

The History of Search and Rescue in Central Oregon

By Glenn Voelz

It's no exaggeration to say that the tradition of volunteer Search and Rescue (SAR) in Central Oregon is older than the state itself. While the modern acronym - SAR - didn't appear until after World War II, volunteer rescuers have been helping fellow Oregonians in the mountains and wilderness dating back to the territorial era.

The legendary fur trapper and scout Moses "Black" Harris rightfully earns the title of Oregon's first volunteer rescuer for his actions during two of the Oregon Trail's most infamous tragedies. Harris began guiding into Oregon Country in the 1830s and settled in Yamhill County in the mid-1840s. He was traveling through The Dalles in late September 1845 when he volunteered to lead a small party of Indigenous Oregonians from the Wasco band to rescue over a thousand emigrants led by Stephen Meek, stuck on the steep banks of the Deschutes River near present-day Maupin. In the weeks prior, around two dozen of the settlers died during an ill-fated detour through the Harney Basin, suffering from illness and lack of food and water.

Harris and his fellow rescuers arrived with food and provisions and began building a pulley system of wagon beds to ferry the settlers across the river. One observer described Harris' rescue apparatus as "novel in the extreme." The mission lasted nearly two weeks before everyone was safely across the river.



Moses "Black" Harris
Painting by Jacob Miller.
Courtesy of the Walters
Art Museum.

The following year, Harris led a group helping settlers caught in the Calapooya Mountains during an early-season storm in November 1846 - part of the same historic weather system that trapped the Donner Party in the Sierra Nevada mountains to the south. Despite Harris' heroic actions, his reputation suffered because he had promoted the untested route along with Jesse and Lindsay Applegate. Also, as a mixed-race man, his residency in Oregon at the time violated the

territory's Black Exclusion Law of 1844. Harris left the territory the year after his rescue mission in the Calapooya Mountains and died of cholera a few years later in Missouri.

Through the end of the 19th century, Good Samaritans in Central Oregon often risked their lives to help those in need. One of the more famous incidents was the search for the missing postmaster John Templeton Craig during the winter of 1877. Craig left Belknap Springs on snowshoes in December carrying mail heading for Camp Polk, near present-day Sisters. Craig was familiar with the route but left just as a storm hit the mountains. Authorities grew concerned when he didn't arrive at Camp Polk in early January.



John Templeton
Craig memorial
near the summit of
McKenzie Highway

An initial search party set out several weeks later but was forced back after the rescuers suffered snow blindness. A second party of two experienced mountain men struggled through ten feet of snow and eventually made it to a cabin west of McKenzie Pass. Inside the cabin, they found Craig's body curled around a pile of ashes. The rescuers guessed that Craig had pushed through the storm to make it to the cabin, arriving cold and exhausted before falling asleep and succumbing to exposure. Today, a historical marker along the McKenzie Highway can be found near the site where Craig took shelter and died.

Central Oregon's First Rescue Group - The Skyliners Era

In the late 1920s Central Oregon created a formal group performing wilderness search and rescue: Bend's famous ski club, the Skyliners. The club's origin story is famously linked

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Deschutes Historical Museum

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to the search for the climbers Guy Ferry and Henry Cramer, who went missing during an early season snowstorm in the Three Sisters over Labor Day weekend of 1927. The search was one of Oregon's most extensive rescue operations up to that time, involving over one hundred ground searchers, climbers, skiers, and pilots. The mission drew searchers from Eugene, Portland, Bend, Hood River, and The Dalles. For nearly two weeks, Oregonians followed the events in the newspapers.



Skyliners ski club rescue unit during training in early 1930s courtesy of DCHS

The Bend contingent of rescuers included four of Central Oregon's best skiers and mountaineers: Nils Wulfsberg, Emil Nordeen, Nels Skjersaa, and Chris Kostol, collectively known as the "four musketeers of the mountains." After joining the search party, the men set out on a twelve-mile cross-country journey by skis from Frog Camp to the base of Middle Sister. They climbed Middle and South Sisters before returning to camp without finding the young men. Ultimately, the search was unsuccessful and called off after two weeks. The bodies of Ferry and Cramer were found two years later by hikers near Chambers Lake, between South and Middle Sister. Despite the disappointing outcome, Skjersaa and Kostol became the nucleus of the Skyliners' rescue squad that would serve as Central Oregon's unofficial search and rescue unit until the late 1950s.

The Central Oregon Search and Rescue Era

By the late 1950s, the Skyliners decided to refocus their activities on sports education and step back from their search and rescue role. In its place, a separate volunteer organization emerged in the early 1960s, offering a dedicated, multi-purpose search and rescue capability for the region: Central Oregon Search and Rescue (CoSAR).

Around fifty people attended the first organizational session for CoSAR in January 1960, held at the Bend Municipal Airport. Participants included the county's Civil Defense group, the sheriff's office, the Forest Service, members of the Skyliners ski patrol, the High Desert Skin Divers, and a local jeep club. Eventually, CoSAR formed with ten affiliated organizations, each providing its own personnel and equipment. While these groups cooperated with the county sheriff's office for SAR missions, they were not directly under its control and did not receive county funding or equipment.

CoSAR's first mission came just weeks after the group's

formation when an off-duty forester was severely injured during a winter camping trip near Lava Camp Lake, west of Sisters. He couldn't walk after cutting his foot with an axe and losing a great deal of blood. Fortunately, his companion was an experienced alpinist and member of the Obsidians outdoor club. She provided first aid to stop the bleeding and built a hasty shelter where they spent the night as a major storm hit the Cascades. She skied ten miles back to Sisters to alert the authorities, arriving late in the evening. Due to darkness

and blizzard conditions, the rescue team waited until the next morning to deploy. The following day, the team reached the injured man using a snow tractor owned by the state game department and evacuated him back to Sisters. The rescuers credited his courageous companion with saving his life.

During CoSAR's first year, it performed over a dozen missions involving fourteen people. CoSAR continued to operate as an informal group of volunteers through the early 1960s until it was no longer able to meet the growing demand for SAR services in Central Oregon. That left Deschutes County without a dedicated SAR unit by the end of the 1960s when the sheriff had to request assistance from Willamette Valley SAR units for Deschutes County calls.

The issue came to a head in 1970 when a private helicopter was used to evacuate an injured hiker from Broken Top in the Three Sisters, violating Forest Service prohibitions on motorized vehicles operating in a wilderness area. Deputy Sheriff Chris Williams called for a dedicated SAR team to serve Deschutes County, and vented his frustration over the situation in the pages of *The Bulletin*, noting that when SAR was needed in Central Oregon, "there was no one to take command, no organized group to function automatically, no specifically trained volunteers."

The Deschutes County Sheriff's Office Search and Rescue Era

In July 1970, the Deschutes County Commissioners, the sheriff's office, and the Department of Emergency Services met to discuss establishing a formal SAR group under the sheriff's office. Deputy Williams called the local jeep, equestrian, and snowmobile clubs to the first organizational meeting, leading to the formation of Deschutes County Search and Rescue (DCSOSAR) in September 1970.

Under the authority of the sheriff's office, the group gained

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Map and Document of the Quarter

The October – December 2025 Document of the Quarter is an old sign that says strangers must provide a fingerprint to cash a check in Bend. If anyone knows what years this was enforced, let the museum know, and we'll add an explanation to the display.

The Map of the Quarter is *Indian Tribes and Languages of the Old Oregon Country*, which was published by the Oregon Historical Society in 1958. It is based on information compiled by Claude Schaeffer, a prominent ethnologist. Part of the map shows the extent of the Wasco, Northern Paiute, and Tenino tribes that make up the Warm Springs Confederation.

access to supplies, funding, and equipment previously unavailable to the unaffiliated groups under CoSAR. Williams obtained \$60,000 in surplus military equipment from the federal government, including six jeeps, four all-terrain vehicles, a one-hundred-kilowatt generator, a mobile command truck, and a military field kitchen unit. In addition to government funding and equipment, the new organization could request state support for air operations via the sheriff's office, reimbursement for aviation fuel, and accident insurance for pilots and aerial observers.

Within the unit's first year, the new organization faced a dramatic mission that made headlines across the county. At the end of August 1971, three young women, aged 17, 18, and 21, departed the Pole Creek trailhead West of Sisters, heading out on their capstone exercise for an Outward Bound survival course. The three women were assigned a 35-mile route through Three Sisters Wilderness, crossing the Cascade Crest and ending at Cougar Reservoir south of the McKenzie Highway. As with the 1927 tragedy that led to the creation of the Skyliners, an unexpected early-season storm brought cold temperatures, rain, and snow to the mountains during the Labor Day weekend.

The Outward Bound party reached the Chambers Lakes basin on Monday, August 30, with weather soaking their clothing and gear. The three women remained there Tuesday and Wednesday in camp, trying to keep warm. Cold temperatures and snow continued into Thursday, September 2 as the women spent another day trapped in camp. The Outward Bound staff began internal notifications when the group was reported as overdue. The women tried to leave camp, hoping to make it over the Cascade Crest, but one member of the party was hypothermic and unable to continue, so they returned to camp.

On Friday, September 3, one woman left camp to find help while the other two remained behind. Sometime later that day, the hypothermic woman died of exposure. The surviving woman followed the tracks of the woman who left the day before and eventually found her a short distance away, alive but struggling in the snow. That night, the two surviving women huddled together for warmth, but the one who had gone to find help became unresponsive sometime that night.

By Saturday, September 4, Outward Bound instructors began searching the trails between Soap Creek and Camp Lake, hoping to find the women. An instructor discovered the lone surviving student asleep in a hasty camp near Chambers Lake, not far from the body of her companion. The instructor and woman walked out together and reached the trailhead late that evening. They alerted the authorities about the suspected fatalities.

Starting early the next morning, Deputy Chris Williams, who helped establish DCSOSAR the previous year, assumed command of the search operation. DCSOSAR horse and ground teams began moving toward Chambers Lakes hoping to find the two missing women. Later in the afternoon, an Army National Guard helicopter was able to land near Chambers Lake and recover one woman's body. The ground search teams covered 14 miles of rugged terrain, but didn't find the third woman. On Monday, September 6, around 50 SAR members from Lane County took over operations from the exhausted Deschutes County searchers. On Tuesday, September 7 the team located the body of the last woman not far from the group's final camp near Chambers Lake. Her remains were flown out by helicopter later that day.

Despite the heartbreaking outcome, media reports praised the hard work of the search teams. The 1971 operation was eerily reminiscent of the mission leading to the creation of the Skyliners forty-four years earlier. Both began with a storm hitting the Cascades during Labor Day week. The two young women from the Outward Bound group died at the same spot and time of year as the two young climbers during the famous 1927 search.

Central Oregon's Long Legacy of Volunteer Search and Rescue

Since the territorial era, volunteer rescuers have ventured into the mountains and



Modern unit of DCSOSAR evacuating hiker from Misery Ridge at Smith Rock State Park. Courtesy of DCSOSAR

wilderness of Central Oregon to assist their neighbors when called upon. Deschutes County has had organized SAR groups for nearly a century, starting with the Skyliners ski club in the 1920s and continuing to this day. With the growing popularity of outdoor recreation and the region's bustling tourism economy, there is greater demand than ever for search and rescue in Central Oregon. Today, Deschutes County SAR provides professional, high-quality search and rescue for the citizens of Central Oregon and visitors.



Search area map for Outward Bound students. Courtesy of DCHS and The Bulletin.

Memorials

Don Rooper

Darla and Jerry Rozelle

Sheila Kelly

Andrea Hunnell-DuPree

Tributes

Ralph C. Curtis

Jean Rotter

Christopher Smith

Kathy Sabatier