

The Calhoun Chronicle

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Open House at 2 p.m., Friday **Self-Proclaimed River Rat Writes History Of W.Va. Inflatables**

by Bill Bailey

On Mar. 7, 2011, we received an intriguing note from a gentleman in Utah:

"I am a river guide in Utah. I am trying to document the history of inflatable boats; focusing on Rubber Fabricators . . . I have attached a draft of the piece I'm working on at the present time.

The draft and all of the letters, photos, and other information will be placed in the Utah State University and Northern Arizona University Special River History Collections.

I plan to visit your area to locate historical photos of the plants and operations. If you have any information or leads, I would appreciate it," (signed) Herm Hoops.

This seemed like an interesting challenge for the Chronicle staff. We like to solve mysteries!

We found former associates from Rubber Fabricators that were willing to share information and memories.



Herm Hoops

When we informed Hoops that former employees and others associated with Rubber Fabricators looked forward to his visit, he sent this reply:

"The primary purpose is to document the information for the Special River Collections at the University of Northern Arizona and the University of Utah. When I began rafting, I received a lot of help from legends of river running, and they never charged me a penny.

This is sort of my way of repaying their graciousness. During the summer, I am a guide, and in winter I repair boats. I am using 100% of my repair business to fund the history. It was sad for me to visit the mostly vacant plants. I stood inside the plant at Richwood, where I first saw the raft they built for me, and a wave of melancholy swept over me.

I felt like I was attending a wake, but wandering around, I realized that the people who worked at the plants were Dream Builders. They probably didn't look at it that way, but they built Dream Craft that took me and hundreds of thousands of people down the rivers."

Hoops planned his trip to Grantsville to meet publisher Helen Morris for the middle of May, 2011:

"My doorbell rang one morning, and when I opened the door, there was this big man standing there with bushy hair and beard, who looked like he had been rafting on the Little Kanawha River and just stopped by to say hello," said Morris.

"Over a cup of coffee, we made plans to introduce him to his resource persons. During

visits to the former Rubber Fab plant, Sav-A-Tool office, senior center, Chronicle office, and Family History Center, he listened to the stories of former employees.

"He heard stories of the three men who came to 'the middle of nowhere' with their families to develop Rubber Fabricators and become a part of the community. They also told of the close family feeling and cooperation in times of emergencies,

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like the Great Flood of 1967."

Hoops took the time to listen, and made people feel that their lives mattered and they would be remembered as a part of this history. Their stories were as interesting and important as some of the celebrities that people are exposed to every day.

On Friday, July 20, Hoops will be back in Grantsville to present, as a gift, the culmination of his research and work, entitled "The History of West Virginia Inflatables." He will make the presentation to former Calhoun resident Joe Geiger, director of W.Va. Dept. of Archives and History.

Hoops and Geiger will be special guests at an open house hosted by Calhoun Historical Society at Family History Center, Main St., on Friday at 2 p.m., where they will meet with visitors, answer questions, and record additional information provided.

Herm Hoops' life has always been associated with water: from bucolic farm ponds and awe-inspiring rivers to the endless ocean, and he has always had an interest in history.

The son of farmers, Hoops grew up on a large dairy cattle and Morgan horse farm. After attending University of Vermont, he taught vocational agriculture and forestry in the Northeast Kingdom of Vermont.

In 1972, he left Vermont, picked up his new Selway raft in Richwood, and headed West for the better part of a year to run rivers--any rivers he ran across.

In 1975, he began a career with the National Park Service and U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service. He retired from the Dinosaur National Monument in 1996, but has continued following his love of rivers as a guide, naturalist and historian, and is proactive in protecting the river canyons of the Colorado

Plateau. The rivers have been good to him, and perhaps, he has been good to them.

Herm Hoops and his wife Valerie live in Jensen, Utah.