

Park playground: It's really all about the kids

BY MICHELLE LAFAVE

Years ago, when we first began to meet at the park, moms and little ones embraced the afternoon sun and the cooling, calming waters of the Applegate River. The giant metal slide beckoned us to the shade of the big Douglas firs and pines as the heat of the day set in. Around and around the playground the older children raced from the lookout fort to the janky old swings and back to the slide to climb and slide and climb again. Our group of homeschooling families met weekly at Cantrall Buckley Park after Ruch Library Storytime to share in the adventure of raising young children. The park was our classroom, the river our curriculum, the playground games our recess.

We noticed the run-down bathrooms, the broken plastic on the newest piece of equipment (1980s), the dilapidated swings, the sketchy nature of the beloved giant slide, and the lack of fall protection (wood chips) throughout the playground.

When Tom Carstens recruited me for the Cantrall Buckley Park Committee in 2012, I couldn't say no, even though I was plenty busy with two children aged two and five. My heart had already been captivated by the playground's old-school charm and the river's magnetic beauty. The children proved equally enthralled.

I spent a good deal of time talking to families about what changes they would like to see at the playground. Repeatedly, I heard that the children *loved* the slide, the concrete tunnels, the wooden fort, and the rockets. I heard calls for better swings, more climbing opportunities, artistic elements, benches, and natural features such as logs and boulders. Most people loved the playground and did not want to see it wiped clean and modernized. We decided to preserve and

Children enjoy the new playground equipment. Photo: Michelle LaFave.



Ruch School sixth graders spread wood chips at the new playground. Photo: Tom Carstens.



Newest addition to the playground: Carolyn and Jerry Trotman donated their family canoe. Photo: Tom Carstens.

rehabilitate the beloved features of the playground. We spent a long time talking about "naturescapes" and "playscapes" and how to incorporate these elements into the existing playground.

The dilapidated swings and the old play structure have now been replaced with upgraded models—a taller swing set, to allow for more exhilarating heights, and a more challenging, virtually indestructible play structure featuring two slides and multiple climbing opportunities. The classic metal slide that the park committee intended to keep and retrofit ended up being removed by the county, as it could not be brought up to code. This was our greatest loss, and I believe the children, being quite resilient at heart, handled it with grace and understanding when they were presented with a new, faster metal slide as part of the new equipment.

As for artistic elements, the Ford Family Foundation funded an amazing mosaic turtle with a log and boulder playscape that now beckons people of all ages. If you haven't seen it, stop by and take a ride on the turtle's back! As part of the bathroom renovation project, we will be blessed with a community mosaic mural spearheaded by local artist Jeremy Criswell, the same artist who designed the turtle (see his article in the Spring 2015 *Applegater*).

Local support and interest have driven the entire project and provided over half the funding (over \$42,000), with the balance coming from local foundations.

Applegate School students planted western pond turtle habitat along the banks of the river, and Ruch School kids spread wood chips on the playground. Jackson Soil and Water Conservation District provided funding for educational signage. Jackson County donated the new swings, balance beam, and chin-up bars, plus the labor to install the new equipment. Carolyn and Jerry Trotman of Ruch donated the family canoe to be added to the playground.

Thank you to everyone involved—we could not have done it without you! **Join us for the official ribbon-cutting celebration on June 4.**

Michelle LaFave
humbughealers@yahoo.com

History: How Cantrall Buckley Park got started

Pioneers James Buckley and John Cantrall settled along the Applegate River in 1854 and 1865, respectively. The Cantrall and Buckley family farms thrived for a century in the rich soils of the Applegate Valley.

In 1961, Neil Ledward, then assistant director of Lane County Parks, was hired as the first director of Jackson County Parks. Prior to then, Jackson County had no parks. Ledward began perusing properties near water that might serve as public parks. One of those properties was a forested section along the Applegate River owned by John Cantrall's grandson, Harlan Cantrall.

Local families had long used the "Old Cantrall Swimming Hole" for picnicking and swimming. So Judge Earl Miller, chairman of the county commissioners, began negotiating with his friend Harlan to sell part of his family land to the county for use as a park. To entice Harlan, Judge Miller promised to name the park "Cantrall Park." This was enough to bring Harlan on board, so in March 1965, Harlan and Margaret Cantrall sold the county about 25 acres along the Applegate River. The price, about \$1,000 per acre, was fairly high for those days, so the county entered into a four-year payment agreement.

In the meantime, "Pickle" Taylor, another county commissioner, was working on *his* friend Lewis Buckley (James' grandson) to sell the county some land. Separately, he made a deal with Lewis to name the new park "Buckley Park." In April, Lewis and Helen Buckley sold the county eight acres along the river for about the same price as the Cantralls.

What to do? The park name had now been promised to two different families! Ledward scratched his head and decided to combine the two, and that's how the new park came to be called Cantrall Buckley. After that, Ledward set in place new procedures for naming parks that would reflect a park's particular geographical area.

Soon after, the Bureau of Land Management leased an adjoining 12-acre parcel to the county. By the end of that summer, Sadie and J.J. Ossenbrugge had sold another eight acres. And the next January, Marion and Louise Dunlap joined in the fun with a sale of another 1.6 acres. The county now had the beginnings of a substantial new 54-acre park! Ledward set about designing it, keeping over 90 percent of the original trees. That's why we have such a nice, shady park today.

Construction began. Laurence Espey, then chairman of the County Parks and Recreation Commission, organized the Jackson County Youth Work Program based on the successful Civilian Conservation Corps (CCC) of the 1930s. Espey had served as the

youngest CCC supervisor in the nation; he knew how to get this done.

Twenty-eight high-school boys from Jackson County signed up to work in the new park and obtain some job skills in the bargain. There were only two job qualifications: physical fitness and a desire to work. Besides working hard, Espey wanted these young men to understand the need to protect natural resources. They received classes in construction, forestry, fire prevention, recreation, fisheries, and map reading. They worked side by side with county work crews.

There was a lot to do—the big flood of 1964 had left a horrible mess. Electrical, plumbing, water, drainage, irrigation, curbing, and roads had to be put in. Massive amounts of blackberries had to be removed; new plants were bedded. Did you know that a fishing pond and waterfall feature were installed? The boys earned a buck an hour and worked eight hours a day. When they were done, the banks of the Applegate River looked a lot different!

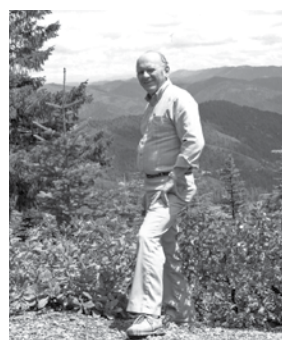
The new park was formally dedicated on July 14, 1968. George Jess, the new chairman of Jackson County Parks Commission, presided over the ceremony. A local National Guard Battalion, the 2nd Brigade of the 414th Regiment in Medford, presented the colors and provided the music. Judge Miller gave the address, but neglected to mention the pioneering efforts of Neil Ledward, who could easily be credited as the "Father of Cantrall Buckley Park."

Ledward took a lot of photos that day. Nobody knows where they are, but our beautiful park lives on thanks to the vision of our county leaders more than 50 years ago.

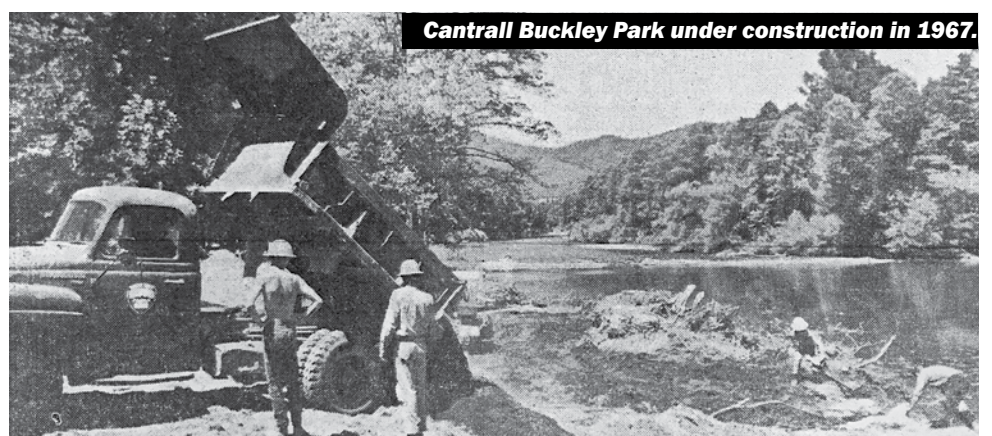
Tom Carstens • 541-846-1025
Postscript: In 1970 Harlan Cantrall sold the county another 34 acres, and the campground was born.



Harlan Cantrall, top, and Lewis Buckley, bottom.



Neil Ledward, first director of public parks for Jackson County.



Cantrall Buckley Park under construction in 1967.