

Cave Man



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”

50 years on the job

By MONA CASTEEL

They say water's soft droplets are kisses of good luck.

But if there's luck to be had in the dark, winding passageways of Shenandoah Caverns it has come to Danny Proctor at the expense of 50 years of hard work and devotion.

"I wouldn't say it's a lot of luck, but I have been blessed," said Proctor, who was caught off guard at a recent Shenandoah Valley Travel Association recognition of his half a century in the caverns business. "We've worked very hard."

Proctor never grows tired of touting this natural wonder. He's been associated with Shenandoah Caverns since 1949, beginning as a volunteer guide in leading people into the depths of the earth. After a short hiatus in the service, he returned and then was named general manager in 1955.

"My brother was here, and he fired me a lot of times, but I never left because he needed me," said Proctor. "Then he became sick and spent a long time in the hospital and that's when I started managing it. I never thought then that I'd still be here (at the Caverns). But I believe every person has a reason for being, and that Dan Proctor's reason to is to run the Caverns. It's a beautiful garden that needs to be tended and I believed I was going to be the one to do it."

Danny Proctor has been in the world of tourism practically all his life, dating back to when, as one of 15 children, he helped greet and provide services for travelers who visited his family-owned restaurant and rental cabins.

"At 4 p.m. every day we had to be washed up because that's when the tourists would start arriving," he said. "My job was firing the furnaces."

The Proctors owned Edinburg Bottling Company that made King

Cola; it was sold to 7-Up in 1928 and the family's tourism business was born. The cabins operated until 1948 when the property was sold and became home to Bowman's Apple Products.

A year later, still a couple of years short of adulthood, Danny Proctor landed at Shenandoah Caverns and basically never left. Dreams of another life never surfaced, he claims. His heart was in the Caverns. Or perhaps, more aptly, the Caverns were in his heart.

There have been three owners since the cavernous corridors opened to the public more than 75 years ago; Proctor has worked for two of them.

"H.B. Chapman opened the Caverns May 30, 1922," Proctor, president since 1995 of the corporation that oversees their operation, said. "He was the Southern Railroad ticket agent in

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Long-time caverns manager is honored

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Woodstock. The Caverns had a lot of business by excursion train such as from Philadelphia and Washington. The Caverns even had their own side tracks. Business was good until the 1930s and the war."

During that time a 45-room hotel housed travelers but closed in 1948 when H.B. Long bought the Caverns. He sold out to Earl C. Hargrove, the current owner, in May 1966.

Discovered in 1884 through the curious exploits of two young brothers working with only a rope and a couple of lanterns, the Caverns are believed to be 550 million years old. They lie 220 feet beneath the earth's surface at their deepest location and cover 48 acres.

Proctor says visiting the Caverns is "like walking through the orchards all in bloom and trying to decide what you like."

Around 90,000 people visit Shenandoah Caverns annually. A lot of them are foreign visitors who venture out to the Valley from their Washington, D.C. visits. More than 500 tour groups for Chinese visit each year.

"But 25 years ago, people were more laid back," he said. "I've watched how travel has developed. Now, this is just a quick stop. We're not really a destination area. Years ago, people would sit on the front porch of the cabin for a week. There wasn't that much tourism then. Now the Valley has started opening up. Now we're very, very strongly marketing (the Valley) to make the state understand we're

another part.

"The Shenandoah Caverns still has appeal in the Shenandoah Valley, along with the National Park and Natural Bridge. But we need to make people's destination the Shenandoah Valley again. Half the population in the United States can make the Shenandoah Valley in a day."

Proctor rarely takes credit for the success of Shenandoah Caverns.

"I'm deeply religious, but not a fanatic," he says. "This is all a gift from God. One of my favorite prayers is right up there." He points to a small plaque, one of numerous framed prints, citations, quotations gracing the walls of his small office. In essence it says no days holds any problem that God and he can't conquer together.

Proctor especially leaned on such prayers in 1998 when he and his wife, Barbara, each suffered aortic aneurysms, six months apart. After surgeries and recuperation, both are back at work, having beaten what had to be great odds.

Being back at the helm is where he wants to be, tending a garden. Yet he's also tending young people, as he has with hundreds during the past five decades.

"I've only fired two students, and they were serious offenses," said Proctor. "But the work ethic today is terrible. You almost have to hire two people to get one."

Still, he believes in the power to influence the youth. He lives by a creed he wrote, "A hundred years from now, it will not matter what my bank account was, or

the sort of house I lived in, or the kind of car I drove, but the world may be a little different because I was important in the life of a young person."

(Danny Proctor also abides by the credo of Walt Disney who believed that even the big whigs in that company weren't above picking up stray pieces of paper. Take a stroll with Proctor and it won't be long before he gingerly bends at the waist to pick up litter; he expects others to as well. Plus, he's known for his mowing expertise. "I don't want the place to be junked up," he says without hesitation.

To illustrate his proclivity for neatness, he was awarded a miniature trash can upon retiring as president of the Travel Association, so often he had stressed, rather strongly, too, that cleanliness counts. The nuance was hard to miss.)

Added to the Caverns as a special attractions is American Celebration on Parade. In its third year, it features sights and animated characters, some restored displays more than 50 years old; they are from the collection of Hargrove and his special events marketing firm.

An extended part of America's historical celebration will open in a newly-built structure at the bottom of the hill in May 2000. Inaugural floats, Miss America floats and other special designs will be on display.

"I believe all of us have a purpose in life and I think mine is here," Proctor says. "I'm a people person and I enjoy people. And I want to help preserve this natural wonder."