

Horse Mountain Grippers gather for Trinity trek

By Sally Morris The Trinity Journal | Posted: Wednesday, October 8, 2014 6:15 am

Friends for more than 40 years, the Horse Mountain Grippers ride on, recently choosing a scenic 120-mile bicycle route through the northern end of Trinity County for their annual fall ride when the loosely formed group of approximately 20 high school chums reunites for active outdoor fun and rowdy good times.

Most of the Grippers grew up in Eureka and graduated in 1973 from Eureka High School though a few have been inducted from rival schools and the group welcomes new friends. Some have known each other since elementary school and though nearly all have moved away from the area to achieve successful careers in all sorts of endeavors ranging from medicine to mechanics, the group convenes at least three times a year to enjoy the easy camaraderie of old friends and stay connected.

They've chosen Hawkins Bar in Trinity County as their base of operations, collectively purchasing a cabin there three years ago, remodeling and turning it into The Gripper Compound or "G-Pound" for short. A stalwart Gripper, Matt Mathews has long owned property at the Trinity Village subdivision his late father, Francis Mathews, developed and when he saw another property for sale along the Trinity River, he called the Gripper brethren and the deal was done.

While official Grippers are all males approaching their 60th birthdays next year, wives, kids and grandkids are welcome at the G-Pound where many photos, every school yearbook and other memorabilia from past and current get-togethers adorn the place.

Aside from their alma mater, the main thing the Grippers have in common is a history of work and play at the former Horse Mountain ski area on national forest land near Berry Summit in Humboldt County that was operated by a Eureka physician, Dr. Jack Walsh, wife Mary and family for 20 years through the 1960s and '70s.

Primitive by modern standards, the Horse Mountain ski area ran an exceptionally long and steep rope tow 1,600 feet up the mountain, a feat made easier if one had a "gripper" — a metal, wrench-like tool used to grab onto the rope tow. The boys from Eureka High School were frequent visitors to the area, and employees at one point or another.

They all became close friends with each other and with Dr. Walsh they describe as their mentor who continues to inspire through his joy in life as a man who has continued skiing into his 90s and at 96 is



Group photo

The Grippers gather for a group photo before taking off.

going strong, still residing with his wife in Eureka.

Assisted by the advent of the Internet and social networking sites like Facebook, the Grippers began their formal reunions about 20 years ago, evolving into long bike rides, including a 100-mile Tour of the Unknown Coast and annual ski trips to Squaw Valley. The group has a Web site maintained by its more tech-savvy members and includes videos of past events as well as blogs by some of the writers in the group.

The Gripper battle cry of öHiouska!ö is attributed to Dr. Walsh, of Norwegian descent, though no one knows the exact translation öand we've been saying it so long that even he can't remember what it means,ö said Gripper captain and board chairman Tom Quigley as the group shouted the word in unison at the start of the annual fall ride.

The group of 18 road cyclists, accompanied by five sag wagons driven by fellow Grippers, staged the event out of the Weaverville Joss House parking lot. The two-day ride headed north along Highway 3 up past Trinity Lake to the Alpen Cellars winery for lunch and a tour, then back on the bikes up Coffee Creek Road. Most rode to the end of the pavement and shuttled up the remainder of the dirt road to overnight at Josephine Creek Lodge, but three rode their bikes the entire 22 miles of gravel, skinny tires and all.

Day two was a challenging pedal up Highway 3 over Scott Mountain and down to the finish line at the Etna Brewery where riders were surprised to find they had a \$200 beer credit, pledged by three Grippers unable to attend the fall ride with the stipulation that the credit was only for beer, not food.

Mathews noted there was no cause for their concern as the bar bill alone topped \$350.

öEveryone we met along the way treated us warmly and we really enjoyed those amazing Trinity County vistas,ö he said.