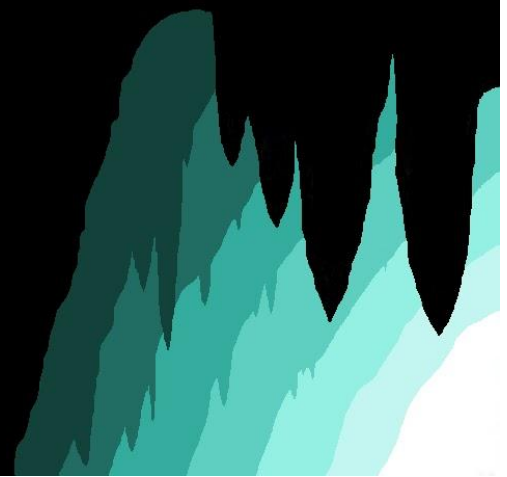


Western Cave Conservancy



Protecting the West's Last Frontier

Vol 15 No 1 Winter 2021

To Those Who Have Made it Possible... Thank You!

Marianne Russo

A year ago, it seemed almost impossible. A large tract of land next to the town of Volcano, some 242 acres, was on the market for just under one million dollars. This tract consisted of eleven separate parcels and included a large area of marble karst, well known to cavers for decades. Included were several known caves and a wonderland of potential discoveries, possibly containing the elusive "Lost Amador Cave" (nobody knows if this legendary cave really exists or not, but quite a few cavers have spent many a day searching for a lead).



Niles Lathrop in Santa Claus / Pearl Cave.
Photo: Dave Bunnell

Slim chance or not, I decided we had to try. I contacted the realtor and let him know we were interested. He talked to the owners and told me that they were willing to sell it piecemeal, so we could bid on just the portions that included caves. This meant that perhaps we had a chance to get at least some of the land. One of the first things I did was to start calling a few cavers who I knew really loved the area and were possibly in a position to help us out financially.

The process of rounding up pledges gave us a great start. Several people came through in a big way, each pledging \$10,000, and one couple pledging an amazing \$20,000. I also approached the Mother Lode



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Grotto (MLG), who had, like the WCC, received a bequest from the estate of the late Bill Papke. I was sure Bill would consider this a wise use of some of his money. The MLG has prudently invested their inheritance and were willing and able to help us out. They gave us a \$50,000 matching grant that we would receive once we had raised \$50,000 (not including the pledges mentioned above).

In early March of 2020, we decided to test the waters and we made our first bid. For all the caves and karst exposures across about 187 acres, we bid \$400,000. This was rejected, but they encouraged us to try again, either for less acreage or more money. We decided to sit on it for a while and see if maybe the price would drop.

While we were waiting I got a totally unexpected letter from a long-time caver. I had known him for many, many years, seeing him at conventions, regionals and other events. In this letter he offered to help the WCC buy a cave, to the tune of \$100,000. Yes, that's right! One hundred thousand dollars was offered. Well, after I regained consciousness, I realized that assuming we could match the \$50,000 MLG grant, and collect all the pledges, we



Kelley Prebil in the entrance to Mushroom Cave.
Photo: Dave Bunnell

would have around \$280,000. This along with our existing funds gave us more to work with, especially if the sellers would allow us to finish paying it off over time.

The sellers were three brothers, one of whom was Doug Ketron, a local Volcano resident and long-time friend of cavers. Since he was local, he became the contact for access to the land. While he was very protective of the caves, he allowed cavers to have access to the caves over the twenty or so years that he and his brothers owned the property. This always required contacting him ahead of time, but that was never a problem. When Doug knew we were serious about trying to acquire the caves and as much of the karst as possible, he became our advocate with his brothers. Through the realtor, he let us know that they would be willing to do some lot line adjustments in order to insure that all the caves were included in whatever we could purchase plus they would be willing to give us three years to pay off the debt.

Finally, in June we made our second bid. This time the bid was for approximately 150 acres and for \$525,000. They countered with \$550,000 and we agreed. This actually included a modest lowering of their price per acre from just over \$4,000 to a



Formations in Miser's Purse Cave.

Photo: Kip Baumann

little over \$3,600. Plus, we would have three years to pay it off, they would carry the loan themselves, and they would bear the cost of doing the requested lot line adjustments. Courtesy of the pandemic, getting all the paperwork done has taken months, but, as Steven Johnson writes elsewhere in this newsletter, we are ready to take our first steps as the new owner.

This incredible achievement, one that would have been unthinkable ten years ago, was made possible only through the amazing generosity of cavers. There have been over 170 separate donations since we started fundraising -- not only from local California cavers who knew these caves, but from generous souls all over the United States who have sent in contributions and good wishes.

Over seventy of these donations were for amounts between \$100 and \$2,500, Around ninety smaller contributions ranging from \$10 to \$75 were received as well, and they really added to the total.

For their outstanding generosity, I want to acknowledge the individuals who gave even more: (in alphabetical order) Anonymous (3), Bill & Peri Frantz, Jerry Johnson, Kenneth Laidlaw, Jim & Claire Lakner, the Mother Lode Grotto, Mike Spiess & Pat Witt, John & Marilyn Tinsley,



Kip Baumann in Hummingbird Cave.

Photo: Steven Johnson

and Daniel Veelik & Beatriz Farfan. And, of course, the late Bill Papke, whose generous bequest gave us the courage and backing to attempt this purchase.

Finally, in late-breaking news, we just received word that the NSS Preserves and Acquisitions Committee has awarded us a \$5,000 grant toward the Volcano purchase. Thank you National Speleological Society!

Thank you, each and every one of you, who donated for this purchase. Without your support, securing permanent protection and access to this cave-rich property would never have been possible.

Also, a special note of appreciation to Daniel Veelik and Beatriz Farfan for stepping up with a large donation to complete the match for the Mother Lode Grotto grant. They wanted everyone to know how much they appreciated the initiative and generosity of the MLG in helping the WCC and the caving community with this effort.

Introducing Paul Greaves, Manager of the Volcano Natural Preserve

Paul Greaves



Paul in his natural habitat.

As the inaugural manager for the Volcano Natural Preserve, I'd like to introduce myself and tell a little of my history with the property. I've been caving with the Mother Lode Grotto (MLG) since 1976. I started "officially" caving in the summer

after I graduated from high school, when I finally got around to contacting the local grotto... that being the MLG. Soon thereafter I connected up with another MLG caver by the name of Eric Popoff. He was very enthusiastic and had a taste for exploring and digging for new caves, as well as

visiting whatever else could be identified and located. We spent countless hours driving around the Mother Lode region and scrounging around any limestone/marble outcrops we could locate. Probably our most consistent interest turned to the Volcano property, as it was relatively close, was freely accessible at the time, and full of juicy leads.

I think I have walked and poked at almost every acre of that property, as long as it looked interesting. I have done this repeatedly over the years, although my most intensive focus probably would have been from 1976 through the mid-80s or so, when intense exploring and digging were more comfortable to pursue, as far fewer people lived in the area and the property was not posted, fenced, or gated (and we were perhaps a bit more casual about such things). The end result is that I have become extremely familiar with the property, and can generally find my way around (or back to the vehicle) even well after dark. I once even had to do it in thick fog! In any case, I look at this land as the place (more than any other) that I first developed my ridge-walking and cave-hunting skills. I even found a cave or two, but never really found "the big one" that I continue to think is out there somewhere.



David Weaver admires the view in Lulu Bell.
Photo: Mara Reed

So where do we go from here? I'll be figuring that out as much as anyone. I have to say that actually being able to play a role in managing and protecting that property is a bit of a dream come true. I have a very personal connection to the place. At the same time, it's a huge area and I'll be needing lots of help. I intend to be as inclusive and easy to work with as I know how, while accounting for all the necessary legal requirements and directives from the WCC board. I am also very open to any ideas or suggestions from anyone else that shares similar concerns and desires to care for the place. It really belongs to all of us now, at least in the sense of all of us being caretakers and having the opportunity to enjoy and explore it. It sure makes the past year or so seem a little less discouraging, doesn't it? Something good that happened in 2020-2021!



Kelley Prebil in Santa Claus / Pearl.
Photo: Dave Bunnell

An Update from the Treasurer

Mike Spiess

As we close the books on 2020, the financial position of the WCC is solid, thanks to the support of our members. As we started the year we were able to acquire Cave of the Catacombs without having to raise additional money. When the Volcano property came on the market, we saw an opportunity to conserve a larger karst area, but the cost was substantial. We were able to consider this challenge only because we had built up substantial reserves for this purpose. The generous donations of our members allowed the WCC to provide a substantial down payment. The willingness of the seller to carry a short term note will allow us additional time (3 years) to raise the remaining money.

As the WCC acquires more property, the cost of maintaining these resources becomes more substantial. To provide an income stream for this purpose, the Board will be establishing a restricted endowment. In addition, we will maintain reserves that will allow us to conserve additional lands as the opportunity arises. The importance of volunteers cannot be overstated. At this time the WCC has no paid staff, which substantially reduces the overhead of the organization, allowing us to save for future projects. Thank you to all the members for keeping us on a solid financial footing. As we approach our 20th birthday, we will likely have a million dollars in assets.

Letter from the President

Steven Johnson

It's been a long haul, but we're excited (and relieved!) to finally close on the purchase of the Volcano Natural Preserve. It was waaaaay back in February 2020 that we first heard about the property coming on the market; what seemed like an impossible dream then has finally become a

reality, thanks to the incredible generosity of cavers across the country.

The Volcano Natural Preserve is the largest endeavor the WCC has ever undertaken, and there are a lot of interesting projects and work to be done -- we expect there to be plenty of opportunities for volunteering and research! We're all eager for safe, responsible caving to resume, and when it does, we expect a lot of you to visit the caves (and surface!) of the Preserve. We hope you will find it worth the wait.

Of course, the fundraising isn't over yet -- we've paid about \$350,000 down on the property, but have \$200,000 remaining to pay over the next three years. We hope that cavers can continue to chip in towards this goal so that we can keep enough money in reserve to be prepared for future opportunities like this when they arrive!

Help the WCC Pay Off This Terrific Purchase!

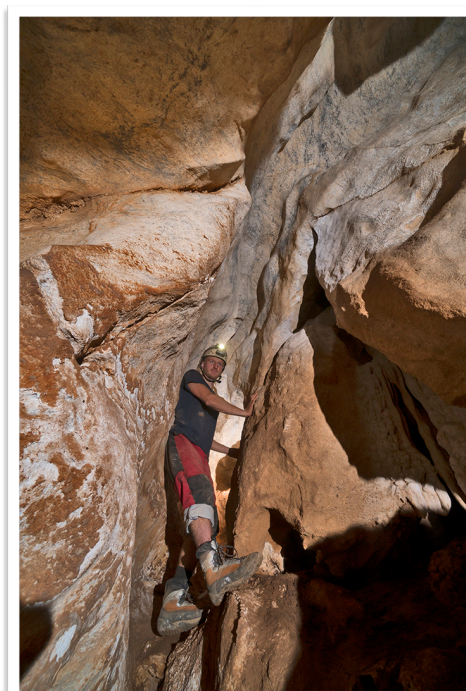
We will happily accept any donations of any size. (And don't forget, it's tax deductible!)

You can always donate online at www.westerncaves.org/donate. Or send a check to:

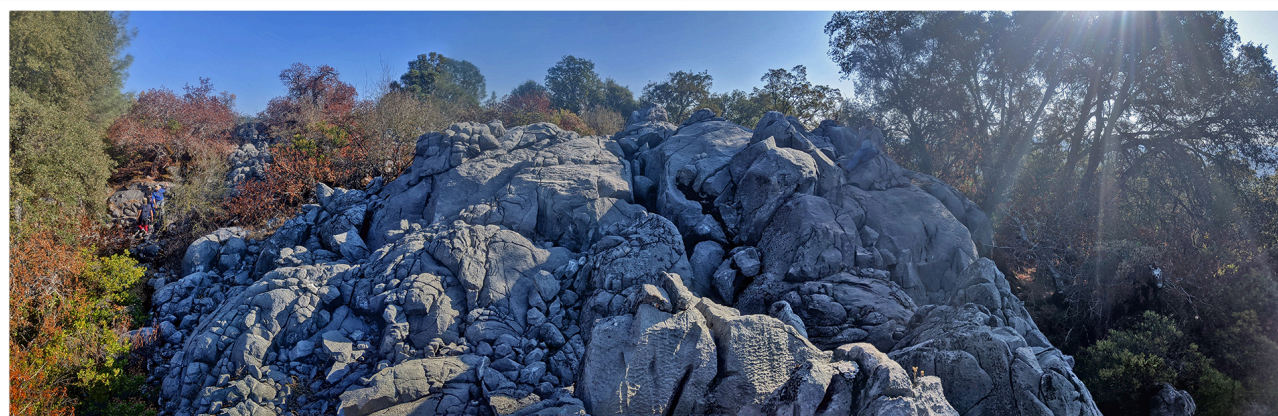
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As always, we'd love to hear your thoughts on all things related to the conservation of caves and how the WCC can help everyone succeed at this goal. Please feel free to share them with me at steven@westerncaves.org.

Cave softly!



Niles Lathrop in Mushroom Cave.
Photo: Dave Bunnell



Panorama of karst.
Photo: Dave Bunnell