

SEARCHING FOR POINT LEWIS

Piecing Together the Location of a Lost Landmark

By Allen "Doc" Wesselius

"This point I have taken the Liberty of Calling after my particular friend Lewis....

—Captain William Clark
Tuesday, November 19, 1805

RARELY IN THE annals of military history has shared responsibility of leadership been successful. The Corps of Discovery under the command of Captains Meriwether Lewis and William Clark was an exception, resulting in the first great American exploration across the North American continent. Not only did the co-leadership accomplish an epic survey of the uncharted territory between the Mississippi and Columbia rivers, but the captains were determined to honor one another by naming geographical features to commemorate each other.

In addition to Clark's naming a coastal eminence in recognition of his friend, there are other examples of the two leaders' conferring honorifics upon one another. The two major drainage systems of the Columbia River were named for the explorers that first recorded their existence. In his journal dated August 21, 1805, Clark wrote "I shall in justice to Capt Lewis who was the first white man ever on this fork of the Columbia Call this Louis's river."

Only after further exploration and the gathering of Indian information did

Clark begin to understand the extent of today's Snake River drainage basin. "Lewis's River" was eventually substituted on his charts to name the main southern tributary of the Columbia River. Lewis returned the honor on May 6, 1806, and renamed the main northern tributary of the Columbia River to commemorate his co-leader of the expedition. He recorded the change: "The river here called Clark's river is that which we have heretofore called the Flathead river, I have thus named it in honour of my worthy friend and fellow traveller Capt. Clark." Clark's 1810 map of the West records these names.

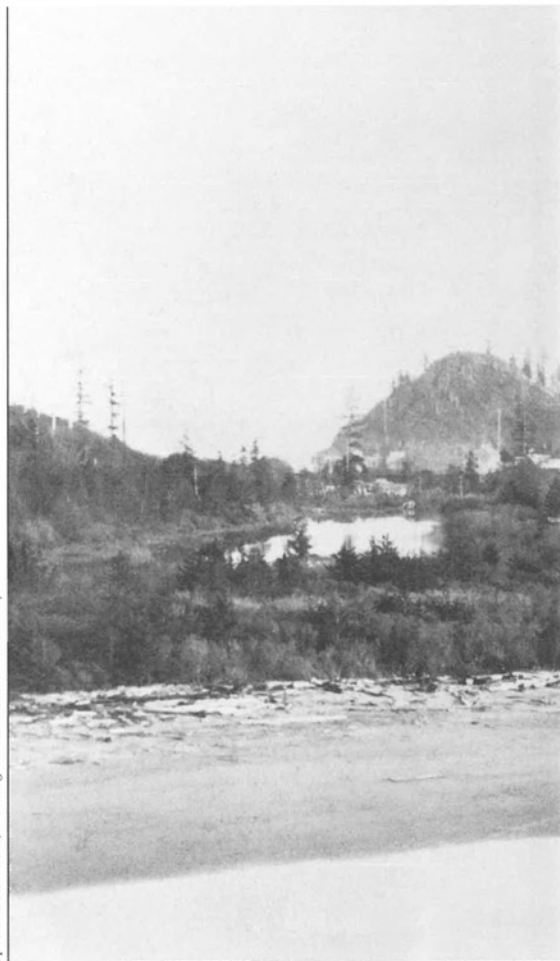
The captains also identified themselves with two coastal features near the mouth of the Columbia River—Clark's Mountain and Point Lewis. The expedition's central objective was to find a commercially practical water route across the North American continent. Reaching the mouth of the Columbia River was one of the goals for the mission. However, identifying themselves with geographical features on the coastline would help establish the extent of their exploration.

Prominent Pacific Northwest coastal geography had already been charted by maritime surveys of several foreign nations. Since the Corps of Discovery was a military expedition sent out by the federal government, Lewis had access

to the most precise and up-to-date maps of the American Northwest then available. While employed as President Jefferson's private secretary, Lewis had used the president's extensive library and collected preliminary intelligence for the mission's topographical preparations. In Philadelphia he traced details of the coastal regions that he thought were the pertinent sections of Captain George Vancouver's 1792 surveys of the Pacific Coast. This information was transferred to a large inclusive map by War Department cartographer Nicholas King, which the explorers carried with them on their expedition.

The base map incorporated all the information that cartographers in the government judged to be valid, and it was therefore the clearest imaginable reflection of the character of extant images of the Northwest prior to the expedition. However, King's Map of 1803 did not contain all the information that Lewis had gathered pertaining to the geography at the mouth of the Columbia River. Other references to British topographical data are found in the corps' field journals. For example, the sketches of Vancouver's surveys are alluded to

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View of the environs of Cape Disappointment, looking south, c. 1890. The outskirts of the town of Ilwaco are visible on the left, and Mackenzie Head is in the right foreground.

in Clark's entry of November 14, 1805. The preliminary sketches traced in the incipient stages of the expedition have not survived; other sources must therefore be relied upon to determine where the captains obtained some of their place names for Pacific coastal features.

Cape Disappointment, the high volcanic extrusion that protrudes into the ocean north of the river, had been named by the British merchant John Meares in 1788. Opposite the rocky headlands of Cape Disappointment lies the low sandy southern peninsula of Point Adams, named in 1792 by the American merchant seaman Robert Gray, who also named the river after his ship, *Columbia Rediviva*. The captains scrupulously used existing place names instead of engaging in wholesale renaming of British topographical information for the sake of American interests. Unfortunately, their legacy was lost with the delayed publication and limited distribution of Nicholas Biddle's narrative, *History of the Expedition under the Command of Captains Lewis and Clark*, in 1814.

Lewis settled the naming of "Clark's Mountain" on January 10, 1806, stating

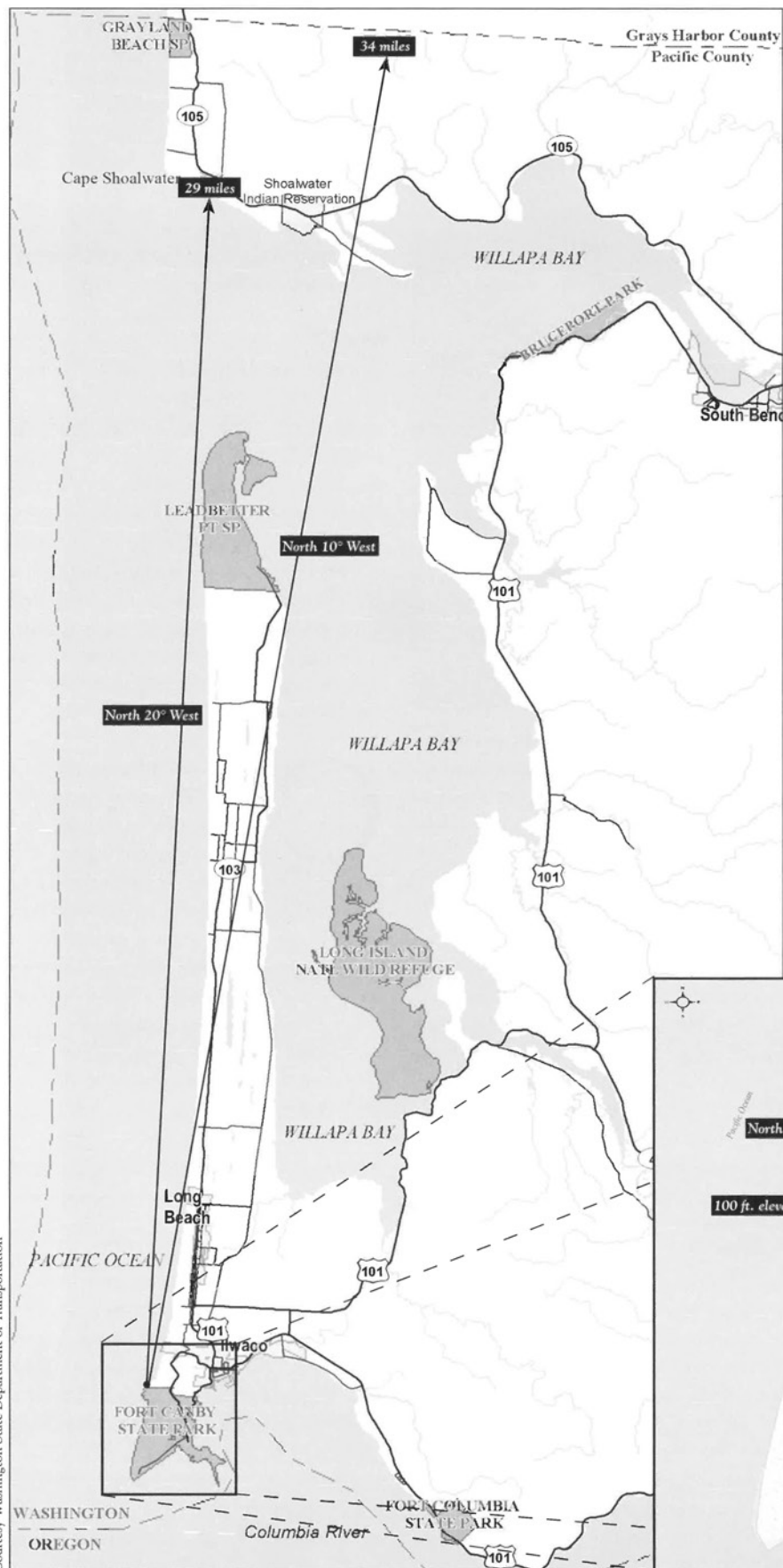
in his journal, "this Mout. I have taken the liberty of naming Clark's Mountain and point of view." At Fort Clatsop Lewis bestowed the honor on Clark after he had explored the seacoast south of the Columbia River and had climbed the mountain. However, until recently the mountain's relationship to the Lewis and Clark expedition was lost when other place names were used to identify the headlands known today as Tillamook Head. In 2002, through efforts by the Oregon Chapter of the Lewis and Clark Trail Heritage Foundation, the United States Board of Geographic Names restored the historical name of the headlands' peak, naming it Clark's Mountain. Clark had first observed these headlands from Cape Disappointment on November 18, 1805, but refrained from naming his discovery after himself. He later used variations of "Point of Clark's view" to identify the mountain's misty profile for his journal entries and on his maps.

"Point Lewis" lost its association with the expedition not only because of the delayed publication of the explorers' journals but also because the exact location of the promontory could not be pinpointed. Early historians,

unfamiliar with the Pacific Northwest, presumed that Clark was referring to either today's North Head, Leadbetter Point, or Cape Shoalwater when he named a geographical feature on the seacoast for Lewis. In 1903, Reuben Gold Thwaites discovered Clark's lost route maps. This additional information aided later scholars in the identification of geographical features noted by the explorers. When attempting to identify the topographical location of "Point Lewis," the original expeditionary documentation must be compared with today's topography. An understanding of late-18th-century maritime terminology also helps in determining the features named by the explorers.

CONFUSION OCCURS around the double meaning of the word "point," used by the captains in reference to some geographical features. In some instances they used the word to describe a particular place or position on a mountain—e.g., "Point of Clark's view." They also used "point" to describe a tapering tract of land extending into the ocean—e.g., Point Adams. The term "cape" was also used to define an extension of land jutting into the ocean. The term could be used to denote the encroachment of highlands upon the seacoast—e.g., Cape Disappointment—as well as to describe extensions of large, low-lying lands into the ocean—e.g., Cape Shoalwater. Both terms—"point" and "cape"—were used to describe the coastline's contour by maritime navigators. These terms become important when trying to identify "Point Lewis" by deciphering the captains' journals and researching their naming of geographical features.

Clark wrote three journal entries for November 19, 1805, the day he explored the Pacific Ocean coastline north of the Columbia River. It was

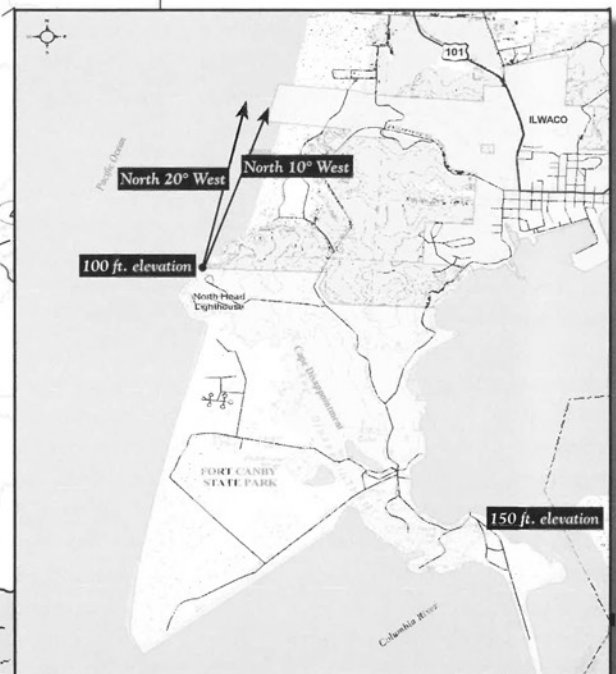


customary for the captains to write field notes that were later transcribed and expounded upon in manuscript form in their notebook journals. Clark's field notes do not include the naming of "Point Lewis" during his exploration, but his extended journal entries do refer to "a Point of high land distant near 20 miles." During the winter of 1805-06 at Fort Clatsop, Clark also compiled an "Estimated Distances" chart that included information on "Point Lewis" and verified his sighting. In winter quarters he constructed a composite map of the corps' exploration that included a section of the coastline north of the mouth of the Columbia River and "Point Lewis." Conclusions drawn here on the identification of "Point Lewis" are based on the corps' original expeditionary documentation and its comparison with today's topographical maps and geographical features.

At Fort Clatsop, Clark had time to contemplate his exploration and return

Figure 1 (left). William Clark's bearings for sighting the landmark he named after his co-captain—a "Point of high land distant near 20 Miles."

Figure 2 (below). Clark's vantage point as determined by aligning geographical features with his compass bearings.



Lewis's favor. Clark's journal entries for November 19, 1805, delineate the route of exploration from Cape Disappointment along a four-mile walk on the seacoast. There is no indication from which elevated vantage point the distant "Point of high land" was first sighted. Clark described his exploration route as, "5 miles on a Direct line to the Commencement of a Sandy Coast which extended N. 10 degrees W. from the top of the hill above the Sand Shore to a Point of high land distant near 20 Miles." From the highlands above the beach he used the next distant eminence to take his compass bearings. Distant mountains can be seen from today's North Head if weather conditions cooperate. These mountains are the "Point of high land" Clark observed along the distant coastline.

Other journal keepers on the sojourn do not report any more insightful information pertaining to the location of "Point Lewis" but do corroborate the weather conditions: "cloudy a light Sprinkling of rain." This is typical of November weather on the Pacific Northwest coast. Such weather limits visibility at sea level. In order for Clark to have observed the distant geographical features, weather conditions must have cleared—a common occurrence the morning following a storm on the coast.

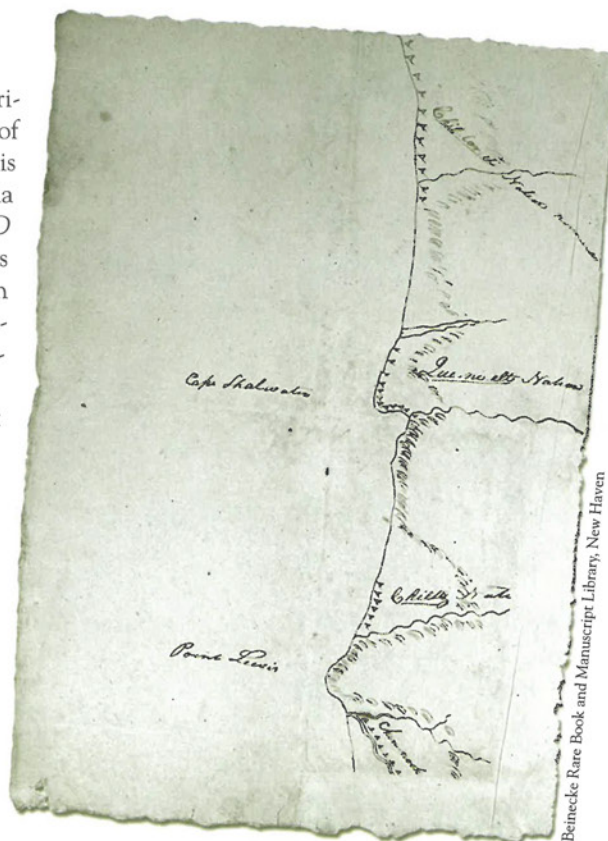
Today, from an elevated position on North Head, the mountains, 35 miles in the distance, can be observed in the Northwest, weather permitting. Like Clark's observation, the extent of Willapa Bay is difficult to make out from this vantage point, below the tree line and only 100 feet above the ocean. Distant geography disappears from sight below the horizon; the curve of the earth's surface blocks the view of the distant sea level bay. Cape Shoalwater, 30 miles from North Head (Figure 1) and below the optical horizon, cannot be seen from the elevated vantage point. The National Geodetic Survey database records 18.87 feet elevation for the vertical control point (benchmark elevation) of Cape Shoalwater. The low coastline to Leadbetter Point is

also hidden below the distant horizon; about 18 miles is the extent of visible sea level geography from this height. The optical horizon formula used was $D = h^2(1+2r/h)$, where D is distance to optical horizon, h is height and r is radius of the earth (8,600 miles). However, the mountains, with their 450-foot elevation, are visible 35 miles away.

Clark's map for the seacoast north of the Columbia River depicts what he observed and does not include a large bay on the seacoast; only a river discharging into the ocean. What is today known as Willapa Bay is described as "low pondy country, maney places open with small ponds." However, he does represent on his map two prominent coastline features extending into the ocean—"Point Lewis" and Cape Shoalwater. The distant "Point of high land" that he observed and named "Point Lewis" is depicted on his map as highlands approaching the seashore. At this point the discrepancy between Clark's map and the actual geography begins, mostly the result of incomplete and inadequate intelligence gathering.

Clark does not give an indication of his place name source for Cape Shoalwater, the second cape on his map. Obviously, he used British topographical information collected by Lewis for the expedition. John Meares had named the coastline feature in 1788 when he explored the coast and also named Cape Disappointment. He used "shoalwater," a descriptive term identifying large deposits of sand that make the ocean shallow, to name the cape and its adjoining bay. Both underwent several name changes before being standardized to their present place names, Cape Shoalwater and Willapa Bay.

Clark's information for the depiction of Cape Shoalwater on his map was obtained from questioning Indians about geography he himself had not explored. His "Estimated Distances" chart ends with the clarification, "Note. 50 miles of the above from the information



Point Lewis on Clark's composite field map. A representation of his understanding of the coastal geography north of the Columbia River.

of Indians." He recorded that Cape Shoalwater was 21 miles north of "Point Lewis" and that "Grays Bay" (today's Grays Harbor) was an additional 19 miles beyond that. Clark's map leaves a concise rendering of his misunderstanding of the coast's geography. The captains did not engage in speculative creation of geography, but they often misunderstood the information they obtained from the Indians.

THE DISCREPANCY between Clark's cartography and modern topographical maps resulted, in part, from a common problem for the explorers. The corps traveled in the Pacific Northwest without the aid of translators through areas where various American Indian linguistic groups spoke many different dialects. Their charts were relatively accurate when the captains themselves collected the information. However, there are several examples of incorrect geographical information derived from



Courtesy Washington State Parks and Recreation Commission

Aerial photograph showing part of the coastline of Cape Disappointment, including North Head (left center).

the misinterpretation of information that Indians tried to convey. The absence of Willapa Bay and the inclusion of a second cape on Clark's map of the seacoast are examples of this misinterpretation. His conjectural map represents the elevated geography he could see in the distance, later expounded upon with information obtained from local Indians.

Including Euro-American topographical information on the corps' route map of the seacoast was also hindered by incomplete intelligence gathered before the expedition left the East Coast. King's Map of 1803 did not contain topographical information on either Cape Shoalwater or Willapa Bay. Vancouver had used "Whidbey's

Harbor" to identify today's Grays Harbor, ignoring names given by both John Meares and Robert Gray. Captain Gray had called the bay "Bulfinch's Harbor." Clark identified geographical features on his map of the coastline by using Cape Shoalwater, a British place name, and adding his American place name, "Point Lewis."

When selecting a prominent geographical feature to name for his co-captain, Clark was faced with the dilemma of having a distant "Point of high land" as the only significant landmark at hand. From his elevated vantage point the panoramic view of the long, sandy beach included the descending foothills of the Coastal Range where it approached the seashore. The eminence, a natural elevation from sea level devoid of a well-defined summit, paled in comparison with the grandeur of either Cape Disappointment or Tillamook Head. He knew that Cape Disappointment was an elevated circular volcanic knob guarding the Columbia River entrance that rose boldly some 150 feet above the ocean. Tillamook Head was a double-peaked, massive volcanic extrusion into the ocean that rose over 1,000 feet above the breakers. "Point Lewis" could only be bestowed on low foothills that he supposed descended to the seashore, similar to other highlands he was familiar with on the Pacific coastline to the south.

THE AMBIGUITY OF Clark's exact location on the "top of the hill above the sand shore" where he sighted the distant "Point of high land" has led to speculation about the location of "Point Lewis." One wonders why Clark did not bequeath his particular friend's name to the headlands from where he viewed the sandy beach and distant mountains. The exact location of Clark's vantage point can be determined by using his two compass bearings from magnetic north and their alignment with geographical features he described (Figure 2).

Geomorphically similar to Cape Disappointment and "Clark's Mountain," the headlands—today's North Head—command a striking panoramic vista of the Pacific seacoast. Sighting over today's Leadbetter Point and Cape Shoalwater, he chose the most distant high point of land to name for his co-captain.

On the northern cliff of North Head, 100 feet above the ocean, Clark's panoramic view can be seen today. An unobstructed view of Long Beach and the distant coastal mountain range is limited to a northern location on the cliff of North Head below the tree line. His dead reckoning of 20 miles to the eminence he observed and used for his compass bearing was short by some 15 miles. Seastrand Ridge is 4 miles inland from Cape Shoalwater's bay shoreline, 30 miles from North Head, and 2 miles from the ocean's coastline. The 1,000-foot North River Divide can, on a clear day, also be seen from Clark's vantage point on North Head.

Cape Shoalwater, as observed by 18th-century maritime navigators, was like a giant sand dune extending the seacoast shoreline into the ocean. The differentiation between the naming of the low-lying sandy cape and the inland mountain ranges was not readily self-evident on most topographical representations of the area. Over time the naming of the two different geographical areas became fused as one entity, known today as Cape Shoalwater. The present naming of the cape represents the survival of names established during the British dominance of the Pacific Northwest fur trading period. Many more geographical features with place names of American and Native American derivations have been included on modern maps of the cape. Unfortunately, there are no references on today's maps to the "Point of high land" named for Captain Lewis of the Corps of Discovery.

Retired veterinarian Allen "Doc" Wesseliuss is a member of the Lewis and Clark Heritage Foundation, president of the foundation's Washington chapter, and a longtime enthusiast of the Corps of Discovery and Pacific Northwest history.

COLUMBIA

The Magazine of Northwest History

A quarterly publication of the

WASHINGTON STATE HISTORICAL SOCIETY

VOLUME EIGHTEEN, NUMBER FOUR

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COVER: "Palouse Falls." This drawing from which this engraving was made probably was made by Gustavus Sohon in 1859. Lieutenant John Mullan, in his official report on the Military Road construction project, describes how Sohon, while the expedition was near the falls, would go off by himself in the evening to do his artwork. Sohon was captivated by the basalt flow, cathedral-like rock formations, and plunge pools. (Special Collections, Washington State Historical Society)