Silver Falls State Park and the Early Environmental Movement

American environmentalism has its roots in two nineteenth-century movements, conservation and preservation. Conservationists were committed to the sustainable use of resources, while preservationists sought to prevent the development and exploitation of wilderness areas. In the early twentieth century, it seemed unlikely that these two disparate movements would ever reconcile; conservationists accused preservationists of slowing growth, while preservationists accused their opponents of being linked too closely with corporate interests. Nevertheless, ideas from both of these groups were expressed by later generations of environmentalists, particularly park builders, who sought to preserve natural areas while making them accessible to the greatest possible number of visitors. One place where principles of conservation and preservation are visible is at Silver Falls State Park, the largest state park in Oregon. The relationship of the park to environmental movements was also connected to President Franklin Roosevelt’s New Deal programs.

Looking to put people back to work and stimulate the economy during the Great Depression, Roosevelt’s administration created work relief agencies, including the Civilian Conservation Corps (CCC) and the Works Progress Administration (WPA). Projects resulting from Roosevelt’s Depression-era policies, collectively known as the New Deal, involved building roads and dams, improving sewage systems in cities, constructing parks, and restoring land damaged by logging or erosion. In 1935, one section of land near

Visitors walk along the path behind South Falls in this photograph taken by June Drake between 1925 and 1934.
Silver Falls State Park became the site of a CCC and WPA effort to improve a state park while restoring the logged-over land to a forested state; this land became today’s Silver Falls State Park. The CCC and WPA’s Recreational Demonstration Area (RDA) in the new state park was constructed with three goals in mind: to alleviate the economic situation in Oregon through a “make work” project, to repair the damaged landscape around Silver Falls State Park, and to construct a popular recreational area that drew on the aesthetic tradition of the Arts and Crafts Movement. Ultimately, the agencies’ work at Silver Falls represented early-twentieth-century attitudes toward nature and recreation. Nature was meant to provide relaxation and rest for city-dwellers through scenic parks; if necessary, this environment could be constructed or rehabilitated.

Silver Falls State Park is located near Silverton, Oregon, in Marion County and today is under the control of the Oregon Parks and Recreation Department. It is the largest state park in Oregon, with just over nine thousand acres of land. The park is notable for the small waterway that runs through it, Silver Creek, which bisects into northern and southern tributaries called North and South Silver Creek. Several smaller tributaries also exist in the area. Canyons of several hundred feet surround the creeks and run throughout the park. The primeval forest of the area is largely gone, owing to logging, farming, and fires in the region, but a secondary growth of Douglas fir now exists in the area. The forest canopy is extensive, with new growth of timber having filled in previously empty areas.

Silver Falls is also notable for its ten waterfalls, which vary widely in height and in water flow. Five waterfalls are located on North Silver Creek, two on South Silver Creek, and two more on smaller tributaries. The height of the falls varies widely, from Drake Falls’ drop of 27 feet to Double Falls’ height of 178 feet. The site had been a local attraction for sightseers decades before it was adopted as a state park, with a hotel once in operation there.

Silver Falls has been written about in histories of park builders in the Pacific Northwest, mentioned in public history documents evaluating the historical integrity of the site, and discussed in works by former superintendents. These publications have all looked at the construction history and the personalities of the developers, but not much has been written about the attitudes that Silver Falls reflects. Nor has much been written about its role in combating the Great Depression. The CCC camp at Silver Falls operated continuously from 1935 through 1942, providing employment for hundreds of enrollees during that time. Likewise, the WPA employed dozens of workers at the park for a number of years. Work done by New Deal employees at Silver Falls reflects a merger of preservation and conservation ideals, and represents changing attitudes about nature in the early twentieth century.

Historian Roderick Frazier Nash wrote that Americans increasingly began to value wilderness because they believed that wilderness had beneficial effects on body and mind. Writers such as Henry David Thoreau, for example, stressed the importance of the wilderness for one’s mental and physical well-being. Nash identified two opposing environmental movements that gained prominence during the end of the nineteenth and the beginning of the twentieth century: conservation and preservation. Conservationists stressed the wise use of natural resources and emphasized sustainable yield of forests. Gifford Pinchot was one of the leading proponents of the school of conservation. Born to a wealthy East Coast family in 1865, Pinchot developed an interest in forestry at an early age, and the Pinchot family endowed Yale University with a school of forestry, enabling him to study there. Pinchot was concerned that logging practices...
were unsustainable and would lead to the death of American forests and believed that, in order to maintain the industry, logging would have to be regulated and managed. Accordingly, he fought to have the federal government create a forest service to manage forests and regulate the production of timber. Pinchot’s ethic became known as conservation, a philosophy that sought to preserve natural resources and create “the greatest good for the greatest number for the longest time.”

At the same time and as a result of John Muir’s efforts, wilderness preservation and restoration became increasingly popular. During the 1860s, Muir fell in love with Yosemite Valley in California and fought bitterly to resist the commercial development of the region. Through publications and speaking tours, Muir built a base of supporters. His school of nature protection became popularly known as “preservation,” because it sought to maintain natural areas and leave them undeveloped. The federal government first set aside Yellowstone in 1872 and began to form a nascent park system by the end of the nineteenth century.

In 1916, Congress formally organized the National Park Service (NPS) through passage of the National Park Service Organic Act. Stephen Maher, a businessman and millionaire who had decided to donate his time to public service, was appointed as the agency’s director. Mather recognized that public support for national parks would be necessary to keep them protected. To that end, he coordinated with newspapers and other business contacts to raise awareness about extraordinary natural sites, and he produced illustrated books and distributed them throughout the country. Mather also cooperated with railroad companies to arrange for reduced and discounted fares to parks, meaning that more Americans could actually travel to the sites. Through these efforts, Mather built a strong base of support for national parks, one that would continue to increase as travel became easier for ordinary Americans with widespread ownership of automobiles. Mather also safeguarded the parks from commercial development, fighting off dams in Yellowstone that western politicians had proposed for irrigation.

Secretary of the Interior Franklin Lane wrote in 1918 that a national park must have “scenery of supreme and distinctive quality or some natural features so extraordinary or unique as to be of national interest and importance.” Not every site that was recommended was eligible, and Mather believed much of the land suggested to him was not as strikingly beautiful as sites such as Yellowstone. He believed, for example, that Mount Hood in Oregon was too similar to Mount Rainier in Washington to be qualified as a national park. He deemed other sites ineligible because of human development. Placing marginal land into the national park system would open Mather and the NPS to criticism and would threaten the integrity of the park service. To circumvent this dilemma, Mather helped organize the first conference on state parks in 1921, hoping to protect land the National Park Service could not oversee.

Like other states, Oregon had been setting aside parks for a few decades, beginning with Sodaville Mineral Springs in 1871. According to historian William G. Robbins, attitudes about conservation and preservation in Oregon were stronger than elsewhere in the American West during the early twentieth century. Conservation had gained popularity among timber interests and had spread to urban dwellers who visited scenic areas. Oregon had been one of the few western states to embrace federal land-use policies at the turn of the twentieth century, partly out of a desire to protect beautiful areas. It was not until 1921, however, that an agency — the Oregon State Highway Commission — was tasked with overseeing the parks. Ben Olcott, governor of Oregon from 1919 to 1923, was prompted by a logging operation along the Cannon Beach–Seaside highway to support the existence of unlogged timber stands alongside Oregon highways. Olcott championed the natural scenery of Oregon and the importance of beautiful roadside areas. Although the initial goal was to develop sites that lay along roadside areas, mostly as rest stop areas for tourists, as time went on, the state began to add other places to its state park system. Officials began developing parks away from roads, and finally, in 1929, Oregon hired Samuel Boardman as the first full-time park superintendent. This action set the stage for the adoption of Silver Falls as a state park.

Silverton had been founded in 1846 and moved to its current site in 1854, taking its name from nearby Silver Creek. The town was an important trading site and, by the 1880s, logging had become a major industry in the area. A
small town also sprang up by the South Falls of Silver Creek in 1890, though by the 1920s, it was largely abandoned; its settlement, however, had contributed to the degraded landscape present in the 1930s. Small homesteads lay in the area, many of whose owners supported themselves through logging.

Although both state and federal governments eventually played major roles in the construction of Silver Falls State Park, interest in the area began with several private citizens who led an effort to have the site designated as a park. One of the first early organizers was a local photographer named June Drake, whose family had come to Silverton in 1889 and who had opened a photography studio there by 1904. He had been interested in the site as early as 1906, and he took and distributed to friends and others many photographs of the falls. Drake was responsible for the first visitor trails cut in the area, as he had hired men to clear areas in order to obtain a clearer view of the falls for his photographs. In distributing the photographs, which travelled around the country and reached as far as members of the U.S. Congress, Drake managed to increase awareness of the falls.

The NPS first considered Silver Falls as a national park during the 1920s. Drake was a primary instigator, campaigning for the site to be protected and nationally recognized. The plan was rejected in 1926, in part because the area was deemed too heavily cut-over and farmed to become a national park, and the NPS recommended that Silver Falls be developed into a state park. Drake identified what he thought were the federal government’s three objections to Silver Falls being made a national park: the state of the land, the divided up parcels of land, and the insufficient size. Believing these objections could not be made by the State of Oregon, he continued to push to have Silver Falls developed as a park.

The idea for the state park was approved in 1929, though the state was unable to take any action until it purchased the property including the South Falls site in 1931. The South Falls site was owned privately by Dan Geiser, who recognized its tourist-attraction potential and charged visitors a small fee to view the falls and used the site for spectacles and circus-style attractions, including sending derelict automobiles over the waterfall and charging a twenty-five-cent admission for viewers to watch. Drake worked with the Oregon Highway Commission and the Salem Chamber of Commerce to purchase the land. He sent a letter on January 28, 1931, recommending that the area around South Falls be purchased immediately, as the land could be acquired cheaply.

Silver Creek was formally adopted as a state park on April 2, 1931, with the plan designed to include nine of the waterfalls. Through Drake’s intervention, the state purchased Geiser’s land for less than half the price for which it had been optioned. The Oregon Highway Commission also began to acquire land around the lower South Falls. The Salem Chamber of Commerce assisted in the purchase of the land and the various falls, as its members knew many of the landowners personally and could arrange favorable agreements.

A hint to the state of the land at this time can be found in a 1951 letter from Sam Boardman, who noted that the property of Frank Chella, purchased for $6,000, had “one of the only remaining stands [of old growth fir] in this section of the country.”

Drake’s photographs show damaged forest in the area, including trees that had clearly been consumed by fire and thin tree lines. The destruction done to the area by logging was noted in several reports, including one by J.L. Bossemeyer, whose description of the Silver Creek area included: “the prevalence of cut-over lands, and farming activity.” He explained residents had lit brush fires to open the land for grazing, while timber of any considerable size had been chopped down as soon as it was ready.

The effect of this cut-over land was detrimental not solely to the aesthetic appeal of the park, but also to the watershed of the North and South forks of Silver Creek. Merriam noted that since logging had commenced in the area, the flow of water had declined significantly. This decrease threatened the waterfalls that made the area so beautiful.

The state officially dedicated and opened the Silver Creek site as a state park on July 21, 1933. Oregon had spent roughly $22,000 on the acquisition of land for the site and an additional $10,000 on improvements for the camp. Soon after, fifty men from the Civil Works Administration came to the site to construct a log cabin and other improvements. The Civil Works Administration was an early New Deal make-work program that focused on

Photographer June Drake photographed and worked to preserve for the public the waterfalls, creeks, and forest that have become Silver Falls State Park.
improving infrastructure and sought to put people back to work, and it was one of the first federal agencies to work at Silver Falls. Workers also removed dead trees and other “unsightly” vegetation from the site and replaced them with different vegetation. The men built trails and cleaned the site, which remained fairly small, totaling about 700 acres. Funds remained tight for any further improvements and rehabilitation of the site, and no plans existed for that work.

Silver Falls, however, was set to receive a massive amount of support from the CCC and WPA. On March 30, 1935, the Oregon Highway Commission signed a contract with the U.S. Army to establish a CCC camp at Silver Falls State Park that eventually included two hundred men. The NPS was responsible for managing the camps and directing the construction of the park. Through the Resettlement Administration, the NPS optioned a great deal of the land that would eventually go to the park and worked hard to ensure that the watershed of Silver Creek would enter the public domain to preserve the integrity of the falls.

The CCC, born in the first few weeks of the Roosevelt Administration, employed young men between ages eighteen and twenty-five and paid them thirty dollars a month, twenty-five of which was sent back home to their families. The workers were housed in camps, with the Department of Labor recruiting members, the War Department running the camps, the Department of Agriculture managing the conservation projects, and the National Park Service overseeing the work done in parks. The CCC became best known for its work in reforestation, prompted in part by Pinchot’s work promoting the conservation philosophy. By the time the CCC was ended in 1942, it had planted 2.3 billion trees.

The CCC made a variety of improvements to the landscape of the Silver Creek region. The evidence of fire and logging proved to be their biggest obstacle. The site’s development by numerous small farmers meant that several areas were no longer forested, and the Silver Falls Timber Company had been active in logging the site near the North and South Falls. Many feared that natural disasters, particularly fire, could threaten the park; two large fires had swept through the site in 1865 and 1886, and their damage was visible in photographs from the era. Thus, the CCC workers were employed in replanting and moving trees in the park. Much of this reforestation was done to protect the watershed of the area; by replanting trees, the land would retain the snow pack better and would have greater water flow in the springtime. Reforestation would therefore help preserve the beauty of the falls as well as the forest in the area.

CCC workers spent thousands of days performing fire-prevention work that would serve to protect the park in future years. That work took several forms. Crews cleared strips, called firebreaks, that would prevent fires from rapidly spreading within a forest. They also removed easily flammable underbrush, so fires would not be so easily fueled; constructed telephone lines within Silver Falls, so news of a fire could spread quickly; and built pump stations at intervals, so fires could be rapidly fought.

CCC employees also constructed trails and parking boundaries to give visitors easier access to areas of the park, established concessionaires at the site, and constructed picnic benches throughout the park to encourage visitors to stay and eat. These actions opened the park to the public for recreation. Areas that previously had been privately owned or difficult to access were made available to all. The construction of trails and the ease of transportation to the site made it possible for more people to visit and enjoy the falls.

The Resettlement Administration became involved in the development of the project in acquiring marginal and unproductive farm land and relocating farmers to more productive land in planned communities established by the

June Drake’s 1925 photograph reveals damage done to the landscape at Silver Falls. Burnt trees are visible throughout the image, and South Falls can be seen in the distance.
The Resettlement Administration transferred lands it had purchased to the Recreational Demonstration Area (RDA) of Silver Creek. Recreational Demonstration Areas were park projects administered by the NPS and either developed into national parks or turned over to their states after World War II. These acquisitions enabled the park to expand considerably in size and also allowed for the construction of boys’ and girls’ youth camps at the site. In 1938, the WPA hired workers from Salem and Silverton to construct structures that were eventually leased to the YMCA and Girl Scouts of America. The interest in children’s camps reflects widely held beliefs about the importance of exposing children to nature. Early environmentalists in the United States had considerable interest in the involvement of children in the outdoors, because it was widely believed that time spent in the wilderness inculcated virtues and strength in young people. As a result, Americans founded numerous organizations geared toward youth recreation in the outdoors. Organizations such as the Sons of Daniel Boone were the forerunners of the Scouting Movement, which was founded by an Englishman, Sir Robert Baden-Powell, in 1907. Ernest Thompson Seton, a nature writer, wrote the first handbook for the Boy Scouts of America movement, arguing that urbanization had weakened people and overworked them. Organizations such as the Boy Scouts were aimed at bringing young people into forests and other wilderness areas so they might be exposed to nature and benefit from the skills that it taught. These organizations brought a physical benefit to young people who spent time outdoors, and their proponents believed it made young people stronger and healthier. Even the CCC was seen as a reflection of this belief.

The NPS had begun work on the Silver Falls youth camp after a study was done, in February 1938, on camping in the state of Oregon and the number of children in the state. The study noted that approximately 10 percent of children within fifty miles of Silver Creek had attended an outdoor camp; the report also noted there were almost no facilities for children of low-income parents. The report concluded there was a strong need in Oregon for more developed camping facilities, especially those catering to children. Accordingly, the NPS made plans to construct camp facilities at Silver Falls. In 1938, the NPS approached the Salem chapter of the YMCA for help in running and maintaining the youth facilities that were under construction, as the Boy Scouts and Portland YMCA had declined the offer.

Plans for the camp included four groups of six cabins. Originally, four separate camps were to be included, but only two were constructed during this period. After the CCC program was terminated, the CCC cabins, which had been constructed in 1936, were converted into a third cabin group. Plans also called for administration, arts and crafts, and recreation buildings as well as a dining hall and a swimming pool. By June 1938, the first youth camp was finished and opened to the public. The camp could accommodate ninety-six children and was open to boys and girls. The camp was explicitly described as being open to all Oregon children, reflecting the desire of its builders to bring children to the area. Silver Creek RDA also included a camp at Smith Creek. After the CCC program was terminated in 1942, its buildings were converted into a third youth camp, North Falls, outside the boundary of Silver Creek RDA. The Salem YMCA maintained some of the camps, while the Conservative Baptist Association managed the North Falls site. In 1962, the number of camper nights spent at Silver Creek Camp alone was 14,466.

Americans’ focus on non-industrial lifestyles extended to aesthetics as well. The architecture and furniture of Silver Falls State Park was designed to integrate the buildings into the natural environment. An important influence on this architectural aesthetic was the Arts and Crafts movement of the
early twentieth century. Gustav Stickley, a furniture manufacturer who at the turn of the century became a leading proponent of the Arts and Crafts style, was an important influence in the aesthetic movement. He advocated building homes so they existed in harmony with their natural settings and stated that buildings should be designed to fit the natural terrain and should be composed of local materials and natural colors.\(^{46}\) By the 1920s, this aesthetic had been codified by the NPS as the rustic style, which emphasized natural materials, horizontality (which emphasized that buildings be closely parallel to the horizon), discrete placing to enable buildings to blend more easily, and the use of natural vegetation.\(^{49}\)

At Silver Falls State Park, the concession building, stone picnic shelter, and log cabin are representative of the rustic style. The CCC was responsible for the construction of picnic shelters and the log cabin, while the WPA was brought in to assist with the South Falls Lodge. Following Stickley’s dictate that buildings be constructed of local materials, the concession building and other structures included walls built of stone from a nearby quarry, local timber framing, and Cedar in the park benches.\(^{45}\) Picnic shelters were built with cedar shakes to help them blend more easily into the surrounding area.\(^{64}\) The structures were also landscaped with native plants that were found in the natural setting. An article from the *Salem Capital Journal* reported that the South Falls Lodge was constructed within a grove of trees.\(^{62}\) The scale of the buildings was dictated by the guidelines established for the NPS rustic style. All of this served to create buildings that were integrated fully into the surrounding environment.

The main concession building at Silver Falls — South Falls Lodge — represented a considerable outlay of effort and expenditure on the part of the CCC and WPA. The building was large, measuring 113-by-65 feet, and included a large dining room and lounge area with a lunch counter and dining terrace.\(^{65}\) Superintendent Boardman believed diners who ate too quickly would disrupt the atmosphere of the concession building and was therefore particularly concerned with creating a dining area more similar to that of a restaurant than a lunch counter.\(^{67}\)

An unusual example of the Rustic aesthetic can be seen in the myrtlewood furniture used in South Falls Lodge. The use of myrtle wood in the structure was relatively out of character, because the material was not from the Silverton region but from the Chetco River near Curry County in southwestern Oregon.\(^{70}\) Myrtle wood was popular in novelties from the period, and it was noted as a particularly beautiful wood.\(^{71}\) Boardman wrote: “I had visited Timberline Lodge and became interested in the design of the furniture of the lobby. Upon inquiry, I learned that Mrs. Margery Hoffman Smith, State Director, Oregon Art Project . . . had designed the furniture. I called on her at her Portland office and told her what I had in mind regarding myrtle furniture for the concession building.” To make the wood suitable for use, Boardman worked with the Oregon State College, which had a large kiln. The lumber went through extensive preparation to make it suitable for use in the construction of furniture for Silver Creek, spending seventy-six days in the college’s kiln.\(^{72}\) After being treated and prepared, the wood was turned over to the Federal Art Project, a subgroup of the WPA, whose workers fashioned it into a number of tables and benches for the concession area.

Between 1931 and 1942, Silver Falls State Park had increased in size from several hundred acres to several thousand acres, owing to the work done at the RDA. The concession building and youth camp had been fully completed and were in operation. In 1948 and 1949, the Silver Creek RDA was transferred to the State of Oregon, adding over 6,000 acres to Silver Falls State Park, and the state continued to acquire land after that time. When Boardman retired as the parks superintendent in 1951, the total park acreage was 7,957 acres, and the area would continue to grow after that, reaching
Visitors today still use the trail shown on this 1940 promotional pamphlet.
a total of 9,000 acres today. The site had been impressively rehabilitated, with thousands of CCC days devoted to planting trees, creating trails, and making the site attractive for tourism. Workers had built concession structures and two youth camps.

The RDA at Silver Falls became not only the largest state park in Oregon, but had also been one of the most extensive make-work nature projects done in the state. The CCC camp at the site was operated from 1935 until 1942, meaning that it only ended with the termination of the CCC program nationwide after the United States entered World War II. The site represented the investment of a considerable amount of money and time. Many of the structures built there still exist today, and the concession building and youth camp are listed on the National Register of Historic Places. Given all the effort put into the construction of the park, it is important to note the greater significance of the site and what it suggests about early attitudes towards the environment as well as the significance of the site in combating the Great Depression.

The park was a relatively small but still important part of the New Deal, and the efforts of the various agencies that were involved represent a considerable cross-section of the New Deal relief efforts. The Civil Works Administration was first employed at the site in 1934, bringing fifty men to the area to construct cabins. Thereafter, the CCC, WPA, and Resettlement Administration were involved at the site. The CCC camps brought young men from across the country, including far-away states such as Minnesota and Georgia, to Silverton, where they ingratiated themselves with the locals. A few experienced Oregonians also served with the CCC. After 1938, World War I veterans came to work at the site.

In addition to the construction at Silver Falls, the CCC workers also cleared snowbound roads and fought forest fires. The CCC men were extraordinarily popular at the national level, and numerous people extolled the benefits the camps provided for nature as well as for local communities. The camps were just as popular in the Silverton area; an editorial from 1939 listed the virtues of the program, including its use in preparing Americans for rearmament. Meanwhile, the WPA was an important organization for bringing relief to local families. Enrollees with the WPA were drawn up from relief lists created in Silverton and in Salem.

The work of the CCC was also an important educational opportunity for the enrolled young men. Camp organizers provided classes and workshops on a variety of different trades and activities. Courses were offered that enabled young men to receive up to an eighth-grade education, and several workers received diplomas as a result. Instructors and park supervisors also

June Drake made this photograph in 1923. The falls are now named for him as Drake Falls.
made available classes on carpentry, auto-mechanics, forestry, woodworking, surveying, and demolitions work, in addition to recreational activities such as boxing.

Instruction in forestry was also made available at the Silver Falls camp and at other CCC camps. These classes had a practical purpose, as they trained recruits for their essential job duties, but the work had a higher purpose as well. According to historian Neil Maher, the classes helped convert many enrollees to the cause of conservation. Classes in forestry were among the most popular of all subjects offered in the CCC camps, helping to build a base of supporters for environmental conservation movements.

By the 1930s, wilderness and nature had assumed a new relevance in the American psyche. Rather than viewing nature as an obstacle that needed to be overcome, many Americans saw it as a benevolent force that helped relieve people of the burdens of civilized society. Nature became a place where man could forget the burdens of living in a city or dealing with the chaos of modern life. Nature was also important for young people, because it taught them essential values of self-reliance and inner strength. Even the work of the CCC fit in to this idea, as the aforementioned editorial in the Silverton newspaper noted in its discussion of the moral and spiritual benefits to CCC enrollees.

Underlying these attitudes toward the environment were the two movements that had arisen at the beginning of the twentieth century: conservation and preservation. Conservation would decline in popularity throughout the twentieth century, because many people believed its values aligned with corporate interests and, therefore, ultimately promoted exploitation. In a curious way, however, both conservation and preservation influenced the development of Silver Falls State Park. Early preservation movements lauded wilderness areas for the spiritual and mental benefits that they provided. While it may not have been possible to restore Silver Falls to a pristine state, the CCC and others were able to restore much of the beauty present at the falls. The ethic of the conservation movement was to provide the greatest good to the greatest number of people for the longest period of time, as stated famously by Gifford Pinchot. The park at Silver Falls was constructed so that the greatest number of people could enjoy the beauty of the site, first by the construction of a two-lane highway through the park, and then through the building of concessions at the sites. The adoption of Silver Falls as a park helped protect the area from further environmental damage. The reforestation and fire prevention work preserved the beauty of the area and made it accessible to all people who wished to visit.

Silver Falls State Park was a place where new attitudes regarding nature received attention from a large number of people. The popularity of the park in the state was considerable, even while large portions of it were still under construction. In 1937, the estimated number of visitors to the site was 79,164 people, then 110,388 in 1938, and 176,780 in 1939. In the span of two years, the number of visitors had more than doubled, while many of the improvements at the park had not yet been completed. Automobile ownership made it possible for Americans to visit parks in rural areas. The construction of the youth camps reflected a strong interest in nature for children and a belief that such institutions were necessary. As the park was being constructed, part of the justification for the construction of the youth camps was the fact that many young Oregonians otherwise did not have access to such places.

It is worth paying attention to the specific version of nature that was being constructed within national and state parks. A few people in the 1930s, such as Robert Marshall, founder of The Wilderness Society, were interested in truly unaltered wilderness areas. Marshall lobbied for wilderness areas to be set aside much as national parks were protected. Park builders in the United States, such as Frederick Law Olmsted, however, constructed their
park environments. Olmsted’s design for Central Park in New York City was meant to disguise the fact that the site had been constructed or altered by humans, and he was largely successful in this goal. Nevertheless, the fact remains that Central Park had been cultivated and built with a specific goal in mind — the creation of a place where New Yorkers could relax and enjoy a natural setting without having to leave the city. Designers and officials cultivated parks and other nature recreation areas to ensure visitors could effectively relax within them.

Americans’ interest in preserving nature was confined to places that were notable or extraordinary in some way. This ethic was clearly visible in the tenets of the NPS and was passed on to the administration of state parks, which were also selected because the areas offered unique experiences. Silver Falls was selected on the basis of the waterfalls, unusual for both their height and scope and for the number present. The interest in both cultivated natural areas and extraordinary natural areas is reflective of the values of the early environmental movement; natural areas that were not deemed to be resplendent were not set aside and protected.

Particular attitudes about the creation of “natural” environments were also reflected at Silver Falls. The Rustic style of architecture helped structures blend into the natural environment. Structures could be unnatural, also reflected at Silver Falls. The Rustic style of architecture helped structures blend into the natural environment. Structures could be unnatural, but with the right aesthetic, they could appear natural. Likewise, the fire-prevention work interfered with the natural environment. Firebreaks, for example, were simply empty strips of land, something that does not occur in a forest setting, and fire prevention interferes with the normal cycle of a healthy forest, something the planners of Silver Falls and other parks did not consider. Ecologists such as Aldo Leopold criticized the CCC because its work was done without the benefit of ecological consciousness, meaning it was sometimes harmful. What is apparent is that Silver Falls was constructed in such a way as to be as beautiful as possible for its visitors and to be accessible to the greatest number of people.

This is not intended as retribution against the work done by these early environmentalists. When one refers to natural areas being modified or improved on, it is tempting to see that work as negative or unnatural, as damage done to the landscape, or as unwelcome intrusions on a pristine wilderness setting. Today, many believe nature is at its best when humans are not present at all. This vision of nature is not one that meshes well with the landscape surrounding Silver Falls. The site had been affected by humans for centuries, and the replanting of trees and restoration of the area had a human origin. Silver Falls was constructed in the same way as Central Park, cultivated to provide a beautiful and relaxing setting. Popular interest in actual unaltered wilderness sites would not take hold for another few decades.

Silver Falls represented the environmental values of the time when it was built as well as a small but important part of the battle waged against the Great Depression. People looked to nature as a place of solace from the woes of modern life, a place where they could find beauty in the form of natural spectacles. The formation of Silver Falls State Park is representative of early interest in the environment for several reasons, owing to the convergence of private, state, and federal protection efforts. In essence, the 1930s represented a unique time in American history, as the preservation and restoration of natural settings became a way to guarantee jobs; previously, exploiting nature had been the chief way to secure the economy. Silver Falls ultimately represents the first wave of early efforts at nature protection and the birth of a popular environmental movement.

NOTES

2. Ibid., 10.
3. Ibid., 15.
4. Ibid., 4.
9. Ibid., 114.
10. Ibid., 119.
13. Ibid., 10. 38.
16. Ibid., 1.
18. Howard McKinley Corning, ed.,
Historic preservation office, Salem, Oregon.
Falls State Park Magazine 1 (July, Silverton Appeal-Tribune, April 21, 1939).


34. "Reforesting Falls Area," Silverton Appeal-Tribune, July 1, 1938.


46. Ibid., 54.

47. "Reforestation Falls Area is Objective," Silverton Appeal-Tribune, July 1, 1938.


53. Ibid.

54. Ibid.


56. Ibid., 148.

57. Silver Creek Recreational Demonstration Area, Master Plan Report, April 1940, United States Department of the Interior, NPS, Oregon Parks and Recreation Department, State Historic Preservation Office, Salem, Oregon.

59. Ibid.

60. "YOUTH CABINS TO BE OPENED ON JULY 10," Silverton Appeal-Tribune, June 14, 1938.

61. Armstrong, Oregon State Parks, 50.


65. Ibid., 53.

64. Work on $20,000 Park Building is Well Along," Silverton Appeal-Tribune, February 17, 1939.


67. Ibid.

68. Letter from Samuel Boardman to M.C. Woodard, September 18, 1940, Oregon Parks & Recreation Department, Salem.


70. Armstrong, Oregon State Parks, 28.


73. Lawrence Merriam Jr., Oregon’s Highway Park System 1921–1969 (Salem: Oregon Parks and Recreation Department, 1992), 228.

74. Oregon Parks, Cultural Landscape Report, 99, 202. The South Falls Lodge is listed under Criterion A for its association with state parks in Oregon, NPS master planning, and its association with the New Deal as well as being listed under Criterion C for its association with the NPS rustic style. In addition, the Silver Creek Youth Camp is listed under the same criteria.


78. "CCC to Hold Open House on April 16," Silverton Appeal-Tribune, April 7, 1939.


80. Maher, Nature’s New Deal, 35. Maher asserts that the camps injected a great deal of money into local economies, making them popular with locals. The repaired natural landscape also helped the sites develop tourist economies.


87. Silver Creek Recreational Demonstration Area, Master Plan Report, April 1940, United States Department of the Interior, NPS, Oregon Parks and Recreation Department, State Historic Preservation Office, Salem, Oregon.

88. Nash, Wilderness, 204.


92. William Cronon, “The Trouble with Wilderness,” in Uncommon Ground, 79. Cronon argues that wilderness was idealized by wealthier urban Americans who were out of touch with wilderness areas.