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Looking back on the saving of Stumphouse

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WALHALLA — Not all people would classify a dark, cold, damp tunnel as something they'd be eager to explore.

This particular tunnel, however, has proven its allure not only to locals, but to countless visitors from all over the country.

Stumphouse Mountain, described as a "star treasure," can look back on two years since the community rallied to conserve its history once and for all.

Eddie Martin, activist, experienced the journey of nearly losing Stumphouse Mountain to a developer in 2007.

"Stumphouse and Issaqueena Falls are icons in the state," Martin said. "When people felt like their icons could be taken away, most people wanted to do everything they could to stop that from happening."

What many people did not know, Martin said, was that the park was in the hands of private owners and, therefore, not protected by the park system.



Courtesy of Eddie Martin

Members of the band, Conservation Theory, perform for an Upstate Forever event. They will be performing at Stumphouse Tunnel at 4 p.m. on Aug. 1 to celebrate the two-year anniversary of saving the park and Issaqueena Falls from private development.

While talks with the developer, city of Walhalla officials and Oconee County Council members were continuing, far more people spoke out against the idea than those who supported it.

"There were some council members who thought a land sale would be beneficial to the area, but I just don't see why," he added.

With nearly 1,000 acres owned and leased by various private entities, the gated community proposed by developers would have limited public access to the popular landmarks.

But with the help of conservation groups and concerned citizens, Oconee County will forever have access to the park at Stumphouse.

"This all sort of kicked off in January of 2007," he said. "By September, the effort to save Stumphouse had raised $4.3 million dollars. It was enough to put an easement on the property, keeping it preserved forever."

Raising that amount of money was "unprecedented," Martin said, and it took just eight months to do so.

For first-timers and veterans alike, heading into the dark tunnel holds a high level of anticipation and excitement.

Just think. You are walking where hundreds of pre-civil war workers chiseled away at the mountain to attempt to allow a rail line to connect Charleston, S.C. to Knoxville, Tenn.

After the war effort took away from funding the transportation line, Stumphouse Tunnel became the home of the famous Clemson Blue Cheese for a while and now remains the perfect area for family picnics and photo-ops.

A tunnel like Stumphouse was formed by the bare hands of workers, without the help of heavy machinery. It's nestled in the heart of Oconee County and both the tunnel and rushing falls are sights to really behold.

To celebrate the first two years of its total preservation, Martin and other officials are holding a remembrance event at Stumphouse.

Taking place from 4 p.m. – 6 p.m. on Saturday Aug. 1, local and state representatives will be on hand to speak about the hard-fought battle that solidified the preservation of Stumphouse.

"It will be like an old-fashioned pot luck gathering," Martin said. "We want everybody to come, bring a dish to share and enjoy a good time. (Rep.) Bill Whitmire and (Sen.) Thomas Alexander are just a couple of examples of who will be on hand."

Conservation Theory, a band in which Martin plays, will be on hand to entertain all who attend the event.

"We are made up of a fiddle, banjo, Mandolin, guitars, harmonica and much more," he said. "We got together in response to this and other conservation efforts. People really enjoy our sound."

But without the grassroots movement from residents in the area, Martin said the successful outcome would not have been possible.

"When the council met to discuss the issue, a group of us decided that night in the courtyard that we needed to form a group and get working," he added.

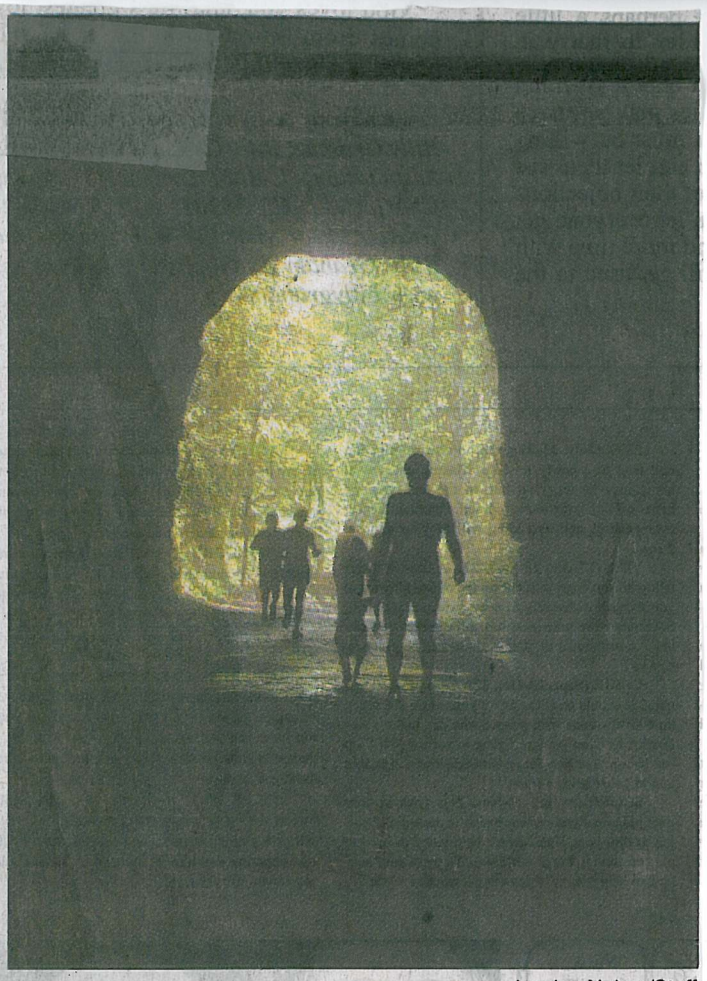
Concerned Citizens for Conservation (CCC) did a lot of the legwork in spreading the word, while Upstate Forever, the Nature Conservancy, Natural Land Trust, OPUS Trust, Department of Natural Resources, South Carolina Conservation Bank, the county and city councils all donated time and money to the effort, Martin said.

"Without each person that helped with the cause, we may have had to sit back and watch our beloved Stumphouse and Issaqueena Falls slip away," he said. "Instead, we can enjoy a community picnic and spend our afternoons appreciating their beauty for years to come."



Jessica Nelms/Staff

Vachel Pennebaker, 9, left, Clayton Deutschmann, 13, back center, Lauren Pennebaker, 12, Tyler Deutschmann, 11, front left, and Ashley Deutschmann, 9, lend each other a hand while climbing the rocks surrounding Stumphouse Tunnel.



Jessica Nelms/Staff

Visitors explore the inside of Stumphouse Tunnel.



Jessica Nelms/Staff

From left: Lauren Pennebaker, Ashley Deutschmann, Clayton Deutschmann, Vachel Pennebaker and Tyler Deutschmann use flashlights to explore the inside of Stumphouse Tunnel.