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Mammoth Cave celebration begins with 'mammoth' mapping project

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Volunteers from the Cave Research Foundation and Mammoth Cave National Park piece together an updated 60-by-60-foot map of the cave system in the Caverna High School gymnasium in Horse Cave, Ky., on Wednesday, Sept. 7, 2022, as part of the 50th anniversary of the Flint Ridge connection for Mammoth Cave that officially made it the longest cave in the world. The map will be on display in the gym for the public to view on Thursday and Friday from 10 a.m. to 2 p.m. (Grace Ramey/gramey@bgdailynews.com)

Grace Ramey

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HORSE CAVE – Two days before the 50th anniversary of the connection discovery that deemed Mammoth Cave the longest cave in the world, a who's who of caving gathered

Mammoth Cave marks 50th anniversary of historic link

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Wednesday in Caverna High School's gymnasium to put together a jigsaw puzzle.

Geology professors, current and former spelunkers and park representatives methodically placed the puzzle's pieces, large rectangle sheets of paper featuring topographical lines, to form a 60-foot by 60-foot map of the entire 420-mile Mammoth Cave system, scaled so that one inch equals 100 feet.

The project was expected to take four hours, much fewer than the thousands of hours members of the Cave Research Foundation have spent in the past 70 years mapping the cave's passages, said Elizabeth Grace Winkler, event coordinator and member of CRF's board of directors.



“This just kind of gives you a sense of how mammoth Mammoth Cave is,” Winkler said.

The map’s brightly colored lines outline the cave’s currently known passageways from an aerial point of view.

Winkler said the maps are created by small teams that make a series of measurements as they explore using different tools: a compass to determine whether the cave is going up or down, right or left; a clinometer to measure a slope’s angles for elevation; a laser device to find width, depth and height without a tape measure; and a sketchbook to trace the cave’s features.

The map will be open to the public Thursday and Friday, when visitors will be able to take off their shoes and walk across the map to trace the cave's meanderings for themselves.

It's just one of several events being held through the weekend to commemorate the 50th anniversary of the Flint Ridge connection, the 1972 discovery made by cave explorers that joined two cave networks and officially made Mammoth Cave the longest cave in the world.

Other events include fireside chats with five of the six spelunkers who found the connection and several critical in pre-connection exploration, special guided connection cave tours, educational activities for kids and a display of earlier maps of the cave at the Mammoth Cave Visitor Center.

“Everybody gets very excited about the connection and the six people who were on it, but it took 17 trips to get there,” Winkler said.



Roger Brucker, 93, is one of those key pre-connection explorers. Brucker first visited Mammoth Cave at age 6 and insisted that his mother take him on an all-day caving trip.

“She was concerned that my little legs wouldn’t be able to take that, but I was still asking questions all the way to the end of the trip, wondering where the cave was and thinking that there must be more to it,” he said.

In 1954, Brucker confirmed his suspicions as part of an expedition to Crystal Cave that mapped 2.5 previously unexplored miles of cave passageways, and in 1957, he was one of the founding members of the Cave Research Foundation.

CRF quickly figured out that following underground waterways was the key to new cave connections. They eventually found passages going toward Mammoth Cave through this method.

Art Palmer, considered to be one of the foremost cave geology experts by his peers, also narrowly missed being part of the actual connection. He was part of the first trip under the valley and between the ridges, but the group members were impeded by a sandstone blockage they couldn't dig through.

He said that cave mapping never really ends, and that the gymnasium puzzle displays that.

“We don't come to a big blank wall and say, ‘Well, that's the last open passage that we know about. We're done, wrap it up,’ ” Palmer said. “So it's nice to see all these open leads.”

WKU professor Chris Groves shared the sense of possibility.

“It seems like everything’s already been discovered and found and used up,” Groves said. “And to some degree, it has – there’s no new mountains. But every single month, CRF has expeditions and people are going into new places that no human’s ever been before. There’s really not that many places in the world that you can still do that.”

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