



Extra-long digging arm is used to remove silt and other debris in sinkholes.

“Cave Farmer” Breaks New Ground

Most people buy a farm for what's on the surface. John Ackerman bought a farm for what was underneath - caves.

Ackerman's "cave farm" is called Minnesota Caverns and is located near Spring Valley, Minn. Natural drains or sinkholes pockmark his farm and others in the region. These depressions, some of which can be quite large, can lead to caves like Ackerman's.

"I have proven that if you excavate a sinkhole, you will find a cave or a passage leading to a cave," he explains.

Ackerman uses a modified tracked excavator with an extra long arm to reach into and remove the silt that has filled many of the sinkholes on his 325-acre farm. Since buying the first part of his cave farm in the early 1990's, he has discovered or expanded 19 caves on the farm. More than 6 miles of caverns and passages honeycomb the subsurface world of the farm.

Ackerman doesn't plan to commercialize his caves. All entrances have been gated off. He explains that his farm's distance from a large metropolitan area would make cave tourism a difficult proposition. A previous owner, who first discovered a cave on the farm while searching for a lost calf, tried to commercialize it and went bankrupt. In addition, insurance is hard to get and extremely expensive.

The lifelong caver does open his doors to area nature centers and youth groups interested in geology and the environment. Local farmers watching Ackerman excavate have been amazed at what they have seen as sinkholes formerly used as garbage pits are shown to drain directly into ground water and nearby wells.

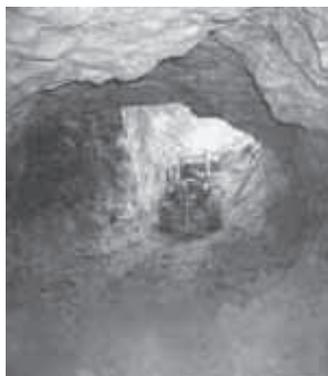
"Neighbors coming over to see a sinkhole being opened up to a major passageway had no idea something of that significance lay under the sinkhole," says Ackerman. "It has had a very large impact on folks who used to dump garbage into them."

With similar topography underlying major parts of the United States, there are plenty of caves yet to be found. If a landowner thinks he has a cave system on his property, Ackerman suggests contacting the National Speleological Society (NSS), an organization of people dedicated to exploring and protecting caves.

Having had more than his share of near death experiences, he stresses that cave exploration is extremely dangerous. Explora-



Though there are many undiscovered caves, it can be dangerous exploring them without an experienced caver.



Huge openings on his "Cave Farm" dwarf John Ackerman and his excavator.

tion, he says, should only be done by or in the company of experienced cavers.

Landowners with caves on their property also need to be aware that some states, such as Minnesota, leave them liable for subsurface accidents. "I had a law firm draw up a fairly lengthy form that releases landowners from liability in case I do something stupid on their property," says Ackerman.

Cave discovery, he says, also brings with it cave protection responsibility. He points out that state laws vary on cave protection. Wisconsin has strict laws on cave vandalism while Minnesota has none.

"Unfortunately, commercialization is often the only way to protect caves," he says.

Contact FARM SHOW Followup, John Ackerman, 26455 Galaxie Ave., Farmington, Minn. 55024 or the National Speleological Society (ph 256 852-1300; email: nss@caves; website: www.caves.org).

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Backhoe works on or off trailer thanks to wheel that supports the hoe and allows it to swivel.

Trailer-Mounted Backhoe Great Fun For Kids

Playgrounds often have backhoes for kids to use in their sandlot area. But Stephen Childs and his son Keith can take their homemade backhoe anywhere they want by hitching it up behind their Deere 110 garden tractor.

"If we want, we can drop the backhoe off the little trailer and use it as a stand-alone unit," says Childs.

The backhoe mounts on a wheel that pivots back and forth on a hub. The operator straddles a flat metal bench and places his feet on the wheel, which is free to swivel allowing him to swing the backhoe from side to side. He grabs a pair of handles located on

a steel bar that supports the bucket and uses a lever to open and close the bucket.

The bucket is made out of tubular steel, with railroad spikes welded onto the bucket's bottom edge to provide digging power.

The entire unit is secured by a safety chain connected to a vertical tube bolted to the mini trailer's frame.

"The bucket holds about 5 lbs. of dirt," notes Childs.

Contact: FARM SHOW Followup, Stephen Childs, 6207 Horton Rd., Bliss, N.Y. 14024 (ph 585 322-7615 or 585 786-2251).

Livestock Producer Specializes In The Unusual

Paul Springer buys and sells livestock, but every one of his animals has something that sets them apart.

He currently has two six-legged steers in his menagerie, but he's negotiating to buy a six-legged heifer and he's also in the market for a heifer or cow with a mule foot (hoof not cloven). In the past he's owned a 2-headed calf, a donkey with two bodies and one head, and many more.

Springer first got interested in unusual livestock back in 1975, when he bought a calf with six legs from a farmer near Blue River, Wis.

He raised the calf and then took him to the Wisconsin State Fair where he put him on display, charging 50 cents to those curious enough to pay the price to look.

He says he didn't make a lot of money, but it was not a loss, either. In fact, the calf, which he named Boldegard, went back to the state fair every year until 1988.

Boldegard lived to be 14 years old. When

he died, Springer had him mounted by a taxidermist. Later, he sold him to a Ripley's Believe It or Not Museum in St. Augustine, Florida, where Boldegard still draws crowds today.

Springer gets several calls and letters a month from producers, livestock buyers, veterinarians and others from all over the Midwest and beyond, asking if he's interested in something they have or have seen.

Before he buys, he makes sure the animal is fairly healthy and not in pain.

Some of the animals he buys are later sold to circuses, freak shows and museums for display. Others he keeps for his own displays until they die. Then, like Boldegard, they may be stuffed and sold.

He has photos of all the different animals he's owned over the years.

Contact: FARM SHOW Followup, Paul Springer, 1931 Cave Road, Mineral Point, Wis. 53565 (ph 608 623-2691).

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