

Hiawatha Caverns

"The Pride of the Hiawatha Valley!"

By Gary K. Soule

Hiawatha Caverns is a formerly commercial cave located in the hilly farmland of Winona County, near Witoka, in Southeastern Minnesota. It is a well decorated, sponge work maze type cave developed in the Oneota limestone formation. Although the cave has never been formally surveyed, a sketch map done by Dave Gerboth shows an estimated 600 to 800 feet of cave passageway. Of this total, about 300 feet was once commercially developed for public tours.

It was in 1962 that the cave was first discovered when workman were grading an easement for overhead power lines. Farmer Edward Nietzsche, who owned the property, noticed a narrow shaft had opened up on the side of a hill that was being used as a cow pasture. He was afraid that cows might accidentally fall into the opening. So he filled it with fence posts. It was a short time later that a neighboring 16 year old farm boy, Carl Douglas, decided to explore the cave. The day Carl decided to go into the cave he told his older sister where he was going and said: "If I'm not home by six, tell the folks where I've gone." Carl arrived at the cave entrance and tied a rope to a fence post. He managed to move the fence posts and carefully climbed and lowered himself down the natural pit. He discovered a small, but amazing, cave. He was home by six and had an unbelievable story to tell his dad, his sister, and the rest of the family.

In 1963 the wild cave was checked by other local residents. A neighbor, Violeete Lacher remembered crawling thru the undeveloped cave. It just so happens that two Illinois men were in the area searching for a cave to commercialize. Their names were Richard Dickens and Ed Van Hook. They talked to Carl and other neighbors on what they had found, and saw the cave themselves. They were excited about the cave! They approached the cave owner, Edward Nietzsche, and his wife, to work out a deal to develop the cave. They soon made an arrangement with him to have a 99 year lease to commercialize the cave and run it. They agreed to pay the owner \$2,500.00 a year, plus 10% of all the admission fees collected. They spent almost all of 1963 and the first six months of 1964 developing the cave. The biggest room in the cave, the Ladder Room, was never developed. It is not quite as well decorated with cave formations as the rest of the cave, and its floor is five feet lower as well. The total cost for development was some \$20,000.00.

The first announcement of the cave in the press was in the January 6, 1964, issue of the Winona Daily News of Winona, Minnesota. They had a full page article on the cave discovery, complete with seven photos of the beautiful formations in the cave. Also pictures of Carl Douglas as the first explorer, and Richard Dickens and Ed Van Hook. The banner headline read: "Have They Found a 'Famous' Cave at Witoka?" The article mentioned that they hired an Urbana, Illinois, engineering firm to evaluate the cave. They declared most portions of the cave roof to be sound. Three small areas had unstable ceilings. The engineers reported that the cave dated back to the Lower Ordovician Period of the Paleozoic Era, some 410 to 520 million years old. This would have been the pre-St. Peter solution, or the Oneota limestone formation. Some news reports would claim that the cave is about 70 feet deep, and 1/4th mile long.

In January of 1964, eager to start getting some badly needed income, Richard Dickens and Ed Van Hook started giving cave tours, even though the cave was not fully dug out and developed yet. According to a letter from Minnesota caver Ron Spring to another caver, Roger Kehret,

dated January 16, 1964, the Minnesota Speleological Survey was contacted by Richard and Ed to assist in the commercialization. Eleven MSS members spent a weekend surveying, exploring, and excavating the well decorated, but low ceiling cave. They noticed some vandalism, and suggested that the tours be discontinued until the floors are dug down six feet. In the very end in about June of 1964, it was estimated that a half million pounds of clay and rock were finally removed to open the cave for walking tours. A horizontal entrance had been dug to make the sediment removal easier, as well as entry into the cave for visitors. Another opening to the cave, some 15 yards away from the original entrance, was then sealed shut. The tour route was generally pretty level in the cave. One undeveloped room in the cave was formed at a five foot lower level.

A Hiawatha Caverns trademark contest was announced in the Feb. 19, 1964, Winona Daily News. The drawings of the three finalists had their work on display at the local drug store. The winner received a cash award. The February 21st issue would already have an ad saying that Hiawatha Caverns was open daily. The May 29th issue featured an ad that said: "See HIAWATHA CAVERNS TODAY! Visit the king of the underground. See one of the world's oldest caverns right in your own backyard. Follow road signs from Witoka and Wilson. Purchase one ticket now, tour the cave at a later date for FREE."

The cave had an interesting concept in regards to guides. An ad in the June 23, 1964, issue of the Winona Daily News read: "GUIDES WANTED Young ladies --- ages 16 to 18 apply at HIAWATHA CAVERNS," and listed the contact information. The guides, all young girls, were required to wear black sweatshirts with the words: "OFFICIAL GUIDE Hiawatha Caverns, Witoka, Minn." on them. A cave design was also shown. This continued for almost all the time the show cave would be open. An old gray shed existed out closer to the county highway. It was used as a ticket booth. On the side of it in bright red letters it said: "WELCOME TO HIAWATHA CAVERNS."

Finally, a new, improved quarter mile long crushed gravel road to the cave, along with a small parking lot, were made. Also some steps down the hill to the cave entrance. A cement tunnel with a steel door on it, kept the cave protected. This downward sloping cement tunnel went about 15 feet to a 90 degree turn to the right. Then for the next approximately 20 feet you walked down a sloping large timber supported tunnel to where you entered the cave. It was lighted electrically. Today, all that remains of improvements in the cave are electric lighting sockets, and an electrical circuit box. Little else in terms of improvements, other than obvious digging exists. The Elephant Room had its floor lowered four feet to accommodate visitors.

The initial cost of the one hour long tour was \$2.00 for adults, and \$1.00 for children. Groups of 10 or more were \$1.50 each. Later, in the three years this financially struggling cave would be open, the tour cost would actually be reduced to only \$1.50 for adults, and only \$.75 for children!

No picture postcards would ever be made on this small cave, but a total of seven different brochures on the cave would eventually come out. They had theme colors of red, white, and black on all these brochure variations. Of these, only two major style changes would exist. The brochures were supported by ads from numerous local or area businesses. While the main text on the different brochures pretty much all stayed the same, the changes in the small business ads would account for five of the seven brochure variations. One common theme of all the brochures was that it said: "HIAWATHA CAVERNS, PRIDE OF THE HIAWATHA VALLEY!" on them.

The 3rd brochure ever produced stated: "Visit Hiawatha Caverns, King of all the underground and father of all caves. Majestic, unchallenged, ageless bearer of Mother Earth's most coveted secrets. The proof of it unfolds in grandeur as you walk comfortably through its clean passageways and chambers. Stalactites and stalagmites, helectites and electites, soda straws and

grape clusters combined with countless unexplored passages, offer a continued curiosity to all who view the reverence of God's Creation." It further states: "Hiawatha Caverns, newly discovered and ancient, lie quietly alive in majestic splendor, eagerly awaiting your eyes to discover and register untold ages of sculpturing unmatched by human hands. Visit the caverns soon. Get a group together, bring your motel neighbors in groups of ten or more. Elderly people will be pleased with the level, well lighted, clean passageways, as our guides narrate in a delightful manner throughout your conducted tour. Free picnic grounds near caverns. Wooded area for hiking. Horseback trail ride, and pony rides."

A nice adhesive, red and black bumper sticker advertising the cave was also put out. It mentioned the cave name and location, and was decorated with black stalactite formations on the bottom third of it! Above the cave name in white letters it said: "NEWLY DISCOVERED."

In addition to newspaper articles, some television coverage was also appreciated by the developers and the cave owner. A June 30, 1964, letter to the owner from Phil Jones, WCCO Television News, Minneapolis, Minnesota, mentioned that they had used the film shot in the cave. A P.S. read: "Ed.. I suppose you are aware that the film we shot was used on your hometown television station."

The July 7, 1964, issue of the Winona Daily News ran the following ad: "WINONA AREA RESIDENTS FIRST! Franchises Being Let Soon For Hiawatha Caverns: --- souvenir shop --- hamburger hot dog --- popcorn - snow cone --- soft drink saloon ---children's amusement rides --- photography booth --- any additional compatible business Address All Replies to Jim Cummings" and it listed his Winona address and contact information. Another ad was placed in a July 10th issue, presumably to try and expand the sources of income for the struggling operation.

The July 26, 1964, issue of the Winona Daily News had a nice article titled: "Hiawatha Caverns Grow as Area Attraction." Three photos were included with the article. One was of Diane Mrachek, a cave guide. It was stated that the developers hope to install more lighting, like the kind that frequently change color, such as are used to spotlight Christmas trees. The article stated that the Grand Opening of Hiawatha Caverns would begin on Monday and last through Sunday. (August 3rd thru 9th, 1964) Among the attractions would be free coffee and donuts, and an appearance by Sally Wiczek, Miss Hiawatha Caverns 1964. There also will be balloons for the children. Their first show cave brochure, already out, pictured and identified Sally Wiczek as she stood in the Elephant Room in the cave.

The July 31st issue of the same paper had an ad that read: "Welcome Winona to HIAWATHA CAVERNS GRAND OPENING This Weekend Free Refreshments Fri., Sat., Sun. Guided Tours Daily --- No Reservations Needed --- Meet Miss Hiawatha Caverns - Sally Wiczek Located at Witoka, near Winona ...follow the road signs" Strangely enough, the Muscatine Journal from relatively far away Muscatine, Iowa, carried a short article in its August 10, 1964, issue. It was titled: "HIAWATHA CAVERNS Open at N. Boston."

Strangely enough, except for various advertising editions of the brochure on the cave, very little information was published on the cave in the fall months of 1964, or even all of 1965, although the cave was open each season. Then in 1966, financial problems entered the picture. As debts were piling up in the early summer of 1966, Dick and Ed were realizing that the cave operation would not be successful. During the summer they packed up and took off rather abruptly. Some in the community were left with bad memories of these two men. Money and equipment were borrowed, and some of the locals felt they had been used in the hard physical cave development process. Evidently they took off so quickly in order to avoid some bills, and word was around that some borrowed equipment was taken by them.

For most of the remaining 1966 season, a man named R. H. Blanchard crudely run the cave. The second major version of the Hiawatha Caverns brochure stated: "UNDER NEW MANAGEMENT Operator R. H. BLANCHARD" and gave his contact information. As mentioned, the rates were reduced 50 cents to \$1.50 for adults, and children's rates would be reduced 25 cents to only \$.75. It was truly obvious that even at these low rates, the show cave was not going to make it. One night this second manager suddenly packed up his suitcase and left in the middle of the night, never to be seen again! Reports indicate that local residents and neighbors ran the cave the best as they could for the rest of the Fall season. The cave was then closed for good.

On Saturday, June 15, 1974, Donald L. Spude and Gary K. Soule met with the now ex-commercial cave owners, Ed Nietzsche and his wife, in their home. Gary interviewed Ed and took notes. Ed graciously gave Gary some old material on the cave operation, as well as an adhesive bumper sticker on the cave! Afterward, he gave Don and Gary a tour of the still beautiful cave. The gray farm implement shed that was used as a ticket building, was also seen. It still had faded "WELCOME TO HIAWATHA CAVERNS" painted on the side of it. Some rusty old steel directional signs that once guided people to the cave, were seen laying inside on the floor. Ed reported some vandalism problems, but he was watching over it. The still secured cave itself was somewhat muddy and very slippery to move around in. Evidently the gravel had somehow sunk down or had mud deposited over it, thus making movement somewhat tricky. But it was a fascinating little tour in a historically interesting, formation filled cave. This trip and other research later resulted in an article in the July - September, 1974, issue of the Journal of Spelean History. The article was titled: "Three Short Summers: The Story of Hiawatha Caverns." Ed would later pass away around 1994, and his son, Alan, who then took over the cave and property, is now deceased as well.

On April 15, 1984, Minnesota cavers Calvin Alexander, Jim Hedges, Roger Kehret, and Richard Lively were able to tour the cave and start a survey. Due to the electrical lines overhead, a compass survey would not work. They reported some vandalism. They wanted to survey the cave on a second trip, but the owner had only granted the first trip if Calvin would lead it. He was concerned about liability. So no second trip ever took place. Even a request in 1987 for a trip by Professor George Huppert, was turned down. A May 27, 1990, visit to the cave by Greg Brick and Dave Gerboth found that Ed had retired and passed the property on to his son. Alan was not home, so they left. A February 10, 1996, visit with Alan, the new owner, was made by John Ackerman and Dave Gerboth. They arranged for a trip later, due to bad weather.

On June 2, 1996, John Ackerman and Dave Gerboth were able to visit and inspect the cave. For the first time, Dave was at least able to make a sketch map of the cave. His findings were published in the July - August, 1996, issue of the Minnesota Speleology Monthly, of the Minnesota Speleological Survey.

On March 24, 2007, Greg Brick, Cindy Doty, Dave Gerboth, Javier Guzman, Bob McRoberts, and Tim Stenerson were able to get one time permission to get into the cave. Additional photo documentation took place, and the cave was reported to still be very beautiful, despite some vandalism. In fact Tim reported: "The deeper we traveled the more decorated the cave becomes, which words cannot describe!" He further states: "Most of the side passageways involve some wet, tight belly crawling and looping around reconnecting with a varied degree of gradient." Two bats were observed in the cave. No trips into the cave have ever been permitted since, due to a new cave owner. Tim reported on his findings in the March, 2007, issue of the Minnesota Speleology Monthly of the Minnesota Speleological Survey.

In a Sunday, August 11, 2019, email, the ever energetic John Ackerman announced the official signing of papers so he could acquire the historic, ex-commercial Hiawatha Caverns for his now extensive Minnesota Cave Preserve. Here I quote John:

“Twenty three years ago I clenched a deal to purchase Hiawatha Caverns, but upon the owner’s death, everything fell apart. Today is a new beginning. With Martin Larsen’s involvement, this purchase has become a reality!

Plans are being formulated to replace the entrance, (a challenging task,) clean out the cave, and search for new passages. The Minnesota Cave Preserve continues to purchase and protect our subterranean world!”

Knowing John, and other energetic cave diggers like Dave Gerboth, I am sure current restoration and exploration activities will provide many great discoveries for this beautiful cave. Only time will tell what amazing discoveries the cave most likely holds!