

The Players

On a spring day in 1909, some 66 Mountaineers, on a Trail Trip (known then as a Local Walk) a few miles west of Bremerton, got slightly off their trail and found themselves hiking steeply down into a charming valley to "Hidden Ranch." The friendly rancher welcomed them to stop there for lunch, and when he noted their discipline and orderliness, and that not one bit of litter was left on the grass, invited them to come again; and thus began a cordial relationship with the Paschall family that endures to the present day. In 1916, with "Daddy" Paschall's help, 74 acres of land above the ranch were purchased by The Mountaineers to form the Kitsap Rhododendron Preserve. Additional purchases and gifts have increased the property to over 170 acres around three sides of the ranch, much of it in virgin forest, the rest well-aged second growth. Small sleeping shacks, a lodge, and eventually dormitories were built, and to this woodland retreat, twice a month by boat from Seattle to Chico, there came a happy crowd who hiked the 2 miles through the forest to Kitsap—the highway from Bremerton not yet built.

Naturally, camping calls for skits and stunts, often impromptu, around the fire or before the friendly hearth. But in 1923 a group led by Howard Kirk and Edith Knudson promoted a carefully rehearsed and costumed production with music, to which a 50-cent admission was charged. So enthusiastic was the audience of some 100 Mountaineers that a production was planned for 1924, this time, at the urging of Mabel Furry, directed professionally by Mrs. Robert F. Sandall—who since then has directed 19 of the Forest plays as well as a dozen productions that were customarily given in Seattle in the winter. Thus was launched an enterprise that has continued to the present, except for four years interrupted by the War, and had reached, in 1967, its 41st season.

The first plays were done only for the membership, but even as early as 1926 strangers began to find their way to them, until finally in the early '30s it dawned on the group that they might be making a real contribution to the artistic enjoyment of other people, and they thereupon undertook a serious program of publicity. Most of the early plays were based on fairy tales and legends, although of a caliber to

interest adults, and were made possible by the marvelous masks and costumes created by William C. Darling. He it was, too, who in 1926 found the ideal spot for a stage and amphitheatre and designed the bark walls and wings of the stage that seem to be growing up from the ground like the forest giants around them. Through seven of those early years, with shaky financial situations, the enterprise was efficiently managed by Claire M. McGuire as a Kitsap Cabin activity, and not until 1933 was it made an official committee of The Mountaineers.

A glance at a list of the plays shows a quite remarkable variety. In recent years there have been a number of musical plays among the 13 that Earl Kelly has directed. The "Alice in Wonderland," "Teahouse of the August Moon," "Li'l Abner," "Wizard of Oz" are especially remembered, but perhaps the highest moments were those in which was presented that American classic, "The Green Pastures," 1955.

Players, past and present, are loosely organized into a group, which selects its own committee chairman and officers. They read plays and select the one for each year, and the committee organizes the work to be done. Try-outs are announced in the monthly Bulletin of the club, usually for two or three days early in March. Anybody who would like to take part is wanted and needed. Even persons who may not be selected for acting, dancing, or singing are needed for theatre repair, set construction, costume making, publicity, etc. etc., an endless number of jobs. However, there have been several surprises in the acting line, people who never had set foot on any stage but who turned in star performances in leading roles, as well as any number of persons who have developed through participation over the years into excellent actors. It is a common thing to hear a player say, "The experience and training in these plays has been invaluable to me in my work and other activities."

The Forest Theatre play does require devotion and work. Rehearsals begin late in March and are held two evenings a week, although not every person is needed every time. A weekend in April and another in May are needed at Kitsap—which is a very lovely place to be in springtime—and there are the three weekends of the play, that around the last of May and the next two in June, five performances.

But the rewards are beyond measure. There is that deep satisfaction that self-expression in any of the arts bestows upon its devotees. Even more, there is the thrill that the player knows as chuckles of laughter

ripple through the audience above and applause thunders down from thousands of hands. Moreover, here is one activity through which The Mountaineers reach out and proffer a unique delight to the people of this Northwest.

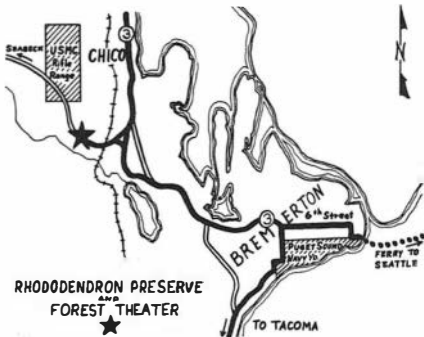
For more detailed accounts see *The Mountaineer*: early plays 1923–1927; histories 1930, 1933, 1942, 1947, 1956.

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I have the impression that the American sportsman is puzzled; he doesn't understand what is happening to him. Bigger and better gadgets are good for industry, so why not for outdoor recreation? It has not dawned on him that outdoor recreations are essentially primitive, atavistic; that their value is a contrast-value; that excessive mechanization destroys contrasts by moving the factory to the woods or to the marsh.

From "Wildlife in American Culture,"
Sand County Almanac, by Aldo Leopold

Kitsap Cabin and Rhododendron Preserve



The sounds of sawing and hammering echo through the sparse woodland some seven miles west and north from Bremerton, two miles southwest of Chico Dock on Dyes Inlet. What's going on here? Not logging surely, for this is a logged-off area. Ah, here we are. A large cabin of some sort is being built, but—those are mostly women busily hammering cedar shakes onto the half-finished structure. And the men? This is the summer of 1918, and far too many of the boys are over in Europe hastening the final rout of the Kaiser's armies. "Let's get this cabin built in a hurry," said the gals, "so that it will be a happy place for the boys to come home to." And build it they did, all in six months of weekends from May to November, under the chairmanship of Harry Myers, and of course with help from some older men. Many a snapshot was taken that summer, preferably comical, of the building and other activities to send overseas.*

The original 74 acres of "Rhododendron Park" had been purchased in 1916 with the help of Mr. S. Edw. Paschall and his family, with whom the Mountaineers had become acquainted in 1909 when they accidentally got off their trail from Chico Dock to Wildcat Lake and found themselves down in Hidden Valley Ranch, at the junction of Wildcat and Lost Creeks that forms Chico Creek. The log farmhouse

* All the boys and girls came home safely from the war.

on the property had served as a "lodge" and many small sleeping cabins had been built, some of which are still usable. But the old farmhouse was disintegrating and a new lodge was needed. So here was rising a picturesque one-story building with a large room for assembly and dining, a big cheerful fireplace, and an ample kitchen and storeroom across the back. Access to the property was by steamer from Seattle to Chico and two miles of old road and trail, for the highway from Bremerton was not built until about 1926. Some years later an additional long narrow strip of land was acquired stretching down steeply to Chico Creek and across and up the other side to protect the flow from a spring of pure water, which has been pumped by hydraulic ram and now by electric pump and piped up into a tank near the Cabin. Further acquisitions by gift (mostly) and purchase have increased the holdings to around 170 acres of woodland. Besides the 1918 Cabin, dormitories have long since been built at some distance from it, as well as a cabin for a caretaker and most recently a modern lavatory building.

From the very earliest days of Kitsap "Lodge," amusing skits and stunts were in order—Robin Hood scenes enacted at various places along the trails, Headless Horsemen galloping about the fire at Hallowe'en, short plays by the fireplace on winter nights—and from this grew the first formalized dramatic production, in 1923, which marked the beginning of the long history of Forest Theatre Plays.

With so many outdoor activities available nowadays that were scarcely dreamed of in 1916, Kitsap Rhododendron Preserve does not draw the year-round crowds of its beginning days, but as a woodland retreat from encroaching "civilization" it is lovelier than ever. Small firs that once permitted a view from the cabin westward across Hidden Valley to distant hills have long since grown to formidable size; and on the property, especially at the Forest Theatre and surrounding it, stand many giant Douglas firs and some cedars that must have been enormous trees before the logger ever worked into this wild area. And wild indeed is much of it, surrounded as it is on the greater length of its boundary lines by vast stretches of logged-off but unused land that provides, together with our own holdings, great areas for wild life. In the late fall Chico Creek and its tributaries carry large numbers of salmon up to their spawning beds. Besides firs and cedars are hundreds of pines, hemlocks, spruce, yews, maples, alders and dogwoods, and the pink pompons of rhododendrons glowing among the trees in

springtime create a veritable fairyland. Ferns and mosses abound, with mushrooms and other fungus plants in season, and in some of the more remote areas one can scarcely move through the brush without a machete.

The Players' group usually plans several weekends for everybody during the year, including Hallowe'en; Christmas Greens, which for uncounted years used to be devoted to making decorations for the Children's Orthopedic Hospital until these were prohibited by the Fire Department; a St. Patrick's Day party in March; and the many spring weekends of work and fun in preparation of the Forest Play; of course with plenty of the amusing skits that all such gatherings inspire. Likewise in the spring the Climbing Committee brings scores of its students over here, where the tall trees, provided with ropes and pulleys, can be made to simulate mountain cliffs for dynamic belaying practice or even the conditions encountered in crevasse rescue, and the large wilderness area is well suited for practice in the use of the compass.

This is not all. Our cabin and facilities are made available to various groups such as Campfire and Scouts, and a youth music group who spend a week of study and practice there and give a concert in the Theatre; and the students of Olympic College in Bremerton find a fascinating area for study of biology.

A weekend at Kitsap when there is a party to be held is a fine opportunity for a new member to test equipment for the out-of-doors and to get acquainted. One must sign up at the clubroom as for any of the lodges. The ride by ferry to Bremerton can be lovely at any time of year, and the 7-mile drive out on the way toward Seabeck offers sea and mountain views. Members in the south part of Seattle may prefer to cross on the Fauntleroy Ferry and drive via Port Orchard, bypassing central Bremerton; and this is the way Tacoma members will come by crossing on the Narrows Bridge.

We do not know of any other outdoor club that has such a heritage of wilderness and primeval forest as has been given to the Mountaineers to cherish and preserve.