

Commercial Rail to Recreational Trail

Longtime Klickitat resident leaves a legacy of trees and trails

By Drew Myron

Irvin Mitchell was a grumpy, eccentric loner with a wide, goofy grin.

And, it turns out, he was generous.

Now, nearly a year since his death at age 86, Irvin is recognized as a unique man who donated his land and estate to one of the region's most unique features: the Klickitat Trail.

The 31-mile former railroad line now serves as a recreational beacon in the heart of the Columbia Gorge.

"Nowhere else is there a rail trail that starts in one of the nation's only National Scenic Areas, winds along a nationally designated Wild & Scenic River, and finishes by going through a remote, beautiful tributary canyon," says Barbara Robinson, president of the Klickitat Trail Conservancy, a nonprofit organization dedicated to the preservation and promotion of the Klickitat Trail.

And, as it turns out, nowhere else is there a man like Irvin.

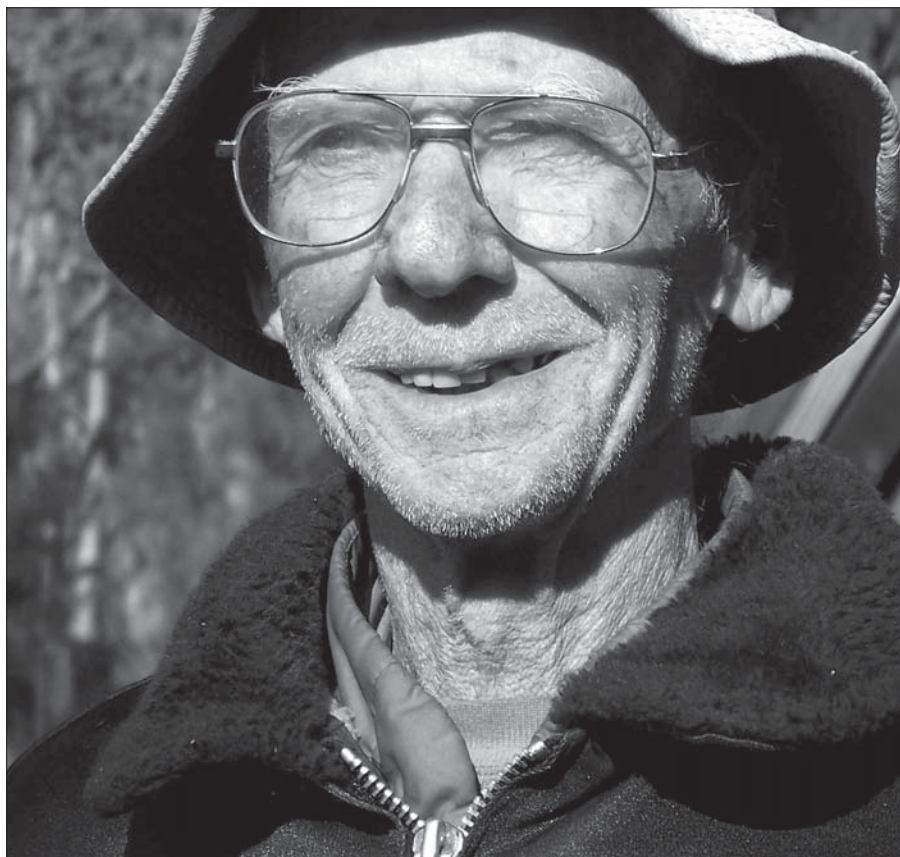
Humble and Modest Roots

Born May 14, 1929, in The Dalles, Oregon, Irvin lived most of his life in Klickitat. He worked briefly for the local lumber company, then enlisted in the Navy in 1950, working as a machinist.

Irvin returned to Klickitat, and when he was 26 years old, bought 160 acres of land, including all of Skookum Flat just south of town.

Living modestly, he supported himself by gradually selling off small parcels of land. He kept 2.5 acres for himself along the south end, along what is now the Klickitat Trail.

Irvin was an avid supporter of the



Even after his death last year, Irvin Mitchell's influence can still be seen along the Klickitat Trail.

trail, says Barbara, and was considered the local "Johnny Appleseed," planting an assortment of trees on his property along the trail and around town.

"Ponderosa, willows, fruit trees—you name it, he planted it," Barbara says.

Ron Krause lives in Lyle and was a friend to Irvin for more than 20 years.

"Irvin was an eccentric person, for sure," says Ron. "To talk to him at the store or the gas station a person would think, 'Who is this grumpy old man?' Well, that grumpy old man was a sleeper, so to speak, that read the Wall Street Journal every day and that also had a strong passion for planting trees and windsurfing."

Irvin was nearly 60 when he learned to windsurf. He was one of the first

windsurfers at the now popular Doug's Beach along the Columbia River.

"He became an absolute fixture there," Ron says.

His passion for the windsurfing spot was a year-round endeavor, says Ron, noting Irvin planted trees at the site and tended them through the winter.

"Really, he turned Doug's Beach into what it is today, with solid soil from planting trees that can survive close to the water to stop beach erosion," Ron says. "That was a big contribution and very overlooked by the people walking around with big blue rings around their mouths from eating too many mulberries. Irv got that huge ear-to-ear grin when he saw people eating from one of his fruit trees."

Brief History of a Long Trail

Despite its tranquil beauty, the Klickitat Trail is not without controversy.

Once an economic engine running between the Columbia River and Goldendale, rail service was abandoned in the early 1990s. The rails were removed and the line was bought by the Rails-to-Trails Conservancy, which donated it to the Washington State Parks, which coordinated with the U.S. Forest Service to repurpose the line as a recreational trail.

In 2001, tempers flared amid turf disputes when a young man visiting the trail was cited by the county sheriff for criminal trespass. The state of Washington issued a stern rebuke to county leaders, and a group of local trail enthusiasts began walking the trail to assert the public's right to access the trail. In turn, a handful of property owners along the route grew hostile and aggressive in their opposition to the trail.

In response, trail enthusiasts in 2003 created the Klickitat Trail Conservancy. Irvin, a property owner and trail proponent, led the way.

Irvin was the group's first paying member. At one of the first meetings, "Irvin pulled a \$5 bill from his pocket and said, 'I'm in!'" Barbara recalls.

"I believe Irvin's true passion was to see people enjoy being happy and healthy," says Ron. "I remember the year the tracks were removed. I was visiting Irvin and saw a new small sign in front of his place that said, 'Trail' with an arrow pointing toward the river. I said, 'You actually want people walking through here?' and he said, 'Hell yes!'"

Irvin's land features divide the trail, with a small sandy beach on one side and native oaks and meadow on the other.

"It's absolutely beautiful," says Barbara.

Not only did Irvin donate his land, he willed his entire estate to the national Rails-to-Trails Conservancy.

Irvin's gift came with some complications.

KTC hopes to work with state parks



The 31-mile Klickitat Trail is used by hikers, bikers and nature enthusiasts.

to complete the 1-mile trail disconnect just north of Klickitat. Because the KTC is not a land trust, Irvin's property was cleaned up and donated to Washington State Parks with the understanding the land would endure as part of the Klickitat Trail.

While the donation was greatly appreciated, the reality was not pretty.

The property was covered with rusted cars, sheds, outbuildings and debris. Volunteers cleared 35 tons of metal and more than 100 tires.

"This gigantic mess had to be cleaned up before a public agency would even consider ownership," Barbara says, "and in less than a year, it has become a gorgeous piece of property—an asset to the whole Gorge community."

A Legacy of Nature and Kindness

Ron says he is fortunate to have been able to learn from Irvin.



There are many sites to enjoy along the trail, including the Lyle Trailhead Viewpoint of the Klickitat River.

"The thing I learned the most was how to think about other people," he says.

"When Irvin Mitchell passed away on September 5, 2015, at age 86, it was with the knowledge that his vision of the public enjoying his land as part of the Klickitat Trail would become a reality," reads the tribute on the KTC website. "On that day, we said goodbye to a dear friend, local legend and fellow visionary who will always live on along the trail—in the spring with his fruit trees in blossom, summer under the shade of his oaks, fall when fruit is abundant and in winter surrounded by quiet beauty." ■