



## Mountain Loop Conservancy Fact Sheet:

### Robe Canyon Historic Park

**Location:** The Robe Canyon Historic Park is located east of Granite Falls, Washington. It is in an area of extraordinary beauty and fascinating history. The park is in a spectacular gorge where engineers tried for years to keep the railroad tracks from being wiped out by thundering waters. There was a once thriving small town located there, now gone. The noise of tracks being cut into stone, of a forest being logged, of tourists exclaiming at the unbelievably rugged canyon walls as they were transported on the train tracks, is a thing of the past.

Robe Canyon was formed by torrents of the Stillaguamish River as it forced its way through cracks in a rock ridge left by the retreating glaciers. Today, the canyon widens at spots to give the river room to have a lazy flow during the low water summer and early autumn months. However, sections of the canyon are still narrow, channeling the river into a churning rush in the summer and to raging white water during high flow.

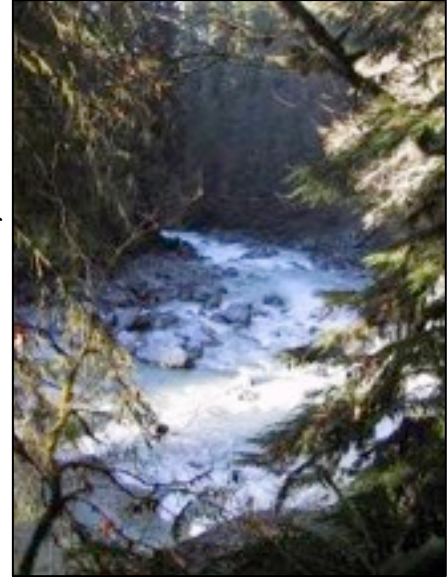
**History:** The narrowest portions of the channel are an awesome sight and are places to be avoided when the river is at its wildest; they are hardly the place to build anything, much less a railroad. But in the 1800s, the operators of the Monte Cristo mines in the

Cascade Mountains needed a way to transport gold and silver ore from the mine to the smelter at Everett. The railroad was to be built by John D. Rockefeller, who, against the advice of the surveyor M. Q. Barlow (for whom Barlow Pass was named), chose what he considered a shorter route through Robe Canyon. Rockefeller's engineers from the east coast saw the river as a placid "trout stream" when they worked there during the summer. Six tunnels had to be bored through the rock walls of the canyon (some remnants remain), and long sections of wooden cribbing had to be built on the edge of the river. Then the 1892 November rains and floods came and mud and rockslides crashed down the canyon wiping out the tracks. This happened year after year, until the railroad company finally gave up trying to maintain the tracks in 1933.



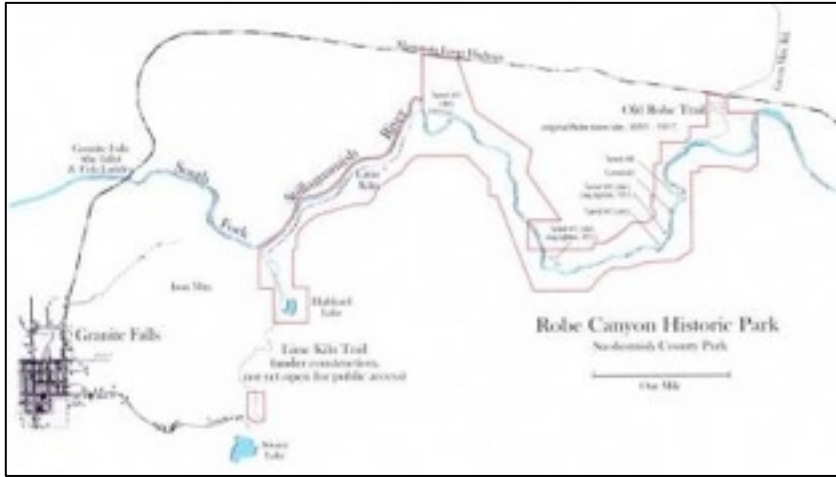
During its 40 years, the railroad led an eventful and colorful life, carrying ore, and then lumber from the clear-cuts ravaging the mountains, and tourists who came to enjoy the Cascade Mountains. The Big Four Inn was built just past Silverton. Trolley cars and autos were fitted with wheels to bring sightseers up the rail line through the canyon.

**Creation of the Park:** In the 1960s, Boy Scout Troop 43 from Lake Stevens decided to work on a project to preserve some of the area's railroad history. It took them several years to clear out a hiking trail along the railroad grade and make a campground where the town of Robe once stood. The property that these projects were built on was privately owned, but in 1995, 160 acres of land was purchased for the creation of a park. The Stillaguamish Citizens' Alliance (the former name of the Mountain Loop Conservancy), the River Network, and many local leaders and citizens were instrumental in securing the land. In 1997, an additional 800



The natural beauty of the Robe Canyon.  
Photo by Nancy Dean.

were added in 2001 near the old Robe town site. Nearly 1,000 acres along seven miles of the South Fork of the Stillaguamish River are now protected as a part of the Robe Canyon Historic Park (Figure 1). There are plans to add an additional 200 acres in the future.



The 2-mile (3.2 km) long Old Robe Trail and the 3.5-mile (5.6 km) long Lime Kiln Trail are very popular with area hikers. The trails are frequently featured in newspapers, on websites and in guidebooks. Volunteers for Outdoor Washington do annual maintenance and trail work. This group spent several hundred hours constructing the Lime Kiln Trail. Volunteers take an active part in ensuring that the trails are accessible to recreational users throughout the year.

**“Gem” of Snohomish County:** Now the canyon welcomes hikers and kayakers to its changing beauty. It is still peaceful and lush in the spring, summer, and autumn, but wild in the winter. Those coming down in kayaks are given a wild ride, testing their skills at navigating the rocky channel. It is for experienced kayakers only and is classified as a Class V area of rapids. This is not a peaceful paddle! Hikers enjoy the forest: Marveling at the hemlocks, cedars, Douglas-fir, Sitka spruce and the other evergreens native to these forests. The forest floor is covered with mosses, ferns, and flowers in the summer. In the sandy soil near the river, there is an abundance of the tiny pink, native roses. Birds thrive in the brush and trees, and you will often see kingfishers and eagles near the river. In the autumn, you will see salmon returning to their first homes upstream. It is a place to enjoy peace today and imagine the lively past.



Kayaker running the rapids in the Robe Canyon. Photo courtesy of Rick Williams.

**Interesting Fact:** Robe had a population as high as 250 people in 1911. Nothing remains of the original town site.

**Sources:**

Brooks, Diane. July 19, 1994. *State park urged near Monte Cristo – Plan includes extension of trail blazed by Lake Steven Scouts.* The Seattle Times.

Brooks, Diane. July 28, 1995. *Trail’s helping hands- Park owes existence to volunteers.* The Seattle Times.

Granite Falls Historical Museum archives. Various dates.

“Robe Canyon Historic Park”. 2009. *Stillaguamish Citizens’ Alliance.* Web 30 January 2011. <<http://www.robecanyon.org/index.html>>

Stillaguamish Citizens Alliance archives. Various dates.

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