

Where the Pacific Crest Trail Begins: Is it Campo? Manning Park?

No, it's Montgomery.

By Barney "Scout" Mann

Are You My Mother? It's the title of a well-known children's book. A baby bird sets forth on a primal quest, asking so many in turn, "Are you my mother?" Who is the Pacific Crest Trail's mother? Does she exist? If today's hikers are the trail's sons and daughters, have raw blisters and mountain views made them forget to ask the question?

Normally, maternity isn't in question. And for the PCT, paternity has been well established. For decades, Clinton C. Clarke trumpeted his relationship to the Trail. In two books and a dozen pamphlets, like a proud papa handing out cigars, Clarke declared: "In March, 1932, Mr. Clinton C. Clarke of Pasadena, California, proposed to the **United States Forest and National Park Services** the project of a continuous wilderness trail across the United States from Canada to Mexico, passing through the states of Washington, Oregon and California...The project was approved and adopted, and Mr. Clarke was placed in charge...."

For half a century, the PCT proceeded with no knowledge of a mother. The 1968 National Trails Act officially created the PCT, but there is no known contemporary record of anyone asking the baby bird's question. In June 1971, *National Geographic* referred solely to "Clinton C. Clarke, the father of the Pacific Crest Trail." In 1973, the first *Wilderness Press Guidebook* stated: "The idea for the PCT came from the mind of Clinton C. Clarke in the 30s."

But lurking in history's backwater, a long-out-of-print book was waiting. In 1946, a now-defunct Seattle press published **Joseph Hazard's** *Pacific Crest Trails*. Even then, it took until 1977 for pioneering guidebook printer Wilderness Press to find Hazard's book, and include the first mention of Catherine Montgomery in a modern PCT history.

On page 57, Hazard recounted his Jan. 13, 1926 discussion about the Trail with Montgomery, which happened a good six years before Clarke's first PCT efforts. At that time, Hazard was a well-known Pacific Northwest moun-

taineer. When he met Montgomery, it was for his job as an H. Sanborn & Co. textbook salesman. It was a foggy Wednesday in Bellingham, Wash. Hazard was keeping an appointment at the hillside teachers' college, Washington State Normal School, where Montgomery was supervisor of primary grades. The Old Main building is still standing and called that today, but the school, now vastly larger, is Western Washington University.

The suggestion came from Miss Catherine Montgomery at the close of a business interview of an hour's duration:

"Do you know what I've been thinking about, Mr. Hazard, for the last twenty minutes?"

"I had hoped you were considering the merits of my presentation of certain English texts for adoption!"

"Oh that! Before your call I had considered them the best - I still do! But why do not you Mountaineers do something big for Western America?"

"Just what have you in mind, Miss Montgomery?"

"A high winding trail down the heights of our western mountains with mile markers and shelter huts - like these pictures I'll show you of the 'Long Trail of the Appalachians' - from the Canadian Border to the Mexican Boundary Line!"

That very evening I carried the plan to the Mount Baker Club of Bellingham. Favorable action was taken. The rest of the mountain clubs of the Pacific Northwest promptly contacted all other outdoor organizations. All adopted the project with enthusiasm and organized to promote it.

Why did Hazard wait twenty years to write about this? Who was Catherine Montgomery? Did she really launch the PCT? Is there any evidence to back up Hazard's story? I found answers at Western Washington University, at the nearby regional archive, the Center for Pacific Northwest Studies, and at more far-flung archives, including the Mazama's and Mountaineers'.



Scadie Smith
Kate Montgomery
Mrs. Annie Temple
Minnie D. Clarke
J.T. Forrest
Zoe C. Honnick
Anne Grey Millitt
H. Kennicott
Tennie Smith
CHEHALIS HIGH SCHOOL FACULTY 1876-7



Captions, top: The earliest known photo of Catherine Montgomery (middle row, far left). She was teaching elementary school at the time - the handwritten caption is mistaken. (From the collection of the Lewis County Museum) **Left:** A 1906 Mazamas summer outing to Mt. Baker alongside one of three Galena Lakes. Montgomery is at far left in profile. (Photo by Fred Kiser, from the Mazamas Archives)



Photo courtesy of Catherine Montgomery Nature Interpretive Center, Federation Forest State Park, Washington.

Montgomery was born April 1, 1867, on Canada's Prince Edward Island. She died September 17, 1957, at age 90, a fifty-eight-year resident of Bellingham. She was a teacher of teachers for the primary grades. She never married and never had children.

Her life's bookends were the Civil War and Sputnik, staggering to comprehend. Her parents, **William** and **Janet**, crossed the Atlantic from Scotland in the 1840's, part of the same immigrant wave that brought John Muir to Wisconsin. Young Catherine's father was a railroad carpenter and he must have been a practical man, for what else can you surmise about a groom who marries his wife on her birthday. When she was 3, her family moved from Prince Edward Island to Schuyler, Neb., and when she hit her twenties, she crossed the rest of the continent, landing in Chehalis, Wash., to pursue her teaching career. In 1899, at 32, she made her last move, to Bellingham as a founding faculty member of New Whatcom Normal School, Washington's third teachers' college. She taught there for 27 years.

The house Montgomery had built in 1924 and lived in until her death is still standing. The current owner knew of Montgomery and even had a copy of her obituary, but he had no idea of the connection between her and the Trail. The house has a broad bay view from the front window. I wondered if this was the same door she passed through that 1926 morning to keep her appointment with Hazard? Was this the view she came home to after setting loose the idea of PCT? Was I the first PCT thru-hiker to stand in her living room?

"You must know about the Catherine Montgomery Nature Interpretive Center, don't you?" asked **Tamara Belts**, a Western Washington University archivist. I didn't. Upon her death, Montgomery left her entire estate, the equivalent of \$1 million today, to the Foundation Forest State Park near Enumclaw, Wash. Today, thousands of school children visit the expansive interpretive center, where they can see a two-foot-tall photo of Montgomery. Recently, I asked one of the center's Rangers: "Did you know that many believe Catherine Montgomery is the mother of the Pacific Crest Trail?" They had no idea. But this unanswered question is just as mind boggling: How does a teacher who stopped working in 1926 with an annual salary of \$3,200 end up in 1957 with a rich woman's estate?

Montgomery's final resting place wasn't Bellingham. Her probate file shows an expense of \$1.51 for postage to send her cremated remains to Nebraska. On a bracing late November day in 2008, **Dan Wisnieski**, a kind local mortician, swept aside early snow in the Schuyler cemetery to take a Polaroid photo. It shows the waist-high, 1920's headstone marking the grave of Montgomery's parents, and behind it a painfully modest flat stone marker: Catherine Montgomery 1867-1957.



I searched for evidence substantiating Montgomery's conversation with Hazard. **The Mount Baker Club**, founded in 1911, has no records pre-dating 1928. Neither the **Mazamas** climbing club or the **Trails Club of Oregon**, both in Portland, had records mentioning her or her 1926 PCT idea.

The Mountaineers, a Seattle club founded in 1906, rivaled the Mazamas in northwest outdoor club prominence in 1926. The club's handwritten original minute books are preserved in a locked, glass front case. Hazard's wife, **Margaret**, "Hazzie" as he called her, was a member of the Mountaineers' Board of Trustees. The minutes are detailed. Late in 1926, they show that Joseph Hazard attended a meeting, but there



The Old Main Building at Washington State Normal School in 1899. The building still stands as part of Western Washington University. (Courtesy WWU Libraries Special Collections)

was no mention of anything trail related. I read through the minutes for 1927 and into 1928. It was near 8:00 pm, I'd come straight from the airport. It felt like I was hiking well after dark, long past time make camp.

1928, September 6: "Motion passed that the Trails Committee be revived, and that the matter of a trail all up and down the Pacific Coast be referred to the Trails Committee."

But, it says "coast," not crest, and what does it mean "all up and down?" Is this it?

1928, October 4: "The President reported that the committee ... for the trail from the Canadian Border to the Mexican Border ... had not been appointed."

Montgomery and Hazard **did** have the conversation. Hazard did act as mid-wife, passing the trail idea along.

Soon enough the Mountaineers' trail committee was formed. Almost as important, the Mountaineers' minutes show members attended trail events in the Los Angeles area. Why does that matter? Clinton C. Clarke likely attended as well.

Montgomery is the mother of the PCT, at least the evidence strongly leans that way. Sadly, all evidence suggests that she died without knowing that she'd given birth to the Trail.

But who was she? In faded newsprint and on microfilm, the faint trail of her life can still be made out.

Her 1957 obituary described her as a "militant crusader." She was a caring, adored teacher - a teacher of teachers. For a quarter century she helped mold a significant percentage of Washington State's elementary school teachers. In 1908, the school newspaper summed her up in one line, "Miss Montgomery- 'To know her is to love her,' so say we, for just and true and kind of heart is she." In 1949, at Western Washington University's 50-year reunion, she was the best remembered of the faculty.

She also was a dauntless outdoorswomen, sawing fiercely against the grain of an era when a woman's place was near the coal-burning stove. In 1921 at age 53, following the death of her best friend **Ida Baker**, Montgomery wrote of the times they went "tramping" together. She



Catherine Montgomery, 83, (center) celebrates the Progressive, Literary Fraternal Club's 50th anniversary, Oct. 19, 1950. (Photo by Jack Carver, courtesy of Whatcom Museum, Bellingham, Wash.)

described days of hiking 14 miles each way into the Mt. Baker Forest, "when we slept on cabin floors with wet feet stretched toward a rude fireplace." A fading photo still exists showing that cabin, a 12-foot-by-12-foot cedar shake structure. She and Baker were staunch, often stern women, yet at day's end, from Montgomery's memorial, you can picture the two of them wriggling damp, sore toes, giggling before sputtering leaping flames.

Montgomery was a spinster. She once opened a newspaper article with this self-description: "An old Maid, spelled with capital letters." Montgomery's second best friend in her life, Washington's poet laureate **Ella Higginson**, once penned a poem, *The Childless Mother's Lullaby*.

But at this late date, was there a way now to give Montgomery her due? On Sept. 27, 2009, a nomination form was submitted to the **Northwest Women's Hall of Fame**. On March 21, 2010, in front of a large crowd, Montgomery was inducted to the Northwest Women's Hall of Fame. For 30 minutes her life was lauded. The final paragraph of the Induction Citation reads:

Of her many legacies, perhaps the most enduring is her vision of a hiking trail along the ridges of the Pacific Coast that she began to champion starting in 1926. Others took up the cause and, today, that 2,650 mile-long trail that runs from Canada to Mexico attracts thousands of hikers. She is justly called "The mother of the Pacific Crest Trail." 🍷

A version of this story will appear in the *Pacific Crest Trailside Reader*, two volumes of essays slated for publication by the **Mountaineers Press** later this year. Proceeds of the books will benefit the **Pacific Crest Trail Association**.