taineer. When he met Montgomery, it was for his job as
an H. Sanborn & Co. textbook salesman. It was a foggy
Wednesday in Bellingham, Wash. Hazard was keeping an
appointment at the hillside teachers’ college, Washington
State Normal School, where Montgomery was supervisor
of primary grades. The Old Main building is still stand-
ing and called that today, but the school, now vastly
larger, is Western Washington University.

The suggestion came from Miss Catherine
Montgomery at the close of a business interview of an
hour’s duration:

"Do you know what I’ve been thinking about, Mr. Hazard,
for the last twenty minutes?"

"I had hoped you were considering the merits of my presenta-
tion of certain English texts for adoption!"

"Oh that! Before your call I had considered them the best – I
still do! But why do not you Mountaineers do something big
for Western America?"

"Just what have you in mind, Miss Montgomery?"

"A high winding trail down the heights of our western moun-
tains with mile markers and shelter huts – like these pictures
I’ll show you of the ‘Long Trail of the Appalachians’ – from
the Canadian Border to the Mexican Boundary Line!"

That very evening I carried the plan to the Mount Baker
Club of Bellingham. Favorable action was taken. The rest
of the mountain clubs of the Pacific Northwest promptly
contacted all other outdoor organizations. All adopted the
project with enthusiasm and organized to promote it.

Why did Hazard wait twenty years to write about this?
Who was Catherine Montgomery? Did she really launch
the PCT? Is there any evidence to back up Hazard’s story?
I found answers at Western Washington University,
at the nearby regional archive, the Center for Pacific
Northwest Studies, and at more far-flung archives, includ-
ing the Mazama’s and Mountaineers’.  

Are You My Mother? It’s the title of a well-known children’s
book. A baby bird sets forth on a primal quest, asking so
many in turn, “Are you my mother?” Who is the Pacific
Crest Trail’s mother? Does she exist? If today’s hikers
are the trail’s sons and daughters, have raw blisters and
mountain views made them forget to ask the question?

Normally, maternity isn’t in question. And for the
PCT, paternity has been well established. For decades,
Clinton C. Clarke trumpeted his relationship to the
Trail. In two books and a dozen pamphlets, like a proud
papa handing out cigars, Clarke declared: “In March,
1932, Mr. Clinton C. Clarke of Pasadena, California,
proposed to the United States Forest and National
Park Services the project of a continuous wilderness
trail across the United States from Canada to Mexico,
passing through the states of Washington, Oregon and
California...The project was approved and adopted, and
Mr. Clarke was placed in charge...”

For half a century, the PCT proceeded with no knowl-
edge of a mother. The 1968 National Trails Act officially
created the PCT, but there is no known contemporary
record of anyone asking the baby bird’s question. In June
1971, National Geographic referred solely to “Clinton C.
Clarke, the father of the Pacific Crest Trail.” In 1973, the
first Wilderness Press Guidebook stated: “The idea for the PCT
came from the mind of Clinton C. Clarke in the 30’s.”

But lurking in history’s backwater, a long-out-of-print
book was waiting. In 1946, a now-defunct Seattle press
published Joseph Hazard’s Pacific Crest Trails. Even
then, it took until 1977 for pioneering guidebook printer
Wilderness Press to find Hazard’s book, and include the
first mention of Catherine Montgomery in a modern
PCT history.

On page 57, Hazard recounted his Jan. 13, 1926 discus-
sion about the Trail with Montgomery, which happened
a good six years before Clarke’s first PCT efforts. At that
time, Hazard was a well-known Pacific Northwest moun-
taineer. When he met Montgomery, it was for his job as
an H. Sanborn & Co. textbook salesman. It was a foggy
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Captions, top: The earliest known photo of Catherine Montgomery (middle row, far left). She was teaching elementary school at the
time - the handwritten caption is mistaken. (From the collection of the Lewis County Museum). Left: A 1906 Mazamas summer outing
to Mt. Baker alongside one of three Galena Lakes. Montgomery is at far left in profile. (Photo by Fred Kiser, from the Mazamas Archi-
Montgomery was born April 1, 1867, on Canada’s Prince Edward Island. She died September 17, 1957, at age 90, a fifty-eight-year resident of Bellingham. She was a teacher of teachers for the primary grades. She never married and never had children.

Her life’s bookends were the Civil War and Spanish, staggering to comprehend. Her parents, William and Janet, crossed the Atlantic from Scotland in the 1840’s, part of the same immigrant wave that brought John Muir to Wisconsin. Young Catherine’s father was a railroad carpenter and he must have comprehended. Her parents, Margaret and John, were only 20 and 22 when she was born. Her two sisters, Alice and Minnie, were born in 1869 and 1871. Her family lived in Victoria, British Columbia for Catherine’s first years. Her parents were strict, but they made her feel loved. They taught her to work hard and be kind.

When she was 3, her family moved to Prince Edward Island to Schuyler, Neb., and when she hit her twenties, she crossed the rest of the continent, landing in Chehalis, Wash., to pursue her teaching career. In 1889, at 32, she made her last move, to Bellingham as a founding faculty member of New Whatcom Normal School. Washington’s third teachers’ college. She taught there for 27 years.

The house Montgomery had built in 1924 and lived in until her death is still standing. The current owner knew of the connection between her and the Trail. The house has a broad bay window from the front window. I wondered if this was the same door she passed through that 1926 morning to keep her appointment with Hazard. Was this the view she came home to after setting loose the idea of PCT? Was I the first PCT thru-hiker to stand in her living room?

“You must know about the Catherine Montgomery Nature Interpretive Center, don’t you?” asked Tamara Belts, a Western Washington University archivist. I didn’t. Upon her death, Montgomery left her entire estate, the equivalent of $1 million today, to the Foundation Forest State Park near Enumclaw, Wash. Today, thousands of school children visit the expansive interpretive center, where they can see a two-foot-tall photo of Montgomery. Recently, I asked one of the center’s Rangers: “Did you know that many believe Catherine Montgomery is the mother of the Pacific Crest Trail?” They had no idea. But this unanswered question is just as mind boggling: How does a teacher who stopped working in 1926 with an annual salary of $3,200 end up in 1957 with a rich woman’s estate?

Montgomery’s final resting place wasn’t Bellingham. Her probate file shows an expense of $1.51 for postage to send her cremated remains to Nebraska. On a bracing late November day in 2008, Dan Wisnieski, a kind local mortician, swept aside early snow in the Schuyler cemetery to take a Polaroid photo. It shows the waist-high, 1926’s headstone marking the grave of Montgomery’s parents, and behind it a painfully modest flat stone marker: Catherine Montgomery 1867-1957.

I searched for evidence substantiating Montgomery’s conversation with Hazard. The Mount Baker Club, founded in 1911, has no records pre-dating 1926 PCT idea. The Mountaineers, a Seattle club founded in 1906, railed the Mazamas climbing club or the Trails Club of Oregon, both in Portland, had records, but no trace of their 1926 PCT idea.

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A version of this story will appear in the Pacific Crest Trailside Reader, two volumes of essays slated for publication by the Mountaineers Press later this year. Proceeds of the books will benefit the Pacific Crest Trail Association.

The Old Main Building at Washington State Normal School in 1899. The building still stands as part of Western Washington University. (Courtesy WWU Libraries Special Collections)