

By Marcy Velte

Caves' discoverer now greets visitors



A new animatronic likeness of Lester Howe greets visitors as they begin the Howe Caverns tour on Tuesday.

HOWES CAVE – An important figure from the past has returned to Howe Caverns to help tell the story of how the local attraction was discovered.

A lifelike, animatronic version of Lester Howe now greets visitors before they take their tour of the caves. Howe, who discovered the caves in 1842 on the land where his cows went to pasture, has been a part of the pre-tour show since mid-February. He officially debuted Tuesday afternoon at an event for Howe Caverns officials and the community.

“Untold hours have gone into creating a show that is historically accurate and entertaining,” said Howe Caverns General Manager Robert Holt. “We’ve researched Lester Howe’s speech patterns, hair color (red) and every detail to make this an extraordinary experience for our visitors before they enter his treasured cave.”

The idea for a Lester Howe attraction has been in the works since November 2009, after Holt and the owners of Howe Caverns saw their first animatronic person at the International Association of Amusement Parks and Attractions Trade Show in Las Vegas. They recruited Garner Holt Productions, the world’s largest manufacturer of animatronics and amusement park equipment, to build Lester.

He took about six weeks to build, according to Bill Butler, the production company’s director of creative designs. To make him look as real as possible, human hair was used and each strand was inserted individually. As he speaks, Lester’s green eyes, mouth and face change expressions. His costume is like the one he wore in an 1850s photograph at the cave entrance.

Only two photos of Howe remain today. The design team researched the Howe family history and interviewed historians to find further details about Lester’s looks and how he may have spoken. Dozens tried out for the voice of Lester, but the part was eventually given to veteran voice actor John Curts.

“[His voice] was eerily similar to how we all sort of imagined he might sound,” said Butler.

To accompany Lester’s story, an animated video that uses a Victorian drawing style shows the discovery of Howe Caverns. Butler said it’s a trick to distract visitors from any non-human attributes Lester may possess and to add humor to the story. A glowing map also outlines the tour paths visitors will later see. Butler said this part of the show took another six weeks to complete.

Lester can be found in an intricately painted and detailed version of his study. He tells visitors how he “loves to meet folks who want to spend a beautiful day underground.” He also reminds them to “savor your time in these timeless caves.”

Holt and Butler would not say how much the project cost, other than that it was “quite a bit.”

“But he’s worth every penny,” said Holt. “The best part is we don’t have to feed him and we don’t have to pay him.”

The short Lester Howe show is just the first of the new attractions Howe Caverns plans this year.

The new Howe High Adventures, featuring four zip line towers and a rope course, is expected to open this summer. Originally, the attraction was due to open in May, but spokeswoman Kathy Condon said construction was stalled because of this year’s rough winter season. The new opening goal is before the July Fourth weekend.

Eventually, a new building will house the Howe Caverns Mining Co., featuring the Patty Tobin Fine Fashion Jewelry Boutique. The building will double the size of the current mining attraction and bring a portion of it indoors.

Other expansion plans include a pavilion and a barbecue pit.

Further in the future, Garner Holt Productions is in talks with Howe Caverns officials to develop the Howe Dinosaur Canyon, complete with animatronic dinosaurs and featuring a huge Tyrannosaurus Rex.

“As you can see, we have an aggressive plan of action that we’ve embarked upon, but we feel confident of its impact and the enjoyment it will bring,” Holt said.