

Hanging Rock State Park's New Visitors Center Nearly Finished

In 1988 National Geographic Magazine voted Hanging Rock State Park, "One of the ten best in the nation". When you get a look at the new visitors center which is slated to open this fall you can easily see why. The first of five such centers being built in North Carolina State Parks it shows the careful attention to detail that makes the rest of the park so attractive. Built with money from the \$35 million bond referendum passed by voters in 1993, the 5,300 square foot facility will contain five main areas and cost approximately \$1.4 million.

The main entrance and lobby will introduce visitors to what the park has to offer and provide a list of exhibits as well as some of the geological and natural history of the park and its surroundings. This room has floor to ceil-

ing glass and a working fireplace made of stone. Here you will be able to pick up trail maps and other publications, get a camping permit or talk to park personnel about other needs.

Just off the lobby is an auditorium that can seat 45 to 50 people and will offer lectures and films.

The classroom is a key part of the building's function. Park Superintendent Tommy Wagner said the room was designed for environmental education. "In most cases," said Wagner, "students will be able to study a subject in the classroom and walk right out the door and see it as it exists in nature."

The museum area, currently not slated to open until spring of '97, will house exhibits that will provide details on the park's natural and cultural history.

The multi-purpose facility will also house the park offices and rest rooms which will be open the year round.

The entire center is completely handicapped accessible with wide porch like walkways that cover three sides of it. The building has a system of ramps which will allow a person in a wheelchair to leave the center, cross the parking lot and travel out to an overlook which provides a view of Hanging Rock and vicinity.

The building was designed and built to stay in keeping with the rest of the park. "Most of the buildings were constructed in the 30s," said Wagner, "and we wanted the new building to have the quality and keep the look of the original construction. We didn't want to change the character of the park."

In some cases that was a tall order. The wood used in the construction is cedar with poplar trim. The guttering and downspouts are copper.

"When it came to the stonework though we thought we might have a problem," said Lance White, a State

Parks Construction Unit supervisor. "We wanted to match the stone," said White, "but the old stone was native and we obviously couldn't mine that park to get it. The stone had to be structurally sound in addition to matching the original," White continued, "Ultimately it came from New York State."

Another aspect of the design process was to minimize the impact of construction on the park.

"When we're completely through," Wagner said, "we will only have disturbed an acre and a half." "By building on the side of a hill adjacent to an already existing parking lot," he continued "we actually moved very little dirt. We are also very pleased with the contracting firm, they have operated pretty much on schedule even after some winter delays and have done a good job of keeping the site clean."

A sentiment echoed by White, "There have been some problems," he said, "There always is in a project this size but the way this building turned out really makes you feel good about what you do."

Even the old park office will have a new role to play once the staff moves. "The plans are not final," Wagner said, "but we hope to refurbish it for temporary housing for park volunteers or summer interns. There is even some possibility that we might use it to house campground hosts. All that will be decided later. Right now we are just looking forward to getting in the new building."