



Crag Rats Hut: 'Premier Hood River Valley wedding venue' helps fund search and rescue

By EMILY FITZGERALD
News staff writer

When the Crag Rats relocated to a new building in Pine Grove in the late 1960s, they intended to use it just as they had used their old building: For meetings, training, and their annual banquet.

They didn't intend to run it as a wedding venue. But that's exactly what they did.

"We rented it out occasionally to the members for next to nothing, and there really wasn't many outside entities that used it unless they knew a Crag Rats," said longtime Crag Rats member Bernie Wells. "But then, little by little, we started getting more inquiries about renting it out."

The two-story, mountain-style lodge sits atop a butte amongst the east hills of the Hood River Valley, on land donated by a Crag Rats member when I-84's expansion encroached upon their old clubhouse near present-day Exit 62.

"Because of its location, it's a very pristine place ... because you get the view of both mountains and all of the lower valley so that's why it's a very good venue for weddings and things like that," said Bill Pattison, who joined the Crag Rats in 1953. Wells joined in 1957.

"As time went on," Wells said, "we kind of upgraded the fees until we got to the point where — heck, almost every week — we were starting to get a ton of inquiries about it, and we decided that maybe that would be the way we would pay for the Crag Rats' expenses."

The volunteer search-and-rescue organization began out of a group of Hood River Valley residents that climbed together

in the mid-1920s.

The organization was initially funded by investors and donations from Crag Rats who had passed, "And the demand for search and rescue was just peanuts in those days up until ... somewhere in the '70s, things began to heat up from recreation, and I-84 was finished," said Pattison. "Up until then, search and rescue was minimal, and it was more fun-and-games for the organization. Now, with the demand for public recreation use of the Gorge — we the Crag Rats have followed along with that demand for service for the tourists."

The Crag Rats are now the oldest high-angle search and rescue organization in the United States and are frequently called upon by the Hood River County Sheriff's Department for search and rescue operations. The Crag Rats are subsidized by the Sheriff's Department for their search and rescue services, but the organization requires outside funding for equipment purchases and training.

"We try to keep up with all the modern stuff," said Wells. "The budget is just like any other budget, there's never enough money for everything, so that's one of the reasons that we decided we had to actually use the building as a venue for public use."

A small staff was contracted to manage the business side of the rentals as the operation grew, but "nobody is paid on the search and rescue side. That is strictly all volunteer," Wells said.

Wells' construction company, Wells Construction, com-



Photos courtesy of the Hood River History Museum

ORIGINAL Crag Rat building being built in 1932. The building is long gone, but some masonry overlooking Exit 62 is still visible.



HISTORIC image of the Crag Rat Hut in Pine Grove, which was built in 1968.

See VENUE, page B10



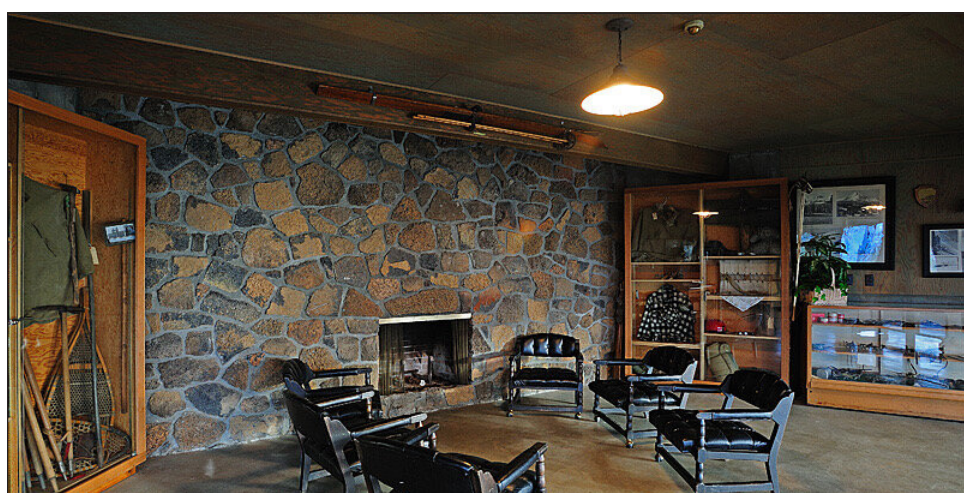
File photo Kirby Neumann-Rea

ON THE MAIN level of the Crag Rat Hut, Charlotte Jones and Bill Pattison look over old photos.



File photo Kirby Neumann-Rea

CRAG RAT Wes Mortensen explains rescue extraction methods at a 2018 event.



THE BASEMENT, at left, serves as a secondary gathering space. The kitchen, at right, was recently expanded as part of a renovation project.



Submitted photos