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Jeanie Voegler, manager of Happy Jack Chalk Mine, stands near one of the entrances that has been shored up with cedar timbers because of humidity changes between the mine and outside atmosphere.

Mine brings back memories for many

Adults recall playing in Happy Jack Chalk mine as children

By Gretchen Fowler
gfowler@theindependent.com

SCOTIA — Jeanie Voegler may spend her days working in a chalk mine, but what she uncovers isn't chalk — it's a story.

Voegler, manager of the Happy Jack Chalk Mine south of Scotia, spends her days telling others the story behind one of Nebraska's most historic and scenic spots.

From how the miners took the chalk from the hill to how the chalk itself was formed, Voegler shares a story that's been untold for years.

While the mine averages 6,000 to 10,000 tours each summer, Ken Bloom said, many people have forgotten the mine even exists.

Bloom, vice president of the Happy Jack Chalk Mine Association, said the mine was opened for tours in 1997. Before that, he said, "it was a state natural resource that was being wasted."

Improvements made to the mine since it opened in '97 include the addition of electric lighting inside the mine, retaining walls, millings and a dam to cut down on mud and prevent flooding, and new signs to welcome visitors.

Adding the lighting to the inside, Bloom said, allowed people to see how big the mine really is, making it appear bigger than most people remember from when they played in it as kids.

It all began in 1869, when a settler named Jack Swearingen built a dugout in the side of the hill that now holds the mine. He brought other settlers to the area and used the peak as a lookout for Pawnee Indians. Because he was always happy to see people, Voegler said, he was given the nickname "Happy Jack."

The hill was mined from 1877 to 1946,

Happy Jack Chalk Mine is south of Scotia along Highway 11 and is open from 10 a.m. to 6 p.m. daily, May 25 through Oct. 10. For more information on the Happy Jack Chalk Mine, call (308) 245-3276.



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Jeanie Voegler, manager of Happy Jack Chalk Mine, shines a flashlight into the chalk wall pointing out impressions of fossils left behind when the chalk was forming.

providing chalk used in buildings, white-wash, cleansers and chicken feed. A general store Swearingen built entirely of chalk in the late 1800s still stands in Scotia.

Guiding tours through the mine today, Voegler tells these stories and many others. She tells how three miners worked for \$1.75 per day, blasting chalk from the side of the hill, and how the Happy Jack Chalk Mine is the only room-and-pillar chalk mine open for tours in the United States.

Currently, only 460 feet of the mine's tunnels can be toured. Bloom hopes to open the mine further for tours in the future, however, and has dreams of one day turning the mine into a mining museum.

Voegler and Bloom said they both grew up in the area and played in the mine as children. Rick Pedersen, a Happy Jack Chalk Mine Association member, said he did the same thing.

"We spent a lot of time out here and always enjoyed it," he said. "It's just kind of a pleasant place to come and visit."

"It's so peaceful down here, and there's so much to learn in there," Voegler said of

the mine. "Everyone is so pleased that we're reopening it."

Bloom and Voegler said a lot of the people who come through the mine grew up in the area and remember playing in the mine as kids.

"We learn as much from what's written down as from the people who come through," tour guide Tina Peterson said. "Everyone has a story."

Because a lot of people from the area have brought their grandchildren back to see the mine after telling them how they used to play in it with flashlights as kids, Voegler said, many of them have requested tours with just flashlights.

Because there were so many requests for tours without the modern lighting, Bloom said, the mine will now offer flashlight-only tours for a more historical effect.

In addition to daily tours and access to the scenic outlook atop Happy Jack Peak during the summer months, Happy Jack Chalk Mine also provides school and field-trip tours upon request and a haunted house in the fall.