high desert, the Frenchglen Hotel State Heritage Site and the Pete French Round Barn State Heritage Site are reminders of the period in Oregon's history when Euro-American cowboys and Mexican vaqueros ran the cattle industry, and homesteaders fought, killed and died for water rights.

Pete French, working in California for his future father-in-law, Hugh Glenn, drove a herd of cattle to southeastern Oregon in 1872. Assisted by vaqueros from California, French built an empire around Harney Lake and Malheur Lake. His properties included a large, round, wood barn – actually, a roofed paddock – where cowboys could train horses in the winter. In the process of dominating Harney County, French alienated many of his neighbors, including Ed Oliver. Oliver lived in a homestead on the bank of Malheur Lake, land that French claimed. After many lawsuits, Oliver shot and killed French the day after Christmas, 1897. Today, the Round Barn is open to visitors.

The Frenchglen Hotel, 35 miles south of the barn, is named for both Pete French and Hugh Glenn. The hotel was built in dirt so hard that workers used dynamite to create holes so that they could plant trees to shade the two-story hotel. Park visitors can rent rooms and dine there in the summer.

North of the Frenchglen Hotel, Kam Wah Chung State Heritage Site, a small stone building, housed a Chinese grocery store, health clinic, temple, and social club for Chinese immigrants from about 1870 to 1948. In 1880, more than 2,000 Chinese immigrants lived in Grant County, drawn by gold mines and railroad jobs. Partners Lung On, an entrepreneur, and physician Ing “Doc” Hay lived and worked in the John Day building, which was also a boarding house for Chinese miners. The building, still stuffed with medicine containers, red-tasseled chandeliers, clothes, furniture, and games, is much as it was when Hay died in 1948. Its collection of artifacts and archives is one of the most complete records in the United States of Chinese herbal medicine and the pioneer life and culture of Chinese immigrants.



The Sumpter Valley Dredge State Heritage Site takes visitors to a fascinating era of gold mining. (Oregon State Archives scenic photo)

Nearby, the Sumpter Valley Dredge State Heritage Site in Sumpter bears witness to the end of Oregon's gold rush. When hard rock gold mining in the region became less profitable, miners turned to digging up rivers to get gold. From 1935 to 1954, the dredge, a three-level wood boat, chewed its way through the

Powder River, scooping up rocks and sand. Massive iron buckets moved the riverbed into the dredge, where, using water and sluices, workers separated gold from the rocks, then dumped the rocks back into the river. The overwhelming environmental damage the process caused is still visible today.

Oregon State Parks Essay: Southern Oregon

On the west side of the Cascade Range, the Wolf Creek Inn State Heritage Site is a counterpart to the Frenchglen Hotel. Built around 1883, it served travelers and stagecoach passengers passing through the Rogue River Valley. Today, it still rents hotel rooms and serves meals to visitors. Author Jack London stayed at the inn in 1911 while finishing his fifteenth novel, *Valley of the Moon*. Rumor has it that movie star Clark Gable hid out there when he needed a break from Hollywood. Nestled into the densely forested mountains north of Grants Pass, the hotel and restaurant retain the feel of a bygone era. The first floor lobby includes

separate men's and women's parlors and a dining room. A ballroom takes up much of

the second floor, and the attic once provided budget bunk lodging. In the late 1880s, cowboys who couldn't afford a room could sleep in the attic for 10 cents a night. They often would jam their spurs into the wooden rafters, to anchor themselves in place; their spur marks are still visible.



The historic Wolf Creek Inn State Heritage Site has hosted glamorous guests over the decades. (Oregon State Archives scenic photo)

“Kids, come on down from that wheel skidder right now!” Visitors hearing that were most likely visiting Collier Memorial State Park, an outdoor museum of logging equipment. North of Chiloquin, the park offers camping spaces and freshwater fishing, and displays the biggest collection of historic logging equipment in the state. The outdoor and indoor museums contain artifacts from the first days of logging to modern day, showing the evolution from axes and oxen to timber tug boats and trains. Its collection of chain saws is a perennial crowd pleaser. Visitors can admire the antique equipment displayed outside.

Oregon State Parks Essay: Willamette Valley

Erratic Rock State Park near McMinnville bears witness to some of the geologic forces that shaped Oregon's landscape. During the Ice Age, icebergs floated down the Columbia River, flooding the Willamette Valley. One of those floods swept up a forty-ton boulder from the northern Rocky Mountains, and deposited it in that spot. Sitting in solitary splendor, the rock is a testament to the awesome power of climate change.



Erratic Rock State Park near McMinnville tells the story of a huge rock carried hundreds of miles by a glacier. (Oregon State Archives scenic photo)

Not far from Erratic Rock, Fort Yamhill State Heritage Area recalls a time of major social change – the United States' wars against indigenous peoples. The first people known to live in the area were of the Yamhelas Indian Tribe, part of the Kalapooian family.

By 1856, thousands of Native Americans in the Willamette Valley had died of diseases introduced by white settlers, and that year, Congress forced 27 tribes – about 2,000 people – into the Grand Ronde Agency Coastal Reservation. That March, the U.S. Army began building Fort Yamhill to protect and control Indians on the reservation, and to be a buffer between the Indians and white settlers. The army dispatched young Lieutenant Philip Sheridan to oversee construction of the fort; Sheridan served there until leaving to lead U.S. Army troops in the Civil War.

The fort included a sentry box, barracks, a hospital, general store, blacksmith shop and a block house.

The army abandoned the fort in 1866. Its block house was moved to the Valley Junction area where it was used as a jail, and later moved about 30 miles east to Dayton. The building that had housed the officers' quarters was also moved but has been returned to its original site. Archaeologists have uncovered the sandstone foundations of most of the fort's buildings, providing a clear picture of the layout of a pre-Civil War military base.

In the 1840s, Euro-American emigrants gathered at what is now Champoeg State Heritage Center near Newberg to create Oregon's first formal government. On May 2, 1843, they voted, 52-50, to form a provisional government and to petition the federal government for support. Today, several buildings,



South Falls at Silver Falls State Park features a Trail of Ten Falls loop trail. (Oregon State Archives scenic photo)

including the Historic Butteville Store and a museum, give visitors a feel for the early pioneers' lives. A stone obelisk lists the names of the 52 men who voted to create a provisional government.

Oregon's largest state park, Silver Falls State Park, near Salem, is on land that was originally inhabited by Kalapooian Indians, whom the federal government forced to move to the Grand Ronde Agency Coastal Reservation in 1856. Loggers then heavily harvested the forested land, and wildfires further damaged the watershed. The area became a state park in 1933, during the Great Depression. The federal government created

a Civilian Conservation Corps camp at the park, where workers planted trees, cleared trails and built a lodge. Federal Arts Project workers handcrafted myrtlewood furniture for the lodge, still in use today.

Looking at the ten waterfalls at the park, few people would think, "I'd like to ride a tiny canvas boat over the biggest waterfall, with no helmet," but exhibitionist Al Faussett thought it was a dandy idea. Faussett, bored with being a logger, had made a major mid-life career change and became a professional daredevil, specializing in plunging over waterfalls. Thousands of spectators came to the South Falls to watch him take the plunge on July 1, 1928. He ended up in the hospital but survived his trip over the South Falls in a 12-foot boat stuffed with rubber inner tubes.

The twenty-one acres surrounding the Oregon State Capitol in Salem have been a state park since 2006. Park rangers guide tours of Oregon State Capitol State Park, which consist of Willson Park to the west of the building and Capitol Park, to the east. The first capitol burned in 1855. When the second capitol burned in 1935, clean-up crews simply pushed the destroyed building's stone columns into nearby Mill Creek. Today, fragments of columns are displayed on the grounds of the third capitol, built in 1936. The grounds display fountains, carvings, and other art. These works narrate a story of Oregon's past that omits the history of Native and non-white peoples in favor of a simplified Euro-American-centric history: art includes copies of the bronze statues which represent Oregon in Congress' National Statuary Hall, in Washington, D.C.; Methodist minister Jason Lee's statue clutches a Bible and a petition to Congress; and fur trader John McLoughlin's image holds a beaver top hat, a nod to the state's beaver trade. Thirty-six stone



The Oregon State Capitol Park in spring features cherry blossoms and daffodils. (Oregon State Archives scenic photo)

plaques, one for each of Oregon's counties, list the county seats. The landscaping includes the Moon Tree, a Douglas Fir grown from a seed taken to the moon and back on Apollo 14 in 1971.

Farther down the Willamette Valley, halfway between Albany and Eugene, Thompson's Mills State Heritage Site opened for business the year before Oregon became a state and operated until 2004. German immigrants Martin and Sophia Thompson bought the mill in 1891, and three generations of the Thompson family operated the enterprise. The mill building grew, rather haphazardly, as the family adapted the business to changing times, expanding from milling flour for local farmers to buying wheat and selling flour throughout the state, and eventually switching to producing animal feed. The mill operated on power generated from its private hydropower plant on the Calapooia River, which is channeled through a concrete tunnel under the main building. In its final years of commercial operation, the mill, having difficulty making a profit from animal feed, instead sold the power it generated to a local utility. The twenty-acre park includes the six-floor mill building, World-War I-era silos, the millkeeper's 1906 Queen Anne family home and outbuildings.

Oregon State Parks Essay: South, Central and North Coasts

Oregon's 363-mile coast is dotted with lighthouses, shipwrecks and maritime history. In 1913, Oregon Governor Oswald West and the Oregon legislature designated all of the coast's "wet sand" areas a state highway, which means they belonged to the public, not individuals. In 1967, Governor Tom McCall and the legislature expanded public ownership of the coast to include areas from the low tide mark to 16 vertical feet above it.

The coast lighthouses represent a past when most goods, explorers, and soldiers – including, in 1852, young army captain, and future United States president, Ulysses S.

Grant – came to Oregon by ships – or were

destroyed trying. The oldest lighthouse, at Cape Blanco State Park, stands in tribute to working mothers everywhere. Mabel Bretherton, widowed mother of three children under the age of 10, became Oregon's first female lighthouse keeper there in 1903. Head up the coast to Umpqua Lighthouse State Park and check out its lighthouse; head north again to Heceta Head Lighthouse State Scenic Viewpoint and watch out for a sense of *déjà vu*. The U.S. Lighthouse Board built Heceta Head in 1892, and then to save money, used the same architectural plans to build the Umpqua River Lighthouse two years later.



Heceta Head Lighthouse State Scenic Viewpoint showcases the rugged beauty of the Oregon coast. (Oregon State Archives scenic photo)



Just north of Florence sits Oregon's most macabre picnic spot, Darlingtonia State Natural Site. The only Oregon state park property dedicated to preserving a single plant species, the bog is filled with *Darlingtonia californica*, also known as "the cobra lily." The carnivorous beauty uses its sweet nectar to lure insects into its bright yellow flowers ... then eats them. A wooden boardwalk winds its way through thickets of the three-foot tall plants. United States botanist John Torrey named the plant for his

Carnivorous cobra lily plants grow at the Darlingtonia State Natural Site north of Florence. (Oregon State Archives scenic photo)

botany professor William Darlington, who died before he saw his namesake plant.

At Oregon's northern tip, Fort Stevens State Park preserves 84 years of military history. When built at the end of the Civil War, the fort had a moat and drawbridge to protect it from attackers. Fort Stevens was an active military installation until 1947; during World War II, 2,500 men were stationed there. On June 21, 1942, a Japanese submarine fired 17 shells at the coastal fort, making Fort Stevens the only military base in the lower 48 states to be attacked during World War II. The Japanese bombs didn't kill anyone and caused very little damage. Today, visitors can check out the park's military history museum, walk on its concrete gun batteries and take a guided underground tour of its bunkers.

October 25, 1906, was a blustery day when the British cargo ship Peter Iredale approached the mouth of the Columbia River, just south of Fort Stevens. The four-masted British ship was coming in empty to Portland from Acapulco through a dark, thick mist, a rising tide and strong westerly winds. It ran aground on the Clatsop Spit and got stuck in the sand. Captain H. Lawrence ordered the crew to abandon ship. A lifeboat rescued all 27 sailors and two stowaways, but the ship was well and truly stuck, and all attempts to haul it back out to sea failed. The Peter Iredale remains mired on the beach, where visitors can climb on what is left of the wreck.



The shipwreck of the Peter Iredale on the beach at Fort Stevens State Park. (Oregon State Archives scenic photo)

A century after Sarah Helmick donated land for a state park, the Oregon Parks and Recreation Department's role has expanded. Rangers at Thompson's Mills show children how to turn grain into flour. River rangers patrol waterways by boat, while at Wallowa Lake State Park near Joseph, rangers lead tours on snowshoes. The Depoe Bay Whale Watching Center broadcasts live video streams of migrating gray whales, so Oregonians anywhere in the state can watch whales' seasonal travels. At the Rough and Ready Botanical Wayside in the Siskiyou Mountains, protected rare, delicate plants thrive in delicate soil. And at Smith Rock State Park near Redmond, rock climbers from around the world gather to scale its pinnacles and spires. As it provides and protects the state's natural, scenic, cultural, historic and recreational sites, Oregon state parks enters its second century involved in every aspect of Oregon.

End of Essay