



Gerber Scout Camp building \$1.5 million dining hall in Blue Lake Township

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By Lynn Moore | The Muskegon Chronicle



Chronicle/Kendra Stanley-MillsJosh

Willson, 23, of White Cloud works on the construction site of the new Gerber Scout Camp dining hall in Blue Lake Township. Willson is working for the Boy Scouts. The former Merrill Dining Hall collapsed in December 2008. It's not often that a building collapse is considered a "gift from God."

But that's how Mike Sulgrove views the **Christmas Eve 2008 collapse** of the Gerber Scout Camp dining hall. Now knowing that the hall was a shabbily built disaster waiting to happen, Sulgrove says its collapse from the weight of snow on its roof was "a blessing."

"That collapsing from snow on Christmas Eve morning and nobody in it — I'll take that as a gift from God."



Courtesy photoThe former Gerber Camp dining hall shortly after its collapse on Dec. 24, 2008. Sulgrove, scout executive of the Grand Rapids-based Gerald R. Ford Council of Boy Scouts of America, says the council was “so darn lucky” the hall at its camp collapsed during a rare time when no one was inside. It’s also fortunate that supporters of the camp have enabled the council to erect an enormous \$1.5 million stone structure in its place.

Centennial Lodge, named for this year’s 100th anniversary of the Boy Scouts of America, is a testament to the enormous growth and popularity **the year-round Boy Scout camp** in Blue Lake Township is enjoying.

Even with a huge “circus tent” serving as a makeshift dining hall last year, the council had to add an eighth week of camping to its summer schedule to accommodate the demand, Sulgrove said.

The summer of 2009 saw record attendance at the 800-acre camp that included 2,200 campers, 700 adult leaders and 100 staffers, Sulgrove said.

And now, with an impressive new lodge and dining hall set to welcome scouts this summer, the Gerber Scout Camp is poised to grow even more. It already has 10 percent more campers registered for the 2010 summer season than attended last summer, Sulgrove said.



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EngineersThe camp is limited by the size of its dining hall, due to the fact that officials insist that campers dine together “like one big family” rather than in shifts, Sulgrove said. With the new dining hall easily able to accommodate 700 people — while the old one barely held 500 — Sulgrove predicts the camp can grow to 4,000 campers a summer.

“That would put us as the biggest Boy Scout camp in the state,” he said.

Not only that, he said, it will have the “finest camp dining hall.”

The stone structure currently under construction will feature 12 massive log beams, each weighing 6 tons and measuring 80 feet in length. The lodge is set to be completed by the time the first summer campers arrive in mid-June.



View full size Hooker | De Jong Architects & EngineersArchitect's

drawing of the exterior of the Centennial Lodge Dining Hall at Gerber Scout Camp by Hooker | De Jong Architects & Engineers in Muskegon. “When it gets done, you’re going to say ‘Wow!’ Not only is it an impressive building, but it looks like it belongs in a Boy Scout camp,” Sulgrove said. “This is not only our dining hall and fellowship hall, training hall and fun scouting hall, but it’s our emergency shelter.”

And it’s a far cry from the former Merrill Dining Hall, that essentially was a “pole barn with vinyl coverings on the outside of it,” Sulgrove said. After the building’s collapse from the snow weight, an engineer examined

the remains and determined the building had structural defects and was not properly built when it was erected in 1997, Sulgrove said. When the snow weight compromised the structure, all of the rafters "basically slid," he said.

"It simply was not done the way it should have been," he said, adding that although it's a matter for the council's insurance company, he believes too much time has passed to get a legal ruling against the builder.

The new lodge is being financed with the \$800,000 settlement for the destroyed hall and money raised through fundraising. Sulgrove is confident the council will be able to raise the needed cash.

"No one has said no yet," he said.

Gerber Scout Camp has enjoyed substantial support from corporate backers, mostly from the Grand Rapids area, that has helped it construct an appealing infrastructure.

The Boy Scout camp includes a gun-shooting range, an archery range; a swimming/boating/fishing area on Big Britton Lake; a 1,000-seat campfire amphitheater; a multisided, multiskill-level climbing wall; and a large outdoor ceremonial lodge complete with a huge, carved eagle that conceals a platform and podium.



Chronicle/Kendra Stanley-MillsJohn

Fox works at the construction site of the new Gerber Scout Camp dining hall in Blue Lake Township Monday afternoon. Fox, a Grand Rapids dentist, also is a scout leader at the camp. Fox said he volunteers when he can. "It clears your head," he said. The separate Cub Scout "Adventureland" camp — for first- through fifth-graders — includes a "Davey Crockett's Challenge" BB gun range, its own swimming area complete with "Huck Finn's rafts" on Little Britton Lake, an enormous "lost ship" that towers over the group campfire circle and a village of large Indian teepees. There are covered wagons — which, depending on the fantasy play they've organized, staff might transform into wagons for circus performers, magicians or pioneers — and two large forts, including an all-log replica of explorers' Lewis and Clark's Fort Clatsop that was painstakingly built over the course of a year by special craftsmen.

A \$1 million gift from Rich and Helen DeVos paid for a high ropes challenge course as well as work on a new Venture base camp where young people ages 14 through 21 will gather and get organized before setting off

for such extended off-site adventures as rock climbing and snow caving.

The first phase of the DeVos Venture Base was completed last fall and will be dedicated this summer at the same time as Centennial Lodge, Sulgrove said. The Venture base camp includes an outdoor pavilion and three cabins that can accommodate 60 people, and eventually two more cabins and a small dining hall will be added.



Chronicle/Kendra Stanley-Mills

The new \$1.5 million dining hall at the Gerber Scout Camp in Blue Lake Township is underway. The former Merrill Dining Hall collapsed in December 2008. *E-mail Lynn Moore at llmoore@muskegonchronicle.com*

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