Catawba Murder Hole cave is subject of new book

Mike Stater
Contributing Writer

A noted cave, which some say wants to tell its own story, now has the opportunity in a recently released book. “Murder Hole” is about the Catawba-area cave of the same name in Botetourt County that author, landowner and caver Marian McConnell describes as “a unique place of danger and beauty.”

McConnell, who is spokesperson for the Veterans Affairs Medical Center in Salem, shares this fascinating collection of legends, history of the cave’s early explorers, stories from those who survived accidents in its dark depths, historical and

See MURDER HOLE page 8

Marian McConnell, co-owner of “Murder Hole,” loves going underground.

PHOTO BY BRIAN WILLIAMS
current photographs, maps, artwork, songs and more.

She and her husband Dan have owned the Murder Hole property since 1994, and built their house within sight of the cave. They are both cavers and have collected information, pictures, videos, and stories for almost 20 years.

The two are members of the National Speleological Society and the Blue Ridge Grotto (local caving club). They lead caving trips and are trained in cave rescue.

“I was looking into the Daylight Cave one day and realized I wasn’t going to live forever,” McConnell said, in explaining her motivation for her latest book. “I wondered what would happen to all the stuff I’d collected over the years when I was gone? I knew there was a lot of interest in the Murder Hole, so why not write a book about it?”

She said her adventure novel, “Emergence,” about a group of women cavers trapped underground was published in 1997 by Cave Books and sold well.

“A book about Murder Hole would be a valuable legacy to share with the local community and anyone interested in history and this very special cave,” she said.

“Over two years ago I began writing the book and sorting through the thousands of pictures and items to best illustrate the cave’s story. I contacted everyone I knew that had been involved in accidents and incidents, and interviewed them to get their stories first-hand. I contacted everyone whose photos or items I wanted to include to request their permission.”

She credits John Long of the Salem Museum as a big help in finding historical articles about the cave. She also said Dan Casey’s article in the “Roanoke Times” about her quest to write the book resulted in more than 60 people contacting with her with more tales to share.

She researched old articles on microfiche at the Roanoke Library, and also researched the history of the land in the Botetourt Courthouse in Fincastle. Pat Richards of Aerial Photography flew over the cave to get an amazing bird’s eye view and pictures of the cave, she said. “That was quite an exhilarating experience!” she said.

“The books arrived in early December and I’m very proud of how beautiful they turned out. I give huge credit to my editor/publisher Tom Rea for making this project a reality. My first book signing event at Dixie Caverns on Dec. 22 was a great success, and the books are selling so well I’ve had to order more copies to have on hand,” she said.

The 150-page book was produced by the National Speleological Society’s Special Publications Committee. It is available in hardback ($35) or paperback ($24) and can be purchased locally from McConnell. The paperbacks are also available online at www.nssbookstore.org, at Dixie Caverns, and at the Salem Museum.

McConnell will be the guest speaker and signing books at 7 p.m. on April 15 at the Salem Historical Society meeting at the Salem Museum, which is located on East Main Street in Salem in the historic Williams-Brown House in Longwood Park. The talk is open to the public.

On March 19 at 7 p.m. she will be signing books at the Fincastle Library where her appearance is sponsored by the Botetourt County Historical Society/History Museum.

McConnell adds a note of caution: Because of the dangerous nature of the entrance to the cave, and for the privacy of the owners, no one is permitted on the property without the prior permission and presence of either Dan or Marian McConnell.

McConnell can be reached at (540) 309-4707 or marian.mcconnell@gmail.com.