

*Monday, January 16, 2012*

## **'It's been a good ride' (Part I)** *Crystal Cave has new owners*

**By Kaye Bird**  
Writer, MGN

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SPRING VALLEY, WI - Perhaps some of us cannot understand the attraction of exploring caves and coming in contact with the various creatures, particularly bats, who inhabit those spaces. We may not understand it, but for many people, caves and caving are lifelong passions.

"Once caving is in your blood, it's hard to get rid of it," said Blaze Cunningham in a recent interview. That is why, when it came time for him and his wife Jeannie to think seriously about retirement, their main concern was not how they would adjust to this newest phase in their life, but rather who would take over the cave.

"We had seen caves being sold to people who then turned those caves into disasters," said Jean. Other caves had been purchased by investment groups. With little or no experience and very little passion for the caves, those deals too often sour, and the cave suffers. The Cunninghams didn't want that to happen to Crystal Cave.

"We knew we had a unique property here, and we also knew that we needed to find the right buyer," said Jean adding, "That buyer had to be a good people person, a good business person, he/she had to have a real feel for the cave and also had to understand conservation issues. We thought it would take several years to find that person."

Not even close. After putting the word out via the National Caves Association publication and talking to others in that organization, they found the right people within months. Those right people are Eric and Kristen McMaster who currently live and work in Minneapolis.

Actually, Eric has some history with Crystal Cave. "My geology class visited Crystal Cave when I was attending high school in Minneapolis," he said. It was the start of an interest that would continue through high school and into college. "I attended Vanderbilt University in Nashville, Tennessee and began caving down there in my free time," he said. He was also



Blaze and Jean Cunningham will be selling the cave to Eric McMaster and his wife Kristen (not pictured). Shawna Fritz, far right will continue to work at the cave. Photo by Kaye Bird

a member of the Cave Rescue Team for the state of Tennessee and has explored caves across this country and around the world.

Eric met his future wife Kristen at Vanderbilt. "She too was interested in caving; the two became co-presidents of the university's Outdoor Club. They also became engaged . . . in a Colorado cave. "We ran into the cave during a thunderstorm," he said and apparently decided it was the perfect place to present the ring to Kristen. The couple honeymooned in West Virginia at where else? A cave.

Both Eric and Blaze have been past presidents of the Minnesota Speleological Survey, so they have more than a few things in common. "We were together at a caving event called Cornfeed at Mystery Cave in southeastern Minnesota in August of 2010," said Eric. "At that time Blaze talked to me about selling the cave." By January of 2011, things had begun to fall nicely into place.

For Eric, that meant first of all a change in careers. "I earned a Masters Degree in Electrical Engineering from Vanderbilt and then co-founded a technology company," he said. By 2001, Eric and Kristen returned to Minnesota. "My mother had breast cancer and needed help with the business called Kwik Sew, which produces patterns. By 2002 he had become president of this company which has offices world-wide. Kristen accepted a position as Professor of Education at University of Minnesota.

Even though the couple had good jobs in the Twin Cities, Eric was ready for a change. "A competitor wanted to purchase the Kwik Sew business, and the deal was finalized just last month," he said. Now he and his wife were free to buy a cave. He was also free to wear the more casual clothes he prefers. "I won't have to wear a suit anymore," he said with obvious relief.

He can also use his engineering degree to, as he put it, "Fiddle around and work on the buildings." One gets the impression that if something needs to be fixed, upgraded, remodeled or built, Eric is the one to do it, and he'll probably have a smile on his face during the process.

Eric and Kristen will be moving from their Minneapolis home to Spring Valley this coming November. They will not only own a cave, they will also own the Cunningham's house located next to the cave. "Both my wife and I just love Pierce County and Spring Valley," he said. They will bring with them two black labs as well as plenty of experience, expertise, energy and enthusiasm.

"We'd like to build some pavilions on the property, expand the nature trails and provide educational programs about the prairie," said Eric adding, "Kristen will develop education programs and grow and expand on what Jean and Blaze have already done. These programs will have a conservation and education theme."

Cave visitors won't notice much difference when the tourist season opens in May. Blaze and Jean will still be running the business, and Shawna Fritz, store manager will still be running

the store.

Keeping in line with Jean's requirement that everyone, and she does mean everyone, who works at the cave become a tour guide, Eric and Kristen will be taking visitors 80 feet under the earth, pointing out a few snoozing bats, directing visitors' attention to the stalactites, stalagmites, fossils, tunnels, and strange, unexplained formations while entertaining tourists with a fascinating monologue describing the wonders of the cave.

If you should visit the cave this summer, take a good look at the tour guides. The ones who don't look like college students are the new owners. And while you're looking, take time to welcome them to the Spring Valley community.

Next week: Jean and Blaze share their history with the cave, their memories over the past 25 years and hint at their future plans.