

**W**hen Hal Sylvester ranged the Snoqualmie and Wenatchee National Forests in the early 1900s, one of his most important jobs was putting names on maps. In his 23 years as Forest Service supervisor, he named more than 3,000 uncharted ridges, mountains, lakes, streams, and rivers. Sylvester was respectful of names given by those who had ranged before him—Native Americans, miners, sheepherders, and settlers—but he also pulled names out of the proverbial hat. “Farm bred and university trained,” Sylvester drew names from nature, classical mythology, the

Bible, and his many friends. In some of the monikers he came up with, his wit and sense of humor are evident.

Albert Hale Sylvester—known as Hal—was born on a farm in Woodside, California, and educated at Berkeley, where he earned a degree in civil engineering. He came to the Northwest in 1897 as an assistant topographer for the United States Geological Survey (USGS), which was conducting an official mapping of every wilderness mile in the country. “I think it was from no particular merit of my own that I was selected for this job,” he wrote in his memoirs.

BY JUDY BENTLEY



University of Washington Libraries, Special Collections, Albert Hale Sylvester Papers

*Head Ranger and Namer of Names  
in Wenatchee National Forest*

# HAL SYLVESTER

One of his early field trips as a “young fellow out on his first big job” was a ride to Snoqualmie Pass to place survey cairns and establish a triangulation network along the Cascade Range. That ride imprinted Sylvester with the beauty of the region whose every mile he would soon know. From the pass “we retraced our steps to Gold Creek, which flows into Lake Keechelus at its head. By good luck and a miner’s trail we made our way up this stream. Its valley is glacial and U-shaped. Over its walls the snow water was pouring in a hundred glittering falls and cascades. It was at that time the most wonderful scenery I had ever seen....”

His habit of naming the unnamed began on that field trip when he left an undersized overcoat buttoned around the cairn he and John Charlton, his assistant, had built. Thirty years later a Mountaineers expedition found the remnants of the coat on the peak northeast of Snoqualmie Pass and sent him the shreds as a souvenir from Overcoat Peak.

Sylvester established his reputation as a jokester on that trip. “Back in camp I undressed and plunged into the icy pond. Ugh! But it was cold. But I managed to stay in long enough to persuade John that the water was fine. When he hit the water

Asahel Curtis photo: WSHS, #1943.42.30629

Asahel Curtis photo taken near the head of Box Canyon Creek in the Alpine Lakes Wilderness of Wenatchee National Forest, 1914.

INSET: Albert H. "Hal" Sylvester (1871–1944).



with a yell I can still hear, I climbed out well satisfied with a good day's work."

President Theodore Roosevelt and Gifford Pinchot designated national forest reserves in 1902. The president's actions aroused opposition from private landowners, but before Congress could act to stop him he proclaimed a number of areas as national forests, including the Wenatchee and Snoqualmie National Forests, on March 2, 1907. Sylvester soon switched from the USGS to working for the United States Forest Service and joined that cadre of first generation forest rangers inspired by Pinchot. He became the Wenatchee National Forest's first operating supervisor, a job he held from 1908 to 1931.

Sylvester was keenly aware of the importance of naming landscape features on maps so that firefighters could find and extinguish fledging fires. Wherever he went, he took along the most recent version of the USGS



**Sylvester tended to name lakes after women. About 150 lakes and ponds bear the names of wives, sisters, sweethearts, mothers, and daughters of the Forest Service.**

quadrangle maps, which were updated every two or three years.

"I seldom went on a field trip without coming back with some new names to add to the map," Sylvester related. During each winter Sylvester and other rangers would edit the maps, adding new names and features. Sylvester supervised 20 men from the Leavenworth office, a crew that grew to over 100 by 1928 when the office moved to Wenatchee.

Most of the time Sylvester took a systematic approach to naming. Main waterways already had names given by Native Americans, so he named ridges, ranges, and divides to the left looking upstream after the waterway. Hence, Keechelus Ridge he named after Lake Keechelus. This pattern worked well with the Chelan Mountains and the Entiat Mountains, but later he was unable to stick with this plan, and Icicle Ridge is to the right of Icicle Creek.

Louis Judd, a Wenatchee Indian, taught Sylvester some of the Native American names and their meanings.

RIGHT: As head ranger, Sylvester (center) led numerous pack trips into the Cascade Mountains, during which he would designate place names for as-yet-unnamed landscape features.

FACING PAGE: Sheep grazing near Horseshoe Basin, 1920. At one point in the early 1900s, 60 percent of Washington sheep ranged the mountain meadows in Wenatchee National Forest during the summer.

Judd was the source for Peshastin, Chiwaukum, Cle Elum, and Entiat. Judd also gave him Na'-sik'elt, the Indian name for what became Icicle Creek. (Put an N in front of Icicle and a T at the end, and it sounds like the Indian name.) Sylvester became an advocate for retaining some of the Indian names. He was not successful with Icicle Creek and Icicle Ridge, but he did retain the original spelling for Na-sik'elt Canyon. He also persuaded the Board of Geographic Names to change the North Fork of the White River back to Mapequa (or Napequa—both names appear in his writings), reestablishing the old name that meant "white or muddy water."

Sylvester borrowed words from the Chinook trade jargon used by Indians and nonnatives. Klonauqua Lakes combines klon, the Chinook word for three, with the Latin word aqua for water. Sylvester noted with satisfaction that the Wenatchee Indians used the syllable *qua* as the ending of many of their stream names, too, so his chosen name had even more resonance.

The chief ranger also made use of the names settlers, prospectors, and sheepmen had given to landscape features. Tumas Mountain, for example, is named after two Macs—McDuff and McAdam. "Toward the summit of the Cascades in the Carlton Pass area there stands a fine example of a volcanic cinder cone rising some 1,500 feet above the general level of the terrain," Sylvester wrote. "I asked a sheepherder its name. He said, 'Oh, it hasn't any real name,' then rather hesitantly, 'We call it the 'Two Macs Mountain.' He then told of two Scottish sheepherders, McDuff and McAdam, who used to race their bands to try and be first to get the pasture on this mountain. I spelled two 'Tu' and added the 'mac' to it for Tumas, which makes as fine a looking Indian name as I will ask you to find anywhere."

Although Sylvester generally respected sheepherders, he found some of their names—such as Ass Hole—unusable. He discreetly renamed that particular hollow Cultus Hole, cultus being Chinook for anything bad, mean, and disgusting. Sheepherders had chosen Ass Point as the name for a finger of tableland over which they had hard going trailing their sheep. He changed it to the German "Asel" Point, "which at least looks better to the average American."

If there was no known name for a feature, Sylvester was free to use his imagination. He tended to name lakes after women. About 150 lakes and ponds bear the names of wives, sisters, sweethearts, mothers, and daughters of the Forest Service. On a single horseback trip along Icicle Ridge in 1909, he named nine lakes in two days, all of them for women he knew: Mary and Margaret, the two sisters of his companion, Burne Canby; Florence, a friend of Margaret and Mary's; Alice, after



University of Washington Libraries, Special Collections, Albert Hale Sylvester Papers

Mrs. Sylvester; Flora, another ranger's wife; Edna, "Burne's best girl"; Augusta, Sylvester's mother; Ida, his wife's sister; and Victoria, the queen of England. The pass above Lake Florence he labeled Ladies Pass. This trip in 1909 marked the beginning of Sylvester's habit of naming lakes after women; other forest rangers followed suit.

Sylvester preferred variety in names. He never liked to name tributaries as forks of another river: "Any name... is better than calling a stream a fork." He grew tired of the many Cougar Creeks in the Chiwaukum drainage system and so poured over the map one winter in the office, renaming the creeks with synonyms like painter, panther, lion, and puma. Of the many Trout Lakes, he wrote: "Such names appear more or less out of thin air by a sort of common consent and practice."

His knowledge of animal names served him well. Marmots gathered in Whistling Pig Meadow. Foulhen Creek is named after a spruce goose, a type of partridge that lives in the deep woods and refuses to be afraid. Woodsmen called it "fool," which has metamorphosed into foulhen.

Many of Sylvester's choices were whimsical. When he ran out of names of friends and family, he picked whatever was at hand. Index Creek was named because it forms the index finger of the Chiwaukum drainage system. He named Kodak Peak, near the headwaters of the Little Wenatchee River, when an assistant left his camera there. Mule Creek, near Whitepine Creek, he said, honored "the dishonored animal so useful in getting across country like this." Battle Canyon, in the Chiwaukum Creek watershed, was named after a fist fight that took place there between two sheepherders.

He was not above poking fun at famous people. Harding Mountain (7,173 feet) he named after President Warren G. Harding, who had visited Seattle in 1923. He quipped, "Like Harding, who compared with some of our presidents does not rate so high, so this mountain compared with the big ones is



Lawrence D. Lindsley photo; University of Washington Libraries, Special Collections, Ph Coll 548.3320



not so much; but nevertheless, it is a considerable chunk of a hill.”

“My guess is that it takes humor as well as whimsy to name names,” he wrote. Some of the names were slight mistakes. A ranger, Jim McKenzie, submitted the name Pomas Creek in the Entiat range, and Sylvester tried to figure out what the location had to do with the French word for apples. “Apple?” I pondered. There are no apples up in that territory, even though Wenatchee is one of the great apple growing districts of the world.” Then he realized the ranger had meant pumice, for the pumice blown out by Glacier Peak, which fills the creek. Sylvester decided not to correct the mistake. “Because of pleasure in the name Pomas itself, and for the love of McKenzie, I would not change Jim’s name to Pumice. It is too rich.”

Less imagination is required to guess the origin of Dishpan Gap, Saucer Lake, Cup Lake, Lake Camp Fire Girls, and Dirtyface



**In conflicts between agriculture and forestry, Sylvester took the unpopular view that some land claimed by homesteaders in the upper Wenatchee River drainage was not suitable for farming.**

Mountain. When Harry Reid carved a life-size figure of a woman, minus legs, from a tree trunk, a shepherd named the nearby watercourse Grandma Creek.

Other names reflected Sylvester’s classical education. Lake Valhalla, named after a Viking paradise, lies just north of Stevens Pass. Studying a topographical map of Chelan County, he noticed contour lines so close together that they resembled a maze. This inspired him to name that mountain Labyrinth and two lakes nearby Lakes Theseus and Minotaur, thinking of Theseus entering the labyrinth to kill the Minotaur. He also used Biblical names: Mount David, Mount Jonathan, Mount Saul. He named Poets Ridge peaks after Washington Irving, Edgar Allan Poe, Henry Wadsworth Longfellow, William Cullen Bryant, and John Greenleaf Whittier.

Some of the monikers he bestowed are obvious to anyone who has seen them. Sylvester recounts camping between two fine lakes in the Mount Stuart Range, the

RIGHT: Hal Sylvester and his wife Alice. Sylvester named many lakes in Wenatchee National Forest after women, including one for his wife—Lake Alice.

FACING PAGE: Blewett Pass, c. 1926. Hal Sylvester was involved in determining the route of the Forest Service road through Blewett Pass, which improved recreational and forestry access.

Snow Lakes. “I camped between them overnight and the next morning went on up the creek to see what I could see. There I found five or six most beautiful small lakes grouped in a wonderful little glacial valley all ringed with alpine larch. From the highest up over an entrancing fall tumbled the water it received from a small glacier. It was an enchanting scene.” The lakes did not appear on the Mount Stuart Quadrangle map, so he named the group Enchantment Lakes.

Besides his responsibilities as a topographer, Sylvester embraced the conservation practices introduced by Pinchot and Roosevelt. In conflicts between agriculture and forestry, he took the unpopular view that some land claimed by homesteaders in the upper Wenatchee River drainage was not suitable for farming. However, he encouraged a conservative approach to timber harvesting on federal lands, preferring to hold off until private forest reserves were diminished.

Sylvester also made efforts to rehabilitate erosion-damaged soil caused by over-grazing of sheep and wildlife. In the early 1900s sheep numbering in the hundreds of thousands were driven into the mountains each summer to graze. Soon, some of the mountain meadows were overgrazed and grizzly bears disappeared from the forest, shot by sheepherders. French Ridge, he noted, “formerly had a good sheep range on it, but it was bitterly used.” Sylvester set aside areas for limited use, including an unpopular closure of Buck Creek Pass to grazing.

Instrumental in negotiating the route of the Blewett Pass Highway, Sylvester aided the causes of forest recreation and forestry access. One of the keys to his success, he claimed, was that he was more interested in human relationships than in trees alone. He moved key personnel to towns and cities to have contact with sheepmen and cattlemen, sawmill operators, timber purchasers, and homesteaders.

Needless to say, the head ranger was an avid outdoorsman, leading a pack trip to the summit of Mount Stuart, the highest peak in Chelan County, in the summer of 1916. He had a number of first ascents: Mount Baring, White Chuck Mountain, Columbia Peak, Overcoat Peak, Sahale Peak, Snoqualmie Mountain, Gardner Mountain, Star Peak, and Reynolds Peak.

After his retirement in 1931, he wrote his memoirs and articles but continued to visit remote terrain, especially the circle of lakes he had found in 1909. In September 1944 he invited three friends on a trip back to Ladies Pass. With four saddle horses and two pack horses, they approached the pass from the northeast, following a trail up Chiuwukum Creek. They spent the first night at Lake Chiuwukum, then proceeded up through the valley to Larch Lake, switchbacked steeply on a granite talus slope, and



Courtesy United States Forest Service

followed a very rough trail. One of the packhorses slipped and fell end over end to its death at Deadhorse Pass. When the group started out again, they sidehilled below Lake Grace and camped under Snowgrass Mountain at Lake Mary.

The next day the five-horse caravan set out, with Sylvester guiding the pack horse, its lead rope thrown around the horn of his saddle. They traversed the saw-tooth ridge between Lake Mary and Lake Florence on a steep switchback trail. Just after crossing the ridge, with Lake Florence in view below, Sylvester paused to point out Snowgrass Mountain, which had been named by sheepherders for the grass that grows through the snow in the spring.

The horses bunched up so the group could talk more easily, but as they did, the lead rope caught under the tail of Sylvester’s horse. His horse went off the trail, bucking, and lost its footing. Sylvester was trapped in the saddle with his leg pinned down by the rope. Both horses went over the side into a jagged rock-slide area. Sylvester could not fall free and was pinned under the horse. In sleet and snow, he was carried out on a stretcher with relays organized by the Forest Service. Rescue efforts notwithstanding, Sylvester died a week later.

Six years after his death, 500 people signed a petition to rename Snowgrass Mountain in his honor. The U.S. Board of Geographic Names refused, however, citing the picturesque origin of the name. Instead, the board named one of the highest lakes in the Cascades after him, Lake Sylvester. Located straight south of Ladies Pass at the head of Grindstone Creek, Lake Sylvester overlooks Lake Alice, which he had named for his wife in 1909. 📷

Judy Bentley is a writer and historian whose book *Hiking Washington’s History*, published in 2010 by the University of Washington Press, includes Sylvester’s two-day naming spree near Ladies Pass.



J.A. Juilen photo; University of Washington Libraries, Special Collections, #UW 33534



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**COVER:** This lantern slide image from the Museum of History & Industry depicts a riveting moment in Washington history. Taken together, this item and the many other documents and images that populate archival repositories across the state form a complex, many-faceted reflection of our state's past and how it fits into the larger fabric of regional, national, and world history. See related story beginning on page 16. (Courtesy Museum of History & Industry, Seattle; #2002.3.135)