

Kirkwood founder excited about future

By Kathryn Reed

With snow at the top of Cornice and a fire roaring at Off the Wall restaurant, the scene could be a perfect painting of Kirkwood Mountain Resort.

Bud Klein describes the ski area as a work of art that is a few strokes from being finished. Dressed in a red sweater, he looks like he could hit the slopes. But even if there were more snow, he says too many titanium body parts prevent him from strapping on boards.

Klein founded the resort in the late 1960s, was there when it opened 35 years ago and was on hand last month for the groundbreaking of Expedition Lodge.

The 80-year-old is the epitome of modesty. His success in the business world is not written about much. And he's just fine with that. Few know about the Klein Bros. success in the nut business – eventually selling to Con Agra in the 1990s. Or how Bud Klein founded California Coolers, which launched the wine cooler craze in the 1980s. Three years ago he gave \$1.5 million to the University of the Pacific for its baseball field that is named Klein Family Field.

Many of the people at the Oct.



Photo by Josh Otto

Kirkwood founder Bud Klein speaks with the *Mountain News* at Off the Wall Restaurant.

15 reception at Kirkwood didn't know why Rodney Strong Vineyards was the wine of choice or why it will be the Rodney Strong Wine Bar when the private residence club opens in a couple years.

You see, the Klein family has owned the Healdsburg winery since 1989. They grew it from a 69,000-case operation into 500,000 cases a year.

But it was his vision 40 years ago that most locals regard – the stash of powder of Highway 88, that resort that boasts the most snow in the greater Lake Tahoe area – Kirkwood.

It was in 1967 that Klein and a buddy drove to Kirkwood from Bear Valley in a Jeep. Cattle were grazing. The land rugged and barren. He had a vision – what we know today as Kirkwood Mountain Resort.

Klein and a few other guys from Stockton formed Kirkwood Meadows Inc. and successfully bid on the lease from the U.S. Forest.

"I flew over it a couple times. I could taste it, smell it," Klein said of what it was like decades ago and what it would become.

In a private chat at Kirkwood with the *Tahoe Mountain News*, the youthful looking and sounding Klein recalled a frantic call he received from his wife Jane while he was in Madagascar. Forest

Service and Sierra Club people were on the east side of Caples Lakes with scopes. They said Chair 4 was three inches too high.

The ordeal to get back to the States included a fire at the U.S. Embassy, more than one strip search, a stop in Uganda where Idi Amin was in power, the payment of bribes to keep a fellow passenger alive, arriving broke in Rome, getting a loan from a friend to get to London and then to San Francisco where his wife and attorney met him.

Klein and his partners offered a \$25,000 bond to the Sierra Club if people complained about the lift within two years. No complaints arrived.

Chair 4 was finished in 1972 – the same year the resort opened.

"The Forest Service was with us in what we did and supported us in court. If we didn't go back there, it would have been a disaster," Klein said of Chair 4.

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Kirkwood Meadows Inc. went to court to defend its right to build. According to Klein, the Sierra Club's attorney told the judge ski resorts were pointless because people weren't having babies so there wouldn't be any skiers. And ski industry numbers have been flat or declining in recent years.

The case was tossed. "Everything we've done has been under a microscope," Klein said.

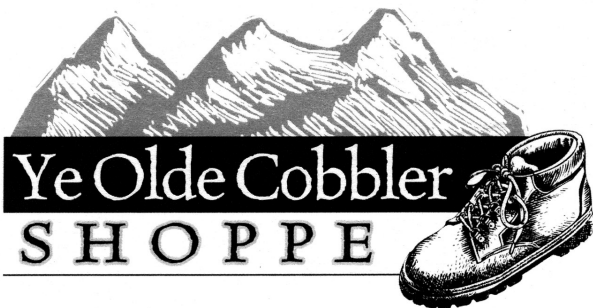
Today, Klein owns 16 percent of the resort and is on the board of directors.

"This will be a big deal for us – that lodge," Klein said of Expedition Lodge. "It will be built for families, not high rollers."

Seventeen fractional and five whole shares are part of phase one of the 3- and 4-bedroom project. Owners won't even have to walk to the lifts – one will be built to service them at the lodge. Prices start at \$379,000.

But Klein doesn't need to buy into this property. He has a four bedroom condo that overlooks the meadow, which will never be developed.

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