



Amos Mincus explores the Echo Junction section of Wishing Well Cave, a place that took years to find, and was much bigger than expected.

(Photos courtesy Phil Lucas)

Beauty found, deep below

BY JOHN BRUCE • STAFF WRITER

BURNSVILLE — One of the things that excited Missy Douglas and Jimmy Landrum when they bought their property in Burnsville was a hole in the ground with air blowing out of it.

Originally from Fairfax, Douglas and her husband were moving from his home state of Texas, where they lived 15 years in Beaumont. There, she worked as a teacher and counselor while earning her second master's degree, this one from Lamar University. He later retired after serving there 35 years as a firefighter.

The couple discovered the Highlands while working together with inner-city children at the Richmond Baptist Association's Camp Alkulana in Millboro Springs, where Landrum is site director. Douglas has volunteered there since the 1980s while attending the University of Virginia. Both continued to return to the camp while living in Texas.

After Hurricane Rita of 2005 destroyed their home in Beaumont, Douglas and Landrum began their search for a place to live in the Highlands and reconnect with Camp Alkulana. Real estate agent Jeff Black first showed them the property on Burnsville Road when Douglas noticed the hole.

"I said look, there's a hole," recalled Douglas, who now works as guidance counselor and math teacher at Highland High School. "There were lots of little sinkholes, but this one was blowing air. I said, 'Well, there's got to be a cave here.'"

Shortly after they bought the house, they visited Highland for Thanksgiving and Christmas. "All the neighbors came over and introduced themselves," she said. One of them, they would later learn, was caving authority Phil Lucas. "We were interested to

learn about Phil and the Virginia Speleological Survey Society," Douglas said. Lucas is the founder and immediate past president of the society, which maintains a database on Virginia caves.

"I asked Phil, 'What do you do to open these caves up?' He said, 'You start digging.'"

Lucas was long familiar with the blowing hole on the couple's property. He remembered he was a teenager visiting Highland when he and some friends were traveling to Breathing Cave in Bath. On the way, he said, "One of the local fellows said there was a hole that blows air, so we stopped and, sure enough, in the bottom of a sinkhole there was a hole about the size of a groundhog hole with cold air blowing out.

"Thirty years ago, when we bought our property, I remembered there was a blow-hole over there," he said. "I went over to meet our new neighbors, so I walked up and introduced myself to Missy. She was excited to get the farm and she pointed out the different views. She said there's a hole down there that blows cold air. She turned around and said, 'Do you know anything about caves?' I said, 'This is your fateful day. I do happen to know something about caves.'"

On a July weekend in 2007, Douglas invited children from Camp Alkulana to help dig. "The really cool thing was that we found neat old bottles, for medicine, milk and ink, some dating to the 1800s, and an arrowhead. By the end of the weekend, we had a hole big enough to stand in," she recalled.

Little did anyone know this first dig was only the beginning of a three-year-long community project that would bring in people from near and far to create a surface entrance to a more than five-mile-long cave known today as Wishing Well Cave.

Lucas documents the project in a book he authored, titled, "Caves and Karst of the Water Sinks Area," self-published in 2012 and available in the reference section of Highland County Public Library. A full chapter of 100 pages and dozens of photographs and maps is dedicated to Wishing Well Cave.

Douglas was determined to find the cave. "The more rocks you pulled out, the more air came out," she said. "It was cold, damp air in the summer and was blowing pretty strong, like a stiff breeze. Phil came over and started logging a history and taking pictures.



Spectacular crystalline icicle-like formations abound in the Wishing Well Cave.

He and I started talking about getting a backhoe because it was getting too deep. Phil got Steve Burns to bring his backhoe in and got the hole opened up, but we didn't find the cave. Phil didn't want to risk animals falling in the hole, so he covered it back up for the winter, to our disappointment."

Lucas recalled the couple was away from home at the time. "I had to make a decision about the deep hole that we had dug in their front yard with the backhoe," he said.

"The next spring, the rocks started falling through, just as they always had been," Douglas said. "Water was pouring into the hole from the top of Jack Mountain. I called Phil, and told him, the hole's back and it's draining water. I started digging again by hand with a friend, and Phil joined us. We found a big boulder the size of a small office and thought it might be resting on top of a passage."

Burns came back again, and dug as deep as his machine would allow, but still no cave. "We then asked another neighbor, Paul Cunningham, who owned an old but serviceable trackhoe, to dig deeper and pull out some big rocks," Lucas remembered.

"Paul Cunningham brought in his track hoe, but we didn't find anything for months," Douglas said. "The big boulder was pulled out and now sits in the yard. Phil decided it was too far down to dig safely.

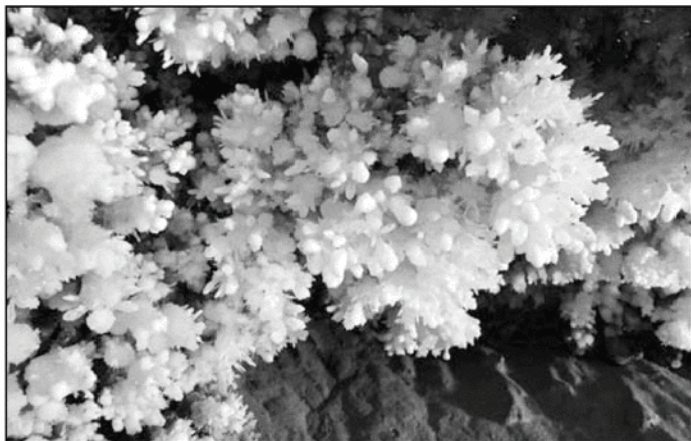
But then, Frank Marks, another neighbor, came up with the idea to slide tube-like tanks in and dig 20 more feet, bucket by bucket, Douglas explained.

"We realized we needed tanks," Lucas said.

A six-foot diameter corrugated culvert left over from the Crab Run Bridge project



4 Phil Lucas, Al Grim and Scott Olson stand in a self-portrait by the newly built cave entrance in September 2009.



Aragonite eruptions decorate a cave ceiling. (Photos courtesy Phil Lucas)

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in McDowell was telescoped onto an old gasoline tank with its ends removed. Another McDowell neighbor, Billy Hiner, was asked to bring his trackhoe to help set the tank and culvert.

Finally, a stanchion was built on top to raise buckets of dirt from the hole, Lucas said. "Someone said, 'Hey! That looks like a wishing well,'" so the cave was dubbed Wishing Well Cave.

"We had many groups, dozens of people, some from as far as Texas to come and help dig," Douglas said.

The work was done under the direction of Lucas, and many diggers were members of the Butler Cave Conservation Society.

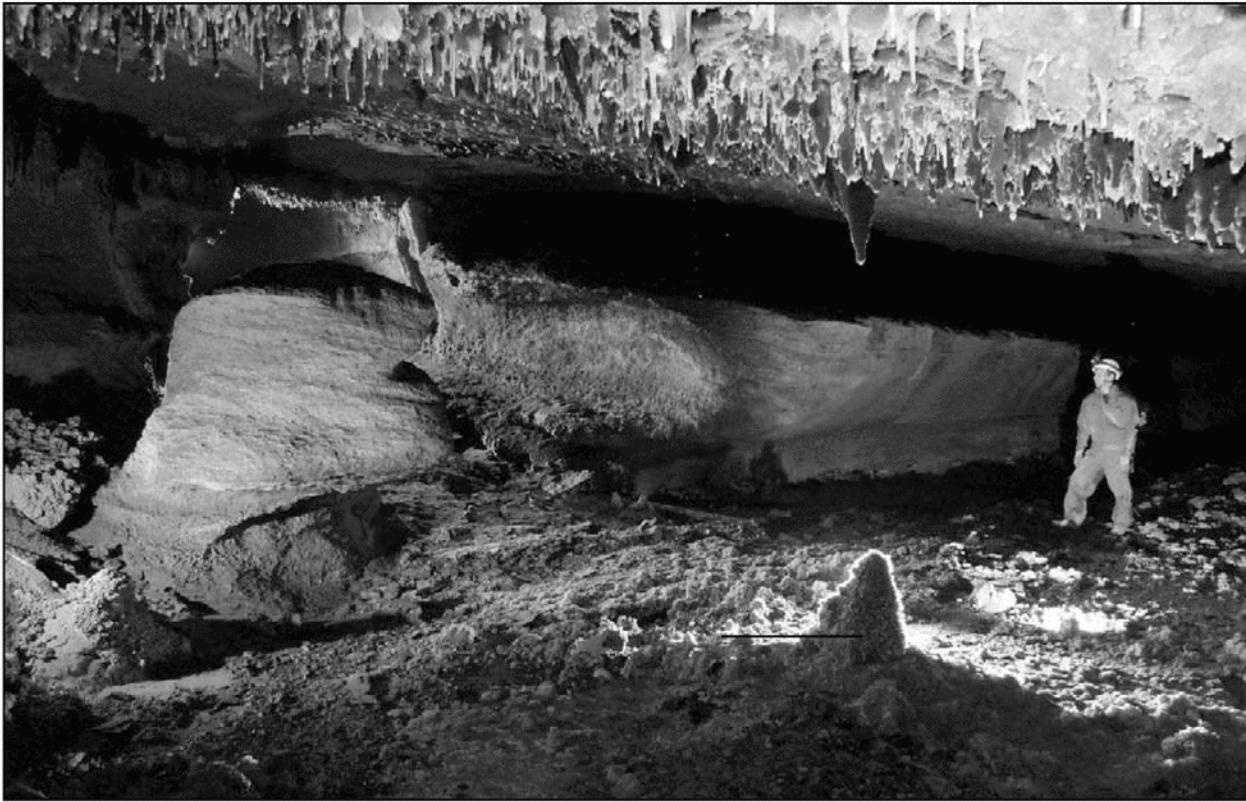
This went on for more than two years, bucket by bucket.

"Every weekend, it would be, 'This is the weekend it's going to happen.' It was not a eureka experience. At first there was a long muddy tunnel, horizontal, that opens into a fairly big room in sandstone, not limestone, like most caves. Then we did more searching to find a limestone rather than a sandstone pit. Every time we had what we thought would be a eureka experience, it turned out to be another passage into mud."

Douglas said the process was so long she doesn't recall what year the diggers finally reached limestone.

The entrance to Wishing Well now includes a vertical ladder bolted to the tubes that are backfilled with rock and soil. Ulti-

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Amos Mincus stands in the Sugar Run section of the Wishing Well Cave.

(Photos courtesy Phil Lucas)



Cave entrance owner Missy Douglas gazes at a soda straw scene in her cave.

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mately the entrance shaft was dug to a depth of about 60 feet.

"It got really interesting the deeper we went," Lucas said.

"Phil did creative supporting with foam, shoring everything up," Douglas said.

"Missy was really excited," Phil said of accompanying Douglas on her first venture into Wishing Well as part of a survey crew. "She had always wanted a cave." Lucas said he asked Douglas whether she would rather see part of the cave that has already been explored or one that had not, known as a "virgin passage."

"Entering a virgin passage for cavers is like putting footprints on the moon. No humans have ever seen it before. It's a high adrenaline thing."

Douglas chose the virgin passage. "We surveyed about a quarter mile that day," he said.

Douglas described the underground world. "From the bottom of the ladder,

you crawl through a 120-foot-long muddy passageway that opens up to a large rectangular sandstone room (called the Doodle Bug Room, about 40 feet wide and 100 feet long). From there, you then climb down a 60-foot pit, and then there are multiple choices — some more difficult than others. At one point, Phil dug through about 10 feet of mud to find a shortcut.

"One of the things that stopped my momentum is that I have MS," she said, noting she was first diagnosed in 2000.

When Douglas first started on the project in 2007, she was walking without aid, but in 2009, she suffered a "severe exacerbation," a kind of attack, and since has had to use a crutch to walk. Multiple sclerosis is a chronic, often disabling disease that attacks the central nervous system.

"I have been in the cave since" the attack on 2009, Douglas said, "on a 10-hour

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About this section

The Recorder publishes special sections year-round for the Allegheny Highlands, starting with the annual Spring Guide, followed by a Summer Guide in June and a Fall Guide in October.

This year's spring guide was designed by Brandi Bussard, Jessica Rogers and Anne Adams, with features from Recorder staff writers, including John Bruce, Margo Oxendine, Mike Bollinger. Contributors include Sandy Hevener and Chris Fuller.

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trip. In Wishing Well, there's lots of small tunnels and huge rooms that 75 feet tall and hundreds of feet long. It's not like a commercial cave, but the structures are a lot prettier. There's lots of stalagmites and crystal structures.

"I only went in one time in 2010, and I look forward to going back," she said.

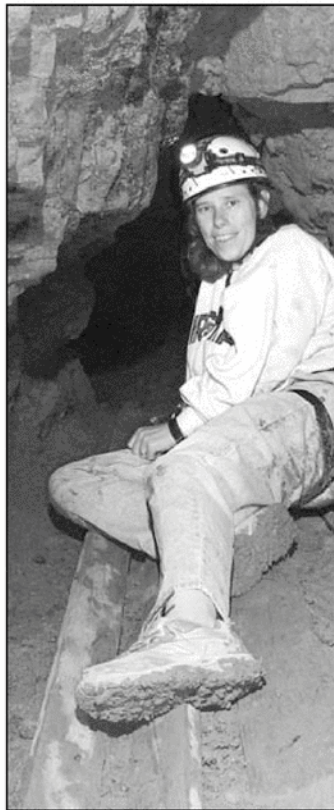
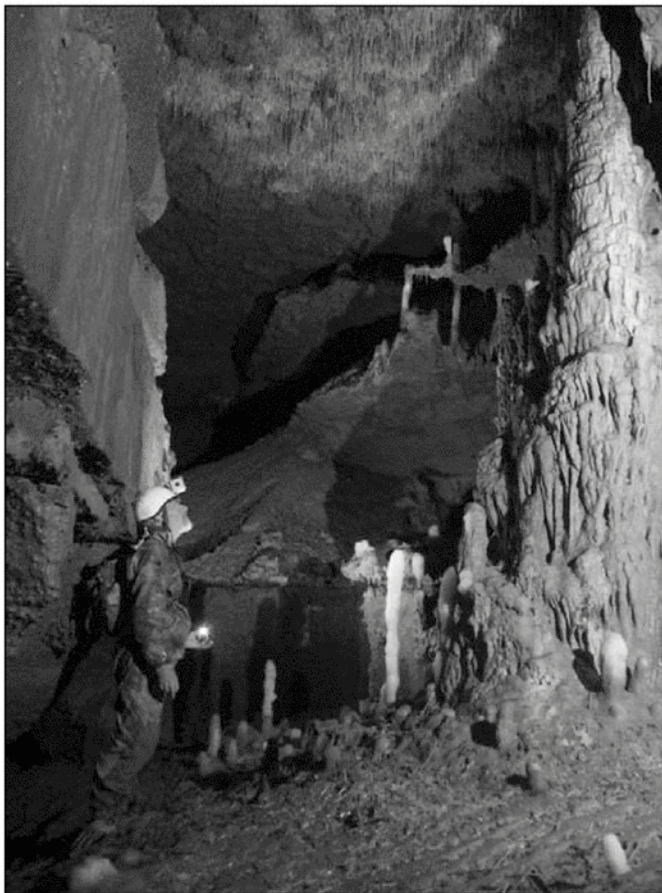
"It was incredible what that young lady was able to do. I'm so proud of her," Lucas said of Douglas.

"This karst valley is world-class," said Lucas added. "There are extremely significant natural wonders there," he said, adding new discoveries are being made constantly.

"The Water Sinks is truly a karst Shagbilla," Lucas writes in his book. "With all the discoveries, tumbling one after the other, I began to realize that I had an obligation to future generations to record these adventures and all the wisdom learned from them."

The Virginia Speleological Survey Society encourages any Highland County landowner who finds a blowing hole on his or her property to call Mark Hodge at (540) 396-3570 or e-mail edevenny@mgwnet.com. For those located in Bath County, call Phil Lucas (540) 396-3584 or email Lucas@virginiacaves.org.

Nevin Davis inspects a giant stalagmite in the Wishing Well Cave. (Photo courtesy Phil Lucas)



Missy Douglas takes part in the first survey of her cave. (Photo courtesy Phil Lucas)