
'Hole-in-the-Wall' Falls

About a mile before you reach Starvation Creek Falls State Park, almost 60 miles east of downtown Portland on Highway 80-N, you can glance out your car window to the right, see Hole-in-the-Wall Falls, and be jolted into an awareness that man has intruded into the beauty of the Columbia Gorge not only with his power lines and roads but with the permanent diversion of one of its streams.

After viewing the magnificence of Multnomah, the grace of Latourell and the charm of Shepherd's Dell, the sight of Warren Creek pouring out through a concrete lined hole in a cliff is somewhat disturbing.

Many of the streams were diverted, at least in part, through flumes and pipes many years ago. The water was used for a variety of purposes, chief among these being canneries and lumber mills. Now most of the flumes are rotting away and the metal pipes rust quietly in the ground. Nature is inexorably reclaiming its own — and as you view Hole-in-the-Wall you have a fleeting moment of sadness and wish that man had come to the aid of Nature to restore the falls at Warren Creek.

A few hundred yards to the west there is a natural waterfall of singular beauty, a lovely cascade high up on the embankment, and this fall is still unnamed. There is an attempt, now, to call it Lancaster Falls, after the consulting engineer for the old Columbia River Highway, and perhaps that is as good a name as any, for it does have a poetic quality to it and Lancaster was almost as much a poet as he was an engineer.

It was this incongruity, the obvious handiwork of man at Warren Creek near an unnamed waterfall in the year 1971 when we have managed to wrap, bag and label almost every conceivable item, that led me to

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explore the history of Hole-in-the-Wall. (The official designation is Warren Creek Falls, but the more descriptive term was coined by a Forest Service official during an interview.)

You can view both of these falls, briefly, from the highway, but a better view is obtained by taking the Mt. Defiance Trail (No. 413) from Starvation Creek Park. Follow back along the fence, between the highway and the cliffs, down an old roadbed that leads you past twisty little Cabin Creek Falls, through the woods and into a meadow where the trail turns left and you face Hole-in-the-Wall head on.

Cross the meadow and lower Warren Creek, where the trail angles upward, and just as you pass under the power line switch sharply back to the left on Trail No. 413-B. This leads you to upper Warren Creek. It is not a difficult climb, but it does take you along the edge of the cliff before you veer back into the woods.

You can walk down the stream bed to the top of the falls. Here there is an iron grid and beneath it great quantities of small, loose rock — but no obvious clue as to why the creek was diverted from its natural path.

My conviction that there was a simple and logical explanation for the creation of the tunnel led me to several interesting interviews. I discovered there was an abundance of curiosity about Hole-in-the-Wall, as well as a quantity of misinformation about its origin.

Thus I was told, by a variety of sources, that Warren Creek had been diverted by a lumber mill; by a cannery; by a railroad — and a number of other explanations which a search through the musty archives of local history failed to confirm.

Finally, in a wood paneled study in a house in Hood River, I was told by a long time resident of the area

that the diversion had been done by the State Highway Department "in the nineteen twenties."

A trip to Salem to verify this brought me to the desk of Lynn Koons, a Highway Department veteran. Mr. Koons puffed on his pipe and chuckled as I told him of my efforts to track down the history of Hole-in-the-Wall Falls.

"It does give you a start when you first see it, doesn't it?" he asked. "Well, to answer your question, J. E. Peck, resident engineer, designed that, I think it was sometime between 1936 and 1942. That loose rock you saw at the top would pile up and dam the creek, then when there was high water it would all flush down across the road. Sometimes it created enough force to pull some big boulders down, too. Peck came up with the idea for the tunnel, and the grid up there, and saw to the construction. It's been very effective."

A good and simple explanation, something that is not always attainable when you seek out events of minor historical significance. I was offered an opportunity to dig back through the files to verify the information and find the exact date, but declined.

"The past is only the present become invisible and mute," wrote Mary Webb in her foreword to "Precious Bane." I thought of these words as I walked back to my car.

It was the visibility of Hole-in-the-Wall that first caught my attention. How much of the total history of the Columbia Gorge — a history that is a combination of legend, both pre and post "civilization" and the more prosaic, everyday works of man — will remain forever "invisible and mute" not one of us will ever know.

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