AMBIVALENT LANDSCAPES:

AN HISTORICAL GEOGRAPHY OF

RECREATION AND TOURISM ON

MOUNT HOOD, OREGON

by

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Introduction

Mount Hood is an Oregon icon. Nearly any promotional or tourism literature for Portland or Oregon features a glossy photo of the mountain. Travel guidebooks and lifestyle magazines invariably describe Oregonians as a people with an affinity for the outdoors, and as a beacon for much of the state, the mountain beckons many of these recreationists to come play on its slopes. The mountain is widely considered to be the second most climbed mountain in the world after Mount Fuji in Japan; over 10,000 climbers summit Mount Hood each year. The Mount Hood National Forest receives an estimated four million visitors annually (USDA Forest Service 2004). The mountain's five ski areas register nearly ¾ million skier days on average each year (PNSAA 2004).[1] "Portlanders give Mount Hood a reverence that borders on devotion. . . . Even though residents of two states share in the glory of its presence, Mount Hood is still regarded as their own by prideful Portlanders. They see it there—not even in their own county—as a part of the city, as much so as those hills on which Portland is built" (McNeil 1990:12).

Mount Hood also has as long and rich a history of recreation as nearly anywhere else in the West. The mountain was first climbed in 1857. Cloud Cap Inn, the mountain's first resort retreat, was built on Cooper Spur in 1889. The Mazamas, one of the country's oldest mountaineering clubs, was founded on its summit in 1894. Timberline Lodge, the Works Progress Administration's architectural gem, was built in 1937. The world's

[1] The Forest Service's National Visitor Use Monitoring program defines a national forest visit as the entry of one person upon a national forest to participate in recreation activities for an unspecified period of time. A national forest visit can be composed of multiple site visits. The National Ski Areas Association defines 'skier days' as one person visiting a ski area for all or any part of a day or night for the purpose of skiing.

second chairlift was installed at Timberline Ski Area in 1939, and for a short period Mount Hood was an epicenter of winter sports in North America.

Several generations of skiers, hikers, and climbers who grew up on Mount Hood share and revel in this history. Tourism marketers evoke it on brochures, posters, and Web sites. The Mount Hood Museum and Cultural Center in Government Camp opened in 2002 largely to commemorate the recreation and tourism heritage of the mountain. Recent efforts to place the Tilly Jane trail on the northeast flank of the mountain on the National Register of Historic Places also reflect an appreciation of the mountain's recreation past. A contemporary marketing campaign for the Mount Hood Territory (by Clackamas County) evokes the mountain's history on posters with period illustrations featuring Timberline Lodge and other scenes of post-war-era tourists.

Despite this history and its contemporary popularity, landscapes on Mount Hood today reveal a recreation and tourism industry that has struggled to assert itself. The sophisticated, upscale character that has evolved at destination resorts around the West has never come to dominate the landscapes on and around Mt Hood.

> Mount Hood has never been a rich man's refuge. For decades it has been a blue-collar place, where the work of logging went side by side with the pleasure of pitching a tent on a lake. No Aspen or Vail, Colo., sprouted on Mount Hood. Instead, there are taverns, restaurants, and stores, the kinds of places you need to get by, not ahead (Sleeth 1996).

Even in areas where tourism and recreation dominate the economy, the character of the businesses and infrastructure is decidedly humble. Government Camp has been variously described as blighted, down-at-the-heels, and a story of missed opportunity, and many businesses still appear to be just getting by.

In addition, a distinct geographic divide in the manner in which recreation has developed is evident in the contemporary scene. On the south side of the mountain, recreation dominates the Highway 26 corridor between Sandy and Government Camp known as Hoodland. In contrast, signs of recreation and tourism are much more subtle in the Upper Hood River Valley on the mountain's northeast side—a casual observer may not notice some of them at all.

In this study, I seek to explain why contemporary landscapes on Mount Hood look as they do. I chronicle the development of recreation and tourism on Mount Hood using a conceptual framework of landscape, location, and place that is rooted in the discipline of historical geography. I examine the evolution of the character and pattern of recreation development and the ways in which various communities have used it to invest meaning in the places they call home.

Despite the efforts of early tourism boosters, Mount Hood has never become an elite destination resort such as Aspen or Vail or Sun Valley. Instead modest recreation developed, and today the area is primarily a regional attraction. While outside forces often shape development at the elite resorts, local and regional interests have had more influence on development on Mount Hood. Communities on the mountain have incorporated recreation and tourism into their lives and landscapes to varying degrees, according to the visions they have for themselves. At the same time Mount Hood is also inextricably tied to Portland, and is an integral part of the city's identity. The mountain and its environs have been a playground for Portland residents for a century and a half. As a result, the landscapes on Mount Hood reflect the tastes, values, and priorities of the city's residents as much as, if not more than, those of local communities.

Mount Hood is many things to many people. "Cultural landscapes of the Mountainous West often highlight the sharply divided visions of what the region should be" (Wyckoff and Dilsaver 1995:11). Most debates over development on the mountain have turned on the nature and degree of development of recreation and conflicting identities rooted in recreation-based economies and more traditional, resource- and agriculture-based economies.[2]

My emphasis in this study is on developed recreation, specifically the built environment. I focus primarily on buildings, infrastructure, and other recreation-oriented structures. I am less interested in dispersed recreation such as wilderness or hiking trails or even the in-between landscapes of campgrounds and picnic areas. Because mountain resort developments tend to revolve around skiing and much of the mountain's recreation history involves skiing, my story of Mount Hood is told largely in the context of this one winter sport. I consider other activities, particularly dispersed recreation, to the extent that they were involved in establishing and using general patterns and material culture of recreation and tourism in the landscapes. Additionally, I consider the role of timber and agriculture to the extent that they have been incorporated into tourism or used as an alternative with which to resist recreation development.

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[2] There have been several proposals for recreation and tourism development and discussions of public lands management on Mount Hood in the last few years. The controversial expansion of the Cooper Spur ski area and development of a destination resort with a golf course, retail center, and condominiums is perhaps the most highly publicized of these proposals. But a number of other plans that have surfaced recently would have significant implications for tourism and recreation development as well as management of public lands on Mount Hood. Partially in response to the Cooper Spur proposal, the Tilly Jane Historic Trail has been nominated for listing on the National Register of Historic Places. In spring 2004 Senator Ron Wyden proposed adding 164,000 acres of wilderness on the Mount Hood National Forest. Another organization has revived proposals for a Mount Hood National Park. In the summer of 2003, Oregon Congressmen Earl Blumenauer and Greg Walden organized a summit to bring together the various parties with interests in development on Mount Hood to begin a dialogue for a comprehensive, inclusive approach to future development on Mount Hood.

I am also interested primarily in development "on the mountain." By this I mean the area in which the historical recreation focus has been on Mount Hood and where a mountain-oriented resort is likeliest to be built. I exclude Hood River because I believe the tourism development there is tied as much, if not more, to the Columbia River than to Mount Hood. Similarly, on the south side, I exclude Sandy and most of the Hoodland corridor because they are more characteristic of gateway communities and access corridors than destination resorts. For this reason, my study concentrates primarily on the Upper Hood River Valley and Government Camp.

I begin in Chapter I with a brief review of other studies that provide context and a departure point for this project. I also discuss a basic conceptual framework for considering the historical geography of recreation and tourism on Mount Hood, and describe my approach to the project. In Chapter II, I sketch the contemporary scene on the mountain, drawing a contrast in the manner in which recreation has been developed on the north and south sides and describing the character of this development. In Chapter III, I recount the early history of Mount Hood recreation and tourism. I begin with the crossing of Sam Barlow in 1845, but focus more closely on the period beginning with the construction of Cloud Cap Inn in 1889, and end at the dawn of World War II in 1940. I trace the development of the basic framework (pattern, distribution, character, and nature) of recreation and tourism on Mount Hood in the larger context of the establishment of national public lands and recreation policy. In Chapter IV, I discuss recreation and tourism after World War II, from the relatively quiet post-war years and the decline of Mount Hood's national eminence in winter recreation with the surge of resort development in the 1960s and '70s, and the south side's concomitant slide into blighted

tourist destination. This chapter considers the continuing dynamic between local and regional interests as seen through the development of the Mount Hood Meadows ski area. I look at renewal efforts on the south side and attempts to reconcile tourism with local identity on the north side. I end in the late 1990s, prior to Mount Hood Meadows' proposal for a destination resort at Cooper Spur on the north side of the mountain. I conclude in Chapter V with a discussion of the ways in which local and regional interests have influenced the pattern and character of recreation and tourism development on Mount Hood.