

# Group Chalks Up A Miner Miracle

Volunteers from Scotia and North Loup, Neb., are creating a mountain of a tourism attraction out of a hole in the ground.

They are restoring the Happy Jack Chalk Mine, about 1½ miles south of the Scotia corner alongside Nebraska Highway 11.

It's at the bottom of Happy Jack Peak, a promontory providing one of the most spectacular views of the North Loup River Valley. It was used by early pioneers as a lookout for marauding Indians.

The mine and the peak are named after frontiersman John "Jack" Swearengen, who, in 1890, built a dugout there and served as a settlers' guide.

Members of the nonprofit Happy Jack Chalk Mine Association have high hopes that the two combined attrac-



## Nebraska Byways

By Tom Allan

tions, described as "the White Cliffs of Nebraska," will improve the vitality of the area through tourism.

Board member Charles Beebe of Scotia, the manager of the North Loup Valley Bank, credits association President Steve Goldfish, a Scotia farmer, for spearheading the restoration of the historic mine.

"Goldfish was a contract miner in several western states before he returned to farming," Beebe said.

"Because of his background, he was interested in reopening the old mine that, according to mining experts, is believed to be the only one of its kind in North America with ... honeycombed caverns."

The mine was opened in 1877, when Ed Wright began mining the chalk that had some 80 uses, including paint, cement, whitewash, polishes and chicken feed. Farmers used it for building foundations but soon learned their livestock found the substance edible. Chalk buildings still stand in Scotia, including one owned by Beebe.

After the mine sat idle for some years, the United Mineral Company of Omaha reopened it in 1932. Three employees, working for \$6 a day, blasted the chalk, loaded it into a modified Model A truck and hauled it to a railroad spur. Mining operations lasted until 1946, when open-pit mining made the operation unprofitable.

In 1967, the Nebraska Game and Parks Commission purchased the land from Mr. and Mrs. Wilbur Fuss and developed it into the Chalk Mine State Wayside Area. It included an attractive picnic site and became a member of the Statewide Arboretum because of the diversity of its native trees and plants.

The commission abruptly closed and sealed the mine in 1978 after a collapse near one of the mine's entrances. The following year, the mine was deeded to the Village of Scotia.

"It was a major loss to the area and visitors who had used the mine and peak for a variety of gatherings and reunions," Beebe said. "Goldfish had faith the mine could be reopened safely, and the association was born."

Other board members — Kristen Hiett of Scotia, a recent University of Nebraska at Kearney graduate and an employee of the North Loup bank, Nick Clement and Ken Bloom, both of Scotia; and Kate Kuszak of North Loup agree with Beebe, who said, "The reopening efforts have caught fire and captured the imagination of hundreds of volunteers."

Beebe, who as a boy helped his father, Bud, work the mine for the Omaha mining company in the 1930s, said much progress has been made already, thanks to the volunteers and the assistance and support of the Loup Ba-



TOM ALLAN/THE WORLD-HERALD

**RESTORATION:** Happy Jack Chalk Mine Association board members Nick Clement, left, and Kristen Hiett of Scotia, Neb., are among area volunteers hoping to create a tourist attraction out of a 120-year-old mine.

sin Resource and Development Organization, the state and the Lower Loup Natural Resources District.

An entry to the mine has been opened and bolstered with heavy timbers, allowing limited entry on a visitor's-own-risk basis.

It is enough that visitors can see the beginning of the honeycombed caverns carved in an unusual "room and pillar" method.

"A company on the East Coast has offered to provide steel to make the mine even safer for visitors," Beebe said. "We've had thousands of dollars in free advice from engineering construction companies and an Omaha engineer."

Added Clement: "In a recent workday, over 100 volunteers helped us complete a 40-car parking lot. We figure the volunteer help on the parking lot, picnic area, restoring some of the railroad-tie steps up the peak and bolstering the mine, so far has been worth \$70,000."

Miss Hiett, who said she got involved because of "so many nice memories of the mine" when she was a young girl, said the association is seeking both grants and tax-deductible donations to restore the mine and park "into one of Nebraska's most unique attractions."

Enough progress has been made that Dave Miller, the director of the State Department of Economic Development's tourism division, is intrigued.

Miller will be the guest of honor next Sunday at a preview open house and barbecue dinner in the old mine's park.

I'm stuck at the Nebraska State Fair for the 39th year and thus won't be able to roam the Nebraska byways again until after Labor Day.

But I have the consolation that the fair is both the Times Square and the Hollywood and Vine of the state.

Sit on the benches in the shade of the Administration Building's porch and, sooner or later, everyone you've ever met in Nebraska walks by.

I can tell them that I'm still a spring chicken after 50 years at The World-Herald. I have former State Sen. Willard Waldo of DeWitt to point to as the genuine "old rooster" of the fair.

Waldo, one of the state's premier hog producers, is celebrating his 85th year at the fair and is, without question, the oldest continuous exhibitor there. He started coming to the fair as a baby with his mother. And he's still going — helping supervise the farm's exhibits.

So don't call me old. I'm still a kid at heart at fair time.