

# Crater Lake

National Park  
National Park Service  
U.S. Department of the Interior

## People and Place



Crater Lake has long attracted the wonder and admiration of people all over the world. Its depth of 1,932 feet (589 meters) makes it the deepest lake in the United States. The lake was formed after the collapse of an ancient volcano now called Mount Mazama. This collapse formed a "caldera" which is a Spanish word for "kettle" or "boiler" and is used by geologists to describe a large basin-shaped volcanic depression. This eruption is estimated to have occurred 7,700 years ago. The interaction of people and this place is traceable for at least this many years. European contact is fairly recent, starting in 1853.

## First Sight



In the spring of 1853, eleven miners from Yreka, California stopped in for supplies at Isaac Skeeter's mercantile store in Jacksonville, Oregon (approximately 90 miles south of Crater Lake). They began bragging that they knew how to find the legendary "Lost Cabin" gold mine. Skeeters quickly gathered up ten other Oregonians and set out, using the information overheard in his store. The trip was financed by John Wesley Hillman, a 21 year old who had recently returned home from a successful trip to the California goldfields. On June 12,

three members from this party came upon a large body of water sitting in a huge depression. Hillman exclaimed that it was the bluest water he had ever seen. Skeeters suggested the name "Deep Blue Lake." Lack of provisions soon drove the miners down the mountains and back to Jacksonville where they reported the discovery of the lake. However, without the prospects of gold and fear of the unknown region to the north, there was no interest in confirming this discovery. It was soon forgotten.

## Naming a Natural Wonder

In 1862, another party of Oregon prospectors explored this area of the Cascade Range, including Crater Lake. The leader, Chauncy Nye, subsequently wrote a short article for the Jacksonville Oregon Sentinel. His article stated, "The waters were of a deeply blue color causing us to name it **Blue Lake**". This piece is the first published description of the lake.

journeyed to see the now-legendary lake. One of the participants, Sergeant Orsen Stearns, was so awestruck by what he saw that he climbed down into the caldera and became the first non-Native American to reach the shore of Crater Lake. Captain F.B. Sprague soon joined him and suggested the name "**Lake Majesty**."

Hostilities between settlers and Native Americans developed in the area. In response, the U.S. Army established Fort Klamath seven miles southeast of the present park boundary in 1863. This led to the construction of a wagon road from Prospect in the Rogue River Valley to the newly established Fort Klamath. On August 1, 1865, the lake was "rediscovered" by two hunters attached to the road crews. Several soldiers and civilians

In July, 1869, newspaper editor Jim Sutton and several others decided to visit Lake Majesty and explore it by boat. By August, a canvas boat had been constructed and lowered onto the lake. Five people reached Wizard Island and spent several hours exploring the cinder cone. Sutton wrote an article describing the trip for his Jacksonville newspaper. Instead of Lake Majesty, Sutton substituted the name "**Crater Lake**" for the crater on top of Wizard Island.

## Dream Into Reality



In 1872, a young man from Kansas named William Gladstone Steel unwrapped his lunch, carefully contained in a newspaper. As he ate, he read an article about an unusual lake in Oregon. The story sparked Steel's imagination and he vowed to someday see the lake for himself. Two years later, Steel's family moved to Portland, Oregon; however, thirteen years passed before Steel finally gazed upon the beauty of Crater Lake. He was so moved that he decided that it should forever be a public park. His seventeen year quest to see Crater Lake established as a national park had begun.

In 1886, Steel assisted with the mapping of the lake, which had been undertaken by Clarence Dutton for the U. S. Geological Survey. During the original survey, soundings of the lake were conducted using pipe and piano wire. The maximum depth determined by the survey was 1,996 feet (608 meters), only 64 feet off from the sonar measurement of 1,932 feet officially recorded in 1959. The proposal written by Steel to create this national park met with much argument from sheep herders and mining interests. A fledgling U.S. conservation movement began in the late 1800's, greatly aiding Steel's efforts by prompting awareness of preserving natural areas. By 1893, the lake had received some promotion when it became part of the Cascade Range Forest Reserve. For Steel, this was not good enough. He continued to work until May 22, 1902 when Crater Lake became the nation's sixth national park.



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## Original Visitors

The Native American connection with this area is traced back to pre-eruption. Archaeologists have found sandals and other artifacts buried under layers of ash, dust, and pumice from the eruption of Mt. Mazama approximately 7,700 years ago. To date, there is little evidence indicating that Mt. Mazama was a permanent home to people; however, it was used as a temporary camping site. Accounts of the eruption can be found in stories told by the Klamath Indians, who are the descendants of the Makalak people. The Makalaks lived in an area southeast of the present park. Because information was passed down orally, there are many different versions. The Umpqua people have a similar story, using different spirits. The Makalak legend told in the park film, *The Crater Lake Story*, is as follows.

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## A Legendary Look at Formation

The spirit of the mountain was called Chief of the Below World (Llao). The spirit of the sky was called Chief of the Above World (Skell). Sometimes Llao came up from his home inside the earth and stood on top of Mount Mazama, one of the highest mountains in the region. During one of these visits, he saw the Makalak chief's beautiful daughter and fell in love with her. He promised her eternal life if she would return with him to his lodge below the mountain. When she refused, he became angry and declared that he would destroy her people with fire. In his rage, he rushed up through the opening of his mountain and stood on top of it and began to hurl fire down upon them. The mighty Skell took pity on the people

and stood atop Mount Shasta to defend them. From their mountaintops, the two chiefs began to wage a furious battle. They hurled red hot rocks as large as hills. They made the earth tremble and caused great landslides of fire. The people fled in terror to the waters of Klamath Lake. Two holy men offered to sacrifice themselves by jumping into the pit of fire on top of Llao's mountain. Skell was moved by their bravery and drove Llao back into Mount Mazama. When the sun rose next, the great Mount Mazama was gone. It had fallen in on Llao. All that remained was a large hole. Rain fell in torrents, filling the hole with clear waters. This is now called Crater Lake.

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## Honoring the Past, Preserving for the Future

Early settlers and explorers did not hear about Crater Lake from the native inhabitants because this place is sacred to most Native Americans of Oregon and northern California. Makalaks (now Klamath Indians) held fast to the belief that this place was so holy that looking upon it would lead to death. There are no stories relating to the resulting hole in the earth and crystal blue lake after the eruption, indicating that these people became silent on the issue of Mt. Mazama, the mountain was no longer. Even today, some Native Americans choose not to view Crater Lake. Its beauty and mystery form a religious context. As you view this lake and explore this place of earthly violence and unearthly quiet, honor its sacred qualities. Llao and Skell remain just below the surface or just above us in the sky, waiting and watching.

