



The Pacific Crest Trail: America's Wilderness Trail

By **Mike Dawson**, PCTA Trail Operations Director

To maintain and defend for the enjoyment of nature lovers the PACIFIC CREST TRAILWAY as a primitive wilderness pathway in an environment of solitude, free from the sights and sounds of a mechanically disturbed Nature.

- PCT System Conference mission, appearing in many publications and at the bottom of correspondence in the 1940s

Many of us make the mistake of believing that the notion of setting aside land in its natural condition with minimal influence by man's hand or of creating long-distance trails in natural settings began with the environmental movement of the 1960s and set into the national consciousness with the passage of the 1964 Wilderness Act and the 1968 National Trails System Act.

But the development of these preservation concepts predates these landmark congressional acts by 40 years. A group of revolutionary thinkers planted the seeds of these big ideas in the 1920s, 1930s and 1940s. And they nurtured them.

The concepts of preserving wilderness and building long-distance trails were linked from those earliest days and were seen by leaders of the time as facets of the same grand scheme. It seems clear that one of the entities developed in those days has always been the epitome of the connection between those movements - **the Pacific Crest National Scenic Trail**.

In recent articles in the *PCT Communicator*, writers have talked about the current association between the PCT and wilderness in this, the 50th anniversary of the Wilderness Act. Few are aware of the close association of the movement to establish what have

Mount Jefferson Wilderness by Deems C. Burton.

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This sketchy description of the PACIFIC CREST TRAIL is written in the hope of arousing interest in the primitive mountain wilderness of the Pacific Slope.

– Opening line of the forward to “The Pacific Crest Trail” published by Clinton C. Clarke, 1935



Clinton C. Clarke

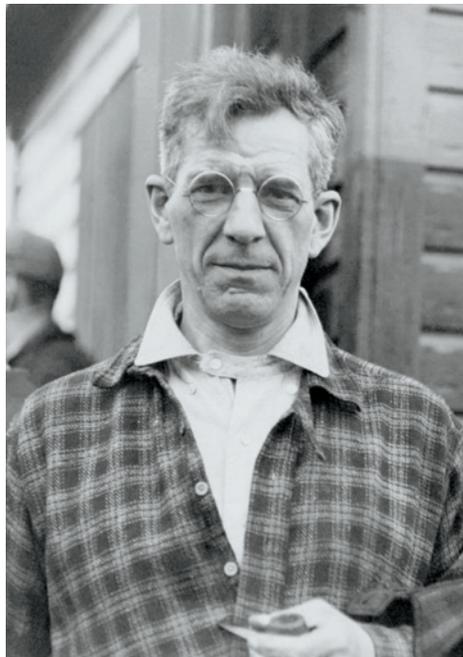
become known as National Scenic Trails and designated wilderness, but the relationship is long and the development deeply intertwined.

In the 1920s and early 1930s visionary thinkers started talking and writing about the value of long-distance trails through wilderness settings and more generally the value of preserving those settings. It is not coincidental that in the 1920s the first proposals for the Appalachian and Pacific Crest trails and wilderness came to light: **Catherine Montgomery** for the PCT, **Benton MacKaye** for the AT, and **Aldo Leopold** for the concept of wilderness preservation. These people did not think small. MacKaye's original article proposing the AT actually called for zoning the region between the East Coast and the Mississippi River into use areas that would leave the majority of the Appalachian Mountains sparsely developed. Clinton C. Clarke's earliest writings regarding the PCT propose a corridor of wilderness stretching five miles to either side of the trail.

In 1935, eight leaders came together to form the Wilderness Society. Led by **Forest Service** employee **Robert Marshall**, they included Benton MacKaye, father of the Appalachian Trail; **Harvey Broome**, director of the **Great Smoky Mountains Conservation Association** who was involved in development of the national park and the AT through the park; and **Harold C. Anderson**, a leader in the **Potomac**

Appalachian Trail Club of Washington, D.C. The first meeting of the **Pacific Crest Trail Conference** took place the same year.

From correspondence, we know that Bob Marshall and Clarke exchanged letters from 1937 to 1939 about a range of issues regarding the preservation of wild lands and the development of the PCT. One of



Benton MacKaye

the great mysteries of that correspondence regards letters in which Marshall writes about planning a trip to California and is trying to set up a daylong meeting with Clarke. The correspondence talks about planning that meeting in September 1939, but we have found no account of the meeting. Marshall died unexpectedly at age 38, a month after the meeting was supposed to have happened.

Legislative designation of Wilderness and National Trails

It is interesting to read correspondence from Clarke to Marshall, who was the chief of recreation and lands for the U.S. Forest Service at the time, regarding the need to provide more permanent protection to areas set aside administratively by the Forest Service “like the situation with national parks” (legislative designation).

“The Primitive Areas set up by the National Forest Service can by the stroke of a pen of Forest Service officials be destroyed and opened to commercialization.” – Clarke to Marshall, 1939.

Marshall replied with the argument that administrative designation would be sufficient, especially in light of a move to require

Clinton C. Clarke on the PCT at the top of Glen Pass. He carries an old-fashioned rolled bedroll tied vertically to his back, a spoon is tucked into his hatband and he has a compass in his flat, open hand. He's looking out in the distance toward Painted Lady Peak. Photo from The Atlas of the Pacific coast [i.e., crest] trail, 1941, courtesy of The Bancroft Library.



Summit of Glenn Pass



President Lyndon Johnson signs the Wilderness Act into law.

action by the Secretary of Agriculture to remove the designation or alter boundaries (which did occur in 1940).

Without Marshall's leadership within the agency, we see two things take place that shake assumptions for the development of the PCT and wilderness preservation. Within months of Marshall's death, the regional forester in California abandoned participation in the PCT project. A lengthy and increasingly bitter correspondence ensued between Clarke and Regional Forester **S.B. Show**, which Clarke then elevates within the agency's chain of command and in the Department of Agriculture. Simultaneously a series of "boundary adjustments" in existing administratively designated wilderness and wild areas allowed development or resource extraction, which shook the confidence of wilderness advocates within the agency and the Wilderness Society.

One of the most crucial drivers of dissatisfaction was the withdrawal of 53,000 acres from the Three Sisters Primitive Area, which had serious effects on the PCT experience. Between 1940 and 1954, more than 500,000 acres of administratively declared wilderness were withdrawn from designation in 33 of the units of the wilderness protection system. Between 1939 and 1964, before the passage of the Wilderness Act, Forest Service designation of wilderness grew a scant 2 percent, from 14.2 million acres to 14.6 million acres. This led to a renewed discussion within the conservation community regarding the need for legislation to designate wilderness, just what Clarke had proposed to Marshall decades before.

Through the next several years, despite many obstacles, Clarke and the PCT Conference continued to advocate for the PCT. Integral to that advocacy was a push for setting aside additional wilderness and expanding the areas that had been administratively designated by the Forest Service or legislated by Congress within national parks. Annual reports and calls to action from the PCT Conference continued to focus on the need for more areas and acreage in wilderness designations and to specifically advocate for wilderness set-asides for:

- Kern Wilderness Area south of Sequoia National Park – now the Golden Trout, Southern Sierra and Domeland wildernesses
- Stanislaus Wilderness north of Yosemite – now the Emigrant, Hoover, Carson-Iceberg and Mokelumne wildernesses
- Columbia Wilderness east and south of Mount Rainier – now the William O. Douglas and Norse Peak wildernesses
- Mount Adams Wilderness Area north side of Mount Adams – now the Mount Adams and Goat Rocks wildernesses

Was Clarke the father of the Continental Divide Trail?

It's a bold but fair question.

In my research for this article, I came across the following passage in a letter from Clinton C. Clarke to John Sieker, then the U.S. Forest Service's director of recreation and lands. The letter was dated July 7, 1948, two decades before Congress passed the National Trails System Act.

"The success of the PCT is due, I believe, to the Trail offering a goal or objective for wilderness conservation and use, and in educating the people in wilderness values. Like programs should be set up to preserve wilderness through the Rocky Mountain region by routing a Rocky Mountain Trailway from Canada through the National Parks and National Forests south to the Grand Canyon. This would be inexpensive if the trail was routed and maintained for backpackers only ..."

This may be the first suggestion that a long-distance trail like the PCT was proposed for the Rocky Mountains – such a trail would later become the Continental Divide Trail. It certainly gives historians something to research further and could rewrite the already impressive legacy that Clarke left on the National Trails System.

It is interesting that Clarke proposed ending this trail at the Grand Canyon – a spectacular finish – and not at the border with Mexico, the logical finish to the PCT. Benton MacKaye originally proposed having the Appalachian Trail's northern terminus at Mount Washington in New Hampshire and its southern terminus at Mount Mitchell in North Carolina. That proposed scenic southern terminus to the AT was also never used.

– *Mike Dawson*

- Kings Canyon National Park – now the Sequoia/Kings Canyon Wilderness
- Sierra Nevada Wilderness stretching from Sonora to Tehachapi Pass – a much larger vision and now the longest continuous wilderness trek on the PCT. It includes the Emigrant, Yosemite, Ansel Adams, John Muir, Sequoia/Kings Canyon, Golden Trout, southern Sierra, Domeland, Chimney Peak, Owens Peak and Kiavah wildernesses.

In addition, Clarke and the PCT Conference advocated for a system of “National Trailways” (later he used the term “National Wilderness Trails”) through the national forests and national parks, arguably an idea that found fruition as the National Trails System with the passage of the act in 1968.

Clarke was at heart an optimist. On Aug. 6, 1948, he wrote to **John Sierker**, in the Washington Office of the Forest Service Division of Recreation and Lands:

“The almost unsurmountable difficulty that the U.S. Forest Service have to face in their programs for wilderness development and protection is understood. The severe impact of political, commercial and financial forces to mechanize the magnificent scenic areas has hindered greatly all plans for wilderness protection ... However I am convinced that these hostile forces now understand and appreciate the necessity of preserving all areas of wilderness value left in California, and will now approve and assist in their permanent preservation.”

Clarke died in 1957 at age 77, and the torch was passed to a new generation of trail and wilderness advocates led by **Warren Rogers**. During his watch, Rogers witnessed the passage of both the Wilderness Act and the National Trails System Act. Furthermore, the PCT and the creation of legislatively designated wilderness along the trail brought Clarke’s dream of a National Wilderness Trail surrounded by secured wilderness lands closer to a reality.

Today, the task of building and maintaining the PCT and advocating for protection and expansion of the wilderness along the trail has become the mission of the Pacific Crest Trail Association and our agency partners in the Forest Service, **National Park Service** and **Bureau of Land Management**. 🐦



Looking west from Mount Whitney's trail crest. Photo by Timothy Galagher.

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