

THE MARCH PANCAKE WEEK-END: WHY WE DIG

By Gregg Clemmer

Virgin cave in Burnsville Cove has to be earned. The hillsides and valleys have been walked. The obvious entrances have been found. Notable exceptions like Breathing Cave and a few smaller caves like Carpenter's, Jackson, and Owl gave up most of their secrets years ago. So it was that Ike Nicholson's discovery of the Butler-Sinking Creek system while scratching out rocks and loose dirt from a blowhole on the Carl Butler farm in May of 1958 would set the tone for discoveries to come. In short, for new discoveries, we were going to have to dig new entrances.

But where?

Before Butler, Nicholson and his sons had visited Chestnut Ridge Blowing Cave, digging open this small blowhole to find 800 feet of sloppy, mostly miserable passage. In summer, the cave's breeze vanished down a twisting, narrow muddy crawl. Bevin Hewitt's 1956 diving efforts with the Nicholsons in Refrigerator Spring (Lockridge Aqua Cave), garnered a surprising discovery of more than a mile of walking, decorated stream cave. Subsequent entrance modification permitted access without free diving.

Over the next two decades, surface and in-cave digging by the BCCS, Duke Outing Club, Potomac Speleology Club, and others, burned calories and charted modest finds in such features as Leap Year Pit, Counterfeit Pit, Better Forgotten, My Favorite, Boundless, Burns, Robins Rift, and Fossil-Moss. These efforts ranged from individual sojourns to grotto, on again--off again, multi-year projects.

Thus it is no surprise that digging for caves became the primary way to access more of the underground. In the decades since, with

positive, interconnected dye traces and several strategic connections, we have come to realize that a great system lies beneath Burnsville Cove. Not just Butler and hydrologically connected Breathing, but a vast unknown complex, one of the great systems of the world. This theorized system boasts few natural entrances, lying deep and difficult beneath Chestnut Ridge and nearby environs.

Dig? Well, yes. But where?

With systematic searches to locate snow melt spots and blow holes, insurgences and resurgences, and yes, strategic, specifically profiled sinks, we have for more than a quarter century gathered during the March Highland Maple Sugar Festival to dig for caves.

The first official Pancake Weekend in March of 1986, heralded the discovery of Butternut Cave, high up on Chestnut Ridge. But there was something else that made this trip memorable. Stopped by a constriction in their exploration, Mike Artz and Gregg Clemmer sent newcomer Rod Morris back to the entrance to fetch a hammer. Outside, Rod encountered "an old man and a dog wondering how we were getting along."

It was Ike Nicholson. Sniffing out a good cave dig, Butler's discoverer had trudged to the near top of Chestnut Ridge. He and his pup were waiting for when the threesome exited. And that rather started this Pancake business.

In fact, why not hold a regular, systematic "cave hunt" near the end of winter when the weather moderates, before it gets hot and buggy? And coordinate it with the Highland Maple Sugar Festival. It would be an easy date to remember and cavers would be supporting the local fire companies by chowing down pancakes and sausage before heading up the hillsides. And although some cavers "cave year 'round," Pancake Weekend seemed a good way to "kick off the year," having an event where cavers young and old could attend, participate, and reestablish friendships.

Traditionally, Pancake Weekend is scheduled in conjunction with the second week-end of the Highland Maple Sugar Festival. The BCCS welcomes your enthusiasm...*and don't forget your shovel*. Of course some years are better than others. Consider this highlight list of successes...and when March rolls around again, think of joining "the diggers." It's not all about pancakes, maple syrup, and sausage!

Caves more than 1000 feet are in italics, more than a mile, CAPITALIZED, and more than five miles, CAPITALIZED and **BOLD**.

1986----Butternut

1988----Bvideo Pit

1991----**BLARNEY STONE** (which we would connect to Bobcat in 1994!)

1992----Black Root

1993----snowed out, but dug in May anyway, finding BARBERRY

1996----finished the **HELECTITE** dig, opening Highland County's longest cave

1998----*Buckwheat*, a potential backdoor to downstream Barberry

1999----*Blind Faith*

2000----BATTERED BAR, closing to within several hundred feet of *Blind Faith*

2002----*Basswood*

2003----Backdoor

2005----Fuhl's Paradise Pit and Black Cherry

2007----Buckets of Smoke

2011----Belleau Wood and Buzzing Tree