

MOUNTAIN MAN



A PICK, A SHOVEL, AND A PRY BAR

In 1947, Richard Zimmerman started hammering the first of 15 caves out of a mountain in Idaho. The 19th century commune he created made him an international folk hero.

It was an unlikely heaven: jagged rocks, narrow terracing, caves hand-chiseled into a stony mountain. There were no modern amenities beyond gas lamps and handmade wood stoves. Everything here was on its second life, from the car windshields that became cave windows to the old tires that became insulation, handpicked from the local dump. It's the closest you could possibly come to living like the Taliban, and yet each year many people: the displaced, the strange, the nomads, and the curious of American society, called this network of ice caves home. For only \$5 a night, people could escape the pressures of modern society and be transported back to the 1800's.

These caves were not always intended to be an eclectic boarding house. In fact, there was never supposed to be more than just one. In

1947, Richard Zimmerman hitched his way to Salmon River, Idaho, drawn by the promise of gold and lured in by the remoteness of the mountainous region. The nearest town was over 20 miles away; he could live in peace without much worry of running into other people. Zimmerman did strike gold, but not big. He submitted a mining claim and the land was his. He needed a place to live, so with American ingenuity and Idaho grit Zimmerman pulled out his mining tools and started hammering a cave into the side of the mountain using a pick, a shovel, and a pry bar.

The construction of the original cave took several months, and once it was done, Zimmerman, who had since become known as Dugout Dick, realized he needed a way to make some money. Although the original promise of



Environmentally friendly before it was popular, Dugout Dick was proud to share that not a dime went into the making of the caves.

the land had been its seclusion, Dugout hammered out 14 more caves over the next few years to draw people in.

And draw them in he did. Dugout's caves became a local sensation, then a national one when he was featured in *National Geographic* and *Life*. The magazines branded Dugout as the "Original Mountain Man" and further rocketed Dugout to international stardom, where he became the subject of several documentaries in Scandinavia. At one point he was invited to appear on Johnny Carson's *The Tonight Show*, but declined because he didn't want to fly to California for the taping.

Due to the media coverage, the array of people who visited the caves over the years was impressive. Indeed, the interesting residents and the stories they told became almost as big an attraction as the caves themselves. Bruce Long, Dugout's caretaker, liked to tell about Leann, a 70-year-old transvestite who lived in the northernmost cave for several years. During one holiday cave gathering involving a lot of beer, Leann was in the middle of an argument with another resident when she had to step outside to pee. She never came back. After 20 minutes

Long went to check on her. When he stepped outside onto the foot-wide terrace, he saw two high heel shoes stuck in the rocks but no Leann. He was calling her name when he heard someone moaning down below. On another terrace ledge, 50 feet below, was Leann, all bruised and cut up. As she later related to the group, after a visit to the ER to get stitched up, she had indeed been peeing when she lost her balance mid-stream. She fell forward, out of her shoes, and onto the rocks below.

Even with the likes of Leann to entertain, people still traveled from all over the globe to meet the "Original Mountain Man." Up until two years ago, he still ran the mountain every day, chasing his herd of goats and doing minor repairs on his array of caves. After a brief hospitalization from a stroke, Dugout was sent to a nursing home to recover. With no children or family, it was feared that he would never again return to the ice caves. But Dugout surprised everyone by walking out of the nursing home and hitchhiking home.

Those fortunate enough to meet Dugout after his hospitalization met a shockingly older man, feeble with sickness and age. He slept most hours of the day and he didn't talk much,

his speech slurred from his stroke. Dugout died in his sleep last February, at 94 years of age. His death may have signaled the ending of an era but it only signaled the beginning of his legacy. As a tribute to his life and popularity, the government has plans to make the caves into a living museum. It is no longer possible to spend the night in the ice caves, but you can still walk the terraces in search of the bathroom, dangling off the side of a cliff, a goat perched on the roof. You can wander through Dugout's cave and marvel at everything he and his visitors did without: electricity, running water, worldly possessions. In this day of smog and traffic, it is hard to imagine life as untouched and simple. But only a 15 hour drive from Seattle, nestled in the mountains of Idaho, heaven awaits.



Driving Directions:

From Salmon, Idaho, drive south on US-93 for nearly 19 miles. Turn west and cross the one-lane bridge over the Salmon River. Turn left and drive south for almost 0.5 miles. The caves will be embedded in the mountainside to your right.