



spotlight on  
HIGHBRIDGE  
SPRINGS WATER CO.

# GOING WITH





# THE FLOW

The Griffin family has developed their Highbridge Springs Water Co. into a beloved Bluegrass brand

By Maryjean Wall  
Photos by Kirk Schlea



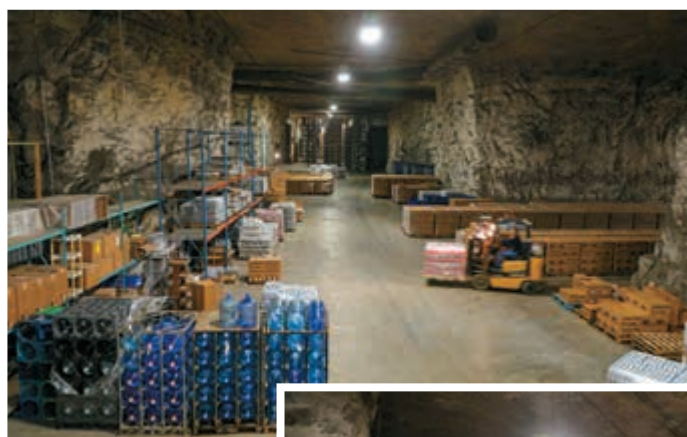


Ruben Esparza loads 5-gallon water bottles from the conveyor belt to a pallet. Each bottle weighs more than 40 pounds.

**W**ater flowing through Central Kentucky is the elixir of life: sustaining and plentiful, a simple gift to all. The great herds of buffalo, elk, and deer instinctively knew this. So did Native Americans who hunted this game. Settlers and early livestock breeders recognized water as one of the region's riches. If you couldn't see water above ground, there was plenty underground in subterranean channels that nature brought to the surface wherever springs seeped through the soil. Nourished with minerals leached from limestone rock, the region's water, pure and abundant, helped give rise to the Bluegrass horse business.

This natural resource also gave rise to a popular local bottled drinking water business, Highbridge Springs Water Co. The story of this company's beginnings to the present leads 130 feet straight underground into a former rock quarry that somewhat resembles Batman's cave. The quarry spans 32 open acres with 5.3 miles of corridors large enough for trucks to drive through. Or, perhaps, for the Batmobile to take flight. The ceilings reach 30 feet in height. Subterranean water flows like black gold from the oil fields into a man-made reservoir inside this "cave." Bottled and distributed throughout the region, Highbridge Springs Water has become a staple of home and office water cooler services and those smaller bottles stacked on supermarket shelves.

It seems like Highbridge water has been with us forever, though it hasn't. The company began bottling water only in 1982, back when nearly the only bottled water to be found



Far left, Richard Stinnett uses a forklift to take water to the loading dock. Left, water awaits loading in the "cave." The height and depth of the cave easily accommodate large vehicles.



locally was carbonated, not flat as Highbridge water is. The carbonated water was sold in those imported little green glass bottles labeled Perrier. Perrier had come to the United States in 1977 following a long history in the United Kingdom and elsewhere.

Americans who visited Saratoga Springs, New York, also



FRESH NEW LOOK.  
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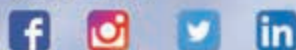
  
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had been drinking bottled water for some time. Bottlers at the Spa had been commercially producing water in glass containers since at least the mid-1800s. Bottled water did not become ubiquitous in the United States until after DuPont patented polyethylene terephthalate (PET) bottles in 1973. This led to a cultural shift and, eventually, to those plastic bottles filled with drinking water.

Highbridge Springs Water took its name from the small residential community, High Bridge, population 242, that is the quarry's neighbor. Both lie about four miles southwest of Wilmore, which in turn lies another six miles southwest of Nicholasville. This is all within Jessamine County. The High Bridge community originally had its own post office. It still has a volunteer fire department. The road ends here, just below this small collection of dwellings, at the iconic High Bridge, spanning 308 feet high over the river. The current bridge



Highbridge President Linda Griffin practically grew up at Highbridge Springs. She stands before a painting of her late father, Highbridge Springs founder Bill Griffin.

“

ONE DAY MY  
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DON’T WE  
BOTTLE THAT  
WATER.’ ”

—Linda Griffin

opened in 1911. An earlier version opened in 1876 (the year George Armstrong Custer lost his life to Native Americans at Little Bighorn, to give a sense of time) and was the first cantilever bridge in North America. The original bridge stood 275 feet high. The 1911 version has had a storied history, given that at various times young Kentucky men have considered jumping off the bridge a mark of manhood. Some lived to brag about their manhood; some did not.

The founder of Highbridge Springs Water was a Laurel County resident, Bill Griffin, who drove to Lexington quite frequently because he had racehorses there. The Griffins have operated a grocery wholesale business in London, Kentucky, for almost 100 years. Griffin was an entrepreneur who dabbled in this and that, lunched with his horse trainer at a racing-oriented watering



Griffin shows an image of the quarry from the late 1800s.

hole called Buffalo & Dad's on North Broadway in Lexington, and generally was quite sharp in spotting a viable business opportunity. Until, that is, he acquired the quarry in Jessamine County. For a number of years, it looked like he should have named this venture "Bill Griffin's Folly."

The quarry story unfolded like this: Griffin for some time had been observing trucks hauling the used stall bedding away from The Thoroughbred Center (formerly Kentucky Training Center), where his horses resided. He wondered where it was going. Where would you dump truckloads of muck?



The company's exterior barely hints of the rush of business inside.

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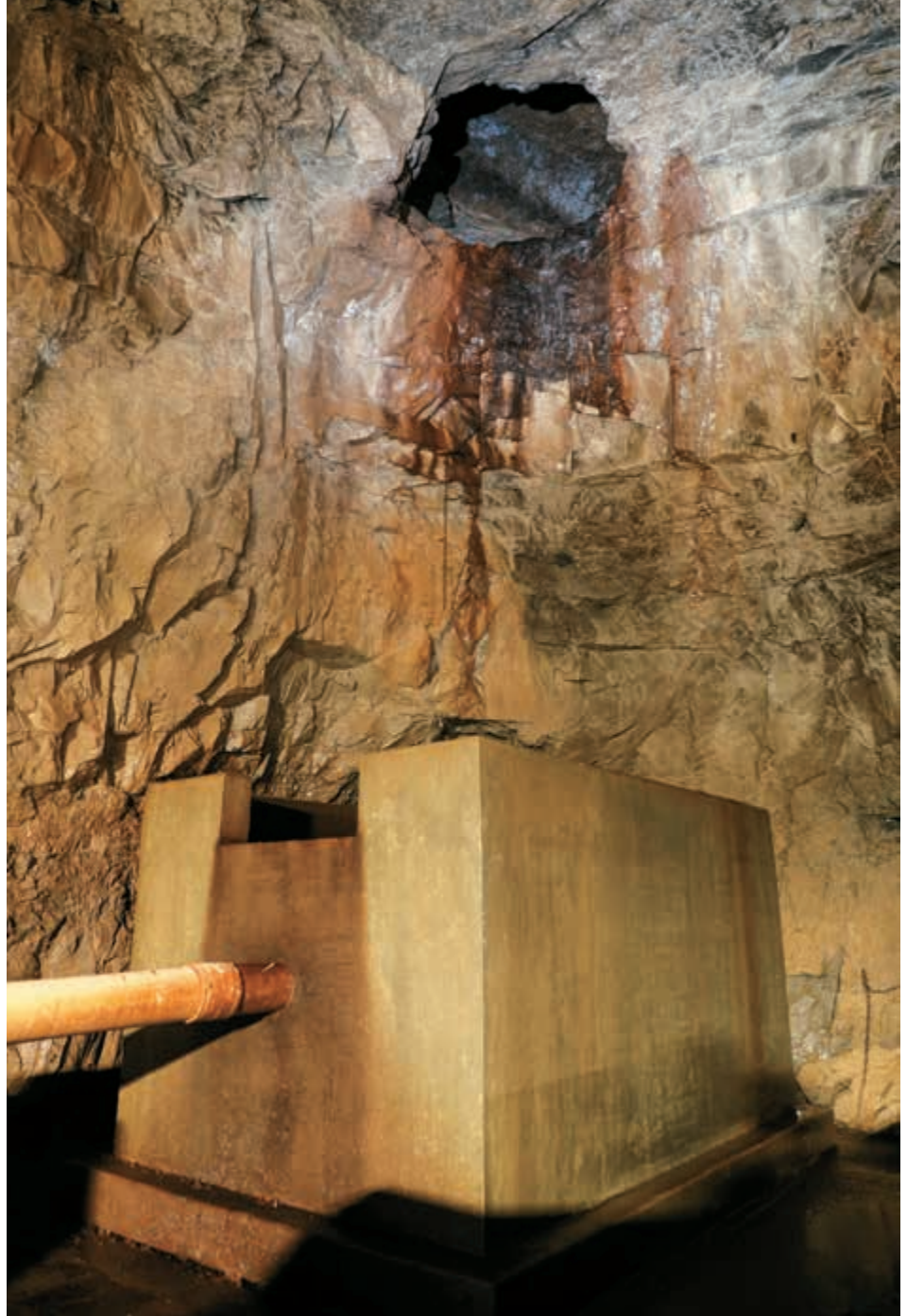
One day he decided to follow a manure truck, just out of curiosity. At the end of the trail, he discovered a mushroom farm.

“Dad, being in the grocery business, looked into it and found that the closest place to here growing mushrooms was Ralston-Purina in Pennsylvania,” said Griffin’s daughter, Linda, who is president of Highbridge Springs Water. “So he thought this was a great idea and he bought in as a small stockholder in Highbridge Farms Mushrooms.”

Turned out the mushroom venture wasn’t profitable. Griffin purchased the operation thinking he as sole owner would be more successful growing mushrooms. But he wasn’t. He hoped to sell the place to some interested mushroom growers from France. But that prospect fell through after Francois Mitterrand was elected president of France in 1982 and stopped a lot of capital investment money from leaving the country.

So, there was Griffin, holding a property that he was no longer sure had a future, and wondering what to do with it. He formed a new plan: to open an underground warehouse where he could store non-fat dry milk for the U.S. government. And why not, given the quarry’s history. “In the back of the quarry are old rusted-out barrels that have a Civil Defense [logo] on them,” said Linda. “They stored food and water in here during the Cold War.”

One day Griffin drove Linda and her youngest sister, Mary, from London to show them the quarry. They agreed to help him start cleaning out the place. “It was just shocking; no lights, nothing,” Linda recalled. (Today the quarry is, in fact, clean and well-lighted, but that came only with a lot of work.) “We start-



A pipe carries spring water to holding tanks, then to the reverse osmosis/ozonation water plant, and finally to bottling.

ed cleaning with brooms and flashlights and lights on our heads,” she said. Her father incorporated Kentucky Underground Storage Co. and they considered themselves open for business.

But not so fast. An engineer informed them they needed to do something about the water coming from the ceiling and spilling into a drainage ditch that led outside. This water was creating high humidity. When blasting to create the underground quarry, the property

owners in the 1920s had accidentally hit an aquifer. Their solution was to dig a ditch to contain the water flow from the aquifer and to drain this water outside, into what is now a parking lot. The engineer Griffin called in during the early 1980s presented a more suitable solution for Griffin’s underground warehouse plan: get someone to design a large-scale industrial dehumidifier. That’s what they did, and the dehumidifier still churns away today.



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The plan to store government milk fell through. Then, Griffin came up with another idea. “One day my dad just said, ‘Why don’t we bottle that water,’” Linda recalled. And that was the start of Highbridge Springs Water. The previous ownership had constructed a small dam inside the cave, with a 3-foot wall retaining what amounts to three million gallons of spring water. The Griffins modified this reservoir twice, first with a 6-foot wall and then a 10-foot wall. From this reservoir comes the water that customers pull off grocery shelves in bottles or receive with their water cooler services.

The water is piped directly from the reservoir to the bottling area where it undergoes reverse osmosis for removal of everything but a trace of minerals. This is the purification process, a phase during which the water filters through a series of porous membranes. This same process also renders the water sodium-free. “We somewhat alter the natural state with the reverse osmosis,” Linda said. “But it’s definitely not tap water being filtered. That is done a lot.” But not by Highbridge.



Bottled water awaits its final destination.



Kentucky Underground Storage Co. holds 450,000 boxes of documents.

## NOT YOUR AVERAGE WAREHOUSE

The below-ground quarry where Highbridge Springs water is purified and bottled also serves as an underground warehouse storage business owned by the Highbridge founding family and known as Kentucky Underground Storage Co. Currently some 450,000 boxes of documents and other items reside on shelves in the underground quarry.

Document boxes are stored for a variety of entities ranging from the University of Kentucky to physicians, libraries, industries, and hospitals. Clients can request retrieval of the actual documents or ask for digital copies that are scanned on-site and forwarded via secure services.

But documents have not been the only items stored in the underground quarry. Toyota’s 1,000th Camry, built in Kentucky, temporarily resided here. So did a client’s antique car collection. Vintage wine and even some private-label whiskey are kept on the shelves for various clients.

Increasingly, as technology has advanced, the warehouse operation has provided digital

backup and scanning services. The Keeneland Library has taken advantage of the scanning services.

Back in the day, the quarry served still more purposes: a local automobile dealer filmed a commercial deep in the quarry’s recesses when tomb-hunter Indiana Jones first became a cultural icon. The cave also was the scene of Halloween parties and even a 5K run. Car thieves also found the quarry a convenient place to cache stolen vehicles: According to Linda Griffin, of the ownership family, thieves would break a padlock that originally served as “security” and strip the stolen cars far inside the interior.

Security, like the services offered by the storage company, has evolved with the times to embrace high-tech. And while the interior corridors are wide enough for automobiles to drive through, these vehicles no longer are the stolen cars of yore. Romantic tales of cave lore vanished long ago at Highbridge Springs quarry, gone with the rising wind of modern-day technology and high-tech security.



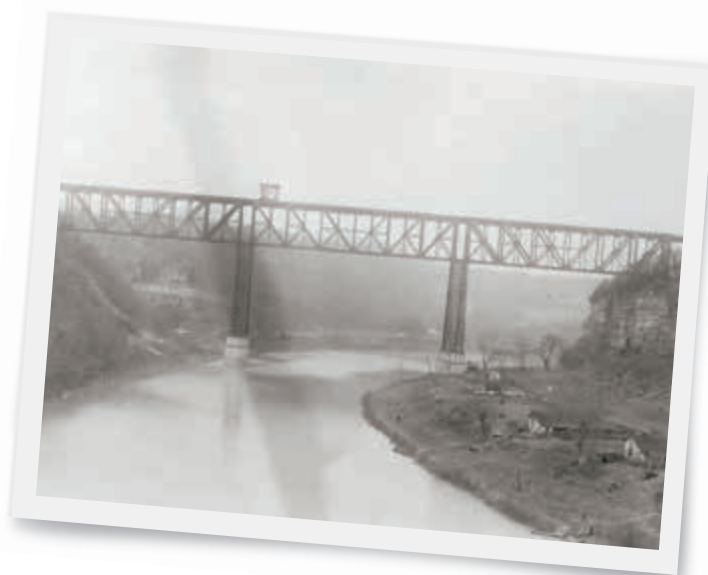


From left, Highbridge Springs produces 5-gallon bottles for coolers as well as customized products for clients such as Keeneland. Daniel Grimes prepares Keeneland water bottles for packaging and shipping.

The water is tested prior to bottling and afterward. Various entities oversee the purity, from EPA to FDA to state and local agencies.

From the reverse osmosis station, the water flows through pipes to stainless steel holding tanks, eventually moving through pipes to the mechanized bottle-filling lines. All this takes place inside the underground quarry. “We bottle in 12-ounce, half-liter, 1-liter, 1-gallon, 2½-gallon, 3-gallon, and 5-gallon bottles,” Linda said.

Getting the water onto grocery shelves was daunting in the beginning. As Linda recalls, her father “would send Mary and I out with cases of water in the pickup truck and say don’t come back till you sell all that water. We’d go to the back doors, knock, and we’d ask, ‘Would you like to buy some water?’ I think because it was so unique, and he sent two girls out



A view of High Bridge soon after its completion





in an industry full of men, that they'd say, 'OK, sweetie. When can we get it?' We'd say right now, we have it in the truck.' ”

One interesting note about Highbridge water is that it has, all along, remained a family business. “It was Mom [Joann Griffin], Dad, and the girls,” Linda said about the early years. Her parents are deceased. She is the last of the five daughters to work on-site, but all of the sisters, and two nephews, retain ownership. In addition to Linda they are Gale Reece, Mary Halbleib, Margaret Griffin, Martha Jennings, and nephews David and Griffin Warburton.

“We gradually hired people because we couldn't do it all,” Linda said. Today the company has about 50 employees working either for Highbridge Springs Water or for its sister com-

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pany, Kentucky Underground Storage Co.

Over the years Highbridge Springs Water sold a good amount of product for racehorses arriving in Lexington from overseas. And while the family no longer has horses, the company maintains a relationship with Keeneland. It supplies custom-label bottles of water with the Keeneland name and logo attached. Keeneland distributes the water to clients at the September yearling sales.

From Keeneland to traveling racehorses to customers who simply like their water to come from a bottle, Highbridge Springs Water has filled a niche in Kentucky's story: a narrative of water that goes back to a time before the earliest livestock breeders and settlers set foot on Bluegrass land. **KM**