

Wisconsin cavers make significant find

Clearing work shows two caves are one



Wisconsin Speleological Society members Gary K. Soule, left, is shown in the Tartarus Passage and Al Schema is shown in the Apollo Passage at Cherney Maribel Caves County Park in Maribel earlier this month. Members of the Wisconsin Speleological Society have spent several years in Tartarus Cave and Split Rock Cave in the Manitowoc County park doing what badgers and gophers do naturally: clearing out tons of debris left behind more than 10,000 years ago by the last glacier. Their efforts paid off when they learned the two caves are actually one. / AP Photo/Milwaukee Journal-Sentinel, Mark Hoffman

Written by

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MARIBEL — Covered in mud, with his head lamp shining a narrow beam of light into the darkness, Al Schema inhaled.

In that rush of air, the amateur caver felt the thrill of discovery.

“When I broke through the initial stone you could feel like a vacuum of air,” said Schema as he stood outside the entrance of Split Rock Cave at Cherney Maribel Caves County Park.

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On a recent Saturday morning, cavers will ceremoniously remove the last few rocks and debris to officially link the two caves and turn them into a 205-foot-long one at the Wisconsin Speleological Society’s annual gathering, the Hodag Hunt Festival. A drawing will be held for 10 lucky cavers to be the first to strap on helmets and kneepads to worm their way through what will be dubbed the Tartarus Cave System.

“Having two cave entrances connect is a very rare thing especially in a glaciated area,” Schema, 38, a Manitowoc County maintenance worker who got hooked on caving six years ago, told the Milwaukee Journal Sentinel.

This isn’t a show cave like Cave of the Mounds where visitors pay money to wander upright through a wonderland of stalactites and stalagmites. This is a cave for folks who don’t mind crouching or slithering through mud and rock wearing a helmet and head lamp to protect their noggins.

Folks like Gary Soule. He’s been a caver for decades and travels throughout the U.S. and overseas to visit caves.

Guys like Soule don’t just explore caves, they spend much of their free time digging them out to reach bedrock. Standing outside the entrance of Split Rock Cave, Soule pointed to the spot about 3 feet up where Wisconsin Speleological Society members began digging.

“Originally we didn’t know it was one cave. We got about 90 to 100 feet into Tartarus when we ran into a wide, low room and it seemed to want to turn toward Split Rock Cave,” said Soule, 61, of Sturgeon Bay. “You could hear vibrations and sounds (from the other cave) and eventually we saw light” from cavers digging on the other side.

“As we started to get closer, I said. ‘boy, this would be neat if we could connect it at the Hodag Hunt.’?”

Kasey Fiske, chairman of the Wisconsin Speleological Society, said it’s unusual to link two caves in Wisconsin. He’s been a caver for most of his life and could think of only one other time that’s happened in the state.

“All the caves in Wisconsin are basically plugged to the ceiling with dirt. These caves were connected at one time but when the glaciers receded into Canada, they left behind dirt,” said Fiske, who works at [University](#) of Wisconsin-Madison. “We’re not creating a cave, because it was already there. We’re just restoring the cave to what it looked like before the glaciers.”

And don’t call them spelunkers. They prefer the term cavers.

Schema, Soule and other cavers have spent several years in Tartarus and Split Rock caves painstakingly carrying out 5-gallon buckets of mud and dirt, rolling out boulders, and micro-shaving — drilling into rocks with a small controlled charge to break them apart. They’re tunneling through dolomite dating back to the Silurian Age around 450 million years ago.

The caves at Cherney Maribel Caves County Park are part of the Niagara Escarpment that forms the thumb of Door County and stretches all the way to Niagara Falls, said Dave Mickelson, a glacial geologist and UW-Madison emeritus professor. The dolomite rock in eastern Wisconsin features more magnesium, which makes it more resistant to erosion.

“The Silurian is the first time when reef-forming corals were common. A lot of the hills in eastern Wisconsin made of bedrock are made of old coral reefs,” said Mickelson, whose book “Geology of the Ice Age National Scenic Trail” was published last fall. “These were deposited on the sea floor and buried by younger ocean deposits, compacted and turned into rock.”

The Wisconsin Speleological Society has 65 members, with 20 who are very active at tunneling and preserving caves throughout the state. Outside Tartarus Cave, which was a tourist attraction as far back as 1900, society members stacked stones and blocks to

make pathways and steps for visitors from the debris that was once inside the 46-degree caves.

They continue to look for more caves using a device that can detect anomalies in the rock. They believe they're close to discovering a big cave at Cherney Maribel. For cavers, finding a new cave or connecting two caves is like scoring a touchdown in the Super Bowl.

"To me it's like walking on the moon. You'll see things no one has ever seen before," said Fiske. "That's why we go underground. We've been to the tallest part of the planet and we've been undersea, but caves are the last frontier on Earth."