The Oregon Skyline Trail

Evolving Attitudes Toward Nature Tourism

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IN 1915, LEWIS A. MCArTHUR, compiler of Oregon Geographic Names, predicted that a road would shortly be built, "on or near the summit of the Cascade Range from the Columbia River to the California line." McArthur, who had a detailed knowledge of the state’s history and natural spaces, claimed that if the road were built, it would "open an almost incomparable storehouse of magnificent scenery of the most varied type." In 1920, it appeared that his prediction would be partially fulfilled, as the U.S. Forest Service was exploring the possibility of a road between two of Oregon’s natural monuments, Mount Hood and Crater Lake. Under the leadership of recreational officer Frederick W. Cleator, the Forest Service organized the "Skyline Party," which took to the Cascade Mountains between July and October 1920 to select a route for a trail, the Oregon Skyline, which they intended to turn into a road shortly afterward. The Forest Service, supported by state boosters, envisioned the project as a way to participate in the 1920s surge in auto tourism — and to put a brake on expansionist plans of the recently established National Park Service. Enraptured by the Cascades, Cleator enthusiastically wrote in his field diary that the Oregon Skyline would be a "great recreational trail" and that, although the road might take a while to build, it would be "simple [and] cheap road building," at least from Crater Lake to Crescent Lake. The Forest Service’s Report of Preliminary Investigation: Oregon Skyline stated that "tourist travel" was the proposed road’s primary purpose, but in the utilitarian tradition of the agency, it would also provide access for "fire protection [and] to transport supplies." To highlight the proposed road’s tourism credentials, the Forest Service emphasized that the chosen route was not the most direct but rather one that passed "near to most of the points of interest." Local newspapers responded enthusiastically to news of the planned Oregon Skyline road. A 1921 headline in the Sunday Oregonian claimed that the road would "Open Scenic Wonders of the Cascades" and provide the "automobile tourist easy access to Oregon’s great snow-capped peaks..."
and scores of mountain lakes. Enthralled by the project, Oregon’s business leaders also envisioned tourists flocking to the state to spend their dollars in hotels, restaurants, and stores that would line the road’s path. By 1920, there were already a number of roads in the Cascades area, including six trans-Cascades roads and highways that Cleator noted were passable for automobiles. None of these roads, however, provided the scenic tourist experience of the proposed Oregon Skyline. He wrote that the Santiam Road from Albany to Bend and the McKenzie Highway from Eugene to Bend (via McKenzie Bridge) were drivable, but the Oregon Military Road could only be travelled "with some difficulty."

Despite Cleator’s public projections for cost effectiveness and ease in construction, the Oregon Skyline road along the crest of the Cascades was a far more ambitious project due to its high elevation — the estimated bill of $1,242,094 for the section between Crater Lake and the Minto Trail (146 miles of the route) was considerable during a time when other roads were needed in the state. Of equal concern was the issue of snow, which estimates projected would limit the road’s usage to just three months a year. Ultimately the restrictions of limited yearly usage and high cost dealt fatal blows to the project. Plans for conversion of the trail into the Oregon Skyline scenic highway and dreams of creating an auto-tourism hub in the Cascades faded and were ultimately extinguished. What remained was a primitive pedestrian and packhorse trail that gained little attention from tourists and state boosters prior to World War II.

The Oregon Skyline, through its initial conception as a scenic highway and its eventual role as a trail, offers a glimpse into Americans’ recreational demands during the 1920s and 1930s — a time when auto-tourism was increasingly popular and Americans hopped into their cars to embark on scenic joyrides through natural areas. It also provides insight into outdoor recreational planning during the early twentieth century, which benefitted from Victorian-era interest in hiking and trail building. A scenic highway with hotels, restaurants, and other tourist amenities would have undoubtedly been well used, but it would have significantly altered the region’s appearance. As the highway was never built, but the trail remained, the route traversed by the Oregon Skyline Trail retained more of its wilderness character and, therefore, its appeal to recreation seekers later in the century. During the post-World War II era, new tourism trends emerged — solo hiking and “getting away from it all” gained appeal. Consequently, the Oregon Skyline Trail, which was partially incorporated into the 2,659-mile Pacific Crest Trail (PCT), was lauded by those who utilized it as a sanctuary of wilderness. Hikers on the PCT celebrated the very absence of what the Forest Service and Oregon’s business community had been trying to create in the 1920s. The history of the Oregon Skyline demonstrates the twentieth century’s rapid transitions in outdoor recreation, as promoted by the National Park Service and U.S. Forest Service.

**FUELLED BY AFFORDABLE AUTOMOBILES** and the construction of roads that penetrated into previously inaccessible natural areas, Americans embraced auto-tourism with gusto during the early twentieth century. Established in 1916, the National Park Service under the leadership of the agency’s first director, Stephen Mather, harnessed the potential of automobiles and actively encouraged their use in the parks. Mather believed that scenic roads would provide greater access to the parks for a broader cross-section of the American public. In addition, Mather concluded that mass-participation through auto-tourism would increase public support for the National Park Service. The National Park-to-Park Highway Association, an organization with an ambitious plan to link twelve western parks with a 3,500-mile loop road, was launched in 1916 and is an example of the faith Mather and the Park Service placed in auto tourism. Automobiles as a method of transportation to the parks rapidly gained popularity during this period, and the Park Service allowed them into Mount Rainier National Park and Crater Lake National Park.
By 1910 and Yellowstone National Park by 1915. By 1916, automobile travel had overtaken transportation to Yosemite National Park by train, and Yellowstone alone received 13,000 automobiles in 1920. Meanwhile, construction of the Transmountain Highway (renamed the Going-to-the-Sun Road) began in 1921 and made Glacier National Park infinitely more reachable.

During this time, automobiles became integral to the park experience. As historian Paul Sutter wrote, “the growing popularity of the national parks in the late teens was inseparable from the growing popularity of automobile touring and the infrastructure that developed around it.” Americans were encouraged to get in their automobiles and embark on a “Grand Scenic Tour” of the United States, not of Europe, and immerse themselves in the natural marvels of the nation through a patriotic cry of “See America First.” Automobiles were synonymous with the national parks, and as National Parks historian David Louter noted, the agency “provided access by road and car in such a way to emphasise the view from the road, and the road [became a] part of a scenic narrative.” Scenic roads also made more areas of the parks accessible in a shorter time span. Auto-tourists cruised between points of interest described in guide books and ticked off sights like items on a shopping list. As Gabrielle Barnett noted in her work on the Redwood Highway: “Auto-tourism harnessed the speed and flexibility of modern technology to reduce the vast forest to a comprehensible and manageable scale.” By the time the Oregon Skyline road was proposed, Americans’ love affair with auto-tourism had been firmly established.

Oregonians were proud that they already possessed a scenic road, which had opened in 1916. The Columbia River Highway showcased the Columbia River Gorge and was considered a marvel in its own right. Historian Linda Flint McClelland wrote that the Columbia River Highway “established the state of the art for building scenic roads in mountainous areas.” The Portland Press Club declared the scenic road “America’s Greatest Highway,” because it exposed the “most wonderful scenic treasure house of inexhaustible richness, with so many jewels beyond compare.” In patriotic fervour, Pittmon’s auto-tourist guidebook proclaimed that there was “nothing superior in Europe” and that the road was “the most remarkable highway in the world.” Theatre critic and outdoor enthusiast Walter Prichard Eaton also voiced praise for the road in the New York Times in 1921, declaring that “we have heard a lot in the East about the Columbia River Highway, and all of it is true. It is the finest scenic drive in the world, without any question.” For Americans in the early 1900s, automobile, highway, and landscape seamlessly merged to become one singular experience. Visitors marvelled over the engineering spectacle of the road as much as the vistas it exposed.

The Columbia River Highway, Cleator argued, was the inspiration behind the Oregon Skyline road project. He wrote that while Oregonians were “agog with excitement over the great success of the Columbia River Highway,” he questioned what “could be more smart than a fine highway from Mt. Hood to Crater Lake, cleaving the alpine gardens, low-gearing the high passes, tooting at the glaciers, parading a brilliant hinterland with Model T(ease) and other fine cars?” Cleator’s words neatly summed up Americans’ enthusiasm for auto-tourism — the belief that the new technology was the modern and smart way to access the nation’s natural wonders.

In 1920, Oregonians believed that a road along the crest of the Cascades was an excellent idea, as it would provide access to an area of natural beauty that had previously been reachable only by the hardest of travellers. A scenic road that blended into the natural contours of the land was consid-
ered a testament to American innovation and technological ingenuity. The Cascades fit with the ideals of what Americans considered worthy of visiting in the 1920s — towering mountains, flowing rivers, crystal clear lakes, and deep valleys. Tourists wanted to experience grand and sublime landscapes that were epitomized in the first tranche of national parks established in the United States — Yellowstone, Yosemite, Rocky Mountain, and Grand Canyon — all of which adhered to the ideal of “monumentalism.”24 Governmental agencies as well as private boosters promoted scenic roads as gateways to these areas of natural wonder.

According to Cleator, civic leaders approached the Forest Service about the Oregon Skyline road. The Forest Service had been interested in the project for a number of years, but it was not until the Oregon State Chamber of Commerce and the Oregon State Motor Association took an active interest in the road that the idea gained real traction.25 Cleator recalled that the Forest Service responded enthusiastically to the interest from business leaders who “saw great promise in roads, Fords and such.”26 Secretary George Quayle of Oregon’s State Chamber of Commerce gave his emphatic support to the Oregon Skyline project when he declared that the new scenic highway would, “in combination with the Columbia River Highway and Mt. Hood Loop...furnish America’s real scenic wonderland.”27 The Mount Hood Loop, which opened in 1925, was another result of the enthusiasm for scenic roads. The Morning Oregonian reported that the road would offer auto-tourists “handsome hotels and resorts” and that “Oregon’s great mountain will take the position among the stellar scenic attractions of the country.”28 Quayle believed that the Mount Hood Loop, Columbia River Highway, and Oregon Skyline scenic highway would offer a troika of fine scenic roads and make the state a beacon for auto-tourists. It appeared that support for the road and auto-tourism in general was unanimous as visions of Oregon as a hub for scenic highway tourism.

The promise of financial windfalls helped drive support for the Oregon Skyline road. Cleator keenly promoted the fiscal benefits that he envisaged the new road would bring to the state.29 He also used the Columbia River Highway as an example of the dollar rewards that scenic roads offered and declared that it would “draw to the coffers of the State of Oregon, a most lucrative tribute from all over the world.”30 In an article for Motor Land Magazine, Cleator claimed that the route of the road would be surveyed to determine the best locations for “public campgrounds, hotel sites, summer homes, and other sites for the accommodation of the tourist.”31 Cleator emphasised commercial opportunities the road would bring, because he feared Oregonians might consider it misguided to build a road that would get only three months’ use, especially during a time when good roads were needed throughout the state.32 Cleator believed that Oregonians needed to realize the potential that the Cascades offered for bringing tourists to the state.33

The Oregon Skyline road had many champions. The Forest Service, state newspapers, and prominent community figures, such as Circuit Court Judge Jacob Kanzler and photographer Fred Kiser, argued that the road was the key to unlocking a wealth of natural wonders that would otherwise be inaccessible to the vast majority of Americans. In April 1921, Kanzler gave a talk titled “Our Forest Playgrounds” at an East Side Business Men’s Club dinner, outlining his belief that national forests were recreational areas for all to enjoy. His talk included Kiser’s color stereopticon pictures of the Cascades, featuring the scenery they argued would be made accessible by the road.34 Cleator later recalled that Kiser’s images had heightened interest in...
the mountains and revealed to the public the "wonders of the Cascades."35

Quoted in the Sunday Oregonian, Cleator informed Oregonians that the auto-tourist would be rewarded with scenery, hunting, and camping, "all within sight of his automobile."36

Cleator’s position on opening U.S. Forest Service lands was also a reflection of the public’s wanting greater access to the national forests for recreation. The agency had been aware of this trend since at least 1907, when Chief forester Gifford Pinchot wrote that the national forests, "serve a good purpose as great playgrounds for the people" and that the future development of recreational facilities was "worth considering."37 Pinchot’s protegé, Treadwell Cleveland, Jr., went further and claimed in 1910 that the national forests would "become . . . the only available recreational grounds on a scale commensurate with the needs of the people."38 Before Mather embraced auto-tourism in national parks, the Forest Service had acknowledged that forest roads and trails were bringing people deeper and more often into the forests for recreation. This increase in recreational visits also meant a greater demand for campsites and accommodations for overnight stays.39 In 1920, Chief Forester William B. Greeley celebrated the automobile as the modern way to experience the Mount Hood region, writing that the area had been a "vast and unbroken wilderness," but "today the auto-tourist speeds past rapids and portages as picturesque now as in the days when they were toilsomely negotiated by the pioneers."40 The Forest Service, however, was motivated by more than good will in its support of the Oregon Skyline road project.

With the establishment of the National Park Service in 1916, two departments of the federal government vied for administrative control of the nation’s public lands. To what extent the new National Park Service drove the Forest Service to accommodate tourists’ recreational needs has been a subject of some debate. Historian Hal Rothman argued that during the early years, competition caused conflict and that the two agencies “grappled incessantly.”41 William C. Tweed, historian of the Forest Service, claimed that it was apparent by 1916 that, in order to compete with the National Park Service, the Forest Service needed to develop recreational facilities.42 Sutter argued, however, that the Forest Service’s recreational program was not in response to the National Park Service but to user demand — the agency had little choice but to provide for visitors who were coming regardless.43

Examining the Oregon Skyline project development offers further insight into this discussion about the effect of competition between the Park Service and Forest Service. Through competition for administrative control of public lands, there were potentially long-lasting effects on the landscape. Tweed argued that the Forest Service’s interest in recreation stemmed from national parks being established at Mount Rainier, Crater Lake, and Glacier, areas that had previously been under Forest Service jurisdiction.44 Cleator’s correspondence likewise demonstrated that continued Forest Service administrative control was a motivation for the agency’s interest in the Oregon Skyline project. In 1921, Cleator wrote to the landscape architect Frank A. Waugh that Forest Service leaders were interested in the project because “there is nothing to beat it for administrative control of the high country.”45 The Forest Service’s establishment of the trail was a physical claim on the Cascades — by providing recreational access, there was less chance of a national park being established there. District forester George H. Cecil confirmed the Forest Service’s interest and informed Cleator that the Oregon Skyline was a “meritorious project” that had been received with “considerable interest” by the various branches of the agency.46 Motivations of profit, access, and administrative control drove the Oregon Skyline project.

Despite powerful incentives of imagined financial windfalls and increased access to a host of scenic delights, the Oregon Skyline scenic highway never came to fruition. In a 1921 letter to district forester Cecil, assistant forester Kneipp raised concerns that the Skyline Road might be a drain on Forest Service finances, asking “is there any danger of creating so overwhelming a public demand for the construction of the road that it will be necessary for us to concentrate on that project available road funds which, in our best judgement, could be expended more effectively and with greater advantage to the National Forests on other roads?”47 Forest Service funds for road construction were not unlimited, and the cost of construction for a road of such limited usage raised serious concerns. Cleator’s public pronouncements of the road’s benefit created a false hope amongst business leaders for what was a badly conceived plan. Cleator later claimed that the Forest Service had rapidly become cold to the idea of the road and “soft pedalled and then quit saying anything at all about the proposed highway.”48 He added that “at a propitious time several years later when the opportunity to set aside wilderness areas came,” the agency ended “any possible Oregon Skyline Highway.”49

The pedestrian and pack horse trail that the Forest Service had planned to transform into a scenic highway remained, however, offering a linear trail through the Cascades from Mount Hood to Crater Lake. The Skyline Party had crafted the route using Frank A. Waugh’s publications as guidance. In Recreation Uses on the National Forests and Landscape Engineering in the National Forests, Waugh had provided details on what he considered the principal points of interest for vacationers — impressive vistas, streams, waterfalls, and particularly fine trees.50 Roads and trails, Waugh argued, needed to be divided into sections with each presenting a particular point of interest that he termed a “paragraphic point.”51 He added that sections

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This 1936 map, published by the U.S. Forest Service, shows the Oregon Skyline Trail marked in red, extending from the Columbia Gorge, around Mount Hood, and along the Cascade Mountain Range to Crater Lake National Park.
dealing with the same theme needed to build to a climatic point where visitors would view the scenery by means of an overlook, thereby ensuring that points of interest would not be missed. Waugh believed that views needed to be revealed to travellers in a particular fashion, and he referred to the work of landscape architects as “art.” Cleator, in acknowledgment of his debt to Waugh’s writings, wrote to the landscape architect that his publications had been “of great assistance” in routing the Skyline Trail.

Cleator’s field diaries and correspondence with Waugh reveal how the Skyline Party routed the Oregon Skyline trail to highlight the best of the scenery. When selecting the route, the Skyline Party believed it was ultimately creating a scenic highway, not a pedestrian trail, but the same principles of routing applied. The party sought out high elevations and sited the trail along mountain crests so travellers experienced views of Mount Thielsen, Mount Bailey, and the Kelsey Valley, amongst other scenic delights. The elevated position of the trail revealed the landscape in dramatic fashion. The Skyline Party also built secondary trails from particularly inspirational views — a trail to Scott Mountain, for example, was established because it offered “an almost unbroken view of the Cascades’ summits for 40 or 50 miles.” Between Mount Hood and the Three Sisters, the party attempted to bring out the “ruggedness of the mountains, the alpine meadows, the high mesas and volcanic formations as intimately as possible.”

By comparison, the Skyline Party largely, but not completely, avoided areas Cleator deemed mundane. Cleator limited travellers’ exposure to areas he labelled as “dusty uninteresting waste of lodgepole flats, ridges and benches” that they encountered on the trail. Between the Three Sisters and Crater Lake, he wrote, the party “made a speciality of opening up all bodies of water that are not too far from the general line-up” as the section would be “ tiresome” if it were not for the many mountain lakes. Cleator utilized concentrations of lodgepole pine as introductions to more interesting areas, so segments that were considered commonplace built up to the more impressive sections of the trail. He articulated these ideas in drafts of an article for Motor Land Magazine, stating that the trail “will not be so much a continuously wonderful landscape view every minute of every quarter mile of the distance, as it will be a series of thrills and heart throbs broken by sketches of more ordinary country and intervals of peaceful happy spirit. We must experience the rough to enjoy the smooth, and conversely, we must have seen the smooth to appreciate the rough.”

The Skyline Party fashioned an idealized, stylized, and controlled vision of nature — unfurling the Cascades in a series of scenes that featured mountains, meadows, and lakes, with a dramatic introduction and conclusion through either Crater Lake or Mount Hood. Cleator was delighted with the route and wrote to Waugh that the Skyline Party had managed “to get the best of the scenery” and that they had “seized every opportunity to show up the best that each locality might offer; and endeavoured to bring it out naturally.” When the trail was mentioned in local newspapers, albeit rarely, it was referred to in glowing terms. The Sunday Oregonian described the trail in 1921 as an “act of providence” that offered “hundreds of weary and perplexed seekers...a pleasing place and manner to spend their vacation.”

Despite Cleator’s belief that the Skyline Party had built a fine recreational trail, there is no evidence to suggest that it was used to any significant extent prior to World War II. A 1930 article in the Morning Oregonian, titled “Glimpses of Oregon Country,” for example, reported that the trail was “splendid” but that the lack of usage was, “one of Oregon’s mysteries.” Accounts from trail users exist, however, including Walter Prichard Eaton’s 1921 New York Times piece about his experience hiking on the trail and the 1930s recollections of the Collier family from Eugene, Oregon, which are archived at the Oregon Historical Society.

During a time of increased auto-tourism in the United States, Eaton’s and the Colliers’ experiences hiking the Oregon Skyline Trail were not the norm, but the reasons they took to the trail are worth exploring. Eaton and the Colliers shared a love of and intrinsic interest in hiking in the mountains. Eaton was certainly well-educated, as were the Colliers — Percy “Pop” Collier was a professor at the University of Oregon who “loved the wilds” and Ruth “Mom” Collier taught at Reed College in Portland. Additionally, Pop had worked for the Forest Service and for his father mapping Oregon for the Geodetic Society. The Collier children, who joined their parents on the trail, continued to visit and hike in the mountains after their family trips on the Oregon Skyline Trail ended. What separated Eaton and the Colliers was personal wealth — unlike Eaton, the Collier family partly choose the trail to vacation on due to the Great Depression and financial constraints.

Eaton wrote of being captivated by the natural beauty of the Skyline Trail’s snow-capped mountains, glacier lakes, coves, and canyons carpeted with alpine flowers. He was so enthralled by the trail that he declared it “one of the loveliest sections of the remaining American wilderness.” Eaton praised the Oregon Skyline Trail for its wilderness character and the absence of tourism infrastructure. He declared that the trail was “undoubtedly one of the finest escapes from civilization conveniently available in the United States.” In contrast to Americans’ growing enthusiasm for auto-tourism, Eaton implored his readers to leave their automobiles in the city. “Any real lover of mountains,” he wrote, “prefers to view them from the saddle of a cayuse, not the seat of a Cadillac!” Eaton hiked the trail while the scenic road was still considered a possibility. He argued that a road into the high

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Cascades would spoil the region, as it would “lay its track through the tumbled, virgin wilderness” and “breed hotels and tin cans.”

The Collier family described their experience on the trail in glowing terms. Tight financial constraints during the Great Depression were a factor in their choice of vacation, and to make their trips as economical as possible, the family manufactured some of the equipment they needed for the trip. As Pop Collier recalled, “in 1933, the first year of the Roosevelt Depression, our family had no automobile…we cast about for recreation that would not require wheels.” Whereas the relative inexpensiveness of automobiles and better roads had provided access to nature for the working class, not all were in a position to benefit from the new technology.

Due to the length of the trail and the limitations of vacation time, they hiked successive sections over five annual trips taken between 1933 and 1937. Planning the trips was in itself an enjoyable exercise for the Colliers. They gathered in the family home and studied Forest Service maps over servings of vanilla ice cream overlaid with homemade peach sauce. The family took fishing rods, flashlights, a cooking kit, notebooks, maps, knives, and a Kodak camera to record their memories, among other items. On the trail they immersed themselves in the scenery and wildlife with swimming, fishing, campfire songs, and foraging for wild strawberries.

The scenery they saw, and the relative lack of a human imprint on the trail, particularly impressed the Collier family. One of their most memorable Skyline adventures was the ascent of Middle Sister in 1934, complete with views of mountain lakes, as envisioned by the Skyline Party. For the Colliers, “the actual experience of living in the wilderness of high mountains with their glacial streams and avalanches which could be heard from miles away” heightened their enjoyment of the Oregon Skyline Trail. The family had a sense of belonging in the Cascades. Miriam Collier later recalled: “By the second night of the trip, sleeping under the stars and trees, I found myself feeling at home as I had never done before.” The epilogue of their
The pursuit of nature during this period, Alexander Wilson argued, was fuelled by the move to cities and the so-called “closing of the frontier” that bestowed on “wilderness” both cultural value and American identity. Glynn Gary Wolar forwarded the idea that recreational trails provided a connection between modern living and the nation’s historical past, stating that those trails were an “archive of the feet” and a conduit between “untrammelled wilderness” and the “twentieth century civilization of concrete and steel.” The Colliers’ time on the Oregon Skyline Trail was not typical of an era that embraced automobiles, but they sought similar experiences to those of auto-tourists — namely, to experience time away from the demands of their everyday lives through exploring the grandeur of a seemingly pristine landscape. At a time when the national parks were being transformed by the New Deal’s Civilian Conservation Corps, which built roads, trails, and administrative infrastructure, the Colliers experienced nature in contrast to their contemporaries.

The Eaton and Collier family accounts reveal that those who took to the Oregon Skyline enjoyed the experience. The trail provided opportunities for travellers to escape urban environments and experience living in comparatively uncomplicated surroundings. The absence of a scenic highway and the correspondent lack of other people made this experience possible. Most importantly, the Skyline Trail offered an affordable vacation during a time of want, one that did not necessitate the purchase of fuel, hotel rooms, and restaurant meals.

Eaton, the Collier family, and the relatively few other travellers who explored the Oregon Skyline Trail before World War II were outliers in terms of American nature tourism during this period — auto-tourism was the order of the day. In terms of exposing the scenery of the Cascades to a multitude of tourists, the trail did not meet the objectives of the original plan. Neither was there any financial windfall — from hotels, restaurants, and stores — that Cleator had claimed would accompany the scenic road. The trail’s popularity was summed up in an article in the Sunday Oregonian in 1934, which argued that if more people had known about the Oregon Skyline, it would have been more frequently used than by “the few hundred people who annually visit parts of this historic trail.” A few hundred was certainly a dramatic fall from the Colliers’ time on the Oregon Skyline Trail — “it was truly an inexpensive vacation of escape from the complexities and frustrations of civilization.”

The Oregon Skyline Trail harkened back to a time before the automobile and offered a new take on hiking in the United States.

**THE OREGON SKYLINE TRAIL**, one of the first long-distance recreational trails in the United States, benefitted from Victorian-era interest in hiking and trail building. A number of hiking and climbing clubs were organized in the late nineteenth century — the Appalachian Mountain Club (1876), Sierra Club (1892), and in Oregon, the Mazamas (1894), to name a few of the more well known. These clubs were well attended — the Appalachian Mountain Club alone recorded a membership of over 1,000 by the end of the nineteenth century. During that period, interest in walking expanded. “Famous” walkers entered American consciousness when Henry David Thoreau published *Walking* in 1862 and when John Muir published his classic 1916 text, *A Thousand-Mile Walk to the Gulf*, which documented his 1867 adventure. Leisure walking became widespread in the late nineteenth century, according to Silas Chamberlin in his work on American hiking culture, “because it resonated with Americans reacting against — and attempting to accommodate — industrialism, urbanism, and a perceived crisis of masculinity.” The Oregon Skyline Trail offered just such an escape from modern living conditions.

Late-nineteenth-century leisure walking activities were largely confined to city parks, and even cemeteries, and those who sought a more natural and wild experience needed trails that penetrated deeper into the backcountry. The Skyline Trail was a part of a wave of trail construction that involved building such long-distance trails. The Green Mountain Club was established in the 1910s to build a trail through Vermont’s mountains. The result was a 270-mile “Long Trail,” the first of its kind in the country and a testament to the possibility and enthusiasm for long-distance trail building in the United States. The longer Appalachian Trail, the idea for which had been floated by Benton MacKaye in 1921, soon eclipsed Vermont’s Long Trail. MacKaye had also used the term skyline, when he called for a “long trail” over the full length of the Appalachian skyline, from the highest peak in the north to the highest peak in the south — from Mt. Washington to Mt. Mitchell.” The Appalachian Trail Conference in 1925 brought regional clubs together to make the trail a reality. In time, the Georgia, Natural Bridge, Roanoke, and Maine Appalachian trail clubs were formed to develop and maintain sections of the Appalachian Trail. As Chamberlain argued, “the construction and maintenance of hiking trails became a crucial and very visible task for the American hiking community.” Trail building, which was often organized by dedicated clubs, ensured a sense of ownership of trails.

Although long trails on the East Coast were being built at the same time as the Oregon Skyline, American hikers in the West were primarily...
interested in organized trips that offered a sense of community spirit. One such example was the Sierra Club’s annual trips. At the club’s Annual Outings, which attracted up to 200 participants at a time, sense of community was key to the continued success of the trips. William Colby of the Sierra Club, an Annual Outing organizer, remarked that the trips encouraged “a spirit of good fellowship among our members.” Of high importance was also the comfort of the members — club staff prepared camp so members could enjoy hiking with the minimum of inconvenience. Wagons and mule trains transported camping equipment, and, on arrival, members ate staff-prepared meals.

In Oregon, the Mazamas engaged in organized annual outings that offered companionship with other members while also ensuring that the trips were as comfortable as possible. Historian Erik Weiselberg wrote that the club’s annual retreats demonstrated the “domestication of the moun-

tain landscape, shaping it to create a balance between exciting challenges and comfortable support.” Sierra Club member Marion Parsons joined the Mazamas on a trip to Glacier Peak in 1910. She recalled the depth of planning undertaken and that the steamer that transported members across Lake Chelan, *Lady of the Lake*, was “loaded high with...boxes and barrels of provisions, with four horses, [and] thirty five mountaineers.” Typical of these outings was one taken to Three Sisters in 1916, involving a transfer from Portland to Eugene by Pullman railcar, an automobile ride to the Poujade fish hatchery for lunch, and finally a five-mile hike to the permanent camp. The permanent camp held a number of communal structures and individual shelters alongside facilities that included a cook and commissary tent, tables, benches, evening campfire, and rubbish and toilet areas. Such accommodations and demonstrated, Weiselberg argued, how the club “imported their urban values onto the landscape.” The camp replicated domestic life with socializing through birthday parties, tea parties, organized swimming parties, and communal dinners. These trips undertaken by the Sierra Club and Mazamas were characterized by engaging with nature through social events and by bringing modern comforts to wilderness areas.

In contrast to the popularity of these outings was the lack of interest shown for the Oregon Skyline Trail, which left contemporary commentators seemingly perplexed. Even when organized trips were offered, there was scant interest in the trail. Eugene H. Dowling, a Portland attorney and outdoors enthusiast, offered outings on the Skyline Trail in 1926, 1927, and 1928 but failed to generate any real excitement. Dowling tried to entice more inexperienced travellers and advertised that all that was needed for the excursions was a change of clothing and a sleeping bag, as cooks would supply all the food. Potential travellers were assured that all necessary equipment for the “comfort and safety of the outdoor lover” would be provided. The first of Dowling’s trips, however, attracted only between fourteen and twenty travellers, despite advertisements and newspaper coverage. Despite the *Oregonian* claiming that Dowling’s 1928 outing generated a “flood of inquiries,” the number of travelers is unknown. Cleator would later write that they were adventures that “the public [was] not ready for,” suggesting that the 1928 trip had a similarly low turnout. Cleater added that he felt travelers were more likely to visit the trail in installments with “plenty of stopovers,” rather than participating in the trips Dowling offered. Oregonians and tourists alike shunned the trail.

Contemporary writers supplied their own thoughts as to why tourists would not take to the trail. An article in the *Sunday Oregonian* in 1927 argued that “the age is one of automobiles,” and “the habit of making long trips by foot or horseback has long since disappeared.” The article, coincidentally...
surrounded by advertisements for Michelin tires and Oldsmobile automobiles, additionally stated that the length of time needed to traverse the trail was a primary reason for the lack of interest. The fifteen days needed by horse, and the month needed by foot, were deemed too arduous and the trail was “no journey for weaklings,” the author remarked. The Morning Oregonian added in 1930 that the trail was out of touch with the demands of vacationists and that “Oregonians simply will not take themselves to horse for a period of two weeks to make the trek over this trail.” Cleator himself expressed the opinion that the length of the trail was an issue and that it was best to experience it in installments of a week or two at a time, with “plenty of stopovers.” The prevailing thought of the period was that the trail was too arduous, too time consuming, and did not reflect tourists’ demands. The popularity of Sierra Club and Mazama outings was predicated on experiencing nature, a sense of community, and the provision of amenities that made the experience more comfortable. Although the Skyline Trail provided an enjoyable experience for the few who ventured onto the trail, it lacked both the companionship and comfort of the group outings. Also, being a linear route, traversing the Skyline Trail involved a new camp every night, making it a more arduous experience than that of the permanent camps. Despite Dowling’s attempts to make his expeditions less demanding, travellers were only offered a stop once a week in “civilisation,” where a “hot bath, mail, and clean clothes await the Micque traveller.” The lack of amenities was a deterrent for travellers. Organized camping grounds that offered sanitation, fresh water supplies, and cooking facilities were what vacationers wanted. The Eagle Creek Campground, situated in the Columbia River Gorge, received 69,991 visitors in 1928, drawn by the amenities, day hikes, and picnic opportunities that were provided — this was nature recreation without the hassle. Analysis of visitation at Crater Forest for the year 1926 also reveal that Americans embraced the automobile at the expense of hiking. Of the 94,770 visitors to the forest in 1926, only 187 hiked in while 93,018 arrived by automobile. Americans would not leave their automobiles behind to experience nature on a long-distance linear trail.

Cleator and his colleagues at the Forest Service tried to address the factors that they believed kept vacationers away from the Oregon Skyline Trail. They reasoned that, for the trail to be used more widely, it needed to be tamed and have its wild edges softened. Cleator wrote in 1934 that he believed the trail was simply too arduous for those who lacked experience in more technical outdoors activities, arguing that the trail was not difficult for those who possessed “real mountaineering experience” but that it was not suitable for “the average city enthusiast.” To this end, in the early 1930s, the Forest Service reduced the trail’s length from 260 to 210 miles and constructed shortcuts to increase accessibility to recreational activities. Cleator wrote that the Oregon Skyline needed to be “properly equipped with such directional, informational, and warning water and sanitation signs as are necessary to make the trail safe, useable and convenient to any ordinary hiker.”

Assistant Forester William L. Royer re-examined the trail in 1936, taking into consideration Cleator’s recommendations, and proposed a substantial overhaul to increase visitation. He argued that by providing easier access through infrastructure improvements and uniform navigational signs, the trail would be safer and easier to navigate. Those improvements included providing distance tables on Skyline Trail maps and uniform signs at campgrounds that stated the distance to the next campsite. In response to the time that it took to traverse the trail, Royer also sought to increase day-use by providing foot access from intersecting highways for fishing lakes and hiking smaller sections of the trail. Royer believed that people were “intensely interested in knowing the names of things, and in high country always want to know how high they are.” Royer’s report therefore recommended that at ridge points, creeks, and lakes, signs be posted to give the name of the location and elevation. Royer also recommended that telephones be installed at
ALTHOUGH CLEATOR was tasked with creating a route for a scenic highway, his field diary revealed that he also considered the possibility of a long-distance hiking trail through the region. Surrounded by the majestic beauty of the mountains in 1920, he scribbled in his field diary, “I am beginning to think that a Skyline Trail the full length of the Cascades in Washington and Oregon, joining a similar trail in the Sierra of California, would be a great tourist advertisement. For that matter it might be continued thru British Columbia and up the Alaska Highlands. This is a future work but it would be fine to plan upon.” Cleator imagined a long-distance hiking trail at a time when others, albeit a minority, were beginning to question the appropriateness of scenic highways and the imprint of humans on scenic areas. Cleator claimed in the early 1940s that he and other members of the Skyline Party were actually against the Oregon Skyline road from the outset — a notion that was at odds with public remarks he made to encourage support for the highway. According to Cleator, when the party was at Walden Peak, looking down over Waldo, Odell, and Davis lakes, engineer Elmer Johnson remarked that it would be a “shame if ever a road is built over the Skyline Trail.” The party was in unanimous agreement that “coughing Fords and tin cans did not long belong in this paradise.” After Cleator finished examining the trail, he claimed that regional forester Buck, who accompanied him on the expedition, stated after visiting Jefferson Park that finished examining the trail, he claimed that regional forester Buck, who accompanied him on the expedition, stated after visiting Jefferson Park that “I am beginning to think that a Skyline Trail the full length of the Cascades in Washington and Oregon, joining a similar trail in the Sierra of California, would be a great tourist advertisement. For that matter it might be continued thru British Columbia and up the Alaska Highlands. This is a future work but it would be fine to plan upon.” Cleator imagined a long-distance hiking trail at a time when others, albeit a minority, were beginning to question the appropriateness of scenic highways and the imprint of humans on scenic areas. Cleator claimed in the early 1940s that he and other members of the Skyline Party were actually against the Oregon Skyline road from the outset — a notion that was at odds with public remarks he made to encourage support for the highway. According to Cleator, when the party was at Walden Peak, looking down over Waldo, Odell, and Davis lakes, engineer Elmer Johnson remarked that it would be a “shame if ever a road is built over the Skyline Trail.” The party was in unanimous agreement that “coughing Fords and tin cans did not long belong in this paradise.” After Cleator finished examining the trail, he claimed that regional forester Buck, who accompanied him on the expedition, stated after visiting Jefferson Park that a road would have to go over his “dead body.” It therefore appeared that despite the Forest Service’s public remarks about the potential benefits of the road, the agency’s planners had reservations about introducing automobile traffic in a relatively unpeopled wilderness area.

In 1932, some twelve years after Cleator documented ideas for a long-distance trail in his field diary, Clinton C. Clarke, an “oilman” who was active in the Boy Scout movement, driven by a concern over the human imprint in natural areas, proposed a trail along the mountain ranges in Washington, Oregon, and California. This trail, Clarke wrote, would “traverse the best scenic areas and maintain an absolute wilderness character.” Preserving these areas was foremost in Clarke’s mind when he promoted an “environment of solitude with no destruction of the vegetative balance, and free from the sights and sounds of a mechanically disturbed nature.” Scenic roads and hotels did not feature in Clarke’s vision for the future of nature recreation in the Cascades and other regions of the American West. Ultimately, Clarke’s dream was realized in the Pacific Crest Trail (PCT), an amalgamation of a number of different trails — the Desert Crest Trail, Sierra Trail, Tahoe-Yosemite Trail, Lava Crest Trail, Cascade Crest Trail, the John Muir Trail, and, in part, the Oregon Skyline Trail.

During the post–World War II era, hiking in the United States became a popular pastime for millions of Americans, and as Silas Chamberlin noted, solo hiking over long distances became an important strand of American hiking culture. As a segment of the PCT, the Oregon Skyline became a part of this form of hiking and experiencing wilderness that has been celebrated by travellers on the trail. Research on the PCT, undertaken by the Pacific Crest Trail Association, has highlighted the growing popularity of the trail and of hiking in an environment free from what Clarke described as a “mechanically disturbed nature.” The association noted that at the time of writing this article, the trail was being used by hundreds of thousands of people annually. Hikers on the PCT range from day hikers to “thru-hikers,” those ambitious souls who attempt the entire 2,650 miles.

The Oregon Skyline Road was an all-too-ambitious idea proposed by the Forest Service that was then met with misplaced enthusiasm by state boosters who dreamed of Oregon’s becoming an auto-tourism heartland — misplaced because the road was impractical, a realization that in time became apparent to Forest Service leaders who had other projects to contend with. The resultant long-distance linear trail did not reflect the recreational needs of Americans who had embraced auto-tourism, nor did it appeal to hiking organizations such as the Sierra Club and the Mazamas. In the pre–World War II era, the Oregon Skyline Trail went largely unnoticed except for a few travellers who either shunned auto-tourism or did not have the means to participate in it. The story of the Oregon Skyline Trail did not, however, end in the 1930s, as evolving attitudes to recreation have ensured that hikers still pass along some of the same paths that Cleator did and enjoy the aesthetic beauty of the Cascades.
NOTES

5. Ibid.
8. Ibid.
9. “Report of Preliminary Investigation,” The estimated cost of building the road between Crater Lake and Minto Trail (146 miles) was $1,242,094. The average elevation of the proposed road was 5,300 feet and in some areas reached 6,500 feet.
13. Ibid., 107.
15. Sutter, Driven Wild, 110.
31. Ibid.
32. Frederick W. Cleator to Frank A. Waugh, “Oregon Skyline,” January 20, 1921, p. 3, RG 95, Region 6, box 70, NARA, Seattle.
33. Ibid.
34. “Judge Kanzler to Speak Wednesday,” Morning Oregonian, April 23, 1921, p. 9.
43. Sutter, Driven Wild, 111.
45. Cleator to Waugh, “Oregon Skyline,” January 20, 1921, p. 3, RG 95, Region 6, box 70, NARA, Seattle.
46. Assistant Forester Kneipp to District Forester Ceci, February 19, 1921, RG 95, Region 6, Historical Collection, box 56, Recreation L, Recreation: Circular Letters, 1934–1936 Correspondence, NARA, Seattle.
47. Ibid.
49. Ibid.
51. Ibid., 24.
52. Ibid., 5.
55. Ibid., September 16, 1920.
59. Ibid.
for Publication, 1919–1923, NARA, Seattle.
65. Ibid., 28–29.
69. Ibid., 148.
73. Ibid., 7.
74. Ibid., 5–6.
75. Ibid., 25–29.
76. Ibid., epilogue.
77. Alexander Wilson, The Culture of Nature: North American Landscape from Disney to Exxon Valdez (Toronto: Between the Lines, 1999), 25.
85. Erik Lawrence Weiselberg, “Ascent of the Mazamas; Environment, Identity and Mountain Climbing in Oregon, 1870 to 1930” (Ph.D. diss., University of Oregon, 1999), 139.
88. Ibid., 148.
89. Ibid., 152–54. Committee member, Martha E. Nilsson stated that the food needed for 100 people for two weeks on the annual outing amounted to, “250 pounds potatoes, 200 dozen eggs, 500 pounds meat, 160 pounds preserves, 250 pounds dried fruit, two cases tomatoes, 180 pounds cereals, 200 pounds crackers, six cases canned milk, 400 pounds bread, and 150 pounds butter.” 155.
91. “Oregon Cascade Skyline Trail on Horseback,” Cascade Mique Tours, Oregon Cascade Skyline Trail on Horseback, RG 95, Region 6, Historical Collection, ca. 1920–1985, box 70 Recreation L, NARA, Seattle.
95. Ibid.
98. “Oregon Cascade Skyline Trail on Horseback,” Cascade Mique Tours, Oregon Cascade Skyline Trail on Horseback, RG 95, Region 6, Historical Collection, ca. 1920–1985, box 70 Recreation L, NARA, Seattle.
101. Ibid.
103. Ibid.
105. Ibid.
106. Ibid.
107. Ibid., 18.
108. Ibid, 28.
109. Ibid., 28–29.
112. Ibid., 10.
116. Ibid., 17–18. The history of the different trails that comprise the PCT are very limited. Clarke’s calculation of the Oregon Skyline Trail at 442 miles is far greater and not replicated by other calculations of the trail’s length.
117. Chamberlin, On the Trail, 142.