

Philippi Park to reopen Memorial Day Weekend

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Philippi Park, located on the John Day River about a mile upstream from the confluence with the Columbia River, will reopen Friday, May 27 for Memorial Day Weekend.

Darrell McSmith grew up camping and fishing at Philippi Park on the John Day River; it's where he learned to water ski with his older brother and two sisters, and where he'd bring his own daughters years later for family reunions.

“It was just kind of this little oasis in the middle of this dry desert area,” said McSmith, who owns All Points Media in Beaverton. “It had a little bit of everything for everyone.”

Located about a mile upriver from where the John Day flows into the Columbia, Philippi Park can only be reached by boat. Budget cuts forced the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers to close the park in 2013, though the agency left the door open for alternative management proposals.

Wanting to do something in memory of his parents, McSmith, 49, came up with a plan. He established a nonprofit group called the OPAL Foundation in February to restore the park, which is now set to reopen over Memorial Day Weekend.

Volunteers with the OPAL Foundation have spent most of the last six weeks mowing tall grass, removing downed trees and cleaning up the park’s sandy beaches. At the same time, they have started fundraising to build up a maintenance and operations budget for the next three years, working with the Army Corps of Engineers.

So far, McSmith said they’ve raised \$63,200 of their \$250,000 goal. The foundation recently recruited a summer camp host, and future projects might include adding wildlife viewing trails and new eco-friendly showers.

“It took a lot of effort just to get it started again,” McSmith said. “We wanted it to be about community, and bringing back these types of recreation opportunities that are unique to the Gorge and the Northwest.”

Philippi Park was established by the Corps in 1978 and it soon became a popular attraction for boaters and fishermen, drawing in roughly 13,000 people every year. By the 1980s, McSmith said the park would be packed with visitors during annual bass fishing tournaments.

McSmith said he and his family would make trips every year from Woodburn — sometimes two or three times every year — to enjoy the sunshine and water.

“We’re one of probably hundreds of stories of people who have spent a lot of time enjoying this park,” McSmith said.

McSmith lost his father unexpectedly in 2001, and his mother died from cancer in 2007. Both loved the outdoors, and he knew he wanted to do something in their memory. When Philippi Park closed, he said it was the perfect opportunity.

“I was fortunate to have great parents,” he said. “I just thought this was something I wanted to do.”

McSmith reached out to the Army Corps of Engineers to forge a partnership, and he said they’ve been supportive throughout the process. Rural communities like Rufus and Arlington have also lent their support, recognizing importance of recreation and tourism to their local economies.

The OPAL Foundation — which combines the names of McSmith’s parents, Oppie and Paul — has spent every weekend since the beginning of April returning the park to pristine shape. McSmith said they will be ready to reopen on Friday, May 27, with the Army Corps reinstalling the main boat dock and turning water and power back on.

Matt Rabe, spokesman with the Corps’ Portland District, said they would not be able to reopen Philippi Park without the “truly unique” partnership with OPAL.

“Because everything is boat-in, boat-out ... it just compounds the cost of maintaining that park,” Rabe said. “It’s having the extra resources from this outside organization that allows us to reopen.”

Rabe said recreation is one of the Corps’ primary missions, and they’re excited to be able to offer the opportunity again at Philippi Park.

“It’s a fairly secluded facility,” he said. “If you’re trying to get away from it all, it’s a nice place to go.”

Philippi Park will officially reopen May 27 with a boat parade up the river, followed by a ribbon cutting and barbecue. Those interested in attending can meet at 9 a.m. at LePage Park, exit 114 off Interstate 84, where boats will launch.

McSmith said he hopes to use Philippi as a model for reopening other parks and recreation sites in the future.

“It’s just an amazing feeling,” he said.

For more information about the OPAL Foundation, or to donate to the Philippi Park project, visit www.opal-foundation.org.