

## **Intro**

The Eugene Millrace was once a source of power and innovation in. Built by the earliest settlers, it was the beginning of a thriving town that quickly evolved into a city. Over one hundred years later, it is now a dumpsite for trash and has little significance on campus or in the surrounding community. The wing dam that was used to transfer water from the river to the Millrace broke in 1940, which corresponds to the first year of World War Two. The war caused people to focus on aspects of life other than recreation, and soon the Millrace was mostly forgotten. Once overflowing with boats and college students, the stream now lacks water most of the year and is covered with abandoned litter. This paper analyzes the environmental movement of the United States and how it relates to the decline of a once great feature of Eugene. I also address the benefits and drawbacks of revitalizing the Millrace, or allowing it to rewild.

## **History of the Millrace**

The Millrace was conceived when Hilyard Shaw looked upon two sloughs from Judkin's Point and decided to combine them to create a race that would benefit industrialization (Muller et. all, 1). The birth of the Millrace established an opportunity for economic growth because it brought water to mills that were built on the banks beginning in 1856. Similar to any industrial boom, these events sparked an increase in the Eugene population and very quickly the town transitioned into a city. While the extension of the railroad in 1871 was a key ingredient for connecting Eugene to the rest of the country, the establishment of the University of Oregon in 1876 ultimately put it on the map.

During this time of rapid growth, the Millrace was still seen as an economic resource over anything else. It was not until the frigid winter of 1886 that people began using it for recreation as well. That year the Millrace froze over so children and adults alike flocked to it for

ice skating. The freeze came at a convenient time when people were moving to Eugene in large numbers and families with more money were spending it on larger houses and ultimately recreational activities. Quickly the Millrace was used less for monetary purposes and more for enjoyment. In 1906 F.L. Chambers erected the first boat house which still exists today. It was built to provide students and community members with canoes to ride on the Millrace and to further its use for leisurely purposes. Up until the 1940s, the people recreated on the banks and in the water with parade events and significant days for celebrating the university and the city of Eugene itself. However, at the turn of the decade a large flood broke the diversion dam that had been put in place to ensure water flow in the Millrace. After it was destroyed, the Millrace ran dry. This occurred almost simultaneously with the start of world War Two when people began thinking about other things, meaning the area was mostly forgotten. <sup>1</sup>

Despite all of this, the 1950s were a hopeful time for the Millrace. The city purchased the main stretch and attempted to fix the diversion dam. The first canoe day was held since the beginning of the war, in hopes of renewing interest in the stream. Soon after that, the water level decreased too much for any use, but students quickly took it upon themselves to create committees and clean up days to hopefully return the Millrace to its previous glory. An editorial was published in *The Daily Emerald* on May 26, 1955 that praised the great work done by the ASUO with regards to restoring the Millrace, “Chances look good for an eventual restoration, better than they have since the abandonment of the ‘Race. Spurred by the Canoe Fete, the committee realizes that it can and must get action- that no amount of talk and study will accomplish what action will,” (‘Race Restoration, 1955). It was clear that the citizens of Eugene

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<sup>1</sup> The research from the beginning of the section “History of the Millrace” was all collected from the Muller source, although I only cited it once in the first paragraph. Nothing is a direct quote, rather my rewording of the events.

were determined to recreate on the Millrace once more. The common goal gave a lot of people something exciting to look forward to and something to work on together.

On February 17, 1956, a year after that editorial was published, another article was on the front page of *The Daily Emerald* with more good news. The city was willing to work with the university directly for the restoration of the Millrace. While there was potential for opposition, the students were optimistic, “the negotiations between the University and the city should result in a workable, binding contract between the two parties for maintenance of the stream,” (‘Race Restoration, 1956). The renewal of the once-beloved stream seemed probable; people were agreeing on ideas and making progress.

While these events brought great hope to many people, they did not last long. The 50s were a decade focused more on consumption and less on protecting the environment or preventing pollution. Although the Millrace is in a town that is now seen as incredibly environmentally friendly, at the time that was not the case. After a few futile attempts at restoration, the Millrace was left alone once again.

### **Decline of Millrace**

A few months after the final positive article was published, more issues began to arise and the citizens of Eugene became frustrated with the majority of the student body that was taking advantage of the Millrace and acting as if they had no interest in keeping it clean for everyone to enjoy. On May 22, 1956 an article in *The Daily Emerald* told the story of a girl that was thrown in the waters of the Millrace after a tug of war competition. It came as a surprise to many because it occurred after multiple efforts for cleanup had taken place. However, it also acted as a wake up call because it highlighted the fact that not enough students were taking the

restoration seriously, “as long as students insist on using the Millrace as a receptacle for empty beer bottles and other trash, serious injuries are possible,” (‘Race, Bottles and Girls, 1956). The fight for the Millrace connects to the larger environmental movement in Eugene and the United States because it shows that if people do not have the same goals or are not willing to compromise, there will be little to no progress. It was disappointing for many to see the decline of the Millrace but it was clear that if not enough people wanted to use it correctly, it could not be used at all.

More than a decade later there were still articles being published about the state of the Millrace. Clearly the stream, or small trickle of water, was not going to be completely forgotten even when the students originally working on the restoration were long ago graduated. In 1969 it was noticed that very few ducks were living in the holding pond, or any parts of the Millrace for that matter. Workers from the physical plant on the east end of the stream decided to pool some money and purchase a few mallard drakes and hens. The hens laid eggs a few weeks later and the ducklings seemed to be growing healthily. However, overnight they all disappeared and it was concluded that they were killed by young students that were canoeing in the area that day (Ducks Disappear from Millrace, 1969). It is unfortunate that any revival efforts are met with malicious opposition.

A few aspects need to be taken into consideration when thinking about the decline of the Millrace. While it is true that not a sufficient amount of students cared about restoration, upon analyzation of the times it could be chalked up to more than that. In the year that the article about the ducks was published, people were beginning to think that the pollution of the planet was so bad that the world might end. A problem as large as that would seem overwhelming, making

trash in a local stream pale in comparison. While I am not arguing that this would make the Millrace insignificant, I do think that it adds a layer to the topic that should be investigated more thoroughly. To add more context to the issue, the following section discusses World War Two and how it related to the environment, Eugene, and the Millrace.

## **World War II**

World War Two signified a large change in the view of the environment around the world and especially in the United States. Before the war there was not a significant discourse about the environment, in fact that word was not even widely acknowledged. The prevailing mindset focused on conserving resources and using the natural world to benefit the most amount of people for the longest; exactly what Pinchot wished for when he was creating the National Forest Service in 1905. It was easy to assume during this time that the natural resources were endless and that our technology would never be able to exhaust them (Government and Environmental Politics, 1992).

The end of World War Two brought a great amount of change, as would be expected. Middle class families had enough money to spend unnecessarily and soon overconsumption became a huge issue. The rapid economic growth due to industrialization made the people richer but it also took a huge toll on the environment. By the very end of the 1950s, citizens of the United States began recognizing the impacts of pollution after the air in some big cities was so bad that people died and were forced to stay inside (Government and Environmental Politics, 1992). While it could have occurred earlier, this realization happened during a time of great political unrest, which created a scene for people to better stand up for what they believed in. In Eugene, this became apparent with the advent of OSPIRG (Oregon Student Public Interest

Research Group), where students were given the tools to protest the Vietnam War. With this political activism platform it was not long before a new campaign was born, demanding more local efforts to curb consumption and increase protection of the planet and its natural resources. More environmental groups popped up at the beginning of the decade, and their memberships exploded in size within the next ten years. <sup>2</sup>

After the war, people flooded to Eugene to receive an education at the University of Oregon. Between 1940 and 1950 the population increased from 20,828 to 35,879, an increase of 72% (Wright & Pinyerd, 2003). While this meant great things for the school, it happened so rapidly that the environment in the city declined. Due to the large influx in industrialization, more people became aware of the negative consequences and therefore became involved in the movement. This is where the transition from protecting resources to protecting the environment became more clear. Because people were dirtying the environment so much more than in the past, they were forced to face reality and do something about it. With more public consciousness, the political and environmental movement of the 1960s and 1970s began.

### **The Environmental Movement**

The conservation and preservation movements started between 1890 and 1920 lead by John Muir and Gifford Pinchot. Scientific management was used for both, especially conservation. He was one of the first educated foresters from Europe to begin the discussion about the fair allocation and use of the country's limited natural resources. Pinchot began an important movement by bringing education into the environmental discourse<sup>3</sup>, which is a direct

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<sup>2</sup> Similar to the first part of this paper, the information for the beginning of the Word War Two section was pulled from the *Government and Environmental Politics* source, however I only cited it once in the first paragraph.

<sup>3</sup> Miller, Char source

connection to the environmental movement in Eugene and ultimately on the U of O campus in relation to the Millrace.

The conservation movement, which was the predecessor of the environmental movement, was unlike what is seen today. It was more focused on natural resources and landscapes and less on how people interacted with those two things. In 1954 Greg McConnell, founding board member of the North Cascade Conservation Council, described the conservation movement of the time as “small, divided, and frequently uncertain,” (Mitchell, 82). This lack of organization that McConnell spoke about was most likely a consequence of a lack of knowledge about the natural world, but also due to the post-war income increase that many families experienced. Meaning, at this time the vast majority of American citizens were strong believers of consumerism and chasing the American Dream. It was not until after this decade, at the beginning of the 1960s, that people began thinking more broadly about the environment and not only how the natural world worked, but how human intervention was affecting it. The general public began thinking more about human health in relation to the environment. This switch in consciousness and “willingness to acknowledge the dark side of the American Dream,” (Mitchell, 82) was the jumpstart for many environmental groups.

Most authors writing about the environmental movement cite Rachel Carson as the whistleblower. Her book *Silent Spring* chronicled the effects of DDT on humans and animals. While her book was based in science and spoke about factual consequences of pesticide use, it did more than just inform the masses. In his essay “From Conservation to Environmental Movement,” Robert Cameron Mitchell wrote about the cultural consequences that resulted from the book, “she called into question the prevailing assumption about the relationship between

humans and nature by pitting a control-of-nature perspective against an ecological approach,” (Mitchell, 87). Carson’s book was only the beginning. Once the story was picked up by the press, the events were quickly brought to the courts, where even more action started. The Environmental Defense Fund (EDF) began in 1967 and was popularized by its work with the case that was attempting to ban DDT. This marked the advent of a new era; the switch from the conservation movement to the environmental movement. Quickly, large amounts of people that wanted to protect the planet were congregating. Groups that had been around for decades such as the Sierra Club (1892), the National Audubon Society (1905), and the National Parks and Conservation Association (1919) were amassing members at astronomical rates. The end of the 1960s marked the birth of many things, including the 1970s, which would later be named the Environmental Decade. <sup>4</sup>

While it may seem that in present day personal actions mean a great deal in regards to the fight for the environment, at the beginning of the movement it was important to be a part of a group. Most of the political work and lobbying was happening within these organizations and associations. The groups acted as a buffer between common citizens and the legal individuals inhabiting the courts. This tactic allowed more people to join in the fight and also merged environmental advocacy and politics. It was in this place that students, just like those of the University of Oregon, were allowed to get their voices heard and to make a difference. The positive pursuits for cleaning the Millrace could be seen as the same kind of experience. When students collaborated on restoration events they were more successful. One example is a sanitation day that was praised in a *Daily Emerald* article published on February 23, 1970. The

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<sup>4</sup> *Government and Environmental Politics*



affair included not only, “the biggest group yet working to clear the stream,” (The Cleaning of the Millrace, 1970) but also the efforts of the physical plant, the Outdoor Program, and the students of a class called “Can Man Survive?” This is a great example of how power comes from numbers and determination to make a difference, no matter how small.

The modern environmental movement began in the 1960s when the signs of degradation were too obvious to ignore. The decrease in air quality and biodiversity and the increase in trash and pollution forced people to acknowledge the human actions that had led to this point. A large movement was born that became apparent in many countries around the world, including the United States. The difficult thing to keep in mind is that although more people were paying attention and attempting to make a difference, the actions of many did not change. In fact, the consumption of oils, plastics, and other pollutants by Americans has only increased since then.

In the 1960s and into the 70s, grassroots activism and political pressure made a huge difference. The first Earth Day was a global movement on April 22, 1970. It sparked a myriad of reactions among individuals and universities, but ultimately brought a great amount of attention to the cause. Large college towns were the epicenters of the action not only because of the larger populations, but also because they were locations for political movements at the time. One article from 1970 in the *Register Guard* praised the Americans that came together to protect the planet, “Americans marched, rallied, and demonstrated on Wednesday for a cleaner Earth. There was some heckling and rowdyism but the overwhelming majority - a mixture of congressmen, militants, businessmen, housewives and hippies - reflected a sense of unity,” (Hundreds of Thousands etc., 1970). As one might assume, Eugene was no different with regards to this kind of positive congregation.

## **Environmental Movement in Eugene**

Today, Eugene is seen as a very green and environmentally friendly city. The copious amounts of trees and bike paths paint the picture of a sustainable place where the residents care about nature. While this may be true now, it was not always the case. Just like any town, there was a lot of pollution during the developmental stages of Eugene. Industrialization may have plentiful economic benefits, but the negative consequences for the environment are extensive. With all of that said, poor water and air quality of the 1950s forced people to take action and to create new avenues for protecting nature (Wright and Pinyerd, 2003). Student activism became a large part of the University of Oregon's identity. This seems like it would lend itself well to protecting the Millrace. However, during the time that many students were fighting against war, pollution, and waste, the Millrace was getting dirtier and dirtier. To better understand the paradox that is here, I have included some information about the environmental history of Eugene.

Student activism was actually most apparent at the University of Oregon in the sixties and seventies, in the form of protests against the Vietnam War. While this was a huge part of the political involvement of students on campus, it brought to attention many other issues such as environmental degradation. On December 9, 1972 an article was published in the *Register Guard*, reviewing an event about student activism that had happened on the U of O campus. The speaker was amazed by the students and the social change they were making. She was quoted talking about the calm demeanor of the activists on campus and said it was not apathy but rather, "a new level of maturity and shows a deeper understanding of what is involved in political and social change," (Activism Lauded by UO Speaker, 1972). This is just one example of what was

happening on campus but if we pan out and take a look at the city the same thing was also happening in the larger part of Eugene. Two years earlier another article was published in the Register Guard about the environmental council that was being erected. The goal of the council was cited as “to save Oregon’s legendary beauty and environmental quality,” (Eugenean Cites etc., 1970). This shows that people were truly invested in protecting the environment that they lived, worked, and played in.

It would seem obvious that pupils worried about a world that was getting dirtier would care about the nature being trashed in their own backyard, but that was hardly the case. While some people fought very hard to clean up the Millrace, it was not enough and the disregard that most people felt overcame the attempts to revitalize the stream.

Although Earth Day was an international movement, it brought great excitement to the city of Eugene. On that day there were multiple rallies and speakers at event, including a speech by the governor Tom McCall and his colleague. In an article written by Dan Wyant in *The Register Guard*, McCall was quoted speaking about the day and what needed to happen while moving forward. While there were many warnings about pollution wiping out humanity, he said, “[I look] not to death of man but to the transfiguration of man as man learns to live with nature,” (Pearl, McCall Talk Highlights Earth Day, 1970). He went on to talk about his dedication to halting pollution if reelected. This was a significant moment for the city of Eugene because it showed not only the dedication of the citizens to the fight against environmental degradation, but it also showed a leader that was passionate about making a difference and saving the earth’s finite natural resources.

McCall was not the only person to demand a change in the way that people were interacting with nature at the time. During a speech at Mac Court, a former resident of Eugene and peace corp director, Willi Unsoeld, chastised the consumer mindset of Americans and called for individual action. He was quoted saying, “Western man in his relation to nature is going to have to undergo a severe alteration. The concept of man involved in a struggle with nature and totally dominant over all living things must change,” (Mac Court Audience etc., 1970). While Unsoeld was talking about the earth as a whole in this quote, it is relevant to the Millrace because it highlights the fact that people had little success living with nature if the end goal was to dominate it.

Thousands of universities and millions of people across the country came together to celebrate the earth and to create a platform for protecting it. While it was a significant event that grabbed the attention of many, the effects seemed to wear off quickly. No other Earth Day has ever been as big, despite the fact that environmental ills are getting worse every year. It was glamorous to wear a green shirt and recycle for one day, but making an actual lifestyle alteration was clearly more difficult. The students in Eugene remained positive about activism and environmental change. However, consumption continued to increase and the pollution of the Millrace got worse.

It is here that the paradox becomes quite apparent. People clearly care about the environment, especially in a place such as Eugene. The unfortunate fact of the matter is that the dirty planet as a whole is an incredibly overwhelming topic. Not much will come from a small group if the majority is focused on other things. The Millrace can be seen as a metaphor for the

larger environmental movement. If the issue becomes so big that it almost seems insurmountable, people are more likely to lose motivation.

There is another event to consider when making predictions about why exactly there was not much effort put into restoration. During the 1970s, so after the first Earth and during the ripple effects of that experience, the people of Eugene realized the grave state of the Willamette River. Multiple industries had their waste flowing directly into the river, making it more polluted than most bodies of water in the country (Habitat Technical etc., 2015). Sparked by the environmental initiatives that were taking place during this decade, enough citizens congregated and decided to clean the river. Through the means of cleaning trash and transferring the industrial pollution to other places, the project was a success.

This story can be viewed from two perspectives. For one, it highlights a great example of how group efforts and determination can make a large difference. However, it also shows a potential reason that less attention was paid to the Millrace. People were focused on the river and therefore had less time and fewer resources to put toward other projects. Whichever way one looks at the situation, it can be a positive outlook for the Millrace. While it may have been forgotten in the past for a myriad of reasons, there is still hope for restoration because of the successful track record and abundant resources that could be utilized.

### **Conclusion/ Analysis**

While there were many important factors in laying out the timeline of the Millrace, one thing is clear. Besides the five year span of World War Two, there were always plenty of resources for cleaning and maintaining the stream. Not only physical supplies like the canoes provided by the Outdoor Program and safety equipment from the power plant, but also emotional

support from the surrounding community. The University served as a home for student activism; whether it be for social justice, environmental rights, or anything in between. With all of that said, from the time of its downfall in 1940, revitalization endeavors have never been wholly successful.

I concur that this is because of how fast the time scale was between when people realized human actions were harming the environment, and when they came to the conclusion that something serious needed to be done about it. Eugene was a great place to find like-minded people to protect the planet, but therefore it was also an easy place to get swept up in the movement and to forget about the local issue at hand. When humans are fearful of a certain outcome, it is nature to hide from the threatening cause in attempt to avoid it all together. In this case it would be the worsening conditions of the environment, manifested in the stream that was in the backyard of many Eugene citizens.

When facing an extensive issue such as this, breaking the process into steps is often helpful. This can be seen with the Millrace as well. Rather than looking at is a one extensive body of water in the need of cleaning and restoring everywhere, it may be more helpful to think about it in sections. Such as, focusing on individual stretches at a time for removing trash, reworking the banks to hold water better or marking areas better as no littering allowed.

If the Millrace is cleaned by a group effort of students and Eugeneans alike there is a chance that positive consequences will be seen in other aspects of the local environment as well. An organized body of people can make a difference. It only takes one leader and many followers. If enough people see positive and tangible change in something local like the Millrace they will become more motivated to put in effort to other things. No time is better than now to practice

divesting from pollutive practices such as consuming oil and plastic. The Millrace is the quintessential place to begin these methods.

The Millrace has a range of possible fates looking into the future. Nothing could change and it could continue on as a stream with little to no water and a place to put trash. Another option is to clean it up once and for all and allow it to rewild and become a habitat for many living creatures free from the dangers of pollution and debris. Or, after cleanup, it could also be turned into a place where people can recreate just like the glory days in swimsuits and canoes with lawn blankets and picnics. Whichever alternative is chosen, cleaning is clearly important. No natural place should be inundated with unwanted plastic items.

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