

Silver Creek

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By Danielle Strom

Silver Creek is the name of a surprising number of creeks in Oregon. This complicates the study of any given creek because sometimes early writers did not specify where they were situated geographically so they could be talking about any one of a number of creeks. The North Fork and South Fork of Silver Creek meet in the canyon that is now located in Silver Falls State Park just to the southeast of Silverton, Oregon.ⁱ

The history of the name of Silver Creek, like so many histories, is controversial, with one interesting and unlikely theory and one more ordinary and likely theory. It is clear, however, that the term Silver Creek heralds from the earliest pioneer days. The first, and more unlikely, theory is that there was

a traveler on horseback [who] had some silver in his saddle pockets and attempted to ford the stream near where the town of Silverton now stands. His horse got into deep water and in the struggle that ensued the saddle pockets were lost, silver and all. The loss was not recovered, and as a result the stream was named Silver Creek.ⁱⁱ

The second theory is that the creek is named after James Smith, often called "Silver" Smith because he brought a quantity, up to a bushel full, of silver dollars to the area. Together with John Barger, Smith built a saw mill at Milford, roughly two miles above Silverton in 1846.ⁱⁱⁱ

The settlement that sprang up around Smith and Barger's sawmill when more than 30 families settled here in 1852 survives to this day. This second settlement was originally called Silver Creek, and the original post office bore this name.^{iv} A few years later, the settlement's name was moved a few miles from Milford and it was proposed that the town be renamed Bargarville, in honor of John Barger upon whose donation land claim the city now stood. This idea was rejected for fear that the town would be confused with the near by town of Parkersville.^v Finally, Polly Crandall Coon Price changed the name of Silver Creek to Silverton. She had the authority to do this because she owned much of the nearby land following her husband's death. Silverton became an important trading center with several general stores, a gristmill, and a saw mill.^{vi}

Also of note is Silver Falls State Park which is located 21 miles east of Salem and 15 miles southeast of Silverton and was dedicated as on July 23, 1933. An article published in 1933 in the *Oregon Historical Society Quarterly* stated that the park is "one of the most beautiful in the state, includes 1030 acres, with nine falls ranging from 25 to 198 feet in height."^{vii}

The Falls are a result of lava outcroppings which, when cooled, are much harder than the surrounding soil. Silver Creek cuts across the lava and this is what cause the falls.^{viii} The falls "constitute one of the important scenic attractions of Oregon and in ordinary times are visited by large number of sightseers."^{ix} Today, Silver Falls State park is Oregon's largest state park at 9,064 acres.^x

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Endnotes

ⁱ Karen Pleasant, *The Trail of Ten Falls : Silver Creek Canyon* (Oregon: Oregon Department of Transportation, State Parks and Recreation Branch, 1970), 1

ⁱⁱ Lewis A. McArthur and Lewis Ankeny, *Oregon Geographic Names* 7th edition (Portland: Oregon Historical Society Press, 2003), 766-767

ⁱⁱⁱ Lewis A. McArthur and Lewis Ankeny, *Oregon Geographic Names* 7th edition (Portland: Oregon Historical Society Press, 2003), 766-767

^{iv} Janice Marschner, *Oregon 1859: A Snapshot in Time* (Portland: Timber Press, 2008), 179

^v Robert Horace Down, *A History of the Silverton Country* (Portland, Or: Berncliff Press, 1926), 224

^{vi} Janice Marschner, *Oregon 1859: A Snapshot in Time* (Portland: Timber Press, 2008), 179

^{vii} Oregon Historical Society, "News and Comment," *Oregon Historical Society Quarterly* 34, no. 3 (September 1933): 184-185.

^{viii} Karen Pleasant, *The Trail of Ten Falls : Silver Creek Canyon* (Oregon: Oregon Department of Transportation, State Parks and Recreation Branch, 1970), 1

^{ix} Lewis A. McArthur and Lewis Ankeny, *Oregon Geographic Names* 7th edition (Portland: Oregon Historical Society Press, 2003), 766-767

^x Christine Barnes, *A Brief History* (Oregon: Civilian Conservation Corps at SFSP)
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