

Steve Goldfish, 38, of Scotia, and his father-in-law Howard Last, 62, of Elko, Nev., strengthen the original entrance to Happy Jack Chalk Mine near Scotia.

Independent/Teresa Hurteau

Still a hard-hat area

Scotia Chalk Mine being shored up for tourism

By Heather Hooper

The Independent

SCOTIA — By the looks of the weekend traffic, it would be an easy assumption that the Scotia Chalk Mine is open for business.

More than 100 onlookers have stopped at the mine each of the past three weekends. But developer Steve Goldfish of Scotia said the mine is still a hard-hat area. He advised visitors to wait until work is finished.

"It's a risk to people coming in there," he said.

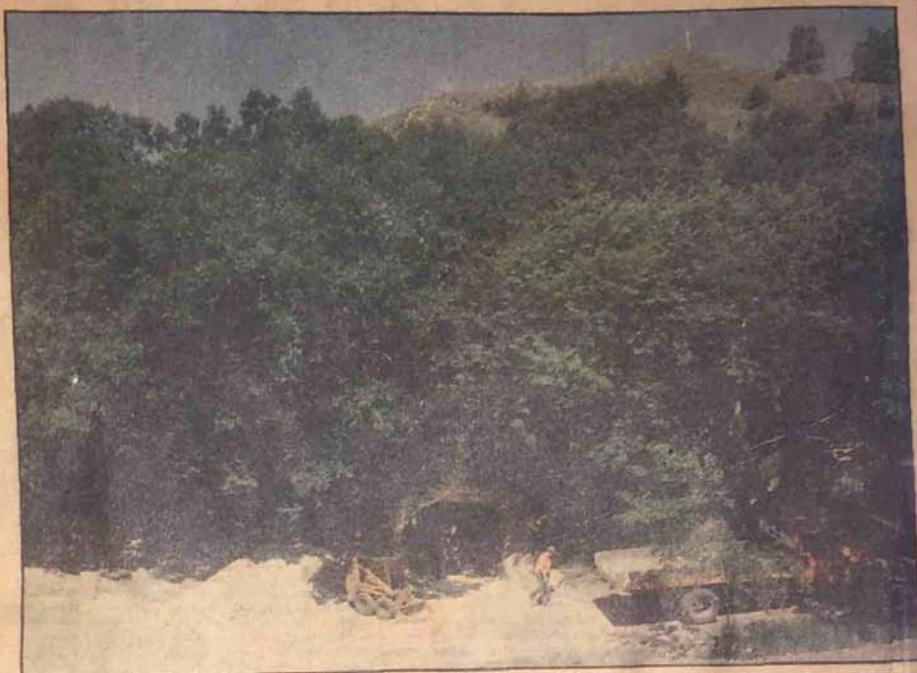
Goldfish and mining engineers Howard Last from Elko, Nev., and Gary Last of Vancouver, Wash., have been busy excavating the entrance and exits and shoring them up with thick cedar archways.

With the entrance open again, many visitors have stopped to take a look. Goldfish said there's a steady stream at the mine all of the time.

Signs on the outside warn visitors to enter at their own risk, but most are not deferred.

"It's like doing construction," he said. "People don't understand what's going on."

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Steve Goldfish walks back to the truck following a lumber delivery by Van Smit, of Scotia at Happy Jack Chalk Mine. From the top of the hill one can view the North Loup River.

Chalk mines: Fall opening planned

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Goldfish and the other miners wear hard hats and often are hit by falling rock as the ceiling is being chipped. One poke to the ceiling recently sent down a rock the size of a man's body, he said.

Overall, the mine is in super shape, he said, and the ground above it is in good condition, too.

"Really, we're doing an overkill on safety," he said.

The mine, once a popular tourist attraction, was sealed and closed by the Nebraska Game and Parks Commission when the entrance collapsed in 1978. Goldfish, an area native and former miner, took on the project last year to restore the historic landmark for future generations.

He's received an enthusiastic response from miners, engineers and locals who remember the mystique of the mine. So far, Goldfish has received about \$73,000 in donated services from mining engineers, landscapers and dirt movers.

A steel company donated \$8,000 in steel reinforcements for the ceiling, and a mining company donated costly mining equipment to get the job done.

The project has been organized into five phases to be completed over the next five years.

Phase one includes opening and securing the entrance and exits, shoring up some of the weak spots in the ceiling and adding extra support to the inside pillars. A 220-foot walkway through the mine, illuminated by low lighting close to the floor, will connect the entrance and exit.

Goldfish hoped to have the two openings sealed and braced with about 50 feet of timber by the Fourth of July. The rest of the interior work will continue through the summer.

Renovation of the parking lot has just been completed. About 5,000 cubic yards of dirt was moved to level the parking lot with Highway 11 and quadruple the existing lot.

There's enough room for 45 cars,

including large recreational vehicles and cars hauling trailers, he said.

Phase two will shore up two large "ballrooms" in the mine for a visitors center. Phase three, will include a historical museum, with information about mining and the geology of the mine.

Phase four will clean up and open other existing tunnels, rework the stairway to the top of the hill that encloses the mine and landscaping around the outside.

The final phase will develop a system of trails on the hillside and labels for local flora and fauna. The North Loup-Scotia FFA chapter is working on that project.

Most of the work so far has been done on a volunteer or cut-rate basis. Goldfish said he hopes to raise more funds for the project, which he estimated will cost around \$170,000 for all five phases.

He said he hopes to have the mine open to the public by this fall.

"When it's all done, it will be something to sit back and enjoy," Goldfish said.