

“Presently they came to a place where a little stream of water, tricking over a ledge and carrying limestone sediment with it, had, in the slow-dragging ages, formed a laced and ruffled Niagara in gleaming and imperishable stone. Tom squeezed his small body behind it in order to illuminate it for Becky’s gratification. He found that it curtained a sort of steep natural stair-way which was enclosed between narrow walls, and at once the ambition to be a discoverer seized him. Becky responded to his call, and they made a smoke mark for future guidance and started upon their quest. They wound this way and that, far down into the secret depths of the cave, made another mark, and branched off in search of novelties to tell the upper world about. In one place they found a spacious cavern, from whose ceiling depended a multitude of shining stalactites of the length and circumference of a man’s leg; they walked all about it, wondering and admiring, and presently left it by one of the numerous passages that opened into it. This shortly brought them to a bewitching spring, whose basin was encrusted with a frost-work of glittering crystals; it was in the midst of a cavern whose walls were supported by many fantastic pillars which had been formed by the joining of great stalactites and stalagmites together, the result of the ceaseless water-drip of centuries.”

The Adventures of Tom Sawyer, by Mark Twain

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## The discovery of..... **HOLY GRAIL CAVE**

By John Ackerman

Like the wondrous cave that Tom Sawyer and Becky Thatcher explored, we have recently discovered a phenomenal new cave system in Fillmore County, Minnesota. Read on...

We have always known that it was there, but it has always eluded our efforts to discover it. We know that a major cave system exists, beginning from the largest blind valley in Minnesota (The York Blind Valley) and ending 10 miles away, at the largest spring (Odessa Spring) in Minnesota. Dye traces conducted by Dr. Calvin Alexander have shown that water from 12 square miles drains into the York Blind Valley. Dye tracing has also proven that this water meanders through the earth until finally discharging from Odessa Spring, located at the base of a magnificent limestone cliff along the Upper Iowa River. (Along the Minnesota/Iowa border.)



Matthew Ackerman at Odessa Spring July 2001

Since the 1800's explorers have attempted to gain entry into this cave system with no success. Like those before me, I have gone to great lengths over the course of many years to locate this Holy Grail of all caves.

Throughout the years, myself and fellow cavers attempted to gain access to the system by diving the spring and hand digging in sinkholes along the suspected corridor. Numerous small caves were discovered in the process, but none of them led to the Mother Lode. During 1997-1999, Dr. Jay Kennedy and I inched our way through low air spaces along the main stream passage in nearby Niagara Cave in an attempt to make a connection with the York/Odessa Cave System, but arrived at an impenetrable impasse. These trips were not complete disappointments because we discovered new unrelated passages, including the huge "Star Room."



John Ackerman emerges from the stream passage in Niagara Cave. 1997

In May, 1999 I noticed a crack along a gravel road bank in the Amish town of Granger, MN. Amish, I blasted open and discovered a 400' long cave. Dave Gerboth and I felt that the lower level of this cave could possibly lead us into the York/Odessa System. Even though a great volume of air was pushing up from below, it was not possible to go deeper.

Located 300' away was a spring that erupted from the base of a hillside. The water from this spring is hydrologically connected to Odessa Spring. After excavating large rocks, I was able to force myself under the fierce outgoing water flow and groped my way down a steep narrow 18' long chute. When I reached the base I was dumbfounded that I had discovered a major water filled trunkline. Unfortunately the passage became impenetrable after 100 feet.



Blasting into the cave. Notice the smoke.



April 2001 During my last dive I became entangled in the thin safety line that was positioned throughout the cave. I finally managed to cut free of it and exited the cave with only seconds left of my air supply.

As the years slipped by I began to realize the York/Odessa Cave System would not be found in our lifetime unless I pulled out all the stops. I vowed to use technology, heavy equipment, high explosives, exploratory drilling machines and Conditional Use Permits in an attempt to conquer my quest. In Spring, 2008 I targeted a sinkhole on Marcia Cummings farm, almost



Near Odessa Spring

within sight of Odessa Spring, and just west of Niagara Cave. Based on years of excavating sinkholes, I have shown that at the base of every sinkhole there lies at least one cave passage. My fellow cavers and I vowed to dig this sinkhole all the way down to China if necessary, until we tapped into the passage that we surmised would lead us into the nearby York/Odessa System.

And dig we did. Clay Kraus, Dave Gerboth, Charles Graling, Dan Dornink, myself and the Cave Finder, kept digging and digging.

Eventually we began to pick up cave signs. Because we could not dig any deeper using machinery we began to excavate by hand. When we reached the 40' level voids began to appear. A large tank and culvert were set in place for protection against a collapse. Sure enough, a spacious cave passage was discovered 65' below the surface!



Clay Kraus checks for cave signs before hand digging, May 2008.

Unfortunately the passage terminated at a mud plug after 35 feet. We deemed this as a minor setback, and it was understood that in-cave digging would be required to continue. Then we ran into some really bad luck. On the morning of Saturday, June 7, 2008, it began to rain. It never stopped, and by afternoon we made a hasty retreat from the excavation site.

By early evening raging rivers began running across farm fields in Fillmore County. Our vehicles were moved off the adjacent gravel road for fear they would be swept away. Several hours before nightfall the road was overtaken by torrents of water as they made their way to the nearby Iowa River. Fillmore County was in trouble.



Photo from adjacent road as the runoff increased.



This is what was left over. The Cave Finder was almost carried into the 65' pit, which filled with muck. Our project was essentially destroyed.

This was a catastrophic supercell rain event, which spawned brief hail, tornadoes and damaging winds. Eleven inches of rain pounded down in a short period of time. The following day the adjacent county declared a State of Emergency. Major roads were closed, and the nearby town of Granger, located along the Upper Iowa River, was surrounded by water. The Upper Iowa River, located a short walk from the excavation site, crested at record level.

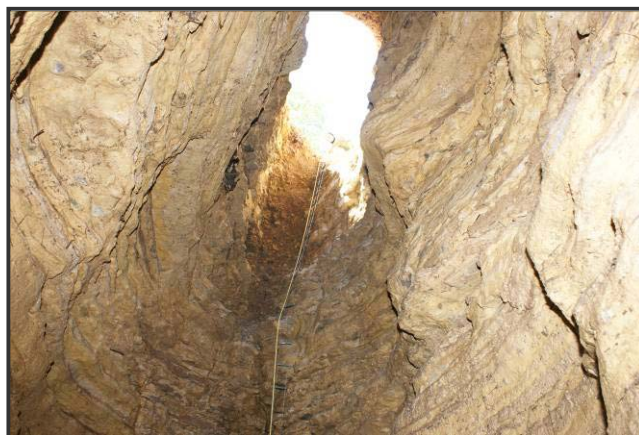
## From devastation came exuberance!

Sometime later I received a phone call from Dan Dornink, a fellow caver, lifelong resident of the area and Fillmore County Sheriff's Deputy. He described a gaping hole that had opened up during the storm event in a farm field, along the York/Odesa corridor. Dan suggested I bring the full caving arsenal.



Dan Dornink inspects the newly opened gaping hole.

Dan Dornink, Clay Kraus, Dave Gerboth and I climbed down into the black abyss and were stunned at what lie before us. While Clay, Dan and Dave were engrossed with a lead near the entrance shaft, I explored in the opposite direction. After 300 feet, the major spacious passage ended in a sinkhole collapse, so I followed a smaller side passage which soon hunkered down to crawling size. To the eye it appeared grim that any more cave passage could be found, but I was not about to give up without scouring every square inch of this passage. Then I detected wind blowing out of a tiny crack along the side of the passage. Using my hands, I began to remove



Looking 50' up the newly opened hole.

loose sand, soil and rocks. Suddenly the wind flow increased, and because sand was blowing in my face I found it necessary to close my eyes. After a short time I began to follow the tiny void upwards, and then saw open blackness above me. I worked my way up into the void and stood up in a large room. I walked around the room but could not find the continuation, so again I searched for the source of the wind. Again I located a tiny crack with wind screaming out, and pulled away the loose sand and rocks.

Then I climbed up into a second spacious room. This time a considerable walking-sized passage led off into the distance, which I began to follow. Adrenalin was pumping through my bloodstream as I screamed “YES! After several hundred feet I could see and hear something change up ahead. Then, beyond any expectation that I may have had, I walked right into open blackness. The passage went to my right and to my left, as far as my eyes could see. As I stood there in awe I whispered “*Oh my God*” over and over. I turned around, and at breakneck speed



[Squeezing through after removing blockage.](#)

made my way back to Clay, Dan and Dave. After blurting out the news, all 4 of us retraced my discovery route, and upon reaching the major intersection, Dan insisted on following the left hand route. As Clay, Dave and I trailed behind, we heard Dan’s almost unintelligible voice, lost in an echo, call out to us.

# And this is what was found !!!



John Ackerman in the Train Station Passage.

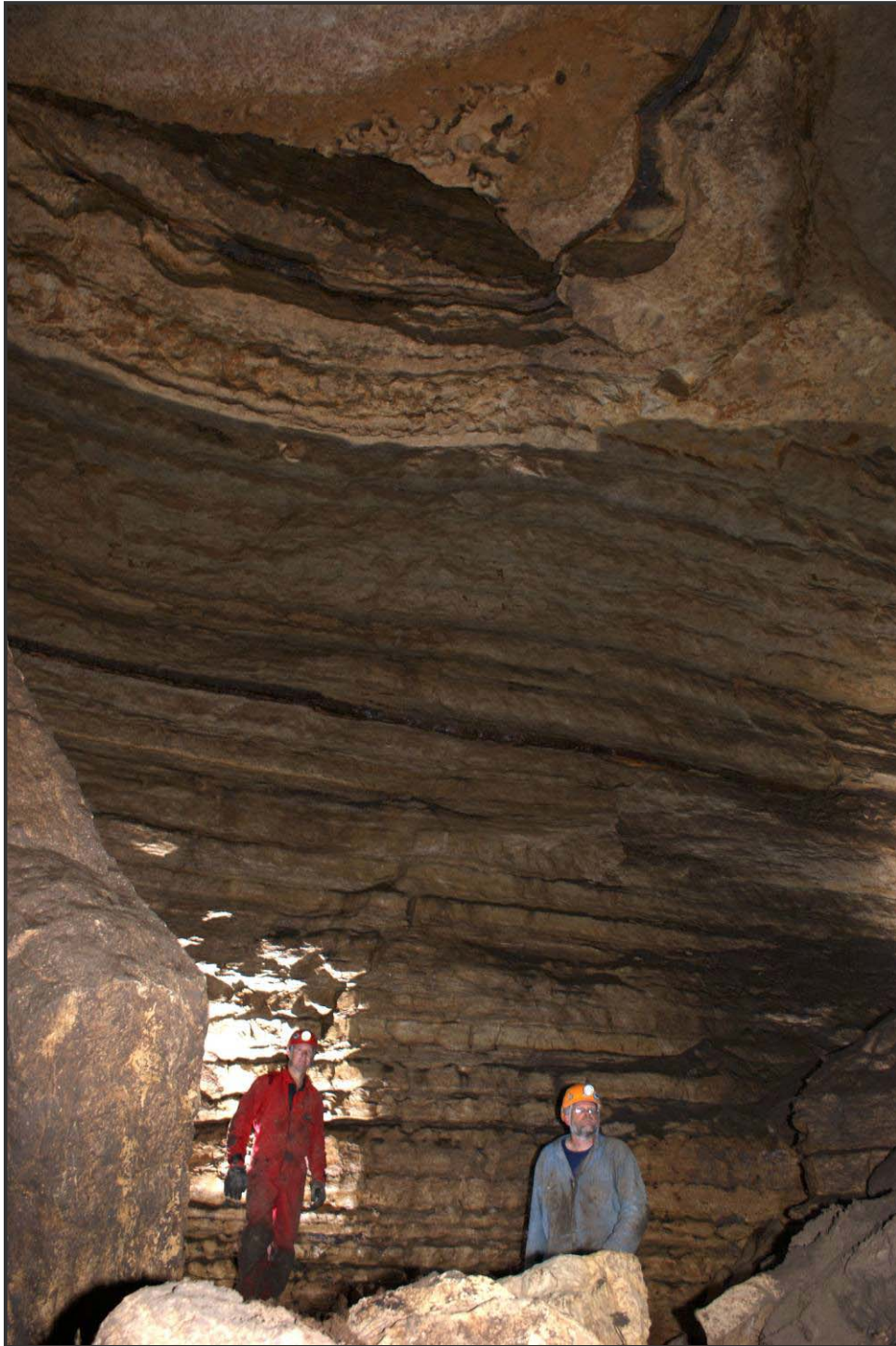
Photo by Clay Kraus.











Could this amazing discovery actually be part of the fabled immense York/Odesa Cave System? To date over 2.5 miles of incredible cave passages have been explored and surveyed. Numerous unexplored passages may indeed lead us directly into the York/Odesa System – time will tell. Since all 2.5 miles of the cave lie directly under 40- acres of surface land it is estimated that the York/Odesa System could be up to 50 miles in length!



Clay Kraus heads up the initial survey, drafts the cave map and superimposes surface features.

During our first journey deep into the cave, Clay and I conducted a fast paced survey with the specific purpose of identifying where the cave was positioned in relation to the surface above. Unfortunately we became lost in the maze of passages, but eventually surfaced unscathed before the sun came up. On a subsequent trip one of our party had a commitment and had to leave the cave early. He was lost for 9 hours until we located him!

After determining a suitable site for a permanent safe dry entrance, I (The Minnesota Karst Preserve) negotiated with the landowners and purchased 11 surface acres above the cave, including 148 acres of subterranean cave rights. Four related family's owned the property, and all were supportive of my quest to preserve, study and protect this unique underground wilderness.

But before the new entry project could begin, the gaping open sink hole needed to be sealed. Not only was the sink hole a serious liability issue, it was also a hungry monster, just waiting to swallow tons of fertile black soil from the surrounding fields during heavy rain events. It must be capped, filled and restored. Even though the sinkhole was not located on my newly purchased property, and was not my responsibility, Clay, Dave, Dan and I felt the need to do what was required.



Natural Entrance Sinkhole. The area around the pit was excavated to bedrock.



After the bedrock was exposed, structural steel tubing was placed over the open hole. Then thick plywood was placed over the beams and rebar was installed.



Sheets of tin were placed along the perimeter to form a tight seal. A temporary culvert access to the cave was installed.



High strength concrete was poured over the works.



The site was partially backfilled and a culvert extension was added.



The new entrance will be located about 350' away. Once the new entrance is completed this temporary entrance will be removed. The site will be graded and replanted with native grasses.



Future entrance site. Sinkhole collapse natural entrance is located near the large tree.



A small test hole has verified the accuracy of the new shaft entrance. Next up: A large industrial drill rig and a host of support equipment will now arrive to create the actual entrance.

Stay tuned..... [www.karstpreserve.com](http://www.karstpreserve.com)