



The Rogue River is within feet of the deck of Caveman Bridge by the Riverside Motel during the 1964 flood.

1964: the flood of the century

Disaster changed people’s lives all over Southern Oregon

By Jeff Duewel
of the Daily Courier

In 1955 the Rogue River flooded Grants Pass, and caused local politicians and citizens to begin planning for what would become Lost Creek and Applegate flood control dams 25 years later. But in 1964 those dams that could take a few feet off of the worst flood weren’t around. On Dec. 23, 1964, the flood of the century hit, when the Rogue River crested at 34.15 feet, slapped at Caveman Bridge and changed lives all over Southern Oregon. The previous larger flood came in 1890 when only a few thousand folks lived in

town, and another disastrous flood hit in 1927. But no other flood disrupted as many lives as the ‘64 monster, which rose about 9 feet higher than the New Year’s Day Flood of 1997, and nearly 11 feet higher than the Dec. 30, 2005, flood. Today, boat captains for Hellgate Excursions point out the high mark of the flood in Hellgate Canyon, 50 or 60 feet above summer levels, and at the old Robertson Bridge. A plaque along the Rogue River trail below Grave Creek Bridge also marks the astonishing flood level. Huge swaths of the Rogue, Applegate and Illinois river valleys were stinking

mud pits in the aftermath, recorded in the Daily Courier: “Mud, slime everywhere. Walls and entire houses vanished. Debris everywhere. And still a lot of water.” Flooding occurred in Washington, Oregon, Idaho, California and Nevada, but Southern Oregon and northern California were hit hardest. The tales of damage from the Eel and Klamath rivers in California are legendary, and the Daily Courier ran a photograph of the devastated town of Klamath, Calif. The storm killed 40 people in five states, caused \$1 billion in damage and left 7,000 people in Oregon homeless. No lives were lost in Josephine County, however.

The Rogue runs through Steve Pritchett’s memories

By Jeff Duewel
of the Daily Courier

Did you know at one time there was a company named “Go to Hellgate?” Not many do, according to Steve Pritchett. His dad, Bob Pritchett, started the company with Glen Wooldridge, his one-time river partner, in the early 1950s. They took folks on a 50-mile motorboat trip down through the craggy canyon and back to Grants Pass for \$5.50. It didn’t last but a year or two — “everybody was afraid to go” — but a few years later Grant Garcia started Hellgate Excursions, which 50 years later features boats hauling nearly 90 people per boat down to dinner at the OK Corral. The “Go to Hellgate” flier is just one of thousands of nuggets packed into Steve Pritchett’s shrine to the Rogue River at his home outside Grants Pass. The glory days of the Rogue River shine through inside, centered around four boats built by his father. A hat, gloves, oars and the Sunset Magazine with Bob Pritchett’s orange boat on the cover sit on the last river boat he built. Steve Pritchett started collecting fishing lures years ago, but expanded it to all river regalia after his dad died in 1989. Joe Wharton’s hand-tied flies lie inside a metal



Steve Pritchett has collected a gold mine of Rogue River history, including the last boat his father Bob built.

lozenge box marked with “Joe Wharton, 1941.” Wharton supplied Zane Grey back in the 1920s from his G Street store. Photos of guide pioneers like Wayne Riggs, Press

Pyle, Sid Pyle, and Squeek Briggs line the walls. There’s John Shaw, maker of the famous Rogue Reel, with the guides’ names engraved on the black surface. Pritchett has a replica of

the 1946 Evinrude that powered Wooldridge, his dad and Charlie Foster up the Rogue River in 1947, the first such voyage. (They certainly had to pull the boat up through numerous rapids, Steve said). “There’s dad running Blossom Bar right over the Pickett Fence in high water,” he said, gazing at another photo. “Dad built that for Chuck and Craig Lathrop,” Pritchett said, pointing to another boat. “They used it for duck hunting over on Klamath Lake. When they closed up the hop yards they gave it back. “This is a crazy picture. That’s Squeek on the bar side of Finley Bend. Look at that metal hotel chair in the front of the boat.” There’s Milo of Milo’s Sporting Goods, Ira Van Blericom, and Cole Rivers, the fisheries biologist who the large hatchery below Lost Creek Dam is named after. Also: ■ A business card of Claude Bardon — Zane Grey’s guide — with the phone number 705. ■ The Saturday Evening Post, Oct. 23, 1948, featuring the Pyle brothers. ■ The last flies tied by Hal Weatherwox, owner of Black Bar Lodge, and a photo of Hal with Bob Pritchett. ■ The Argosy article, describing the main character — “A balding and whimsical gentleman of Grants Pass named Glen Wooldridge, a man with a clerical look and a longshoreman’s vocabulary.”



The front of the Greyhound bus that crashed on Dec. 5, 1948, lies on Highway 99. It carried the Grants Pass High football team, which won the state football title the day before in Portland. Players Sterling Heater and Al Newman died in the crash.

A community’s joy ended with tragedy

By Jeff Duewel
of the Daily Courier

It was supposed to be a joyful homecoming for the 1948 Grants Pass High football team. On an early December day, they beat Jefferson of Portland 6-0 for the state championship. The next day half the town waited for the boys to come home on the Greyhound bus, but a mere 15 miles from home tragedy struck on Mount Sexton. The driver lost control coming down the hill in the rain, spun out of control on a left-hand curve of old Highway 99, and toppled over, dangling over a steep embankment. Nearly everyone was hurt at least slightly, but most of the team got out. But Al Newman and Ster-

ling Heater perished. The whole town went into mourning. Four days later 3,000 people packed the new gym for the memorial service, and flowers were sent from every high school in the state. Shortly afterward the new gym was named Heater-Newman Memorial Gym, and it stayed that way when a new gym opened in 1999. Grants Pass Athletic Director Jess Loffer had the state title trophy on his lap when the crash happened, and it was used to break windows to escape the burning bus. To this day the trophy sits in a case at the school, a link to one of the greatest tragedies in Grants Pass history. “It’s something that will be with you forever,” Loffer said in a 1988 interview.

The river’s renown blossomed as the tourism industry grew

By Jeff Duewel
of the Daily Courier

By the 1950s the Rogue River had become more accessible to floaters, who had more money and access to guides and newly popular rubber rafts. The fishing for salmon and steelhead had already become legendary, fueled by the works of author Zane Grey. The center of the fishing universe in the old days may have been the Weasku Inn, upstream from Grants Pass, where Clark Gable could be seen occasionally. He used to bring a girl along when he fished with a guide, said Rick Olsen of Grants Pass, whose father, Bert, guided Gable. “One time, Gable hauled in a nice steelhead, lit up a cigar, had a shot of whiskey, patted the girl on the butt and said, ‘God, this is living,’” Olsen said. Glen Wooldridge was known for the first powerboat trip up the river, featured in newsreels and in Argosy magazine, and for publicizing the Rogue more than anybody. Wooldridge’s bust is on display at Riverside Park in Grants Pass, and he’s synonymous to many with the river. He dynamited a few places to allow boat passage.



The original Orange Torpedo Trips crew in 1969, from left, Gary Mires, Rich Hosley, Jerry Gastineau, Chris Bentley, Helen Bentley, Jerry Bentley, Gaynor Goth, Darl Thornton and Grant Martinsen.

Guide Mel Norrick took former President George H. Bush down the river in 1988, and helped haul supplies for film movies such as “Rooster Cogburn.” A photo album includes a shot of Hepburn riding in one of the original “Tahiti” inflatable kayaks that appeared on the Rogue in the 1970s. “I thought John Wayne was fantastic,” Norrick recalled.

“Katharine Hepburn always wanted to get in that Tahiti.” How about those Tahitis? Well the they appeared on the Rogue River because of Orange Torpedo Trips, the company founded in 1969 by Jerry Bentley, who died last year. By the 1980s everyone had traded inner tubes for the orange colored kayaks. Between the mouth of the Applegate River and Grave

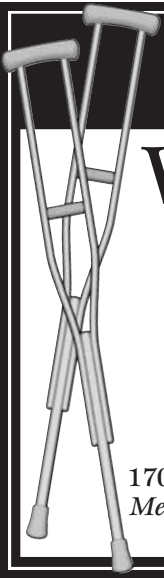
Creek alone, a stretch of 27 miles, more than 100,000 people visit the river every year. The Rogue became a federal Wild and Scenic River in 1968, which led to a quota of 120 floaters per day on the 34-mile Wild Section between Grave Creek and Foster Bar. It also established rules for future riverside development.



WOOLSEY

Former Morrison’s Lodge owner B.A. Hanten said in a 1999 interview he threatened to saw a government truck in half with a chain saw over what he could and couldn’t do on his property. “He took them to court and whipped them,” said Jerry Briggs, a retired boat building and guiding legend on the Rogue. “As far as I know he’s the only one who beat them in court.” The late Grant Garcia founded Hellgate Excursions in the late 1950s, and Gary and Julie Woolsey bought it in 1973 and added the now-famous dinner trips. By the mid-1980s Hellgate had competition from Gentry

McKinney’s new company, but the two later merged and today Hellgate carries upward of 75,000 people a year down the Rogue. Garcia is also known for winning the first-ever Boatnik hydroplane race, on May 30, 1959 — a 50-mile round trip to Galice Creek and back, with George Brown on board. Boatnik was created in 1959 as a wordplay on Sputnik, the world’s first satellite launched by the Soviet Union just two years earlier. It continues to this day, drawing thousands to the river over Memorial Day weekend to watch whizzing jet-boats and hydroplanes.



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