



BELLADON

So the Future Will Have a Place:
A Centennial Epilogue

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For people who have a strong connection to the Oregon state park system, the prior seven chapters will likely provoke a smorgasbord of reactions. Some of the stories—mainly successes—are well-known and have been repeated enough to become modern legends. The first Oregon state park superintendent, Sam Boardman, and his struggles to overcome enormous odds and sow the seeds of the system we enjoy today, features prominently. Likewise, the post-WWII boom and the spread of camping, especially under Chet Armstrong, became the Oregon State Park hallmark: state parks are the comfortable, accessible way to experience nature and explore Oregon history.

As reputations go, this is the kind of aura that attracts a talented, dedicated workforce and brings the community to the very doorstep of the state park system in a way no flashy marketing campaign or special event can.

When the cycle of funding crises reached a climax in the 1980s and 90s, the park system survived its most recent trial, and we now tell stories of the looming catastrophe and impending closure of dozens of parks, only to be rescued by voters who dedicated Oregon Lottery revenue to the cause. There may not have ever been a truly unfettered golden age for state parks in Oregon, but the relative boom that followed when the Lottery poured tens of millions of dollars into park repairs and improvements, community grants, and new parkland purchases likely seemed like one to agency employees and people who campaigned for the 1999 ballot measure.

We may have grumbled about it at the time, but the effort to build new parks from 2004-2014—even at a time when the maintenance load was still acute and depriving some parks of delivering service—created tremendous dividends. The coastal beach at Crissey Field near Brookings, rich history of Thompson’s Mills south of Albany, expansive trails of “Stub” Stewart west of Portland, and arid wonderland of Cottonwood Canyon near Condon have served hundreds of thousands of visitors, and over their life, will probably benefit millions more. Lest we fall prey to this misconception that “as long as visitor numbers are high, we’re doing good work,” the true measure of success at each of these parks is in the quality of the experience, not the volume. It’s a poorly-kept secret that most park rangers would prefer to spend an afternoon with a few dozen people who are deeply moved by their park experience than to hear that thanks to good parking management, their park hosted 10,000 people over the weekend.

When we told these stories, it was part pride, and part to cast a wary eye on the future in a possibly vain hope we could find a way to forestall the next inevitable funding crisis.

The pride is justified. When people like Jessie Honeyman, Stub Stewart, Carl Washburne, and Robert Sawyer acted, investing the assets of their privilege into what they viewed as betterment of their society, their efforts seem almost heroic to us now. Agency staff and volunteers can feel some linkage to them by doing their part to continue the work. Keeping 250-plus parks open and serving public needs is challenging, rewarding work and the signs of success come not from dollars earned or acres acquired, but in the life-affirming satisfaction experienced by its patrons.

We challenge the most callous soul to remain unsoftened by the gratitude of a family bonding over a sunset at Fort Rock or a solitary hiker proclaiming victory over their own weary legs atop Humbug Mountain. Those human moments are made possible by today’s state park employees and volunteers drawing lines on a map, brushing a trail, cleaning a restroom, and emptying a trash can: arduous tasks that often obscure their glorious outcomes. Pride is, in a sense, a kind of compensation.

However, one of the reasons we directed the authors of this book to go wherever the tale led them was to leaven that pride with the complexity of history. We often speak of Governor Oswald West’s horseback ride on a postal trail up over Neah-Kah-Nie Mountain, the lucky, or shrewd, or both, maneuver to have the legislature declare beaches a public highway in 1913, and how that set Oregon on a course to value public access to landscapes for recreation. We go to great lengths to remove obvious physical barriers that prevent people from enjoying the benefits afforded by access to natural landscapes, sometimes adding with a flourish, “This was Oswald West’s dream, we think: working to help all

people enjoy Oregon's beauty." We do not include in our stories the Governor's support for the monstrous eugenics movement, which declared that some people are more worthy and desirable than others and justified forced sterilizations in the name of genetic "progress." The concept found refuge in more than two dozen states, and the repercussions of the movement reverberated in Oregon until the 1980s.

The parks themselves are not, as Boardman imagined at the start, perfect jewels tasked with healing our wounds, delighting our senses, and connecting us with forces greater than ourselves. They do have beauty and adventure in abundance, and we believe our desire for the joy, peace, and unity with nature these attributes can inspire are among the many things all people have in common. That said, we do park landscapes a disservice if we ignore the fullness of their existence, because they also stand as testimony to wrongs suffered by tribal peoples, sometimes by merely existing within a landscape that sustained human cultures for millennia with virtually no acknowledgment of their existence. Kam Wah Chung State Heritage Site is a billboard, written in poetic yet cryptic verse, illustrating the journey from suffering inhumanity to celebrating acceptance for people from China who labored in Oregon. The Sumpter Dredge Valley Dredge converted lush riverside into a moonscape for what may as well be an eternity when viewed on human timescales.

So, no, not just perfect beauty: all public lands bear the marks of human history since time immemorial, and you'll find triumph, tragedy, crime, peace, joy, anger, and love, but not perfection. Likewise, the people who influenced state parks—governors, directors, commissioners, legislators, philanthropists—are neither purely heroic nor privileged despots. They, and the system they left in our care, are worth celebrating when their actions are judged virtuous, and rightly earn our dismay when in hindsight, they fall far short of even modest humane principles. To hear of racism, sexism, and other forms of disregard for basic humanity threaded into the cultural foundation of the state parks tradition does not diminish its accomplishments, but it prompts us to ask: how can we do better? It is extraordinarily difficult to judge our own attitudes and behaviors in the here and now, but dissecting our own legends is one way to both understand ourselves and make progress.

And that is the challenge. We can see in the most popularized words and deeds of our forebearers their aspiration to serve: "No local selfish interest should be permitted, through politics or otherwise, to destroy or impair this great birthright of our people," said Governor West, speaking of the beach highway legislation. One of the greatest difficulties anyone in public service can face is moving from the conception of a grand idea on paper to delivery of that service in reality, and through decades of buying and building public beach ac-

cesses, blunting development pressure, and protecting natural and cultural resources, it's easy to understand why most people regard the Oregon public ocean shore as a marvel of public policy.

That does not mean, however, that all people are served equally by that success. By definition, we cannot usually see our own blind spots, and questions such as, "Whom are we leaving behind?" and "Whom does this help, and whom does it hinder?" cannot be wholly answered by the same people who may have unwittingly designed gaps in park services in the first place. The same can be said of every systemic malfunction—bias, prejudice, narrow-mindedness—baked into private and public institutional cultures, including state parks.

The purpose in studying history is not to judge our predecessors, but to critique ourselves and our own leap from aspiration to service. Understanding that these tumors exist in our body of work does not mean rejecting the wealth the healthy parts have produced, but it presents a challenge we must be courageous enough to accept: we must go beyond merely building facilities and presenting opportunities to enjoy outdoor recreation and Oregon history, and instead fully embrace parks as a social endeavor that comes pre-loaded with the benefits and barriers selected by a dominant culture.

The challenge before us has remained unchanged since the Boardman era: protect Oregon's most special places, provide the greatest human experiences possible in those landscapes, and do both in an enduring way. Each generation has plumbed the depths of these seemingly bottomless pits in different ways, though the need for money seems a central theme. As you've read up to this point, Oregon seems to swing between sudden rushes of funding to accomplish short term goals, to small changes in ongoing funding that incrementally increase or decrease resources available for day-to-day operations. Gas tax, bonding, general tax funds, recreational vehicle license plate revenue, Lottery, visitor fees: the shifting patchwork of finance schemes has contributed to past instability and threatens the future ability to serve.

It seems like an obvious statement, but reliable, sufficient funding is and will always be critical, because every mile of trail, campsite, restroom, trash can, and access road has a price tag. Likewise, the park professionals who plan, build, protect, and operate park services to meet higher-and-higher levels of use deserve a fair wage. Even volunteers cost money.

The single greatest factor determining the present and future success of the state park system may not be so practical, however. It is related to the tensions described above: is there broad public agreement about the purpose of the park system? Is it equally welcoming and capable of serving people without regards to income, education, the color of their skin, whom they love, the language they speak, how they style their bodies and clothing? Does the agency culture attract,

support, and encourage employees and volunteers with diverse backgrounds and viewpoints? Compared with the question, “But where will the money come from?” these questions may seem hopelessly abstract, or even academic.

They are intrinsically related. Backlash aside, people—visitors, people with tribal affiliation, employees, volunteers, and others—first deserve state parks that function well. “Function” is a complicated word, and runs the gamut from the personal, spiritual experience to “mere fun” to mental and physical health benefits to community economic strength and beyond. It also relates to the way our bureaucracy supports staff and volunteers. None of it is simple, and all of it requires negotiating a common understanding of the word. While it is possible to secure broadly-supported public funding without improving the functionality of agency services, doing so relies more on political persuasion campaigns based on what people already believe to be true, which does not always align with reality.

Past attempts to improve the state parks and recreation service have borne fruit, from the development schemes of the 1950s and 60s to the 2010 Plan, but have not attempted to examine some of the cultural and institutional barriers to success that exist within the agency, and between public servants and the people they serve. In a departure from the past, where issues of equity and bias were either ignored or given unenthusiastic treatment, as of 2022, the agency is taking a different tack to make progress against the headwinds of bureaucratic inertia. First, by holding open conversations internally among staff, and externally with communities that have felt unwelcome experiencing parks, we are following a structured approach: engage each other and those with diverse viewpoints in candid conversations about barriers, take the time to digest what we learn and relate to it on a personal level, then adapt how we work to incorporate an ethic of service to all people. Second, we are establishing a collaboration between agency human resource professionals and Oregon State University to recruit the expertise of social scientists, business leaders, and other human resource experts to review and recommend ways to develop a workforce that reflects the people we purport to serve.

These programs aim to lead to substantial change to the agency culture, a lofty goal that can take years, and even if improving service doesn’t make it easier to pursue truly reliable, sufficient funding, it remains the correct course.

More practically, the state park system has grown opportunistically, through every director, every commission, every governor. The needs of the day, the availability and nature of funding, the public willingness to sell or donate property, have all combined to create a mulligan stew of properties. Past chapters have brushed against the issue—Should the state park system incorporate large tracts of old growth? Transfer property to local management? Discussions about

what the state park system should embrace and where it should divest are part and parcel of a larger conversation about whom it serves and why. Ultimately, the state park portfolio will be shaped by both physical and social dimensions: locations that are either efficient or not for staff to operate, resources that are either closely associated with the recreation or not, history with state-level impact or not. To decide what “deserves” to stay in the state park system based merely on funding is a recipe for constant withdrawal down to our means, however. It is a far greater accomplishment, as a promise to our future selves, to pursue the means that live up to the vision of the state park system.

For all the shining victories and near-catastrophes since 1922, now we look ahead. To what end, and how will we get there? Our response will let slip what we have learned from our history: are we protecting special places to the best of our ability; are we providing opportunities for the great experiences to all people, including those who do not benefit from being heard as members of a dominant culture; can we make it last?

We are not completely surrounded by challenges, pushing in on us from all sides and preventing forward progress. We are supported from beneath and propelled forward by our history—the successes and mistakes—and by a general acceptance that outdoor recreation and history are valuable and necessary to the human experience. This forward motion is countered by resistance from the future: if parks are nothing more than leisure, and leisure is a luxury, how can we invest time, money, sweat, and space when we have yet to address existential threats from global climate change and economic inequities? It is possible the answer Oregon gives may be, “We cannot.” If that happens, and there will be times it does, the people who care for parks will do their level best to help them endure until the answer changes.

Optimism is a defining characteristic among people who dedicated their lives to parks and history. Rather than mere luxury, we believe outdoor experiences and a deeper, personal understanding of history aren’t just fun and useful on the smallest of scales, but also make us better people, capable of caring enough to be stewards not just of the places set aside with lines on a map and called “parks,” but also of our communities, neighborhoods, state, nation, and planet.

So the future will have a place.