

Chalk one up for Scotia!

BY LINDA ULRICH

For the Lincoln Journal Star

SCOTIA — If you've been digging around trying to find a unique Nebraska travel destination, head for the hills to Happy Jack's Peak and Chalk Mine.

"Young or old, we really haven't found an age that doesn't enjoy the chalk mine," said Jeanie Vogeler, mine manager.

The honeycombed underground chalk mine is the only publicly accessible room and pillar chalk mine in North America.

Room and pillar mining is unique because the miners would blast out a room and leave a pillar to support the hill above. Most chalk was mined in open pits.

The mine has more than 6,000 feet of tunnels. Visitors can see about 500 feet of the mine, including the largest room, which is 20 by 50 feet and fondly referred to as the ballroom. Mining tools are displayed in the mine. The 30-minute informal tours are a mix of history, geology and paleontology.

The mine's temperature is a constant 56 degrees Fahrenheit so a jacket can be worn even on the hottest summer day.

"It's a great place to go when it's 110 outside," Vogeler said.

The cave's only inhabitants are small brown bats, which are harmless and most prevalent in early spring and late fall.

Chalk mining began in 1877, when Ed Wright used blasting powder and sawed chalk slabs off the hill and hauled it away using horses. The chalk he mined was mainly used for foundations and buildings, and many farmhouses in the area have chalk foundations. A building on Scotia's main street, originally a general store constructed by Wright in 1877, is made entirely of chalk.

The Omaha Paint Co. operated the mine from 1926 to 1946. Chalk was mined by three farmers, who divided the daily wage of \$1.75. They blasted the chalk and hauled it out of the mine with a cableless Model A pickup. The chalk was driven out of the mine to a corn crib to dry for two weeks. The dried chalk, which was hauled by rail to Omaha, was used as a paint filler, white wash, cement, polishes and chalk.

Happy Jack's Peak and Chalk Mine

If you go

What: Happy Jack's Peak and Chalk Mine

Where: Scotia

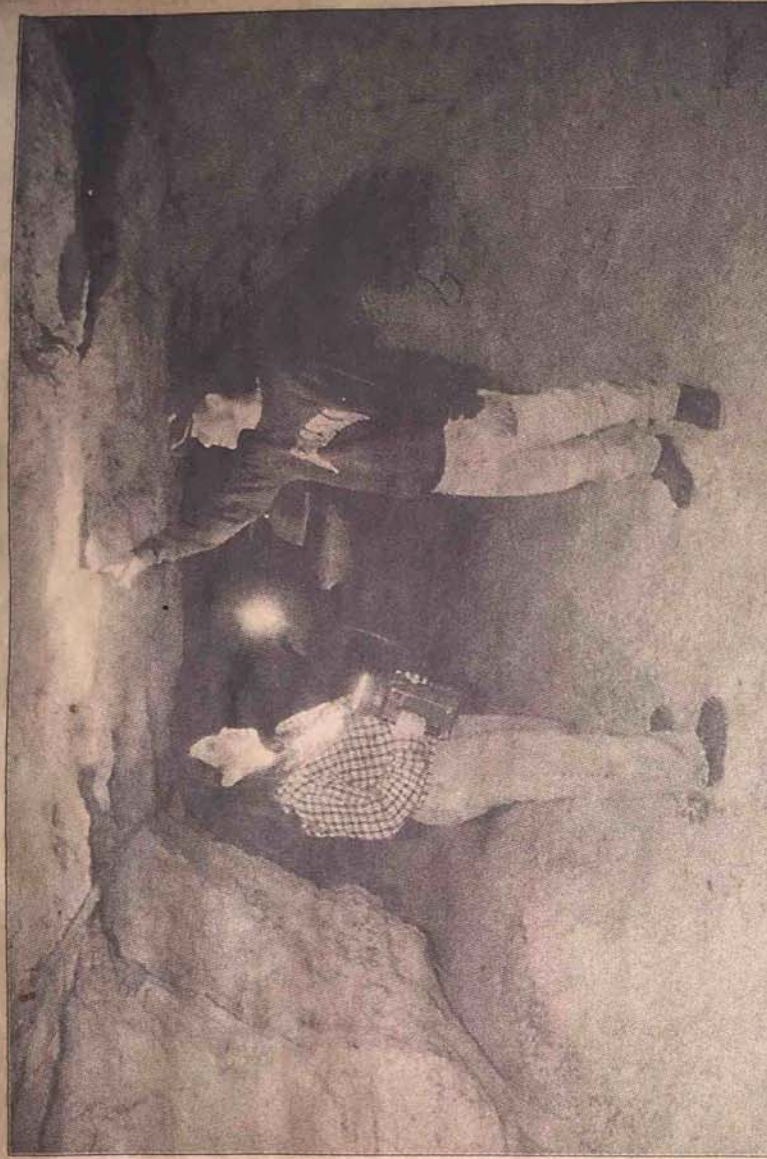
When: Open 10 a.m.-6 p.m.

weekdays and 10 a.m.-8 p.m., Memorial Day weekend through Oct. 10.

How much: Adults, \$5 for 30-minute tour; \$4 for 10-minute walk-through. Children age 5 and under, free.

More information: (308) 245-3276 or write: Happy Jack Chalk Mine, Box 72, Scotia NE 68875.

Mileage, from Lincoln: 150 miles. Take I-80 west to exit 312, Grand Island/Hastings. Go north on U.S. 281. Go west on Nebraska 22 to Scotia. The mine is two miles south of Scotia on Nebraska 11.



KEN HAMMOND/USDA

A guide shows a visitor the interior of the Happy Jack Chalk Mine near Scotia.

ally diatomite, was formed by deposits of fossilized photosynthetic micro-organisms called diatoms.

Diatoms that form the chalk are organisms that lived in an ancient lake that covered the area millions of years ago, according to Matt Joeckel, research geologist with the University of Nebraska-Lincoln Conservation and Survey Division.

Joeckel has identified ancient preserved rodent burrows in the cave walls that are 6 million to 12 million years old.

The rodents, about the size of a prairie dog, were actually a type of squirrel. Other more shallow burrows were presumably made by gophers, he said.

combined with a hiking trail. A small gift shop and picnic tables are near the mine's entrance. The mine is accessible to people using wheelchairs.

The Nebraska Game and Parks Commission operated the mine as a wayside area from 1967 until 1983, when the mine was bulldozed shut. In 1996, six people bought the mine from the village of Scotia and formed Happy Jack's Chalk Mine Association, a nonprofit, volunteer organization working to restore the mine.

"It's a friendly community and everyone in the area has a soft spot in their heart for the mine," Vogeler said.

In addition to touring the mine, visitors can climb Happy Jack's Peak, named after John "Happy Jack" Swearingen, a trapper and government scout in the mid-1800s. He lived in a dugout in the chalk bluffs and used the peak to watch for Pawnee and Sioux natives.

"No one knows for sure where the name Happy Jack came from. He must've been a really happy person," Vogeler said, smiling.

The peak provides a panoramic view of the North Loup River Valley. There are two ways to climb the peak: a set of 234 steps made from railroad ties or recently constructed stairs that go partly up the peak