

CRATER LAKE NATIONAL PARK  
CRATER LAKE, OREGON 97604

THE HISTORY OF CRATER LAKE NATIONAL PARK

Crater Lake, the deepest lake in the United States (1932 feet) is located inside Mt. Mazama, (a once active volcano). Until it collapsed about 6840 years ago, Mt. Mazama was among the highest of the Cascade peaks.

Man's first account of the eruptions of Mt. Mazama is preserved in several local Indian legends. These ancient tales tell about a fiery battle between gods Llao (Mt. Mazama) and Skell (Mt. Shasta). The victor of this destructive war would win the hand of the tribal chief's daughter. Oral tradition says that the battle lasted several days. Hot rock and pumice flows dropped onto the Indians huddled in their hogans on the shores of Klamath Lake. The sun disappeared from view. As the smoke cleared, it became apparent that Skell was the stronger of the two. Llao had lost the battle, and his home was destroyed as Skell decapitated his mountain. The followers of Llao were so distressed by the loss of their leader that as they circled the smoking rim to mourn, their tears gushed forth, half filling Llao's former home. These oft repeated oral Indian tales reflect the Native Americans' early understanding of how Mt. Mazama was destroyed and how the water of Crater Lake gathered.

The first recorded discovery of Crater Lake by early settlers occurred on June 12, 1853, while a party of prospectors from Jacksonville, Oregon, were searching the southern Cascades for the "Lost Cabin" gold mine. While climbing the slopes of Mt. Mazama to establish a better view of the surrounding region, 21 year old John Wesley Hillman, riding slightly ahead of the rest of his party, spotted the lake for the first time. Several names were suggested, but all agreed that the name "Deep Blue Lake" was most appropriate. News of the discovery eventually spread to Jacksonville, but was soon forgotten by people whose only interest was gold.

On October 21, 1862, Crater Lake was rediscovered by another group of prospectors led by Chauncey Nye while returning to Jacksonville from the gold fields of eastern Oregon. Nye was unaware of the Hillman discovery nine years earlier, so he wrote a newspaper article about their discovery, using the name "Blue Lake" in print for the first time.

It was not until 1865 that anyone actually reached the shore of Crater Lake. Captain Franklin Sprague and Sergeant Orson Sterns, two soldiers from nearby Fort Klamath, and Peyton Ford, a civilian, descended the steep rock rim to the blue waters. After refreshing themselves, they named it "Lake Majesty".

The lake finally acquired its current name in 1869 when a camping party led by Jim Sutton from Jacksonville put a boat onto the lake and explored Wizard Island. Mr. Sutton wrote a newspaper article about the party's discoveries and used the name "Crater Lake" for the first time.

Crater Lake remained obscure for several more years. Photographer Peter Britt captured the lake's magnificence on film in 1874. Now views of the lake could be shared with the world!

In 1883, John Wesley Powell, director of the United State's Geological Survey, assigned Professor J.S. Diller and Everett Haden to visit Crater Lake and file a geological report. The scientific story of the creation of Crater Lake had finally come to the attention of the U.S. Government. But it was through the singular

efforts of one man, William Gladstone Steel, that Crater Lake reached the status of a National Park. Steel, a journalist, teacher and land developer living in Portland, viewed the lake for the first time in August of 1885, after having read about this majestic sight nine years earlier. For the next 17 years, Steel mounted a national campaign to have Crater Lake established as a National Park. With the help of many influential friends, the bill finally passed Congress and was signed by President Theodore Roosevelt on May 22, 1902. Crater Lake is the nation's fifth oldest National Park.

The first park visitors found travel to the lake difficult. Roads were poorly maintained trails and there were few overnight facilities. Road construction began in 1903 and by 1918 visitors could travel completely around the lake. This helped increase annual visitation from an estimated 1,500 in 1904 to over 20,000 in 1920.

The land hasn't changed much over the years. Comfortable hard surfaced roads have replaced those early dusty paths, and more than 500,000 people visit the park annually. And because Crater Lake is a National Park, present day visitors can receive the visual thrill that so excited Will Steel back in 1885.