Crater Lake
By Dennis Powers

The first non-Native American to view Crater Lake is generally credited to John Wesley Hillman, a California prospector who was searching for the fabled "Lost Cabin Mine." Speculated to be in Southern Oregon, the story held that attacking Indians had forced the four California owners to bury their hoard of gold. Although the sole survivor mentioned a few landmarks, the cabin and buried treasure had never been found. Hillman rode his mule on June 12, 1853, to a rim, where if it hadn't stopped a few feet from the edge, he would have pitched over to his death. As his group marveled at the sight, a vote on its name was taken between "Mysterious Lake" and "Deep Blue Lake" with the latter chosen. The discovery was also referred later as "Lake Mystery."

Created after a violent eruption of an ancient volcano, Crater Lake formed 7,700 years ago by an explosion 42 times as powerful as the 1980 Mount St. Helens eruption. The mountain then was 10,000 to 12,000 feet high and later named Mount Mazama. When the top 5,000 feet of the volcano collapsed from the lava that exploded out, a basin or caldera formed. When the lava flows sealed its bottom, the subsequent rainfall and snow melt over countless years filled this with 4.6 trillion gallons of water. The collapsed basin is roughly 3.7 by 5.5 miles, and the ash settled in a distinct layer over several thousand square miles.

Thus, the deepest lake in the United States was formed at 1932 feet--and the seventh deepest in the world—that today is half-filled with water. A small volcanic island named Wizard Island is on the lake's west side. Surrounded by black, volcanic lava blocks, its cinder cone rises 760 feet above the lake with a small crater at the summit. The lake's water is so clear that it holds a world-clarity record of 142 feet. The dramatic deep-blue color is due to its great depth, water clarity, and the way light interacts with water. Water molecules absorb the longer wavelengths of light better (reds, oranges, yellows, and greens). Shorter wavelengths (blues) are more easily scattered than soaked up. In the deep lake, some of the scattered blue light is redirected back to the surface where the color is visible.

Peter Britt took the first surviving picture of Crater Lake in 1874; in 1902, President Roosevelt signed the law making Crater Lake the 6th National Park that now contains over 183,000 acres. The 33-mile Rim Drive around Crater Lake is two-lanes with scenic overlooks. From mid-October until mid-June, the north entrance and Rim Drive are closed due to deep snow and ice buildups, although the lake rarely freezes over. Although visitors can fish (non-native Rainbows Trout and Kokanee Salmon) and swim, the surface water is cold but "warms" up in the summer to 55° to 60°. The "yellow stuff" floating in the water at that time is simply pine pollen that settles later to the bottom. More visitors from California than from Oregon visit, and the total visitation numbers some one-half million people every year.

Sources: NPS, Crater Lake, "Frequently Asked Questions," at "Q and A" on Crater Lake; Stephen R. Mark, "Oregon Encyclopedia: Crater Lake National Park," at More (With Images); "Crater Lake Institute: John Wesley Hillman," at Discovery of Crater Lake.