

Hood River stone mason is one of few skilled enough to match original stone walls in the Columbia gorge

*By Karol Dietrich, Special to The Oregonian
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Stone masons Rick Olmstead and Josh Maiden work last month on the Mitchell Point State Park overlook. Rick is the son of Don Olmstead, owner of Nature's Edge Stone Art Inc., one of a small number of companies that can meet federal criteria for matching historic stone walls in repair and expansion projects.

When old stone retaining walls crumble along narrow, winding roads threading through the Columbia River Gorge, government officials often turn to stone mason Don Olmstead to make repairs.

Olmstead, owner of Nature's Edge Stone Art Inc., in Hood River, is one of a small number of master stone masons with skills to meet federal criteria in matching original stone walls, retaining walls and overlook areas.

Basalt rock formations cradle the deep and wide areas of the Columbia gorge, and sometimes look like gigantic sculptures

towering over tall fir trees. The quiet beauty of stone landscaped walls throughout Oregon's state parks often mimics these natural works of art.

"I like being able to create a job that people can appreciate in a natural setting," says Olmstead. "I love stone work, as it allows more creativity."

In 1915, as highway workers blasted through the basalt formations to build the Historic Columbia River Highway, masons created stone retaining walls and viaducts that still stand today. When those structures crack, crumble or get blasted away, Olmstead's crew can restore them to their original charm.

His company recently completed two parking lot retaining walls and overlook areas in the gorge at the Guy W. Talbot State Park near Latourell Falls and at Mitchell Point State Park, which is still closed to the public.

"He has great knowledge and expertise, and does top-quality work," says Tammy Edgerly of the family-owned business, JP Contractors Inc., whose company uses Olmstead and his family-owned company on their Oregon Parks and Recreation projects in the gorge.

Olmstead says his company has five full-time employees now, but on larger projects, it employs up to 80 stone masons and apprentices. His son, Rick Olmstead, completed the work at Latourell and Mitchell Point.

Olmstead grew up in the Bend area, went off to military service and returned to join his twin brother in the masonry business, initially as an apprentice with a master stone mason. He then launched his own masonry business.

His work is seen at premier grand lodges such as Skamania Lodge in Stevenson, Wash.; Eagle Nest Resort in Waterville Valley, a world-class ski resort in New Hampshire; and the lobby stone flooring at the L.L. Bean Company in Freeport, Maine. At Multnomah Falls Lodge he built a 20-foot-high stone retaining wall near the outdoor cafe, matching basalt stone to the lodge.

Olmstead recently completed a project for the federal Lewis & Clark National Historical Park at Station Camp, which is near Chinook, Wash., at the mouth of the Columbia River. This is where the Meriwether Lewis and William Clark expedition camped Nov. 15-25, 1805. Olmstead used Fawn Creek rock to build an overlook wall at the site, which is near the quaint St. Mary's Catholic Church.

In Portland, his stone work lines the entrance to the historic Ladd Carriage House on Broadway. In the city of Wilsonville's Murase Park, he built a multi-layered stone wall with a waterfall feature as a central focal point. Mark O. Hatfield trailhead park near Mosier display his use of Prairie Moss Rock – a distinctive pink-hued stone that comes from central Montana.

"We are grateful to these artists who can repair or re-build these park areas, which help the visitor experience the natural beauty," says Chris Havel, Oregon parks and recreation spokesperson.

The stone work in park areas is sometimes called site furniture, Havel says, and few stone masons can furnish a site like (Olmstead) does.

"It creates a wonderful outdoor art experience for visitors to our state parks," he says.

Olmstead travels and hand picks the rocks he uses for his projects. He travels to central Montana, with permits in hand, and uses heavy equipment to pick up boulder-size rocks, some of which he resells to other stone masons. He also trucks some gigantic rocks back to his Hood River business, where he cuts them into various shapes and sizes for park projects or residences.

The Camas Grey basalt rock he uses on most of his projects in the Columbia River Gorge state parks comes from the Fisher Quarry in Camas, Wash.

Olmstead says he "loves what I do" and hopes he can be part of the Mitchell Tunnel project, which the Oregon Department of Transportation has proposed and submitted to Congress for approval.

"I'd like to be the stone mason who re-creates the adits (window-like stone wall openings)," he says.

-- Karol Dietrich