

Caves captivate Highland residents

BY JOHN BRUCE • STAFF WRITER



Caver Matt Lucas, son of preeminent caving leader Phil Lucas, crosses a pit in a local cave. (Photo courtesy Phil Lucas)

McDOWELL — The caving bug has bitten Mark Hodge.

Ever since he met his mentors-to-be in May 2011, Hodge has been consumed by all things about caves, from discovery to exploration.

Matter of fact, Hodge has been on the trail to cave discovery in Highland for the past year. He says six new caves have been discovered in the county during that time alone, one of them on the eastern slope of Jack Mountain earlier this month. Most have been small caves, he said, with the largest being Carmichaels Pit, a 465-foot-long, 85-foot deep pit on the western slope of Bullpasture Mountain.

Hodge is particularly interested in having Highland residents contact him if they discover a “blowing hole” on their land. The term refers to a small hole, crack or crevice that expels air when running one’s hand over it. It’s a good sign that there’s a cave close by, Hodge says.

For Hodge and his mentors, Phil Lucas and Rick Lambert, caves are treasures to behold – especially undiscovered ones.

“What could match the thrill of seeing something no one has ever seen before?” Hodge asked. He pointed out that, thanks to caving law in the Virginia state code, landowners are free of liability in the unlikely event a caver is injured while exploring with their permission.

Highland and surrounding areas are so rich in caves, Hodge said, that, “if you’re a caver, this is be best place in the world to live.”

Hodge never thought much about caves or caving before he settled in Highland County. An Air Force chief master sergeant who worked in intelligence as a Russian translator aboard spy planes, Hodge retired in 2010 and moved to the old mill in McDowell. His wife, Liz Devenny, a stained glass artist and fellow retired veteran, set up house there a few months before his retirement.

Then came the flood of April 2011. The storm opened a gushing hole at the base of Cedar Knob in the mill’s back yard. A map of a cave inside the knob, called Solid Rock Cave, hung on a wall in the mill when Hodge and Devenny purchased the property. On the map was the name of local caving authority Rick Lambert, who heads the Virginia Speleological Survey Society, and the year the cave was surveyed and mapped, 1992. Solid Rock was first reported by Barbara Hagen in 1956 as a very small cave, according to official records.



Mark Hodge stands by the entrance to Solid Rock Cave behind his home in McDowell. (Recorder photo by John Bruce)



“Caving, for me, is a passion,” Lucas said, here at home in front of a portion of the huge Virginia Speleological Survey database. (Recorder photo by John Bruce)

“Somebody told me Rick lived in Monterey and he would be more than happy to look at the cave that the storm opened up,” Hodge recalled.

Months earlier, preeminent caving team leader, author and photographer Phil Lucas, who lives down the Bullpasture Valley, noticed as he would drive through McDowell subtle changes in the steep face of Cedar Knob. It looked to him like a staircase was being carved up the knob’s steep slope.

The staircase captivated Lucas. “I saw the steps and knew something was going on. The higher it went, the more I thought, this man is of my own ilk. I’ve got to meet him.” Finally he stopped by the McDowell Post Office and asked postmaster Glenna Neil who was living in the old mill. Later that day he called Hodge and introduced himself, saying that he was interested in seeing the staircase he was building.

“The next day is when the flood occurred,” Lucas said.

He stopped a couple days later to meet Hodge, who mentioned a spring had blown out from the side of the hill, opening up a new cave. “It was a coincidence I was making contact. Mark said he had a cave team coming by next Monday, and I told him I would be on that team,” Lucas said, adding jokingly, “I just wanted to see that staircase up close.”

Hodge, 50, explained he carved out the staircase to make it easier to get to the top of Cedar Knob, which sits on the 16-acre parcel he and his wife own.

“I always liked tree houses and such,” Hodge said. “The top of Cedar Knob is an absolutely a delightful place.” He had been up there several times but slope was so steep it was dangerous. He took a little over a year to complete the 145-foot-high project in September 2011.

Besides a breathtaking view of McDowell and the Bullpasture Valley from Hodge’s knob-top viewing platform, there’s a big, flat, vertical bedrock face that bears graffiti from as far back as 1919.

Hodge said his first exposure to Highland caving was an article his wife showed him about local caving that was published in The Recorder several years ago.

He invites landowners who find blowing holes on their land to contact him by calling 540-396-3570 or e-mailing edevenny@mgwnet.com.

Lucas, 69, has been exploring wild caves since the age of seven, when he joined his older brother, Bill, who now lives in Waynesboro, and a friend explored a wild cave behind their house on Route 11 north of Harrisonburg.

“They let me tag along,” Lucas recalled. “The cave had an entrance and a long gallery. You could throw a



Local caving authority Rick Lambert pauses by a cave entrance in Highland where a warm updraft melts snow. (Photo courtesy Phil Lucas)

rock in a pit and couldn't tell if it ever hit bottom. My brother and friend tried to get down the pit, as I watched wide-eyed.

"Many years later, I explored the pit. I wasn't a caver at age seven, but I was bitten by the cave bug at that time."

His family moved to Staunton, where Lucas rode a bicycle to explore local caves with his back pocket stuffed with candles. Finally, he met Oscar Estes, who was an experienced caver, and taught him much about caving techniques.

In those early years, caving was not known as a sport, Lucas explained. "Back then, people who explored caves were called spelunkers," he said. "Today, cavers rescue spelunkers!"

Lucas was quick to emphasize that exploring caves isn't risky as long as one has the proper equipment and training. "Caving is not a dangerous activity anymore than other outdoor sports," he said.

Lucas first began visiting Highland as a teenager. He attended Bob Roller's summer camp along with some buddies. A life-changing event happened when Lucas met his future spouse at age 16.

"Bob Roller, the old codger, told us we needed to go to a camp up the river because they had girls up there. We went up and, sure enough, there were three or four girls."

One of them was his wife of 48 years, the former Charlotte Robertson. "We've been together ever since," he said.

The camp belonged to her father, Charlie Robertson.

In 1987, when Lucas served as Fairfax district manager for Virginia Power and lived in Chantilly, he went along on a weekend expedition in a newly discovered cave on the ridge behind what would eventually become his retirement home. He coincidentally learned that the land, between Flood and Burnsville, was for sale.

Back in Fairfax a few days later, Lucas was playing racquetball with a friend at lunch. "He noticed bruises on me," Lucas said, explaining bruises are a natural side effect of scrambling and crawling over rocks in a cave. "He asked me why, and I told him about caving and about the property in Highland that was for sale."

Along with his friend, Tom Roehr, a veterinarian, and fellow Virginia Power manager, John Shenel, Lucas bought adjoining tracts of land. Mr. and Mrs. Lucas now own 175 acres and built a home there when he retired from Virginia Power in 1999. They live on a hilltop near the Bullpasture Gorge that Lucas picked for its spectacular long-range vista of the Bullpasture River Valley.

A bonus was the presence of many caves on the land and throughout the area. There are about 11 miles on the Lucas land alone with names that include the Helictite Cave, Water Sinks Cave System and Owl Cave.

"Caving, for me, is a passion," Lucas said. "It's a big part of my life. I have other hobbies, but caving is my primary occupation. It was a pretty big part of my decision to move here." Lucas explained he had long sought land as pristine as Highland's. He'd looked for land in Canaan Valley, WV, on skiing trips. "But I couldn't find something wild enough," he said.

"This land fell in my lap," Lucas said. "When the opportunity knocked, I opened the door."

The couple purchased the land from previous owners Audrey and Bobby Botkin. The property was Mrs. Botkin's home place.

Lucas is involved in both the scientific and organizational sides of caving. He has served as chair and director of the Virginia Cave Board, a state agency whose directors are appointed by the governor. He has served as president of the Cave Conservancy of the Virginias. He is a member of, and recipient of many prestigious awards for caving science and leadership from, the National Speleological Society. He is a member of the Bath County's Butler Cave Conservation Society that owns and manages many large significant caves in the Burnsville area.

He is founder and past president for 32 years of the Virginia Speleological Survey, an organization dedication to the collection and dissemination of cave information.

Lambert now heads the group, whose directors and coordinators report caving information from 26 counties in Virginia and West Virginia.

Lucas serves as director for Bath County, and Hodge is coordinator for Highland.

Mrs. Lucas has served for many years as the survey's data manager. The proprietary database contains measurements and other data painstakingly collected by volunteer cavers from thousands of caves.

"What is amazing is how much data there is on caves," Lucas said. "Our database is worth millions of dollars because it would cost so much if the labor weren't free." The society has contracts with state agencies and universities that use the data for teaching and planning purposes.

Lucas is enthusiastic about the future of caving in Bath and Highland. He pointed out that in 1958, there were only nine caves with 5.5 miles of passages in the area of Burnsville and Chestnut Ridge. Today, there are 90 known caves and 70 miles of passages there.

"That shows the potential," Lucas said.

He explained a statistician did a study in 1958 that predicted 90 percent of caves do not have entrances. "That stands to reason because there really isn't a physical reason for a cave to have an entrance, and we found in following years that his study was accurate.

"That's one of the real excitements that people find with caving. When you discover a new cave, it's like finding a treasure. Caves are treasures like time capsules. When you encounter a place where no one has ever been before, that's pretty special. Caves touch on lots of sciences, from geology to archaeology and hydrology. Most new species of life are found in caves. It's such a rich subject."

Standing in his study, Lucas points to an expanse of filing cabinets covering a wall. "That's part of the database," he said, containing records of roughly 4,000 Virginia caves; 300-400 of them are in Highland, and between 200-300 are in Bath. The two counties are outranked in volume of caves only by Scott and Lee counties in southwest Virginia.

Lucas has written two books about caves including "The Water Sinks - Highland County Adventure," and "Caves and Karst of the Water Sinks Area." The latter book is available in the reference section of the Highland County Public Library.

To learn about caving, access <http://www.caves.org>, the Web site of the National Speleological Society.