A Once and Future Forest

How has Mt. Helena's changing landscape impacted the people who have called it home?

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An 1860 era picture of Mt. Helena in the distance, with an Indian camp at the base.



A Dodge touring car on top of Mt. Helena, viewing the city of Helena in 1916.

"Helena pioneers say that originally Mount Helena was covered with quite a heavy growth of pine timber. On several parts of the mountain may still be seen the stumps of this former growth. Many of these exceed two feet in diameter. It is believed that by preserving the natural growth of timber, Mount Helena can be restored to its original condition.

Short article in The Montana Record-Herald (Helena, Montana) from January, 1905 The Montana Record-Herald (Helena, Montana) · Fri, Jan 13, 1905 ·Page 3 Downloaded on Oct 12, 2026

KTVH news story about recent (2026) Mt. Helena forestry management

Contextual Paragraph

Mt. Helena has not always been covered by dense forest and timber as it is today. In fact, during the early 1900's the Helena Improvement Society was very concerned about restocking the Mt. Helena tree population, as many of the first- and second-generation trees had been harvested for the booming mining economy and growth of a young Helena city. Today, Mt. Helena is part of the wildland-urban interface – and the City Open Lands Department is engaged in a 30-year project to reduce wildfire risk and maintain this popular recreation area. The primary source pieces above show a different side of Mt. Helena. The first, a historic photo from the 1860's shows how Mt. Helena might have looked to early settlers and local tribes. The second photo shows how Helenans may have recreated on Mt. Helena in the early 1900's. Finally, a short article from 1905 in the Montana Record shares concerns from community members who want to create a future Mt. Helena forested park. What do these documents say about how Helenans have used and appreciated these public lands over the years?

Key Questions

1. Looking at the first picture, what do you notice about the landscape – how would you describe tree growth on Mt. Helena?
2. How might indigenous tribes have used Mt. Helena for their homes, food, and livelihood in 1860?
3. How might early Helena settlers have used Mt. Helena as they pursued mining and built up their new city?
4. Can you imagine driving a Dodge touring car to the top of Mt. Helena? Take a closer look at the back tires in the third image. What does this say about how people viewed recreation on Mt. Helena in the early 1900's?

5. Recreation is still an important part of Mt. Helena – whether biking, hiking, even rock climbing. What do you think the 1905 writers (Helena Improvement Society) of the newspaper article were hoping for their community?

Assessment

1. The newspaper article mentions that the reforestation effort can return Mt. Helena to its original condition. How would they know what the original condition of Mt. Helena would be?
2. Do land management objectives change over time? How has the use of Mt. Helena changed in 160 years?
3. If you were in charge of Mt. Helena management today, what would you want to preserve for future generations?