C. B. Watson (1849-1930)

Chandler Bruer Watson—attorney, journalist, public servant, prospector, and historian—was southern Oregon's first conservationist. Raised in Pike County, Illinois, Watson arrived in Ashland in 1871. He graduated from the Ashland Academy in 1875 and married his classmate Ella J. Chitwood; they had two children. The couple was prominent in Ashland civic life, working for woman's suffrage, a Carnegie library grant, and the southern Oregon Chautauqua.

As U.S. deputy surveyor, Chandler Watson set the original section corners and recorded conditions for remote lands from the Cascades to Steens Mountain. He admired the forests and bunchgrass prairies, and in 1873 he climbed to his "first thrill" at the sight of Crater Lake.

Watson studied law and ran unsuccessfully for state representative in 1874. He prosecuted land cases in Lakeview, served as collector of customs at Coos Bay, became a deputy district attorney in Astoria, and was Ashland city attorney in the 1890s. He won election as Jackson County district attorney in 1897.

The editor of the *Oregon Sentinel* in 1875, Watson also launched the *Stateline Herald* and partnered with William Gladstone Steel on the magazine *Resources of Oregon and Washington.* Under his pen name See Bee, Watson wrote his 1896 “Sermon on the Mount” for the *Ashland Tidings*, sharing his experience in the mountains and praising John Muir's "Mountains of California." Through the Ashland Commercial Club, he promoted an appreciation of the mountain landscape and forests and later compared western frontier development to a destructive windstorm he had survived.

Watson signed Will Steel's 1885 petition to reserve Crater Lake, and in 1892 he signed the Oregon Alpine Club's petition supporting Justice John Waldo's proposed Cascade Forest Reserve. As president of the Ashland Crater Lake Club, Watson met with John Muir and the Sierra Club board in 1896 to enlist their help in protecting the reserve, and he helped organize the Portland Mazama Club's promotional Crater Lake Excursion.

As an advocate for the protection of the Oregon Caves, Watson organized a visit by poet Joaquin Miller and Oregon Senator Jefferson Myers in 1907 and wrote an article for *Sunset* magazine. In turn, Miller named the entry grotto at the Caves for Watson. Appointed to the Oregon Conservation Commission in 1908, Watson lobbied for national monument status for the Oregon Caves, achieved in 1909.

In Ashland, Watson catalyzed his fellow citizens with his vision of a grand natural park from the city plaza to the summit of Ashland Butte (present-day Mt. Ashland), orchestrating a voter initiative to establish Lithia Park. As president of the Commercial Club, he wrote letters and used his political connections to halt timber sales in the Ashland Creek watershed. He was honored as the Siskiyou Club's "Chief Mountaineer."

Watson served on the Oregon Historical Society Board of Trustees and when he died in 1930, he left unpublished two manuscripts, “The History of Southern Oregon” and “Indians and Indian Wars of Southern Oregon.” He is best known for *Prehistoric Siskiyou Island and Marble Halls of Oregon*, his 1909 book on regional geology, natural resources, and mountain scenery.

Throughout his life, Watson worked to ally commercial and conservation interests, helping southern Oregonians negotiate complex trade-offs to conserve resources and preserve the natural landscape. A granite boulder marks his grave in the Ashland Cemetery, a tribute to his appreciation for nature.

Written by Darren Borgias

Further Reading:

Watson, C. B. (posthumous). "Recollections of the Bannock War." *Oregon Historical Quarterly*, vol. 67 (1967): 317-329.

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