

Across the woodland footlights

by Nedra Slauson

One of the last sizeable stands of virgin timber in Kitsap county is part of the Wild Rhododendron Preserve owned by The Mountaineers, a Seattle-based organization of outdoors enthusiasts, near Bremerton.

The property is the site of the outdoor Forest Theatre, where the Mountaineer Players present a play every spring when hundreds of native rhododendrons and dogwood are in bloom. This year's play, which opens at 2 p.m. Sunday, May 30, is "Around the World in 80 Days", based on the novel by Jules Verne. The performance will be repeated on Memorial Day, May 31, and the next two Saturdays and Sundays, June 5, 6, 12 and 13.

The Preserve has giant fir and hemlock, madrona and other evergreen trees, flanked by rhododendrons up to 25 feet high, dogwood trees, and many other varieties of native plants. Though loggers have worked nearby areas, the Mountaineers have maintained their property's pristine nature since the club bought its first parcel of 74 acres in 1916. Conservation wasn't quite the byword then that it is now, but preservation-minded members of the club fortunately saw the importance of acquiring this timbered land, only seven miles from Bremerton. In the 66 years since that initial purchase, the Preserve has grown through additional purchases, gifts and bequests to its present size of 215 acres.

The Mountaineers, organized in 1906 with 151 charter members, was the third outdoor club to be established on the Pacific coast, after the Sierra Club in California (1892) and the Mazamas in Oregon (1894).

On a pleasant spring day in 1909, a band of Mountaineers on a club hike in Kitsap county lost the trail and found themselves heading down a rather steep, forested hillside. At the bottom they found Hidden Valley, the ranch of S. Edward Paschall and his family. He invited the group to eat lunch on his property and thus began a friendship that lasted throughout Paschall's life and the lives of his daughters Mary and Patience. The Paschall family helped arrange the Mountaineers' purchase of the first 74-acre parcel and, over the



Alice and the White Rabbit were stars of the 1927 production at the Forest Theatre. — Photos pages 8-9 courtesy of Mountaineer Players, Georgia Graham, historian.

years, they donated or bequeathed several other tracts to be added to the Preserve.

The property was a popular weekend camping spot in those early days. The journey from Seattle included a boat trip to the waterfront community of Chico, followed by a two-mile hike through heavy undergrowth, carrying camping gear, clothes and food in backpacks, to reach the Preserve. Within a few years members had constructed a rustic lodge — Kitsap Cabin, which is still in use — and several "sleeping shacks." The latter were eventually replaced by men's and women's dormitories but some of them are still standing and occasionally used.

Camping, naturally, called for skits and stunts, often impromptu. These led to the first fully-staged and costumed play, in 1923, presented for about 100 Mountaineers and friends, all of whom made the two-mile hike through the underbrush and paid 50 cents admission. "Robin of Sherwood" was the play they saw.

The Mountaineer Players have produced a spring play every year since then, except during World War II. This year's production is the group's 59th, a record few amateur drama groups can match. Indeed, the Mountaineer Players is one of the oldest outdoor drama organizations in the country.

Early-day play-goers competed with

mosquitoes for space at the first Forest Theatre. The Players realized such heroism by the audience could not be expected to last indefinitely. By 1926 they had developed a new Forest Theatre in a beautiful natural amphitheater, where every seat has a perfect view of the stage and mosquitoes are only a memory. This theatre, used today, features wings built of cedar bark, "footlights" across the front that are living ferns, and rhododendrons and other native plants growing on stage. At least one or two on-stage rhodies are in bloom when the play is given, along with hundreds in the surrounding forest.

Today's audience members walk down a winding forest trail, past rustic benches they may welcome as resting places when they later walk *up* the trail after the show. Experienced play-goers bring blankets to soften the Forest Theatre's log-terraced earth seats, sun hats and rain gear. The weather is usually good in late May and June, but spring showers are not unheard-of.

For the Players' first 12 years, according to veteran Player Harriet King Walker, the spring productions "passed into history without a drop of rain. Then in 1935 the ice was broken — or whatever it is that holds rain up in the sky." But the play ("Toad of Toad Hall") went on, and the audience stayed bravely to the end. There have been some drizzly days — and worse — for performances since then. But the weather is generally good, the Players



Here the Mountaineer Players are performing *The Mouse That Roared*, the 1965 production.

think positively ("It is *positively not* going to rain by performance time this

afternoon!") and the show goes on regardless.

Today the Forest Theatre and Wild Rhododendron Preserve draw thousands of men, women and children who come to see a play, perhaps enjoy a picnic beforehand, and — probably most important — put aside their daily problems for a few hours in a close-to-home forest where people share space with wild things — plant and animal — on an almost-equitable basis. The foresight of those Mountaineers who stumbled onto Hidden Valley by chance, and of others who followed them through the years, has saved a small piece of "original" land in an area which is fast becoming another urbanized extension of the Puget Sound metropolis.

(Tickets for this year's performances at the Forest Theatre are available at The Mountaineers office, 719 Pike St., Seattle (623-2318); Fidelity Lane's Seattle main office (624-4971), at The Holiday Inn, Bremerton (497-4971), and at the Forest Theatre on performance days.)



Kitsap Cabins, photographed about 45-50 years ago.