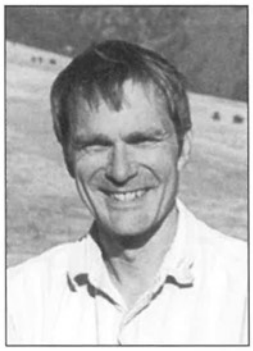
HISTORY COMMENTARY

Mount Rainier National Park—One Family's Journey

By Theodore Catton



Few mountains of the world have as powerful a presence for an urban people as Mount Rainier holds for the people of Seattle and Tacoma. Residents of the two cities flock to Mount Rainier at the end of their work week to enjoy the mountain's tonic effect on their overstressed lives. They have done so for more than a century: driving over the national park's sinuous roads, camping in the deep shade of giant Douglas firs, hiking through meadows resplendent with purple aster and Indian paintbrush, and drinking in the mountain air. The elixir we know as "going to Mount Rainier" is an inseparable blend of nature and the national park experience.

I grew up in Seattle in the 1960s in a family that built some of its most significant shared experience around Mount Rainier National Park. The centerpiece of that shared experience was hiking the Wonderland Trail, the 90-mile loop that encircles the mountain just below the reach of its many glaciers and permanent snowfields. The Wonderland Trail is no picnic; it crosses all the rushing, milky-gray rivers emanating from Mount Rainier's enormous glaciers and climbs over all the ridges in between. In its meandering course and countless zigzagging ups and downs, the Wonderland Trail is not so much like a circular hat band stretched around a hat as a rawhide draped loosely over the radiating spokes of a wagon wheel. The trail affords intimate and constantly changing views of Mount Rainier's deeply incised volcanic cone and leads the hiker past numerous tarns and "parks"—high meadows graced with wildflowers and wind-sculpted clumps of dwarf alpine fir—perhaps Mount Rainier's most alluring natural feature. Many Pacific Northwesterners would agree that there is no finer scenery in the region.

We hiked the Wonderland Trail the first time when my older brothers were nine and seven and I was barely three. For my parents, the logistics of taking such a young family around the mountain were challenging. Reckoning on walking the whole distance at a toddler's pace, they plotted out a 12-day itinerary. This amounted to just seven or eight miles per day, but as it happened we fell chronically behind schedule and hiked until after dark on several occasions. We made advance food drops at ranger stations one-third and two-thirds of the way around the mountain, but even with this preparation we had to subsist on light rations that, in retrospect, seemed frighteningly meager. I shouldered a tiny rucksack in which I carried each day's petite lunch. My brothers wore little REI shelf packs with a box of food and a sleeping bag strapped on each. We all five slept in a pair of canvas pup tents. This trip amounted to a lot of togetherness and gave us a great sense of accomplishment. For our family, however, the real power of Mount Rainier was not something manifested in days but in decades.

To start at the beginning, Mount Rainier first entered our family lore in one of my father's stories from World War II. Dad served in the Pacific on board the aircraft carrier USS *Ticonderoga*. On January 18, 1945, in the faraway Strait of Formosa, a Japanese kamikaze pilot crashed his airplane into the deck of the *Ticonderoga*, killing himself and scores of American servicemen and wounding many others, including Dad, who took a piece of shrapnel in his shoulder. The aircraft carrier, badly damaged by the attack, limped back across the Pacific for repairs, finally sailing into Puget Sound under a smoky winter sky. This is how Dad, just past his 19th birthday, saw the Pacific Northwest for the first time. He was on shore leave in Bremerton when the weather cleared and the mountain suddenly revealed itself, outsized and luminous above the sound. I imagine him rounding a street comer, arm in a sling, rocking back on his heels with some kind of sailor expletive escaping his lips. Later in life he would recount how that breathtaking view inspired him to settle in Washington. Certainly it was the grandest mountain he had ever seen—more impressive, in fact, than the sight of Mount Fuji from Tokyo Bay, which he beheld before the year was out.

After the war, Dad went home to the Midwest and four years of higher learning on the GI Bill at Oberlin College, where he met my mother. A Midwesterner as well, Mom had never seen a mountain bigger than a sand dune. In 1949 they got married and drove out west with all their belongings packed into a 1933 Pontiac—destination Seattle—where Dad started on a Ph.D. in sociology at the University of

Washington and they both began their long love affair with Mount Rainier.

Mom and Dad enjoyed considerable hiking and car-camping with student friends in the early 1950s, and as they did so Dad's recreational and intellectual pursuits converged on Mount Rainier National Park. He became fascinated by the sociology of national parks: who visited them and why, how the national park system had evolved as an institution, what the National Park Service did to protect sublime values and to cultivate public appreciation of nature. With a sociologist's eye, he observed the skillful layout of the national park's campgrounds, the ritualized campfire talks in the campground amphitheaters, the various behaviors of hikers and campers and park users of all types. He also took a keen interest in park management issues—protesting, for example, the proposal to install a permanent chair lift at Paradise for downhill skiers.

These were contentious years in the park's history. The biggest controversy centered on what direction winter use of Paradise should take. While the National Park Service finally withstood strong political pressure to develop Paradise as a downhill ski resort, it nevertheless disappointed many conservationists in its pursuit of other new construction projects under what it called "Mission 66"—a well-funded initiative to rehabilitate and expand buildings and roads in national parks in order to accommodate burgeoning numbers of visitors. The most conspicuous Mission 66 project in Mount Rainier National Park was the Stevens Canyon Road. By linking the south and east sides of the park, the National Park Service hoped to redistribute the visitor load and reduce crowding at Paradise and Sunrise. Dad supported Mission 66 in principle, but he was wary of too much development. He regretted, for example, the decision to widen and pave major trails at Paradise in order to control the amount of damage caused by people wandering off established trails. And he noted where motor tourists had carved their initials in a fine specimen of glacially polished rock at one end of the newly opened Stevens Canyon Road—a spot formerly accessible only to wilderness hikers.

Mom and Dad had their first child in 1954, a second in 1956, and a third (me) in 1960. Child-rearing did not lessen their enthusiasm for going to Mount Rainier; if anything, the burden of children enhanced the pleasure. But as they approached having a fourth child—they had always talked of having four, as had both of their families—Dad realized that with every additional child he and Mom were themselves contributing to the park's problem of crowding. The population explosion was no longer something happening only to the Third World; it was impacting those places most dear to him—the national parks. In an effort to resolve his personal dilemma—perhaps crisis is not too strong a word—Dad wrote an article for *National Parks Magazine* in which he argued that all those who loved the national parks must respond to the population threat on a personal level. His prescription for population control was that all people who wanted two or more children should stop one short of their desired number. In his case, that meant stopping at three. Dad wrote this article not long after we had completed the Wonderland Trail in August 1963. By the time it was published in March 1964, Mom was pregnant with their fourth and last child.

Whatever conflicted feelings Dad had about it, Mom would never admit that four boys was too many. And perhaps to prove her appetite for it, she agreed to another hike around the Wonderland Trail in 1967, shortly after my brother Jonathan turned three. My older brothers Steve and Philip were then thirteen and eleven; I was seven. We were still a young family to make such a trip, 15 days in the back country. I have slightly more recollection of that second time around the mountain. I remember in particular Mom's pride in Jon's sturdy performance—especially whenever we met a party on horseback.

I remember, too, Dad's trail-side natural history lectures. He identified intensely with the National Park Service's educational mission. Since its founding in 1916, the Park Service has emphasized the importance of national parks as outdoor museums. It strives to educate the public through the technique of on-site teaching or "interpretation." Dad deeply admired this program as a professor and environmentalist, and he could not contain himself from occasionally becoming professorial on the trail. As we were hiking he would call a halt, point out some geological or ecological phenomenon exhibited before us and provide a mini-lecture about what we were observing. Probably more than anything, Dad cherished the national park for this: its function as an outdoor classroom in which he could impart knowledge and environmental ethics to his growing children.

We had more camping trips to the park in the summer of 1968. Dad complained irritably about the creeping urban sprawl. He fumed about the worsening traffic. I did not know it then, but he was beginning to despair. The population explosion was happening here. Few would acknowledge it, but the fact was that the Puget Sound area was growing faster than any Latin American country—not because of a comparable birth rate but because so many people were moving to the area to enjoy "the good life."

Moreover, Dad did not like what was occurring on the University of Washington campus: the student protests, the wild bloom of hippies. He supported the antiwar movement but he did not support its tactics. Militant students were disrupting university classes, branding professors as reactionary or irrelevant. He worried about Steve approaching 18 and being drafted to fight in the interminable Vietnam War. He pondered all the military targets in the Puget Sound area that would draw Soviet warheads in the event of a nuclear holocaust. As for the flower children and drug peddlers who suddenly materialized all over the University District, Dad

Courtesy William R. Catton, Jr.

The Catton family on the Wonderland Trail, 1967.

had only contempt. "Animals!" he would scowl whenever we drove past the cordon of hippies who lined the graffiti-covered wall along the west edge of campus. As a political liberal and an intellectual steeped in the theory of social change, he had remarkably low regard for the counterculture.

By the following year Dad wanted to leave the country, but first he had to persuade Mom that it was the right thing for the family. In that summer of 1969—our last in Seattle—Dad took his four sons one by one to Mount Rainier. He and I hiked the short, steep trail up to Van Trump Park, where we pitched our tent at the edge of the meadow. In the rosy light of evening Dad and I went exploring in glacier-polished rocks above camp. I pointed out some striations: parallel grooves caused by the vanished glacier where it had picked up debris and ground it against the rock as it flowed over that spot. It always delighted Dad when we took what he had taught us and pitched it back to him. I was unaware that he and Mom were then debating a big move, or that we were going to be leaving Seattle that winter.

Sometime that fall Mom and Dad reached agreement and made the momentous announcement to us boys that we would be leaving the country for New Zealand. Dad resigned his professorship and accepted a position at the University of Canterbury in the South Island city of Christchurch at half his American salary. For this apostasy he was written up in the *Seattle Times* under the acerbic headline, "He's Had It! U. of W. Prof Will Move To New Zealand." *Seattle Times* columnist Don Duncan interviewed Dad in his office on campus. Dad talked about the population explosion, the inexorable deterioration of the environment, the overconsumption of finite resources...and Mount Rainier. He noted his family's two backpacking trips around the Wonderland Trail, and he expressed hope that his sons would enjoy untrammeled national parks in New Zealand. Although New Zealand's population was growing, too, he said, it was not in a crisis situation like that facing the Puget Sound region. "If all of us just get to peek once in a lifetime at Mount Rainier out of a high-rise apartment," Dad was quoted, "then I say that is not really living at all." Duncan wrote:

> *Catton emphasizes he is not leaving because he is mad at anyone at the university. Nor is he angry at local and state officials he believes buried their heads in the sand while the problems of overpopulation swept over the Puget Sound country. And he acknowledges his own part as a father in the population explosion.*
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> *What is the answer?*

The bespectacled, soft-spoken professor shakes his head and says, "I'm afraid there isn't one."

In 1970 New Zealand had about three million people and ten large national parks. The nearest to our home, Arthur's Pass National Park—roughly the same driving distance from Christchurch as Mount Rainier National Park is from Seattle—took its name from one of the few highway passes through the South Island's spectacular Southern Alps. Dad reveled in New Zealand's spaciousness, its unsealed roads, one-lane bridges, and primitive motor camps. Steve and Philip entered high school and in a few years were busy with mountaineering and tramping trips of their own. I was content with my Kiwi friends. But unbeknownst to us boys, homesickness ailed Mom considerably more than the rest of the family. Toward the end of 1972 my parents made the most wrenching decision of their lives. With great "ambivalence"—a new word suddenly injected into my 12-year-old vocabulary—and over the tearful objections of my two older brothers, they decided to call three years in lovely New Zealand enough.

Six months later we were resettled in Washington, but on the dry east side in the small university town of Pullman—far from Mount Rainier. And at the end of the year we were once more gathered momentously at the Seattle-Tacoma airport, putting Steve and Philip on the airplane back to New Zealand. Just 19 and 17 years old, they held permanent-resident visas and would eventually seek New Zealand citizenship. Later it became evident to me, as I plodded through my high school years, what a loss this represented to Mom and what bittersweet happiness this gave Dad.

In Pullman the remaining four of us no longer made as many visits to national parks. We found our inspiration in lesser temples of nature, such as nearby national forests and county parks. This change owed in part to our geographic location, and, I believe, to the fact that Mom and Dad were so often at sea in those years about their distance from Steve and Philip and at odds with each other about the choices they had made to bring about this separation. Making matters harder for them, a relict American law forced the State Department to take away my brothers' United States citizenship when they became naturalized New Zealand citizens near the end of the decade. Still, despite these personal upheavals, Mount Rainier continued to inspire our family. Whether the mountain projected itself out of our past or by its sheer, iconic mass on the far side of our state, it continued to be in our thoughts. In 1978, when I was 18, Mom and Dad and Jon and I hiked the whole Wonderland Trail again.

If anyone in Pullman thought Mount Rainier and the other volcanoes of western Washington were irrelevant in their lives, that changed on the morning of May 18, 1980, with the eruption of Mount St. Helens. Although Pullman residents were too far away to hear the blast, the plume of ash completely engulfed our sky. Jon phoned, alerting me to the fact that Mom and Dad were at Mount Rainier. As luck would have it, they were at Paradise that morning with Philip's in-laws, who were visiting from New Zealand. They heard Mount St. Helens explode with a tremendous roar and watched the volcanic cloud grow before their eyes as it billowed north as well as east. They marked its advance over the Tatoosh Range by the way the snowfields turned from white to gray as they were showered with ash. With fine flakes of what had just been the top thousand feet of Mount St. Helens beginning to fall around them in the parking lot, my parents took their guests into the visitor center and watched through the observation-story windows as the ash stain on the snow moved up the slope of Mount Rainier.

The year of the eruption was also the year Dad published his book and the year Steve came home. Dad's book, *Overshoot*, had been in manuscript ever since he was at the University of Canterbury—expanding, changing, bouncing from one myopic publisher to another. It is now an underground classic among environmentalists, its dire message concerning human population growth and resource use and the planet's carrying capacity as urgent and compelling today as it was then. When it was finally published, it lifted a burden for both Mom and Dad. Likewise restorative, Steve's return across the Pacific that June after ten years abroad gave Mom and Dad a kind of emotional landfall of their own. Eventually Steve got the State Department to "vacate" its earlier decision concerning his United States citizenship.

When Dad retired from teaching at Washington State University, he and Mom built a home near the town of Graham, about halfway between Seattle and Mount Rainier National Park, from which they enjoyed a spectacular view of the mountain through their living room window. Unfortunately, after several years, the unstoppable spread of what Dad had once called "Pugetopolis" rooted them out all over again. They strenuously fought a sanitary landfill development on wetland a few miles down the road. When they ultimately lost that battle, they moved to their present home in Lakewood, south of Tacoma. Now in their 70s, they still enjoy hiking on Mount Rainier.

For my parents, as for so many residents of Seattle and Tacoma, Mount Rainier looms not only on their horizon but in their hearts as well. National parks are for the people, a former director of the Park Service once said, and people make of them what they will. My parents made the experience of going to Mount Rainier an invigorating and unifying force in the life of our family.

Theodore Catton, of Missoula, Montana, has since 1995 been a public historian with Historical Research Associates, Inc., where he specializes in the history of conservation, Indian affairs, and the American West. He is author of Inhabited Wilderness: Indians, Eskimos and National Parks in Alaska *(University of New Mexico Press, 1997). His second book,* National Park, City Playground: Mount Rainier in the 20th Century, *is forthcoming by the University of Washington Press.*

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COVER: Detail from "Mount Coffin and Mount St. Helens from the Columbia River...," by Henry J. Warre. Situated on the north bank of the Columbia River about five miles below the mouth of the Cowlitz, Mount Coffin (left foreground) served as a place for Chinook Indian burials. "All, excepting slaves, are laid in canoes or wooden sepulchers, and conveyed to some consecrated rock or thicket assigned for the dead."—Alexander Ross. See related article beginning on page 24. (Courtesy National Archives of Canada, #C026343)