



Friends of the Forest Sedona

NEWS

“Nice Little Projects” Win Award for Volunteer

by Susan Vitek

Sitting in his chocolate brown vest and checked shirt, leg crossed at the knee revealing black and brown cowboy boots, Friends of the Forest (FOF) volunteer Al Gilson looks ten years younger than what’s listed on his driver’s license.

Raised on a farm in Iowa, Gilson was at his dad’s side learning to repair family farm buildings, including those at his grandmother’s place.

“I’ve been in construction one way or another all my life. I’m a ‘jack of all trades and master of none,’” says 71-year-old Gilson. He’s been involved in several major projects with the Red Rock Ranger District through FOF and won the “Special Projects Award” for 2009.

“When FOF first found out about my carpentry skills, I finished the inside of an extension at the Oak Creek Canyon Vista. I had a trailer and shop equipment so that was handy,” he said.

A “handy” person was definitely needed for getting the Apache Maid Cabin near Stoneman Lake Road restored for rental purposes. Gilson estimates that he spent about 1,000 hours on that major undertaking.

“I tore the linoleum off to the original fir floor. Some wood had to be replaced, and I got glazed looks at the store when I asked for fir wood. So I bought spruce, did the tongue and groove, and after I painted it, the floor looked just like the original,” he said.

Gilson built new windows of barn sash (yes, I had to ask—this is the same wood that goes into barn windows!), repaired the front door, and built new screen doors for all three entrances. He built ramps for wheelchair accessibility too.

Gilson and wife Regina remembered that when they took their grandchildren to the site for a picnic, five-year-old Andrew and the 3-year old twins “thought it was cool. They never saw an outhouse before,” Regina said with a smile. (The cabin, 10 miles south of Stoneman Lake, will be available to rent on May 1, 2010.)

A highly visible project is the Red Rock Ranger Station wood and stone sign on Highway 179. When Gilson heard the original sign bid, he knew he could save a significant amount of money by donating the labor.

“I’ve laid stone before, but was never very good at it. Stonework is an art in itself. A friend from church helped us start, and I bet there were ten other FOF members helping. It’s a nice little project,” he added.

The “nice little project” saved the Forest Service about \$20,000.

Gilson and the FOF Trail Maintenance volunteers were also asked to repair the Bell Rock Pathway bridge. “Our trail crew tore it out and replaced it in a day. I knew it needed good bolts, and they are pricey, so FOF donated the \$500.

“We double nutted those bolts so they won’t drop off again. Everyone pitched in and did what it took. They made it happen. These guys work good together. Each knows what to do since they all have different skills,” Gilson said, always ready to praise the many volunteers who help him.

And his trail crew responds in kind. FOF volunteer Mike Vitek describes Gilson as “a talented, patient construction manager who provides excellent leadership and training so jobs can be done efficiently and safely, keeping all us neophytes in line.”

Trail Maintenance works on new and old trails every Friday. “I don’t care for always workin’ on trails swingin’ a pick and fiddlin’ with rocks, but I like goin’ out with the guys. And they are always anxious to hear about a new project,” Gilson added.

It never is long until a new project gets tossed his way, especially when the Trail Maintenance crew accepted the challenge of building information kiosks.

“This was an interesting project that was a ‘no go’ unless we had five men. That steel was just too heavy to manage with less. With a three-hour commute, we took in tools like jackhammers, never knowing if we had to go through dirt or rock. We needed a generator, water to mix concrete and lots of logistical skills involving tools or parts.”

Gilson put his arms behind his neck and leaned back, looking at the ceiling, when asked how many steel kiosks they installed. A “whew” escape his mouth as his mind counted. “Let’s see, eight, ten, twelve—anyway, quite a few, and each took a whole day.”

Or, as the modest Gilson would say, “Yep, we do nice little projects.”

For more information about Friends of the Forest, visit www.friendsoftheforestsedona.org or contact the Red Rock Ranger Station at 203-2900.



Left to right—Joe Landholm, Ron Rusk, Al Gilson, Rick Zabor
Bob Tener Mike Ward, Roy Julian, Rick Baldauf. Workers not in
picture include Frank Wirkus and Mike Vitek.

Photo by Mike Vitek