

Cavern ^{history} made Crystal ^{clear}

Historic Strasburg cave to open for tours again, emphasizing education

By Carolyn Keister Baker

Crystal Caverns in Strasburg, the oldest known cave in the state, will once again be open to visitors, this time as one of the few caverns in the nation to be run as a museum.

The Wayside Foundation of American History and Arts Inc., which owns the caverns, will hold a grand opening at Hupp's Hill on Saturday, according to Robert K. Denton Jr., the museum's administrator and curator.

The caverns' main purpose will be to educate people, he said. The foundation will emphasize their unique history and teach visitors about their geology, the area's karst topography and paleontology, he said.

One feature that will probably be popular will be special lantern tours called "illuminations," he said.

The Hupp family, which had owned the surrounding land and caverns, used to hold illuminations, Denton said. The caverns were lit with torches and lanterns so people could walk into the chambers and marvel at the beautiful limestone formations, he said.

To re-create those days, the caverns will be lit with candles and lanterns, and guides, dressed in period clothing, will tell how Indians, Civil War soldiers, settlers, truant children and servants hid in the caves, he said.

Wayside Museums Director Babs Melton said haunted cave tours will be held for Halloween.

The gravel walkway through the caverns is a little less than a quarter-mile long and has no steep grades, Denton said. During guided tours, visitors will be given flashlights so they can explore the caverns, he said.

The caverns contain fine examples of microgours, a rare form of rimstone, that "are not generally seen in other commercial caves," he said.

People will be able to walk through at least one previously closed passage that leads to the highest room in the cavern known as the Tower Room, Denton said. New lighting has been added and many of the wires and lights concealed, he said.

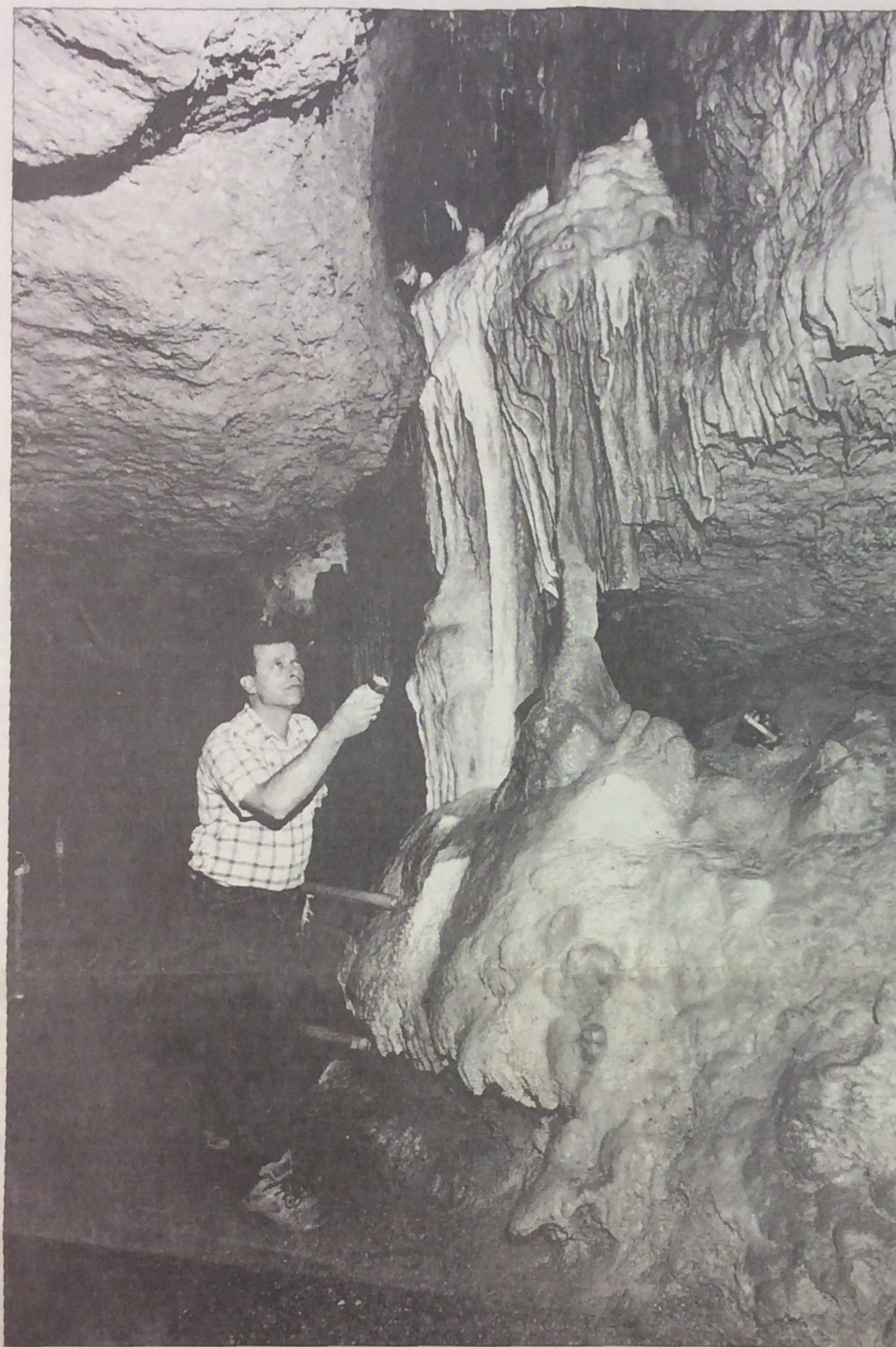
Plans are to replace exposed lights with electric candle lanterns, Ms. Melton said. Once the lights are changed, visitors will carry lanterns instead of flashlights, she said.

Visitors will learn about studies being conducted on rare animals, including an eyeless beetle and two shrimplike creatures called amphipods, Denton said. Some of these creatures have been found only in this cave, he said.

Visitors also will learn about recent discoveries of partially fossilized animal bones in the cave, including teeth from a deer and bones that may be from a hare that lived during the Ice Age, he said.

Two attempts to reopen the cave were made in 1993 and 1995, he said. Flooding during those years and this

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Robert K. Dent Jr., administrator/curator of Crystal Caverns at Hupp's Hill, looks over some formations. There will be a grand opening of the caverns on Saturday.



Daily staff photos by Rich Cooley

The building pictured above is the entrance to Crystal Caverns at Hupp's Hill. Hupp's Hill Battlefield Museum is at left.

Right, this is part of the route along the quarter-mile gravel path that tourists will take to explore the caverns. They will carry flashlights.



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year had damaged the cave, cutting deep gullies through some of the walkways, he said.

The cavern's lowest room is still under water and probably won't be included in the tours, Denton said.

"It's one of the most decorated rooms in the cave. I can't wait to see it," he said.

The cave was first opened to visitors on May 30, 1922, by Bruce Hupp of Strasburg, an heir to the Hupp estate, and Frank H. Miller and Archie C. Painter, according to John Wayland's "A History of Shenandoah County."

The caverns have had several

other owners, including Raymond A. Howard and Wayside of Virginia. In 1993, Wayside President Leo M. Bernstein sold the caverns and 242 surrounding acres to Bles South Limited Partnership.

Since then the property has been deeded to the nonprofit foundation.

Crystal Caverns is one of three museums the foundation owns. The others are the Stonewall Jackson Museum, also at Hupp's Hill on U.S. Route 11, and the Museum of American Presidents at 130 N. Massanutten St. in Strasburg.

The caverns' opening will be held in conjunction with the sixth annual

Hupp's Hill Civil War Summer Camp, when youngsters learn about Civil War infantry, cavalry and artillery, Ms. Melton said.

"It will be a pretty happening place that day," she said.

The caverns will be open Monday through Saturday from 10 a.m. to 5 p.m. and Sundays from noon to 5 p.m. Tickets will be \$8 for adults, \$6 for senior citizens and \$4 for children. Children under 6 will be admitted free. Tickets also get visitors into the Stonewall Jackson Museum.

