Chester H. Armstrong (1892-1973)

By writing a history of the state park system in 1965, Chester H. “Chet” Armstrong provided Oregon with one of the first such works anywhere in the nation. Packed with data, *Oregon State Parks: History, 1917-1963* also served to justify keeping the parks within the State Highway Department, which published the book. Oregon thus retained the distinction of being the only state in the nation where the highway department had jurisdiction over state parks until 1989, when the legislature created a separate Parks and Recreation Department.

Born in Newberg and raised in Salem, Armstrong attended Willamette University and Oregon Agricultural College before serving in World War I. In 1919, he went to work for the highway department, where he worked in various capacities before landing the newly created position of assistant state parks superintendent in 1948. After just eighteen months, Armstrong assumed the duties of his supervisor, Sam Boardman, who retired. For the next ten years, he focused on developing and maintaining a park system that, under Boardman, had grown to 60,000 acres.

During Armstrong’s tenure, the first campgrounds opened in state parks and usage of the Oregon system tripled to 11 million people a year, the sixth highest in the nation. The number of full-time staff doubled during the decade, to 150, yet operation and maintenance costs of the parks remained the third lowest in the country.

Armstrong left his post in 1960, having led a great expansion of state park facilities in Oregon. Not only did Oregonians benefit, but the state parks under Armstrong became a prime marketing tool to attract visitors from California and elsewhere to spend their vacation dollars in Oregon.

Written by Stephen R. Mark

Further Reading:

Armstrong, Chester H. *Oregon State Parks History, 1917-1963*. Salem, Ore.: State Printer, 1965.

Merriam, Lawrence C., Jr. *Oregon's Highway Park System, 1921-1989: An Administrative History*. Salem: Oregon Parks and Recreation Department, 1992, pp. 39-45.

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