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The

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Players provide supporting cast for Rhodie Preserve

Editor's note: Gardner Hicks was asked 40 years ago if he could help The Mountaineers Players at the Forest Theater on the Kitsap Peninsula. He responded with a "yes" and ended up with a walk-on part in the cast for "The Hobbit." Ever since, he has been known by Players as a "one-man maintenance committee" on the grounds, part of the 460-acre Rhododendron Preserve that found its genesis via a group of thespian-inclined Moun-

taineers who hiked into the forest to view the wild rhododendrons 100 years ago. In the following article, Hicks conveys some history about the preserve and its significance.

By Gardner Hicks

I think that the Players and Rhododendron Preserve have a kind of symbiotic relationship such that

neither one would be around today if the other were not.

The Mountaineers was founded in 1906. In 1909 a group of Mountaineers was making its way up Chico and Wildcat Creeks intending to hike to Wildcat Lake. The group had taken one of the mosquito-fleet

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Gardner Hicks on site.

Annual performance sustained interest in the preserve

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ferries from Seattle to Chico and had hiked in from there. On the way, it encountered a homestead in the woods. The homestead (then known as Hidden Ranch) had been established in the 1880s. Edward Paschall bought it and moved his family into the 14-by-16 foot cabin in 1907. The Paschalls and Mountaineers found that they enjoyed each others company and The Mountaineers began to make it a regular destination.

In 1915 some property adjacent to the Paschalls became available and The Mountaineers acquired it. By 1919 The Mountaineers opened the first section of what was later enlarged to construct the present-day Kitsap Cabin.

Conditions in this part of the world were a good deal different from what they are today. There were still considerable stands of original old-growth timber and the works of man were scattered and widely separated. The automobile existed but it was a rich man's toy and fairly rare. Serious travel was by water or by train. Local travel consisted of walking, or if you could afford it, riding a horse or a horse-drawn buggy.

Mountaineers had about a one-hour ferry ride, a one- or two-hour hike, and maybe an hour to set up camp. After that their time was free until it was time to strike camp and head back to the ferry. In the evening they would sit around the campfire, talk, tell stories, sing and perform impromptu skits. There was no radio, no movies, no television and no internet. Their entertainment was pretty much a matter of their own resourcefulness.

The skits became more elaborate and more of a daytime production. By 1918 each scene took place in a different clearing or spot in the woods and the entire company and audience moved from spot to spot. Word got out, attracting more people from Seattle and this progressive theater format began to get cumbersome. So work was begun to find a site and develop

a more traditional theater. The first performance on the present site was in 1923, and the Players group was born.

Coincidentally, the road which is now Seabeck Highway was opened the same year. In the preceding decade, the automobile had become widely affordable, and it was practical to spend one's free time in the mountains or at the beach. One had more choices and could enjoy more variety—resulting in fewer people being attracted to the property at Kitsap. Fortunately for the property, the Players had a play to put on. They needed a facility from which to stage their production, preferably with an outdoor ambiance, as they were part of an outdoor club. The Kitsap Forest Theater filled the bill nicely. Between the play and the property, enough people were attracted to the enterprise to supply the energy to keep it going.

I suspect that without the attraction the Players provided—something to do once you got there—the property would have lingered on for a time but would have eventually faded away. And it's doubtful that the people and interest would have been there to tend and nourish the preserve.

For a considerable period of time there were no changes to the preserve boundaries. Eventually, a piece

of property became available, five acres for \$7,000. You could literally see the edge of the property to the left as you sat in the theater. The club couldn't help. It felt its resources were limited and shouldn't be used in a way that would benefit a relatively small number of members. The Mountaineers Foundation was on the scene but quite new and didn't have the necessary resources either.

We could imagine people someday in the backyards of their houses using their barbecues and looking over a fence to watch our show. So, a group of Players ("Mountaineers Kitsap Joint Venture") was formed to buy and hold the property until ownership by the club could be figured out.

We sent in our checks, the property was purchased, and we held it for about three years. During that time we held fundraisers; I know that for two seasons cast members went through the audience soliciting donations. One year they were selling golden apples. Finally the club stepped up and took part in the effort—members donating significantly to the cause—and enough money was raised so that the joint venture was completed and the title to the property transferred to the club.

The making of a preserve

These are the boundaries of the Rhododendron Preserve and its acquisitions through 2008. Since then, it has gained 100 acres from land formerly owned by Ueland Tree Farm and a 68-acre option on an additional Ueland parcel. In the mid-1980s the state passed a law permitting appropriate public and private organizations to hold wild land in conservancy status free of property taxes. Soon after, The Mountaineers Board of Trustees decided to transfer 170 acres of the 190-acre Rhododendron Preserve to The Mountaineers Foundation with the stipulation that the acreage be placed in conservancy status, maintained and preserved through contracts with The Mountaineers, and that money be raised to enlarge it. As a result, potential development has been stifled around the property and habitat around salmon spawning streams preserved.

Hidden Ranch and Patience Paschall

Patience Paschall, daughter of Edward Paschall, was a talented composer and lyricist, an actress who could forge a character with whatever costume parts and props came to hand, a naturalist wise in the ways of the creatures and plants of Hidden Valley, and a true Mountaineer. She circumnavigated Mt. Rainier seven times, building her strength and endurance by walking the steep trail to her home at Hidden Ranch (now the Rhododendron Preserve). She was warm and friendly, but with a spunk and proclivity to speak her mind—acquired as the much youngest of four siblings. She learned to drive at age 60.

— "Theatre in the Wild: A Pictorial History of The Mountaineers Forest Theatre."

