

Bill Monroe's column: Opal Creek offers amazing experience and easy access



**by Bill Monroe,
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Stealth is required when Tom Atiyeh, son of former governor Victor Atiyeh, fishes some of Opal Creek's clearest and quietest fishing holes.

LYONS -- There is a place in Oregon not too far from anywhere else where you can enter a wilderness by stepping from a car. A few yards past the locked gate and around the corner is a 1,000-year-

old tree (it's been officially aged), and less than a mile beyond is a winch from the battleship [USS Oregon](#), left in place decades ago when the mining ran out.

The road to Jawbone Flats in the [Opal Creek Wilderness Area](#) climbs a benign 200 feet in three miles. At nearly every turn are excellent campsites nestled in deep, luxurious moss. Down a steep embankment, in the Little North Fork Santiam River, the water is Crater Lake-clear.

And cold enough that brook and rainbow trout flourish, turning, finning, rising to each errant insect. It's a beginning fly-fisher's dream -- rising trout, easily seen, comfortable camping available by hike, bike and horse. "I actually caught a 12-incher last night," Tom Atiyeh said last week. "It surprised me because most of the fish are smaller."

Atiyeh, 62, is the son of former governor Victor Atiyeh, also a fly-fisherman, whom I joined for a story early in my career when he was running for re-election. We spent that trip on the elder Atiyeh's favorite waters, the Deschutes River.

Tom Atiyeh said he prefers the smaller, crystalline purity of Opal and Battle Axe creeks and, after they come together, the Little North Fork Santiam. "It's very quiet here," he said. "Just you and the water and the forest."



In his hand was a split bamboo fly rod (remember those?), handcrafted for him by his father in 1951, initialed by his father and labeled "Tiger." "It's an heirloom for me now," Atiyeh said. "I rarely bring it out, although I caught that 12-incher on it."

Father and son share a legacy of fly-fishing, and the Atiyeh roots in Opal Creek go far deeper.

Gold was discovered in the area in 1859 (a few flecks remain, Atiyeh said, for those who like to pan recreationally), and by the early 1900s, silver, lead and zinc were found as well.

James P. Hewitt, Atiyeh's grandfather, built the "Jawbone Flats" mining camp in 1928. The name Jawbone refers to what women of the time did when the men went to work for the day.

Atiyeh spent much of his childhood there, camping with the family, fishing the creeks, picking huckleberries and watching butterflies light on his fingers (they still do). And on a warm day last week, as he did as a

kid, Atiyeh stripped to his bathing suit for a cool dip down the "Butt Slide," a natural groove worn into the granite by the river about halfway between the camp and the trailhead.

Today, he is executive director of the 15-acre [Opal Creek Ancient Forest Center](#), a year-round, fully self-contained environmental education center and a frequent destination for families who want to rent one of the center's few cabins.

Information and directions to the center -- visitors are welcome -- are at www.opalcreek.org. (Caution: Get a parking permit at the trailhead for \$5 or pay \$125 for the parking fine issued by the U.S. Forest Service.)

"We're totally off the grid," Atiyeh said. Solar power supports the center's new learning center, donated by Paul Allen, and a modern hydropower generator taps the energy of a 300-foot drop in water from Battle Axe Creek for electricity to Jawbone Flats. There's even a self-composting outhouse.

The center receives thousands of visitors a year, those passing by on the trail down main street as well as youngsters and teachers being taught valuable environmental lessons.

Call ahead and you might even be able to reserve a place at the lunch table, where cook Rebekah Yglesias makes the most ardent meat-eater appreciate vegetarian meals (electricity in the center is too important to waste on freezers).

"I'm a meat eater all right," said Yglesias, happily munching a rare treat of donated smoked kokanee brought in by a visitor. "But I will say I feel so much healthier up here."