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## THE AGE OF LAVA BUTTE

Lawrence A. Chitwood\*, Robert A. Jensen\*\*, and Edward A. Groh\*\*\*

Lava Butte and its jagged black fields of lava, located 10 mi (16 km) south of Bend along U.S. Highway 97, have been major scenic and geologic attractions since at least 1900 (Figure 1). Public interest in the natural history of Lava Butte and the vast volcanic and glacial panorama seen from its summit led the U.S. Forest Service to construct Lava Lands Visitors Center near the base of the butte. Dedicated in September 1975, the center hosted 163,000 visitors in 1976.



*Figure 1. Lava Butte, a 500-foot-high (152 m) cinder cone.*

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\*\*\* Private Geologist, Bend, Oregon

The 500-ft-high (152 m) butte is actually a classic basaltic cinder cone. A paved road spirals to the top, where, from the rim of the deep crater, much of the 9.5 sq mi (25 km<sup>2</sup>) of rugged lava that poured from the south flank of the cinder cone can be seen. Trails leading from the Lava Lands Visitors Center below pass over the fresh-looking, clinkery, basaltic lava. A small observation center that for many years served as an interpretive center at the top is capped by a U.S. Forest Service fire lookout.

Lava Butte and its associated lava flows and plume deposit erupted from the northwest end of the Northwest Rift Zone, a narrow zone of discontinuous faults and deep fractures that cut the northwest flank of the 500-sq-mi (1,300 km<sup>2</sup>) Newberry Volcano (Figure 2). Numerous other recent lava flows and cinder cones also erupted from these fractures (Peterson and Groh, 1969).

For decades Lava Butte has hidden its age from both visitors to the area and geologists. The nearly barren surface of the lava appears starkly younger than other volcanic features nearby, even to the casual observer. Indeed, some visitors wonder if the rocks are still hot. Adventuresome people at the turn of the century may have been enticed to visit Lava Butte by this early description: "The whole surface of the lava beds looks as if the fire were smouldering beneath, and one can scarcely content one's self to remain alone in the solitude of this ruin" (An Illustrated History of Central Oregon, 1905). While the impression of a semi-demonic "ruin" lingers in the minds of many who visit Lava Butte even today, a less fearful but more provocative history lies hidden in these rocks.

Israel Russell was the first geologist to estimate a minimum age of Lava Butte; in 1905 he wrote, "The presence of pines on Lava Butte, and the occurrence of both living and dead trees on the lava flow that escaped from it, furnish evidence that the activity of the volcano ceased at least a hundred and probably more than a hundred and fifty years ago."

Howel Williams wrote in 1957, "The youngest of these [cinder cones and lava flows] are almost surely less than 1,000 years old; among them are the flows that poured from Lava Butte. . . . and those that poured through forests on the northwest flank of Newberry Volcano . . . ."

The first radiocarbon age (Lava Cast Forest Flow, 6,150±120 years B.P.<sup>1</sup>) of the very young-looking lava that poured from the Northwest Rift Zone astonished geologists so much that they asked the laboratory that had determined the date to check its figures. Peterson and Groh (1969) wrote, "We were rather surprised to find that such fresh-looking rocks were this old, but several other radiocarbon dates obtained later confirmed this age."

The surface of the lava from Lava Butte appears fresher than nearly all other nearby recent flows along the Northwest Rift Zone.

<sup>1</sup>Before present.

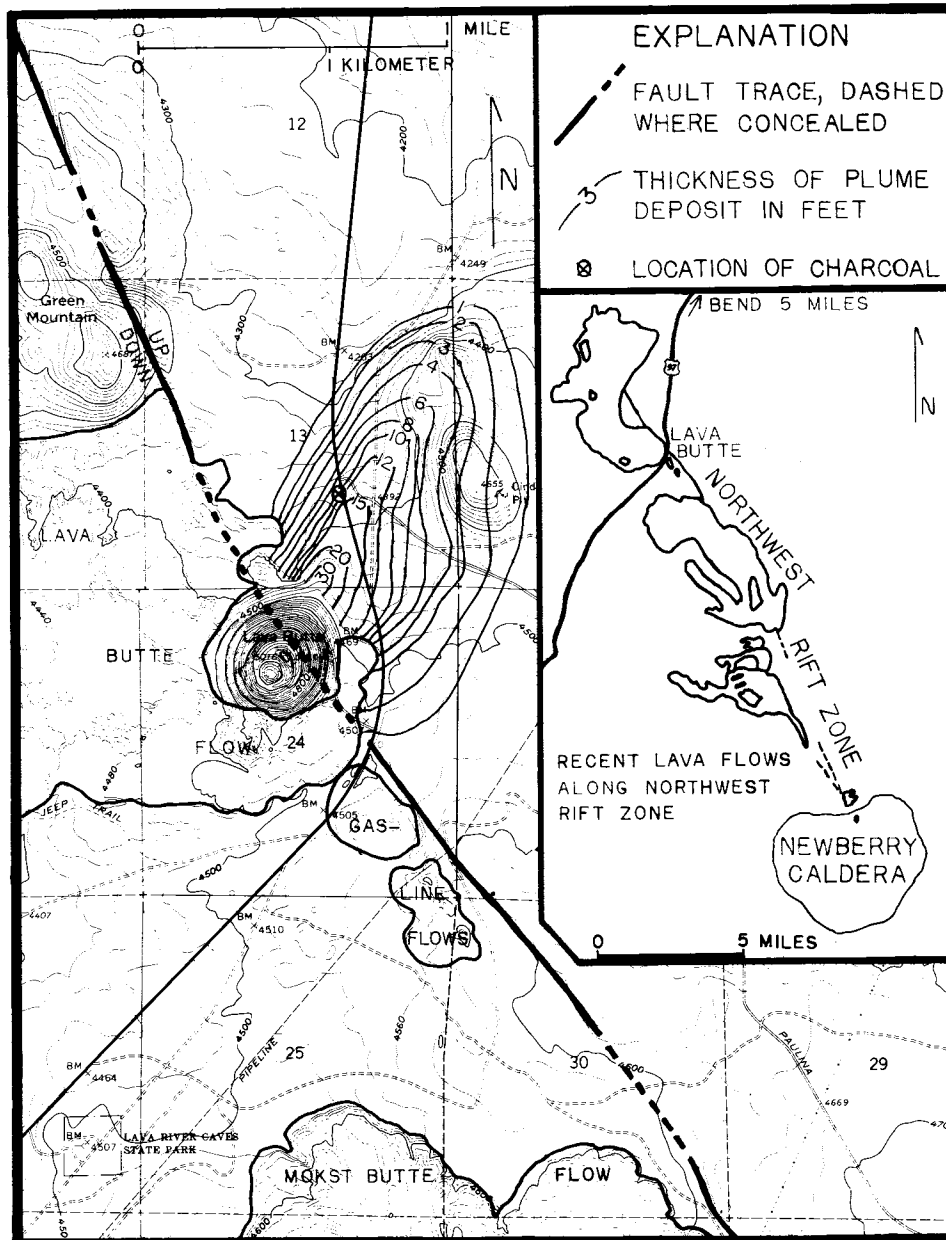


Figure 2. Lava Butte and several other young cinder cones and lava flows that were formed at different times by eruptions along the Northwest Rift Zone. During the eruption that formed Lava Butte, three types of volcanic deposits were created: a cinder cone, formed when cinders fell out of cinder-filled eruption clouds into a great pile to form Lava Butte; a plume deposit, formed when a southwest wind blew smaller cinders to the northeast; and lava flows.

Although all of those that have been dated have radiocarbon ages of about 6,000 years B.P., for a decade Lava Butte has been thought to be only about 2,000 years old because of its fresh-appearing lava.

Lava Butte is known to be younger than the Gas-Line Flows (Figure 2), named for a nearby natural-gas pipeline, because volcanic ash from the eruption that built Lava Butte lies on these flows. The radiocarbon age of the Gas-Line Flows is  $6,150 \pm 65$  years B.P. (USGS-80)<sup>2</sup>. This date supersedes the date reported by Peterson and Groh (1969).

During the last few months, 14 geologists who are familiar with Lava Butte and its geological setting were informally polled for their opinions on its age. Estimates ranged from 1,800 to 5,650 years, and the average of all the age estimates was 4,060 years.

Until recently, the search for wood suitable for radiocarbon dating has been discouraging. In this environment, wood must be carbonized<sup>3</sup> to be preserved; otherwise, bacterial action or rodent activity will destroy it over a long period of time. Lava molds of splintered trees have occasionally been found along the edges of lava flows, but none have contained carbonized wood. Presumably the first lava flows invaded a forest and toppled, buried, or burned virtually every tree they encountered. Then, to make the search even more difficult, additional lava flowed over some of the first flows.

Fortunately, during the eruption that formed Lava Butte, a southwest wind winnowed<sup>4</sup> small-sized ejecta from cinder-filled eruption clouds and carried them northeastward, forming a plume. Small cinders (lapilli) and volcanic ash rained from this plume and fell to earth, forming an ash-plume deposit (Figure 2) that extends northeastward from the base of Lava Butte for about 1 mi (1.6 km) and covers an area of at least 0.7 sq mi (1.8 km<sup>2</sup>). The approximate bulk volumes and proportions of each of the three volcanic deposits formed by the Lava Butte eruption are (1) the plume deposit, 130 million cu ft (3.7 million cu m), 1 percent; (2) the cinder cone, 1 billion cu ft (30 million cu m), 9 percent; and (3) the lava flows, 10 billion cu ft (300 million cu m), 90 percent.

Groh suggested that the ash-plume deposit might be the best place to find carbonized wood because the ash and cinders might have retained enough heat when they fell to earth to carbonize roots growing in the ground. We therefore dug 50 holes with hand shovels to search for wood and also to determine the shape and thickness of the deposit.

<sup>2</sup>Sample reference number used by the Branch of Isotope Geology, U.S. Geological Survey, Menlo Park, California.

<sup>3</sup>Reduced to carbon by being subjected to intense heat in an enclosed space.

<sup>4</sup>Selectively removed fine particles by wind action, leaving the coarser material behind.



*Figure 3. Location along U.S. Highway 97 north of Lava Butte (in background) where carbonized roots used to determine the age of Lava Butte were found about 2 ft (0.6 m) below the level of the road.*

Carbonized wood was finally found in August 1976 within the Mazama pumice that underlies the cindery plume deposit (Figures 3 and 4).

The carbonized wood appeared to be from small roots a few millimeters in diameter that had been carbonized by residual heat from the plume deposit. The Mazama pumice is 21 in thick (53 cm), but the carbonized roots within it were found only in the upper 6 in (15 cm). The pumice blanketed much of the Pacific Northwest 6,600 years ago during extraordinarily violent eruptions of Mount Mazama, which now holds Crater Lake (Williams, 1942; Wilcox, 1965).

The radiocarbon age of the carbonized wood, and thus Lava Butte and its associated lava fields and plume deposit, is  $6,160 \pm 65$  years B.P. (USGS-107), as determined by Steve W. Robinson, Branch of Isotope Geology, U.S. Geological Survey, Menlo Park, California. Duane Champion, U.S. Geological Survey, who is currently doing a paleomagnetic study of the recent cinder cones and lava flows along the Northwest Rift Zone, arranged for the age determination; and again many geologists are somewhat surprised that such young-looking lava is so old.

The age of Lava Butte is significant because ages of all dated recent eruptions from the Northwest Rift Zone, including that of Lava Butte, are apparently grouped over a short period of a few hundred years. All radiocarbon ages so far lie between  $5,800 \pm 100$  and  $6,380 \pm 130$  years B.P. (Peterson and Groh, 1969).

While Lava Butte is known to be the same age as or younger than the Gas-Line Flows, the appearance of a slight radiocarbon age discrepancy between them is probably of no consequence. The eruptive period along the rift may be even shorter than the radiocarbon dates indicate. The age of recent lava flows or cinder cones is determined by measuring the radioactive carbon-14 content of wood that was carbonized by heat at the time of an eruption (Libby, 1965; Sheppard, 1975). The radioactive carbon-14 available to a growing tree from atmospheric carbon dioxide becomes fixed in the wood of the tree, and half of the carbon-14 decays (changes) to nitrogen-14 in 5,730 years. That is, if only half the amount of carbon-14 normally found in the atmosphere is found in the wood of a tree being tested by the carbon-14 method, the age of the tree is 5,730 years. But the sample of carbonized wood to be used for dating should be taken from the youngest (outer) growth rings if it is to yield an age close to that of the eruption. If older wood is mixed with younger wood, the age that is determined for the wood will be greater than the length of time since the eruption. Therefore, the apparent spread of ages along the Northwest Rift Zone may be the result of this type of sampling error.

Existing evidence thus suggests that the short period of eruptive activity that produced Lava Butte was the final event along the full length of the Northwest Rift Zone. Any future

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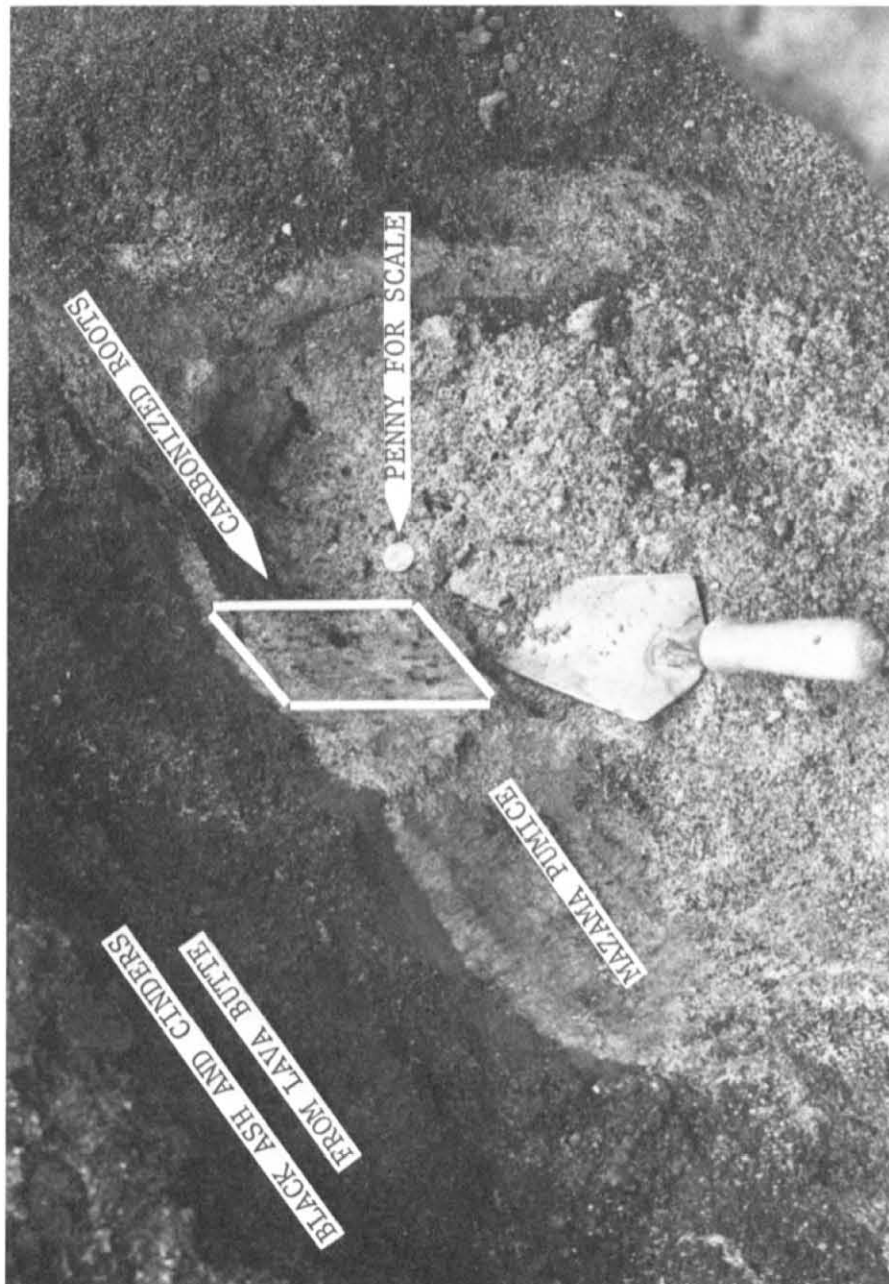


Figure 4. The small black spots above the gardener's trowel are carbonized roots from plants buried  $6,160 \pm 65$  years ago. The roots were found in the top 0 to 6 in (0 to 15 cm) of the 6,600-year-old cream-colored Mazama pumice which underlies the black ash and small cinders of the Lava Butte plume deposit.

volcanism in this part of Oregon would probably follow a similar pattern of multiple events in a relatively short period of time.

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#### EDWARD A. GROH

Ed Groh, co-author of this month's feature article and longtime friend of the Department, died September 15, 1977. His main geologic interest was the volcanic history of Oregon, primarily Holocene volcanic landforms around Bend; and he cooperated with Department geologists in writing Bulletins 57 and 89 as well as numerous Ore Bin articles on volcanic features such as Hole-in-the-Ground, Diamond Craters, Cove Palisades, Crack-in-the-Ground, Newberry Volcano, and Metolius Springs. Recently he had been working in the development of Oregon's geothermal potential and had been consulting in the Newberry Volcano area.



*Edward A. Groh*

Although never a member of the Department's staff, he had contributed much to the Department's publications. His presence and work will be missed, both by geologists who worked with him personally and by readers who learned about Oregon's volcanic history through his articles.

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3. A map showing the survey or protraction grids on which is depicted the location of the claim; and
4. A \$5.00 service fee for each claim.

## **Mining Claims in Oregon-Washington Are Filed at . . .**

Mining Claim Recordation Office  
Bureau of Land Management  
729 NE Oregon Street  
P.O. Box 2965  
Portland, Oregon 97208  
(Telephone: 503-234-3361)

(Complete instructions may be obtained by contacting the above Recordation Office.)

\*If your claim is within a National Park, you must record it with the National Park Service.

#### COLOR GEOLOGIC MAP OF EASTERN OREGON IS HERE

The U.S. Geological Survey has released its Map I-902, "Geologic Map of Oregon East of the 121st Meridian," a 42x44-inch map of Oregon east of the Cascade Range. The map is lithographed in seven colors and is on a scale of 1:500,000 (1 inch equals about 8 miles).

In addition to serving as an educational tool and giving an overview of part of the State's geology, the map should provide a useful framework for future environmental and geologic studies. The region is currently being explored by industry and federal and state agencies to determine its potential for development of geothermal energy and selected mineral resources, notably uranium and zeolites.

George G. Walker, geologist with the USGS Menlo Park, California, research center, prepared the map as a companion to Map I-325, "Geologic Map of Oregon West of the 121st Meridian," which covers the remainder of Oregon on the same scale.

Copies of both maps are now available from the Department's Portland, Baker, and Grants Pass offices. To order either of the maps by mail, see centerfold, page iii, for Map I-902 and the inside back cover for Map I-325.

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#### MINING ASSOCIATION TO MEET IN SPOKANE

Theme of the Northwest Mining Association 83rd Annual Convention, which meets December 2 and 3 at the Davenport Hotel in Spokane, Washington, is "Mining at the Crossroads." The convention will focus on the effects of government policy on the industry, looming energy shortages, new exploration techniques, changes in commodity markets, and changes in mineral industry education. A short course will precede the convention.

Registration materials for the convention may be obtained from Northwest Mining Association, West 1020 Riverside Avenue, Spokane, Wash. 99201. (Telephone: 509-624-1158).

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#### USGS SELLS OPEN-FILE REPORTS BY MAIL

Anyone can now order USGS open-file reports by mail from Open-File Services Section, Branch of Distribution, U.S. Geological Survey, Box 25425, Federal Center, Denver, Colo. 80225. (Telephone: 303-234-5888).

This facility will stock only open-file reports. Specify series and number as well as complete title, and prepay by check or money order.

#### SCHWABE APPOINTED TO GOVERNING BOARD

John L. Schwabe, a Portland attorney, has been appointed by Governor Robert W. Straub to serve a four-year term as a member of the Department's Governing Board. Schwabe is a senior partner in the Portland law firm of Souther, Spaulding, Kensey, William-son, and Schwabe.

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#### DeWEESE RETIRES FROM GOVERNING BOARD

R.W. "Bill" deWeese, Portland businessman, has retired from the Department's Governing Board after serving the two-term maximum. DeWeese was appointed by the then governor, Tom McCall, in April 1969. He owns and operates Odyssey Productions, Inc., a commercial film-making organization. DeWeese has devoted much time and effort while serving on the Board, acting as its chairman for the last five years.

DeWeese's many other public services have included memberships in the Oregon Office of Emergency Planning, the Portland Chamber of Commerce, and Portland Public School District No. 1, often in the role of chairman or director. He has been a director on the boards of over half a dozen industrial or commercial organizations located in the State, as well as National Director of the Association Internationale des Étudiants en Sciences Économiques et Commerciales.

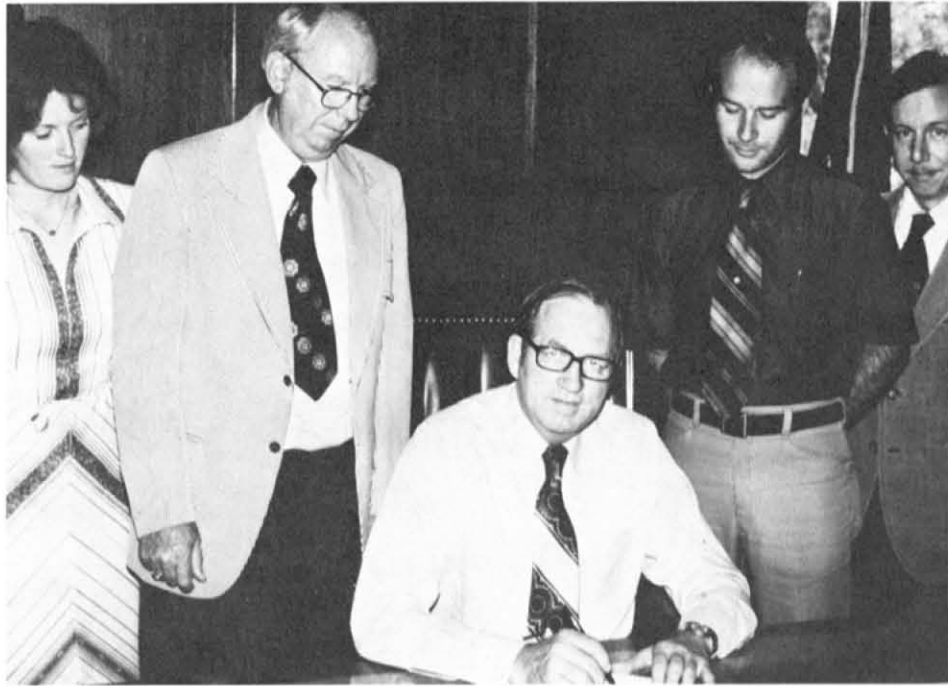
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#### STAFF GEOLOGIST HONORED

Herbert G. Schlicker, an engineering geologist for the Department, has been awarded a Certificate of Appreciation by the Association of Engineering Geologists. The award stems from Schlicker's participation on the A.E.G. Geologic Hazards Committee study of the seismic susceptibility of the Auburn Dam on the American River, California. The Committee became concerned over the methodology used in calculating probable earthquake damage to the concrete, thin-arch, 685-foot-high structure.

Because the August 1975 Oroville earthquake, which occurred only 50 miles from the dam site, developed a horizontal acceleration of 0.12 *g*, committee members believed that the Auburn Dam design should be based on acceleration values greater than this to ensure an acceptable margin of safety. As a direct result of the A.E.G. committee's concern, the U.S. Bureau of Reclamation ordered a restudy of the dam's design, even though construction had already begun.

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#### GOVERNOR SIGNS GEOLOGIST REGISTRATION BILL

On July 21, 1977, Governor Bob Straub signed the Geologist Registration Bill (HB 2288). Shown here witnessing the event are geologists Mavis Kent, Herbert Schlicker, John Beaulieu, and Rick Kent, all of whom campaigned long and hard for passage of the bill. This photograph was taken by Senator Walt Brown, who also took a personal interest in the bill.

The registration bill becomes law in October and will be administered by the State Department of Commerce, 428 Labor and Industries Building, Salem, Oregon 97310. After the State Board of Geologist Examiners has been appointed, application forms will become available to geologists. The cost of registration will be dependent upon the number of registrants, so it is recommended that each geologist intending to register write immediately to the Department of Commerce and indicate his intention to register.

The registration act contains an engineering geologist specialty, and the Board will entertain requests for additional specialties. A "grandfather" clause will be in effect for one year. Registration may also be by reciprocity.

\* \* \* \* \*

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