VIRGIL T. McCROSKEY

Giver of Mountains

by Mary E. Reed and Keith Petersen

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Department of History
Washington State University
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Cover Photo:
Virgil and Milton McCroskey on top of Steptoe Butte, 1890s.

VIRGIL T. McCROSKEY
Giver of Mountains

On some other day when we are gone, may another crowd gather to commemorate the memory of this true citizen and gentleman.

The Reverend Father W.L. Davis, Gonzaga University, Dedicatory address for Steptoe Butte State Park, July 12, 1946.

The pyramidal profile of Steptoe Butte rises 3,600 feet above the Palouse country in northeastern Whitman County, Washington. On summer days dozens of cars wind two-and-a half times around the peak—past morning glories, wild roses, yarrow, a few pine trees—before reaching the summit. The scene from the top is their goal, where the view is of wheat fields and small towns and roads that cross the landscape. Few cars pause at the apple orchard near the mountain base and most visitors are unaware of the small, weathered plaque in the picnic grounds which gives a thumbnail history of the place:

"For the enjoyment of all the people forever and ever." Those words appear on the deed giving this property to the people of the State of Washington.

On July 4, 1946, Virgil T. McCroskey of Oakesdale officially deeded 120 acres, thus creating Steptoe Butte State Park. The 40 acres at the summit, the acreage for road right-of-way, and the 60 acres that lie at the base of the Butte represent all that is splendid in man's generosity to his fellow man.

Twenty miles east of Steptoe, clearly visible from its crown, a forested hillside intrudes upon Latah County, Idaho, farm land. A 25-mile road rides the crest of this ridge, stretching eastward from Farmington to Idaho Highway 95 in one direction and toward Tensed in the other. Few cars travel this dirt road, through fragrant cedar, fir, pine, and a cornucopia of wildflowers. Even fewer of the cars' occupants are aware that they are enjoying the scenery in Idaho's third largest and third oldest state park. No marker designates this as a state park. No roadside plaque commemorates Virgil McCroskey's donation in 1955 of 4,500 acres to Idahoans in honor of his mother, Mary Minerva McCroskey, and all pioneer women of the Inland Empire.

Just north of Mary Minerva McCroskey State Park is 400-acre Camp McCroskey, with first-growth Ponderosas forming a "Cathedral in the Pines." This, Virgil's 1945 gift to the Inland Empire Council of the Boy Scouts, was donated four years after he gave another 40 acres to the Idaho Department of Fish and Game for a wildlife refuge.

Long before the ecology movement of the 1960s, before Earth Day and environmental impact statements, people such as Virgil McCroskey demonstrated their concern for the natural landscape and their determination to work persistently, even relentlessly, to preserve it.

Virgil Talmadge McCroskey, the ninth of ten children of Joshua Philander Theodore (J.P.T.) and Mary Minerva McCroskey, was born October 5, 1876 in Rockville, Tennessee. Virgil was not yet three when the family journeyed west, first to Hollister, California, and then to a new home at the base of Steptoe Butte—a small one-room cabin with an attached lean-to kitchen and leaky board roof into which the twelve family members squeezed. The cabin was near a 640-acre homestead J.P.T. secured, and within weeks the family built their own 20-by-20-foot house where they lived until 1885 when a more commodious home was constructed.

While their house was crowded, the farm was beautiful and productive, with three springs of pure, cold water. The rich soil supported abundant crops of wheat. Sam Stevens, also a Tennessean, had first interested J.P.T. in the area around Steptoe, which he called Tennessee Flats. But it was J.P.T. who populated the Flats with natives from the Volunteer State. His descriptive accounts of the productive soil lured dozens of friends and relatives to Whitman County. Some boasted he was responsible for the migration of more settlers to the Palouse than any other person.

Among those who came under his influence were Robert C., his half-brother, and Solon, his cousin, both of whom settled in Garfield. Because Solon had 11 children and R.C. five, in addition to J.P.T.'s 10, it was soon said around the area that you could not go bird hunting without shooting a McCroskey.

Joshua Philander Theodore McCroskey

The families were successful as well as large. J.P.T. served on the state constitutional convention, was a Whitman County Sheriff, and built both a church and school for his neighborhood. R.C., a prominent farmer and banker, was also a state senator and State College of Washington regent. Solon was a respected Presbyterian minister.

The four youngest McCroskey children, including Virgil, attended a one-room school west of their home. Believing the children needed schooling in town, Mary later moved to Colfax where they went to public school while J.P.T. stayed on the homestead. In 1892 Virgil and his brother Milton joined the first preparatory class at the new Washington Agricultural College in Pullman and graduated two years later. They then enrolled in the college, from which Virgil in 1898 received a diploma in pharmacy, and a year later a collegiate diploma in economics and history.

Virgil practiced pharmacy for four years at Walla Walla and Waitsburg, moving back to Colfax in 1903 where he purchased the Elk Drug Store. He worked there as a druggist until 1920. Though he never married, he did raise two nieces and a nephew, orphaned by the death of their parents. At age 44 and with his family raised, Virgil retired from the full-time practice of pharmacy, returning to live on the family homestead he had inherited after his father's death in 1910. His mother had died in 1891.

Virgil on trip to Hawaii, 1921

Virgil on right, at the Elk Drug Store, Colfax

The next 20 years were Virgil's traveling time. He explored the Philippines, Japan, Hawaii, China, Korea, Mexico, Tahiti, and New Zealand. He also extensively toured the United States by automobile and was most impressed by visits in the late 1930s to several national parks. Virgil's interest in the outdoors, however, predated these national park tours. In 1903 he became a charter member of the Washington Outing Club, qualifying by a successful ascent that year of Mt. Rainier. He also climbed Mt. Hood and other peaks in the northwest.

Virgil's love of the outdoors was symbolized by his fondness of trees. "I've always been a worshipper of trees," he once said. A man of nearly boundless energy, Virgil required more than traveling to occupy his time after early retirement. He first set to beautifying his home in the shadows of Steptoe Butte, planting flowers and shrubs and decorating the grounds with strutting peacocks. He was most proud of his 60 varieties of trees, many obtained on world travels. The result was an arboretum around the old family homestead, making it a showplace in the Palouse. He was not satisfied, though, especially since it took all his time to maintain the grounds. "Some folks spend their whole lifetime beautifying an estate," he said years later. "They spend a lot of money but sometimes all the beauty quickly disappears after they are gone, particularly if the property falls into the hands of someone who has no similar interests." Virgil, determined to spend the remainder of his days working on projects that would endure, sold the family homestead to finance his future endeavors.

When seeking an enduring project, he needed look no further than the towering peak of Steptoe, the feature that had dominated his landscape since childhood. First called Pyramid Peak, the butte received its present name in 1858 after Colonel Edward J. Steptoe. Recognizing the uniqueness of the butte, geologists have given the generic name "steptoe" to describe similar formations throughout the world. But geologists were not the only ones appreciative of the butte. In 1888 James S. "Cashup" Davis purchased the hill and eventually built a hotel on top. The hotel brought fame but little fortune, and within a few years after Davis's death in 1896 it was abandoned, eventually burning in 1911. The McCroskey family was familiar with the activities of their neighbor. George, Virgil's brother, visited Cashup often, while Virgil was an occasional guest, describing Davis as an "imaginative person, a character from Dickens."

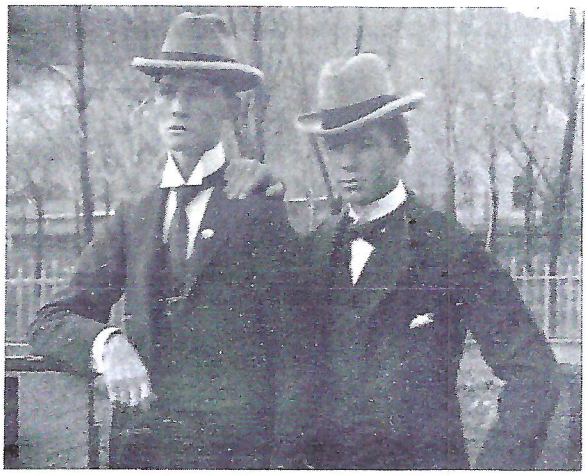
After the fire, Cashup's wagon road to the top became impassable, and only the heartiest hikers trekked to the crest for its spectacular vista. George and Virgil thought the landmark deserved wider use, and in 1927 George wrote in a local newspaper:

> It would seem the right thing for the state parks board and citizens to secure this historic landmark and build a road from one of the highways to the summit . . . It is my hope in the near future to see Mount Steptoe dressed up and improved in a manner befitting its importance as one of the scenic wonders of this continent.

The Washington State Parks Commission shared this view and in 1927 placed Steptoe on its list of proposed state parks. Little progress was made during the next 10 years, however. That remained for Virgil, a retiree looking for a project of enduring value. McCroskey vigorously promoted the park concept, especially before the Colfax Chamber of Commerce. In 1936 Aubrey White, the father of Spokane's park system, visited Colfax and encouraged the park idea, greatly assisting Virgil's cause. After White's visit, the chamber unanimously adopted a proposal to secure 40 acres at the summit and a road right-of-way leading to it. This property was placed in escrow for the State of Washington with a purchase price of $500 to be paid by the Colfax Chamber. Another of Virgil's brothers, Fred, was one of the chamber members charged with fundraising. It seemed certain Steptoe would at last become a state park. Virgil predicted it would attract thousands of tourists and become the country's best advertising medium. Even the parks commission got caught up in the enthusiasm, listing Steptoe as Washington's newest state park in its biennial report for 1934-36.

Despite the optimism, the campaign failed and it remained for Virgil—the most optimistic of all—to make the dream reality. He first purchased the 40 summit acres from Clive Roberts, who owned most of the butte, and then received additional support from Homer Hanford and Beniah Carroll, who donated nearly seven acres to the state in 1939 for a road right-of-way. Then Virgil hit a roadblock. Harry Cornwall, a prominent Steptoe area landowner, refused to allow the summit road to pass through his property and would not sell any of his land. Virgil, who had patience to match his energy, waited until Cornwall died in 1944, then purchased 15 acres from his estate. In the meantime, he bought an 80-acre picnic site at the foot of the hill. He then persuaded State Senator Ernest Huntley to introduce legislation accepting the property as a park and providing funds for a spiral highway to the top. After the legislation passed, Virgil donated the present park in two gifts in 1945 and 1946. The land was deeded with the stipulation that it be used only as a park, "for the enjoyment of all the people, forever and ever."

Despite the wrangling with Cornwall and the disappointment of some Steptoe town residents who wanted the park access road closer to their community, most Whitman County residents were undoubtedly pleased to have the state's newest park—the 72nd in the system—located in their county. Several hundred turned out for the dedication ceremonies on July 4, 1946, traveling the newly constructed road to the summit. There they listened to official speeches praising McCroskey. "If you want to get something done," noted Secretary of State Belle Reeves, "get Mr. McCroskey to do it." Most of the crowd had come, however, to hear Virgil, whose words revealed his reverence for the butte. He spoke of the history of the place and of the Dickensian Cashup Davis. He noted that the butte was home to many native grasses, flowers, and plants that were becoming rare in the region. Like many others, McCroskey seemed most satisfied, though, with having preserved a marvelous view of his beloved Palouse. Steptoe was "an island in the sky," he told those assembled; the view from the summit, changing with the seasons, was like that from a magic carpet.



Virgil on left, in Pullman, 1898

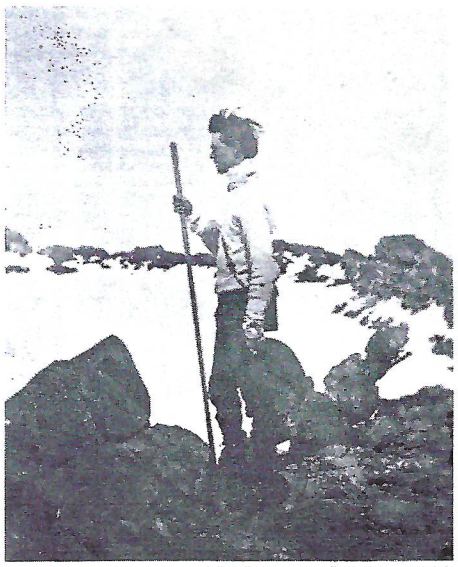
Although Virgil always maintained an interest in the butte, his activity there declined once the donation was made. Still, he hoped for further improvements, such as a vista house on the top, and was disappointed when it was not constructed. As late as 1963 he was still attempting to purchase additional property to improve the road. He was also ever vigilant. In 1966 he complained to the parks department about human "skunks" who trespassed onto public property with their farming operations and requested that the department order them to desist, which it did. He was upset about the intrusion of telecommunication relay stations the state allowed on top, eyesores which even some inside the parks department had reservations about. When Steptoe was nominated in 1965 by the Department of the Interior as a National Natural Landmark, Lloyd Bell, Parks Supervisor of Interpretive Services, wrote, "Over the years the [Parks and Recreation] Commission has granted permission for several communications organizations to mount what now appears to be a cluster of TV and radio transmitting aerials. I do not know whether [the Department of the Interior] is aware that the natural beauty of Steptoe Butte has been largely destroyed." Nonetheless, Steptoe became a National Natural Landmark and a second dedication ceremony was held on its summit in October 1966.

One of Virgil's favorite spots was the little-used picnic area in the apple orchard at the butte's base. The grounds were improved through a 1972 donation of $9,500 from the estate of Virgil's brother, Frank. In 1978 the parks department officially named the picnic grounds after Virgil and erected the small metal plaque paying tribute to him. Virgil, never one to seek publicity for himself, would have been entirely satisfied with the small plaque. However, he took more pleasure in praise for the butte itself, like that from his friend, poet Bert Gamble, who wrote:

> After cremation scatter me
> Over McCroskey's grass;
> Where March Chinooks come bold
> and free
> Where rain and wild geese pass —
>
> High upon Steptoe Butte I'll dream
> Where sun-flowers nod and sway
> So near to God and stars that gleam
> While eons roll away.

To most people, establishing Steptoe Butte State Park would have been the accomplishment of a lifetime. But to Virgil McCroskey, a hard worker with an ambitious vision, the development of one park was not enough. So, in 1939, at the age of 63 and while still waiting out Harry Cornwall, Virgil embarked on his most ambitious task, the construction of 25-mile-long Skyline Drive in Latah and Benewah counties, Idaho.

Looking east from a hill behind the McCroskey homestead, a forested ridge stands in sharp contrast to the cultivated fields below. When Virgil was a boy,



Virgil on Mt. Rainier, 1903

the McCroskey family traveled the old county road past Farmington to this ridge to pick huckleberries and picnic under the trees and enjoy the view. Virgil, the worshipper of trees, loved the spot, the closest woods to his home. When logging began on the ridge in the 1930s, he determined to preserve a bit of the place which had so delighted him as a child. In 1939, with the help of the Farmington Community Club, he purchased the first road right-of way on what was to become Skyline Drive. Although the Community Club quickly lost interest, Virgil committed himself to the project which became his life's work for the next 31 years.

By 1941 McCroskey had secured 500 acres and was laboriously making footpaths with his hoe. Friends soon made regular trips to the ridge with tractors and equipment to begin road building. In fact, so many improvements were made that the U.S. Forest Service approached Virgil about donating the property to that agency. But McCroskey had different plans. He had given a state park to Washington and now proposed to do the same for Idaho. In 1946, after securing 650 acres and building nearly seven miles of road, Virgil publically announced, "I hope one day . . . the State of Idaho will accept this for a state park." Idaho's governor expressed immediate interest, but Virgil was not yet ready to make the gift.

Over the next four years, McCroskey worked almost daily on his project. In purchasing land for the road, he generally found willing sellers because the property had little value. When landowners refused, McCroskey persisted, usually convincing them to sell. Sometimes he resorted to more forceful means. When a Farmington resident refused to sell half an acre for the right-of-way, McCroskey convinced the Whitman County Commissioners to begin condemnation proceedings. The farmer finally relented and sold the land.

Virgil had learned how to survey while watching road construction at Steptoe. Now he used that skill in personally surveying Skyline Drive. He hired a bulldozer driver to cut the trail, which in places took peculiar bends. Virgil explained one such swing: "The road was supposed to come across here. But when we got here with the bulldozer, I saw it would go through this lovely little bed of kinnikinnick." The kinnikinnick won; the road swerved. McCroskey not only went out of his way to preserve resident plants, he transplanted many of his favorite trees and flowers to the ridge, painstakingly transporting water to them each hot day from his home in Oakesdale. He gave each scenic feature a pet name—Point Sublime, Veil of Cashmere, Field of Ferns, Goat Ranch. To some 70-year-olds this would have been overwhelming work. To Virgil it was a pleasurable adventure. "This forest is inhabited by silent and benevolent spirits," he once told a reporter. "I can work all alone in this park, where I spend most of my waking hours, and not see another human being and never be lonely."

Tom Wahl, Bert Gamble and Virgil on Skyline Drive, 1950s

Finally in 1950 McCroskey was ready to make his gift to Idaho, having accumulated over 2,000 acres. When he approached the State Board of Land Commissioners with his gift idea, they thanked him and helped get his proposal before the state legislature the next year. McCroskey's 1951 offer to the legislature provided clear title to over 2,000 acres of land and nearly 25 miles of road. Within the proposed park were first-growth cedar, pine, and fir, and an abundance of wildflowers. From the drive, Steptoe Butte, the Bitterroot and Blue mountains, and Canada were clearly visible. To the west, the verdant Palouse hills stretched for miles. McCroskey felt the state could not lose. "I will improve and maintain the drive as long as I am able to do so," he assured the legislature. "And I hope to provide for its upkeep after I am gone." A bill was introduced, but the legislature rejected his offer.

Mary Minerva McCroskey

While Idaho was the first Pacific Northwest state to have a state park, it was the last to have a state parks department. In the 1950s the Department of Lands maintained Idaho's two state parks on a shoestring budget. Many legislators were concerned about maintenance costs if additional property was accepted. But, as demonstrated at Steptoe, McCroskey was a man of patience. He waited until the 1953 legislature convened and presented his proposal again. By now his holdings had grown to 2,800 acres and this time he offered to give $500 per year for 15 years for the park's upkeep. His only stipulations were that cattle and sheep be prohibited from grazing there, and that the park be named after his mother and in honor of all pioneer women of the Inland Empire. This was an offer the Idaho House of Representatives could not refuse and it passed the legislation by a 40 to 17 vote. However, the bill fell two votes short in the Senate. The two senators who protested the loudest, ironically, were north Idaho's Ernest Gaffney of Benewah County and William Costley of Lewis County. Along with concerns about maintenance costs, they worried about removing property from tax rolls—a loss of $178 a year to Benewah County. Senator Costley claimed that the area "provides nothing as a tourist attraction," while his colleague questioned the wisdom of a park with a road "luring" tourists away from Idaho into Washington. Further, since neither McCroskey nor his mother had ever lived in Idaho, Gaffney felt the state could surely find Idahoans to name its parks after.

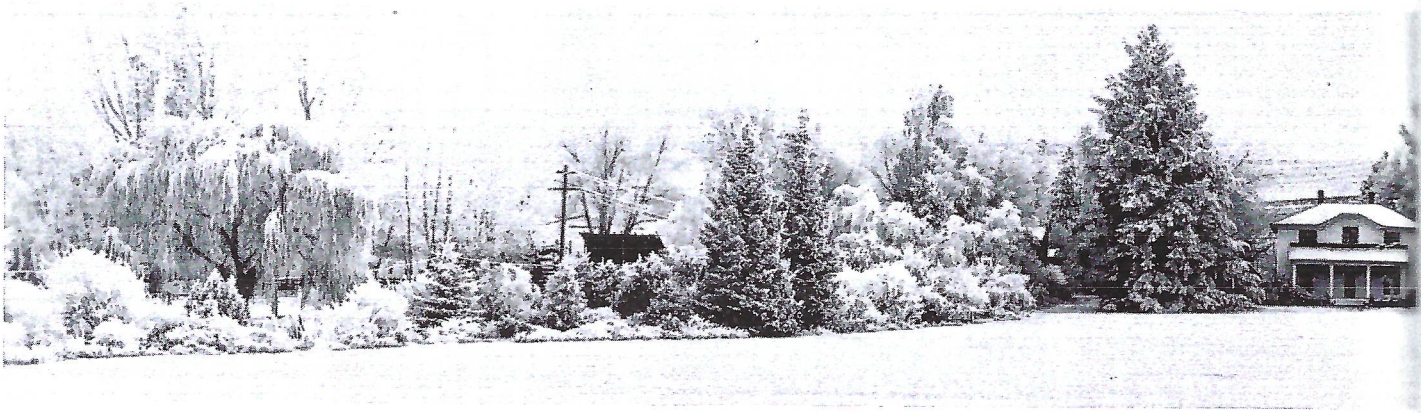
The second refusal of the legislature caused Virgil to reevaluate his tactics. Mere patience might not work. He was, after all, 77 years old and had a park to donate. So with the support of influential Latah County friends, McCroskey set about pressuring the 1955 legislature into accepting his gift. A Skyline Drive Association was incorporated and began a campaign of incessant publicity. While Washington had over 70 state parks and Oregon nearly 140, Idaho had only two, which meant that the Gem State was "missing her share of . . . tourist revenue." The state needed more parks, and a good way to begin was with McCroskey's gift. When the State Land Commissioner retorted that the area "would require considerable expenditure of money to make it attractive," and that "other areas in the state could be developed for less money and would be of more recreational value," the Association charged the state with looking a gift horse in the mouth. Neither McCroskey nor the Association claimed Skyline Drive was the most spectacular spot in Idaho. It was merely a lovely ridge with a good road, accessible to many people on leisurely drives. Further, since McCroskey wanted the park kept in a primitive state, maintenance would be minimal. Finally, McCroskey offered to maintain the park at his own expense for 15 years if the state would only accept it.

The Skyline Drive Association enlisted the support of the Idaho Federated Women's Clubs, the Moscow Branch of the Daughters of the American Revolution, and the Latah County Pioneer Association. North Idaho schools even held an essay contest on "Why Idaho Should Accept Mary Minerva McCroskey Park as a State Park." While Virgil worried lest his supporters get overly enthusiastic, he nonetheless recognized the value of publicity and capably directed the campaign. He wrote letters to state officials, made public speeches, and led tours along the drive. He allowed the University of Idaho Ski Club to construct a ski lift on the ridge, thinking the publicity would help. He and friends built a handsome fireplace and picnic grounds to lure tourists. Tom Wahl, who constructed the fireplace and often worked on the drive with Virgil, remembered how hard McCroskey labored to have the park accepted. "He just kept struggling along just like he would if he were digging a hole. He persevered and succeeded . . . . Every button he could touch he touched it somewhere or other."

From the Spokane *Spokesman-Review,* July 1955

When the 1955 Idaho legislators convened, they found Virgil McCroskey on hand, waiting with a deed of gift. This time his proposed park contained 4,400 acres, and Virgil promised to maintain it himself for 15 years. The legislature was more willing to listen than in past years and the Senate passed the authorizing bill by a 35 to 5 margin. The House vote was much closer, the bill gaining acceptance by only three votes. Lobbying had assisted in securing the legislation, but the 1954 election of Governor Robert E. Smylie was equally helpful. Smylie, campaigning on a platform of increasing tourism and improving the environment, believed new state parks would fit in perfectly with his plans. McCroskey's park was the first of several accepted during Smylie's three terms. In signing the bill accepting the park, Smylie wrote:

> This act looks to the future. As our population increases we will need to set aside more and more scenic areas for the enjoyment of future generations. The addition of forty-four hundred acres to our park system without cost to the State until 1971 is therefore highly desirable.
>
> Future generations will thank Mr. McCroskey, and I feel certain that they will applaud the State's decision to accept his gracious gift.



Again though, it was Virgil's poet-friend Bert Gamble who succinctly captured the essence of the ordeal, wiring McCroskey, "Congratulations on your victory over the hordes of mammon and the malcontents."

The state's acceptance of the land gave Virgil little rest, for he was obliged to maintain it for 15 years—no easy obligation for a 79-year-old. McCroskey went to the park every day the roads were passable. He cleared brush, planted flowers, and worked on the drive. Virgil realized he could not do all the labor himself, but he knew how to recruit others. He loved to lead tours and picnics and then innocently ask guests, "Would you like to come and help me pull a log?" He recruited the Boy Scouts and Oakesdale youths who piled into his pickup until it was overflowing. McCroskey then took them on a day of adventure—and work—on "Virgil's Mountain." Still, he did much of the physical work himself, even into his eighties and nineties.

He spent most of his time improving the road. He leased a bulldozer, hired an operator, and kept the drive maintained for summer tourists. He received occasional assistance from the state for unusually difficult or dangerous tasks, such as dynamiting, but did most of the labor himself or at his own expense.

McCroskey also actively acquired more land for the park. He donated additional acreage in 1961 and 1963 and diligently encouraged land trades to increase state holdings along Skyline Drive. Some of his exchange efforts succeeded and some failed. When a landowner whose property adjoined the drive suggested he might construct a tavern, Virgil became alarmed and successfully encouraged the state to exchange 40 acres away from the drive for the 25 acres the man owned. McCroskey failed to facilitate exchanges between state and federal agencies. As early as 1957 he suggested that Idaho trade certain property away from the park for acreage closer to the drive owned by the Forest Service. However, the Idaho Attorney General ruled that a trade of state grant lands for federal properties was unconstitutional. Virgil then purchased as much private property as possible for exchange purposes, while never giving up on the idea of securing Forest Service land. In 1968 the Forest Service agreed to trade certain properties with the state, but the State Land Board refused because it did not want to lose potential income from timber sales, and McCroskey Park property could not be logged. Still, the park did grow beyond its 1955 boundaries, though not as much as Virgil would have liked.

During the 15 years he maintained the park, occasional controversies arose. Virgil was very concerned about the wildlife and could not understand the motives of a hunter any more than he could a logger. "The deer are so beautiful," he once said. "How can man shoot them?" His gift had no provisions forbidding hunting in the park, and when he later tried to have the state post the area, he failed.

As at Steptoe, McCroskey felt he had to be ever vigilant against farmers and ranchers encroaching upon McCroskey Park. In 1955 the State Land Board granted permission for a farmer to remove a fence between his property and the park "for the purpose of curbing the weeds thereon." Virgil, usually mild-mannered, could become quite outspoken when protecting his parks, and this event brought his assertiveness to the surface. "I was surprised and disgusted . . . to find that [the farmer] had plowed and seeded land in our new State Park," he indignantly wrote the State Land Commissioner. "He has plenty of thistle in his fields and so have his neighbors. In fact, it is all around . . . . The answer to his proposition should have been an emphatic NO . . . . [He] is not interested in destroying Canadian thistle. He wants to augment his income." The state granted the farmer cultivation privileges for two years. For the entire period, McCroskey barraged the land department with complaints. His arguments were persuasive, and at the end of the two years the land commissioner asked the farmer to leave the park and replace the fence.

Although McCroskey was a conservationist, he was not a preservationist in the strictest sense. He enjoyed transplanting non-native plants on Skyline, which he carefully tended until they took root. His diary for 1945 contains frequent references to trans-

The McCroskey family homestead near Steptoe Butte

planting and caring for new trees and flowers:

> August 27: I hurried up to the mountain and watered the sumac over on the Manuschatt ridge and planted some more near there that I had brought from Colfax.
>
> September 16: Watered the Mountain Ash and Fox Glove on the grade toward Point Sublime. Drove north and watered the Mountain Ash near the Mission View. . . . Watered the Mountain Ash, California poppies and Sumac at the Field of Ferns.
>
> September 17: I drove alone to the mountain and first went over to the Manuschatt ridge and planted the sunflower and helianthus plants that I had brought from near Washtucna . . . . I planted them beside the last Sumac that I planted. I drove on to the goat ranch and . . . took the petunias and Myrtle or Box Vine down into the Cedar grove where I planted most of them.

Virgil's enthusiasm for flowers worried some botanists who felt he should not introduce new varieties to the park. While they never convinced him to stop planting, they did try to have him keep a locational record so future researchers would be able to distinguish native from non-native species.

If McCroskey had a fondness for flowers, he had a passion for trees. His favorite poem began, "If you love a tree, we are brothers," and ended, "If you love a tree, in your heart is a shrine/ For the love of a tree is a love half divine." As he often said, "Don't look at a tree and think of an ax." But trees have enemies other than man. Jim Mitchell was a young Forest Service employee when he first met McCroskey at Mineral Mountain Lookout, near the park. Virgil had stopped to visit and noticed that the lookout railing was covered with caterpillars of the Tussock Moth. "Tears started down his face," Mitchell recalled, for Virgil knew what the moth could do to his park. While some encouraged him to let nature run its course, McCroskey could not sit idly by and see his trees destroyed. He decided to use chemical sprays, and was successful in combating the pest.

These controversies, however, were minor, largely because McCroskey Park was—and is—one of the state's best kept secrets. Not totally convinced that the park's acceptance had been a good idea, and hampered with a limited budget, the parks department has never devoted much time or money to the site. In 1968 Theodora Smith, an active member of the old Skyline Drive Association, became upset because the park still did not have an official highway marker, and wrote, "Today, Mary Minerva McCroskey State Park would seem, definitely, Idaho's 'Cinderella' Park! Whereas her sister parks receive attention, improvements, allocations for development—Mary Minerva McCroskey State Park still awaits recognition, due appreciation and enjoyment of all she represents!"

Picnickers on Skyline Drive, 1950s

While Virgil was disappointed at the lack of attention, he did not let it interfere with his own commitment. Although slowed by age, he still did as much as possible and became frustrated when he could not do more. In 1970, at age 93, he wrote, "I guess I am almost a hopeless cripple and never can accomplish much any more! I've been up in Mary Minerva McCroskey State Park three or four times

but never a lick of *work*. . . . Soon, I hope to get up there with others who *can* work."

Virgil died on September 14, 1970, just three weeks short of his 94th birthday and 15 years after the park's acceptance. He fulfilled his promise to maintain the property and left nearly his entire estate—approximately $45,000—to the Idaho Department of Parks and Recreation to care for the site. After his death the state acquired an additional 40 acres from his estate and purchased 40 more in 1973. Although it has commissioned studies of the park, the department has done little other than road maintenance work since his death.

While Steptoe and Mary Minerva McCroskey were Virgil's most impressive philanthropic efforts, they were not his only ones. His first land donation, a 40-acre Skyline Drive tract given to the Idaho Department of Fish and Game in 1941 for a wildlife refuge, was later transferred to McCroskey State Park. In 1943 he gave 200 acres near Skyline Drive to the Inland Empire Boy Scout Council. This tract was deeded back to him two years later in exchange for 400 acres of virgin pine and cedar on the north side of the ridge. McCroskey labored on this wooded tract for years developing a "Cathedral in the Pines." The site, named Camp McCroskey, became a popular wilderness outing spot for Scouts from throughout the Inland Empire.

How does one take the measure of a man? Virgil McCroskey's life was filled with subtle contrasts. He was a bachelor, described as a loner who lived and worked mostly by himself, but he had a wide circle of friends and enjoyed his membership in the Masons and Shriners. As a lover of trees and caretaker of wildflowers, he was preoccupied with the natural landscape, yet was extremely interested in the affairs of men and was an active, committed Democrat. Virgil was not religious in a church-going way. "I got enough formal religion when I was a boy to last me for the rest of my life," he once said. But he drew great inspiration from the mountains. He was content to live quietly in small communities, but once had been an avid traveler to exotic places. A hard, tireless worker at ease among ordinary people, he was also conversant on literary topics and knowledgeable about the London stage. He was modest, but not shy, able to assert himself stubbornly for causes he believed in. His character expressed itself in his appearance—a tall, lean and wiry man, toughened by sun and wind, but in public, habitually dressed in white shirt, tie and slacks, complemented by the most proper manners.

Virgil McCroskey received considerable formal recognition for his accomplishments. He was the subject of feature articles in national magazines, was honored in 1961 as "Pioneer of the Year" by the Eastern Washington State Historical Society, and in 1969 by the Soil Conservation Society of America for his "vision, energy and generosity" in preserving Steptoe Butte and McCroskey parks. As the "Giver of Mountains," he has attained a unique place in Palouse history.

Virgil on Skyline Drive, 1960s

Virgil McCroskey and the Conservation Movement

Although largely unrecognized, characters and occurrences on the local scene are irrevocably linked to larger, more diverse events in the nation and the world. This truism was proved by the life of Virgil McCroskey. Imbedded as he is in the historical and geographical scope of the Palouse, his life nonetheless represents and reflects forces outside his home region.

The late 1960s and early 1970s have been popularized as the country's environmental period, but America's conservation roots extend much further back. The environmental movement is a direct descendant of the conservation activities of Theodore Roosevelt's presidency. With the assistance of his friend Gifford Pinchot, the first chief of the United States Forest Service, Roosevelt set aside vast tracts of forest reserves, earning respect as the foremost conservationist of his day.

The Roosevelt conservationists were utilitarians, not preservationists, believing natural resources on public lands—even national parks—should be fully and rationally managed for their resource value as well as for recreation. When Pinchot and his supporters proposed construction of a dam in the Hetch Hetchy Valley of Yosemite National Park to provide domestic water to San Francisco, a permanent split occurred in the conservation movement. "Domestic use is the highest use to which water . . . can be put," stated Secretary of the Interior James R. Garfield in 1908, reflecting the utilitarians' notion that wild rivers were wasted resources. "Nonsense," countered John Muir, charismatic founder of the Sierra Club. "These temple destroyers, devotees of ravaging commercialism, seem to have a perfect contempt for Nature, and instead of lifting their eyes to the god of the Mountains, lift them to the Almighty Dollar," he thundered. The Hetch Hetchy Dam was built, but Muir remained an inspiration to later generations who rejected the multiple use or utilitarian concept.

Theodore Roosevelt, Gifford Pinchot, John Muir, and other early conservationists kindled an awareness of the need for parks. The nation's first parks, established in eastern cities, preceded the national park movement by a number of years. Yellowstone, the first national park, was established in 1872, but the national park idea did not become popular until the 1890s and early 1900s when Congress created several more, including Yosemite, Sequoia, Mt. Rainier, and Crater Lake. Soon, under the enthusiastic leadership of park boosters, some decidedly inferior places were designated national parks. When Idaho Senator Weldon Heyburn first proposed a park in north Idaho, he distinctly requested that it be a national one. By this time, however, some conservationists were wary of diluting the national park system with places of little national significance, and began urging that another class—state parks— be developed. Consequently, Heyburn became a state, not a national, park.

Stephen T. Mather, the first director of the National Park Service when it was established in 1916, set strict national park acceptance guidelines. While Heyburn and a few other state parks had been developed prior to this date, the nation's state park system expanded rapidly after Mather's decree since it was no longer possible for many sites to qualify for national park status.

In 1921 Mather called the first meeting of the National Conference on State Parks, an organization which was to become the leading proponent of the movement. The goals of the conference were to:

> urge the acquisition of additional land and water areas suitable for recreation . . . until there should be public parks, forests and preserves within easy access of all the citizens . . . and also to encourage the interest of non-governmental agencies and individuals in acquiring, maintaining and dedicating for public uses similar areas.

The National Conference asserted that such state recreational areas, unlike national parks, should not be confined only to rare and extraordinarily beautiful scenery. State parks "might with great advantage also preserve examples of the average or characteristic scenery of each state."

In 1927 the National Conference dispatched Charles Sauers, long-time park movement leader, to the west coast to proselytize for the movement. Sauers met with many groups in the Pacific Northwest, urging development of state parks. In the 1930s the National Park Service sent similar consultants to virtually every state.

The work of state park boosters was greatly aided by technological and social improvements which shortened work hours, increased leisure time, and more importantly, brought the automobile within reach of most Americans. As an official of the National Conference noted in 1930, "It was not until automobiles became fairly numerous . . . that the State Park movement may be said to have been fairly launched."

State park development in Washington roughly paralleled the national trend. The state received its first gift of park land from an individual donor in 1915, and a few other tracts were acquired by gifts over the next four years. In 1919 Washington passed legislation authorizing the State Land Commissioner to set aside tracts not to exceed five acres for public parks. In 1921, the same year as the formation of the National Conference on State Parks, the legislature created the State Parks Committee, authorizing it to acquire, maintain, and develop a state park system. By 1983 the system had grown to include

200 state-owned parks consisting of over 87,000 acres.

In Idaho the state park system began sooner but developed more slowly. Heyburn became the first state park in the Pacific Northwest when accepted in 1908, but this early beginning failed to materialize into a movement. For example, Mary Minerva McCroskey Park, accepted in 1955, was only the state's third. Moreover, Idaho did not get a professional state parks department until 1965. By 1983, Idaho had 26 state parks, totaling nearly 42,000 acres.

Virgil McCroskey was clearly influenced by the conservation and state parks movements. He grew up during the early conservation fervor. When he successfully climbed Mt. Rainier in 1903, he was enjoying a pristine wilderness preserved because it was one of the country's first national parks. Late in life, Virgil stated that his extensive travels to national parks profoundly influenced his work at Steptoe and Skyline Drive.

In 1927, when the National Conference on State Parks sent Charles Sauers to the Northwest, George, Virgil's brother, made the first family plea for establishing a Steptoe Butte State Park. In 1936, when the National Park Service sent out its consultants, Virgil made his most convincing argument to the Colfax Chamber of Commerce to purchase Steptoe for a park. In that year he was greatly aided by Aubrey White of Spokane, another conservationist in tune with national trends.

McCroskey also recognized the influence of the automobile on Americans. As he admitted, his parks were not on the dramatic order of a Yosemite. McCroskey worked with what property was available locally. As the National Conference on State Parks noted, parks within easy driving distance of people were just as valuable as isolated, spectacular tracts. Within minutes, travelers could ascend Steptoe by car and enjoy a scene equalled only by airplane travel. And Skyline Drive gave Palouse residents an opportunity to enjoy a leisurely automobile trip through a forested area.

Still, McCroskey does not fit easily into the ranks of conservationists. Not a pure preservationist like Muir, neither was he a total utilitarian like Roosevelt and Pinchot. On the one hand, he would have rejected the preservationists' argument that wild areas should be left to nature's control. If nature threatened to destroy his beloved trees with Tussock Moths, Virgil was ready to do battle with her. If nature had not provided enough wildflowers, he would add more. If nature made it difficult for people to enjoy its beauties, he would build roads.

On the other hand, he was not a pure utilitarian either. The greatest good did not always come from the most use. He saw the value of undisturbed areas providing rest and meditation from the tensions of modern life. Thus, while multiple use would dictate that parks be open to groups such as hunters, cattle ranchers, loggers, and telecommunications organizations, Virgil vigorously opposed such intruders upon his mountains.

Virgil McCroskey's life and works can show us the interrelationship between outside and local forces. McCroskey clearly was influenced by outside events. Just as clearly, his efforts contributed to the national conservation and state park movements. But a study of McCroskey also demonstrates that individual idiosyncracies are important. Virgil McCroskey stands as an example of unique human endeavor in the Palouse. Beyond the issues and events of the conservation movement, Steptoe Butte and McCroskey Park are really monuments to one man's foresight and dedication. They exist nowhere else and are the legacy McCroskey left to all of us, "forever and ever."

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Through the foresight of the individuals who preserved documents, photographs, and memorabilia, we were able to understand this intriguing man and prepare this booklet. Each day, invaluable diaries, letters, photographs, ledgers and other materials are carelessly thrown away. People too often think that what happened to their family, business, or club is of no importance. But that is not the case and each time these records are destroyed we all lose another piece of our heritage. We strongly urge readers of this booklet to contact a local historical society, archives, or library before disposing of such material. Professionals at these institutions will be happy to advise on the best disposition of these records. Such consultation can insure the preservation of valuable historical records for future generations.

Unfortunately, most of Virgil McCroskey's personal papers have been destroyed. The existing materials are maintained in several locations. The largest collection is in the Oakesdale Community Library. These clippings, letters, souvenirs, and photographs were salvaged from McCroskey's house and donated to the city. Under a cooperative agreement, a portion of these records have been photocopied by the Latah County Historical Society in Moscow and added to its library. That society also has three other manuscript collections and numerous photographs relating to McCroskey. The Eastern Washington State Historical Society in Spokane has two boxes of McCroskey materials, including his 1945 diary, some letters, and numerous clippings.

Lee and Jody Sahlin of Spokane and Barbara Butts of Pullman preserved McCroskey family genealogies, photographs, letters, and memorabilia which they generously allowed us to use.

Three oral history interviews were conducted as a result of this project—with Barbara Butts and Tom and Elizabeth Wahl of Pullman and Harold Heilsburg of Colfax. These oral histories have been donated to the Whitman County Historical Society and are now available for public use. Louis Livingston of Spokane, who interviewed McCroskey in 1966, generously allowed us to listen to the tape recording, which is in his personal possession. The Idaho Oral History Center in Boise has two interviews with Governor Robert Smylie which shed light on the development of state parks in Idaho. In addition, we spoke informally with several individuals and would like to thank them for their time:

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Both the Washington and Idaho State Departments of Parks and Recreation have correspondence, deeds, and other materials relating to their respective parks. The Idaho Department of Lands also has material on McCroskey State Park for the period prior to the formation of the Idaho Parks Department.

Photographs in this booklet are courtesy of the Latah County Historical Society, Moscow, Idaho; the City of Oakesdale; Barbara Butts; and Lee and Jody Sahlin.

In recent years, historians have devoted considerable attention to the conservation movement. Much less attention has been paid to the history of state parks. The following sources will provide researchers with a good introduction to these fields.

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