

Mount Hood trail skis toward history

The backcountry Tilly Jane Trail is on track to receive historic designation, thanks to work by friends of the trail

04/12/04

by Mark Larabee

Ski into Mount Hood's backcountry on the Tilly Jane Trail near Cooper Spur and you're skiing into history.

The popular trail, first blazed by mountaineers in the 1890s and developed as a permanent trail by the Civilian Conservation Corps in 1939, has been nominated to be included on the National Register of Historic Places. Advocates who have pushed for the designation for two years say the proposed listing is long overdue.

"You're able to make the same turns that the early backcountry pioneers made," said Ralph Bloemers, a Cascade Resource Advocacy Group lawyer who worked with the Friends of Tilly Jane on the proposal.

Because the Forest Service treats the trail and its surroundings as a historic treasure, the listing would not offer additional protections, said Christine Curran, an architectural historian with the Oregon Historic Preservation Office. Any proposed development in the area already has to be scrutinized by her office to see whether it would adversely affect the land.

"However, it does raise the profile of the significance of the property and reinforces the importance of the Forest Service's role in preserving historic properties and landscapes," she said.

The Tilly Jane Trail gently climbs 1,900 feet over 2.7 miles, from the snowpark near the Cooper Spur Mountain Resort past the A-frame Tilly Jane ski hut and other historic structures to the Cloud Cap Inn. According to the application for historic designations, the trail remains virtually unchanged since it was first cleared more than 100 years ago. It winds through old-growth forest and open natural park land along a ridge with views of the surrounding wilderness.

The Cloud Cap Inn, built in 1889, and the ski warming hut, built in 1939, already are part of the historic register, part of the 1,071-acre Cloud Cap-Tilly Jane Recreation Area that was designated in 1981. But the Tilly Jane Trail, which provides the most direct route from the forest road to the Inn during winter, never was listed.

Lewis L. McArthur, 87, is a member of the Portland-based Snow Shoe Club and the Hood River Crag Rats. He was on the Oregon Advisory Committee on Historic Preservation when the Cloud Cap Inn was added to the national register and helped with the current application. He says the trail wasn't included in the original historic listing because it wasn't 50 years old at the time, a requirement of the federal program.

"Nobody thought of it," he said with a chuckle. "It was the same thing when Timberline Lodge was put on the register. Nobody thought about the Silcox Hut. It was overlooked."

The effort, if successful, would add at least 100 acres to the historical recreation area. But Bloemers said the advocates and the U.S. Forest Service, which owns the land, will survey the trail in the next few weeks and may include even more land.

The proposal calls for a historic designation on a 150-foot-wide area along the trail. But that could widen to 600 feet to include open meadows and views along the trail, Bloemers said. He hopes the final proposal will be completed by the end of the month.

Curran said the State Advisory Committee on Historic Preservation approved the application in late February but asked for additional information. The final proposal will be submitted to the Forest Service, which is expected to forward it to the National Park Service in Washington, D.C., for listing. The National Park Service has 45 days to accept the nomination, reject it or send it back for revisions, she said.

"They typically follow the state's recommendations, but they have the final word," she said.

"I think it's excellent," McArthur said of the proposed listing. "I've skied that trail many, many times over the last 40 years. Back then it was rare to see people up there. As winter sports have increased, more and more people are going up there. It makes a wonderful day outing. "

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