

## 'It's been a good ride' (Part II)

### *Crystal Cave has new owners*

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SPRING VALLEY, WI - When Blaze and Jean Cunningham purchased Crystal Cave from William and Laurel Moe 25 years ago, they were given a spiral notebook with four pages of notes and plenty of good luck wishes. And that was it.

This time when the Cave changes ownership, there will be an impressive transition period. "There are lots of loose ends," said Blaze. And to make tying up those loose ends a little less difficult, both he and Jean along with new owners Eric and Kristen McMaster will work side by side this coming season; Shawna Fritz will continue to be the fulltime store manager. "We will still be running the business in 2012," said Jean, but by November the sale of the Cave and the house will be a done deal.



Blaze and Jean Cunningham have sold Crystal Cave and will be retiring in November of 2012. Submitted photo

And then what? "We'll keep a base here in Wisconsin," said Jean. But they'll also have a "base" down south so they can visit more regularly with Cunningham relatives in San Antonio, Texas. and their son Sam who is in the Army and stationed in Colorado Springs, Colorado.

"Retirement can leave a big hole," said Jean. "We have to re-educate ourselves on what we will do with our time." Part of that time will no doubt be spent but caving, but it won't be the same; they leave behind a Cave that has been a part of Jean's life since 1968.

"I had worked for Mrs. Moe during my sophomore and junior years in high school," said Jean. At that time in Spring Valley, girls didn't have many options. According to Jean, they could waitress, work in the nursing home or in the Cave; she chose the Cave.

"I was a guide for eight years through high school and college," she said. When it came time for graduate school, Jean decided to attend the University of New Mexico in Albuquerque, and it was there where she met her future husband, Blaze.

"We met while I was a graduate student at University of New Mexico and working part-time

for Gulf Mineral Resources, Albuquerque; Blaze was employed by Gulf Technology, Houston. The two companies were divisions of Gulf Oil Corporation. We were both working on a uranium mine project in western New Mexico at a place called Mariano Lake," said Jean. In 1979 Blaze was transferred to Casper, Wyoming.

Jean became a full-time employee of Gulf Mineral Resources in late 1978 and moved to Salt Lake City in January 1979 to continue working in uranium exploration. "In May of 1980, I transferred over to Gulf Oil Corporation into oil and gas exploration and moved to Casper," said Jean.

Having been apart for two years, it was a reunion of sorts, and three years later they married. "I left the company when Chevron purchased Gulf in 1985," said Jean. "We knew the Cave was for sale at that time and decided to make a purchase offer when the Casper office closed the next year. I said to Blaze, 'Let's go buy a cave.'" And that's exactly what they did.

The Cunningham's Cave "needed some attention." Well, the cave didn't need much attention, but the gift shop and the surrounding property certainly did. "We didn't get any records from the previous owners, so it took a significant amount of time to fix things-- much longer than we had anticipated," said Jean admitting that their lack of experience in running their own business was also a factor. "All I knew how to do was give a tour," she said.

Still, the couple persevered. According to the Cave's website, "In 1992, exploration began in the cave. A major breakthrough made by Blaze and Spring Valley veterinarian, Nate Carlson and David Gerboth (also known as 'Digger Dave'), added considerable length to the explored parts of the cave.

"In 1995 we purchased an additional 96 acres of land which gave us some breathing room-- some space to expand. We also added a nature trail calling it 'The Hundred-Acre Wood,'" said Blaze.

While there certainly were some growing pains in those early years, neither Blaze nor Jean has any complaints. "Every year it's a whole different ball game, a whole new dynamic," said Jean. Blaze added, "It's never been boring."

In the early years, high school students served as guides, but gradually that changed. "We started hiring college kids and adults," said Jean. Tour guide work is seasonal work, and while there have been a few years where finding guides was difficult, it's never been a significant problem for the Cunninghams who advertise at two local universities--UW/River Falls and UW/Stout.

They fondly remember many of those young people who worked at the cave, and they enjoy the visits from school groups and other organizations. "Yearly we have about 200 groups from schools, parks and recreation organizations and YMCAs that visit the cave," said Jean. Those 200 groups translate into over 12,000 students.

In the past 25 years, the couple has attended cave conventions from Pennsylvania to California, Puerto Rico and Bermuda. It was at one of these conventions that they discovered fudge. "We heard how much fudge was being sold in caves, so in the early 1900s, we also started selling the fudge with names like Decadent Chocolate, Digger Dave and Cave Mud to mention only a few, and the people who create the fudge have always been local. "Our current Fudge Queen is Sarah Bjork from Elmwood," said Jean.

When Eric and Kristen take over, the fudge stays. And that's not the only thing that will remain the same. "We'll continue the theme of unique minerals and fossils and the gem jewelry. We'll also have Wisconsin souvenirs that can't be purchased on Amazon," said Jean.

Looking back over the years, Jean and Blaze recall the events of late 2010 when the Wisconsin DNR (Department of Natural Resources) came into the picture. To prevent the spread of White Nose Syndrome, the DNR determined that caves could either be bat caves or tourist caves--not both. Eventually a compromise was reached. "We have to follow certain regulations, but that was the most significant event to directly affect the business," said Jean.

So now it's time to retire. "It's time to pass the baton; it's time for younger people with great ideas and energy to run the Cave," said Jean.

And there are no regrets, no second guessing if owning a cave for the past 25 years was the best decision. As Blaze said and Jean agreed, "It's been a good ride."