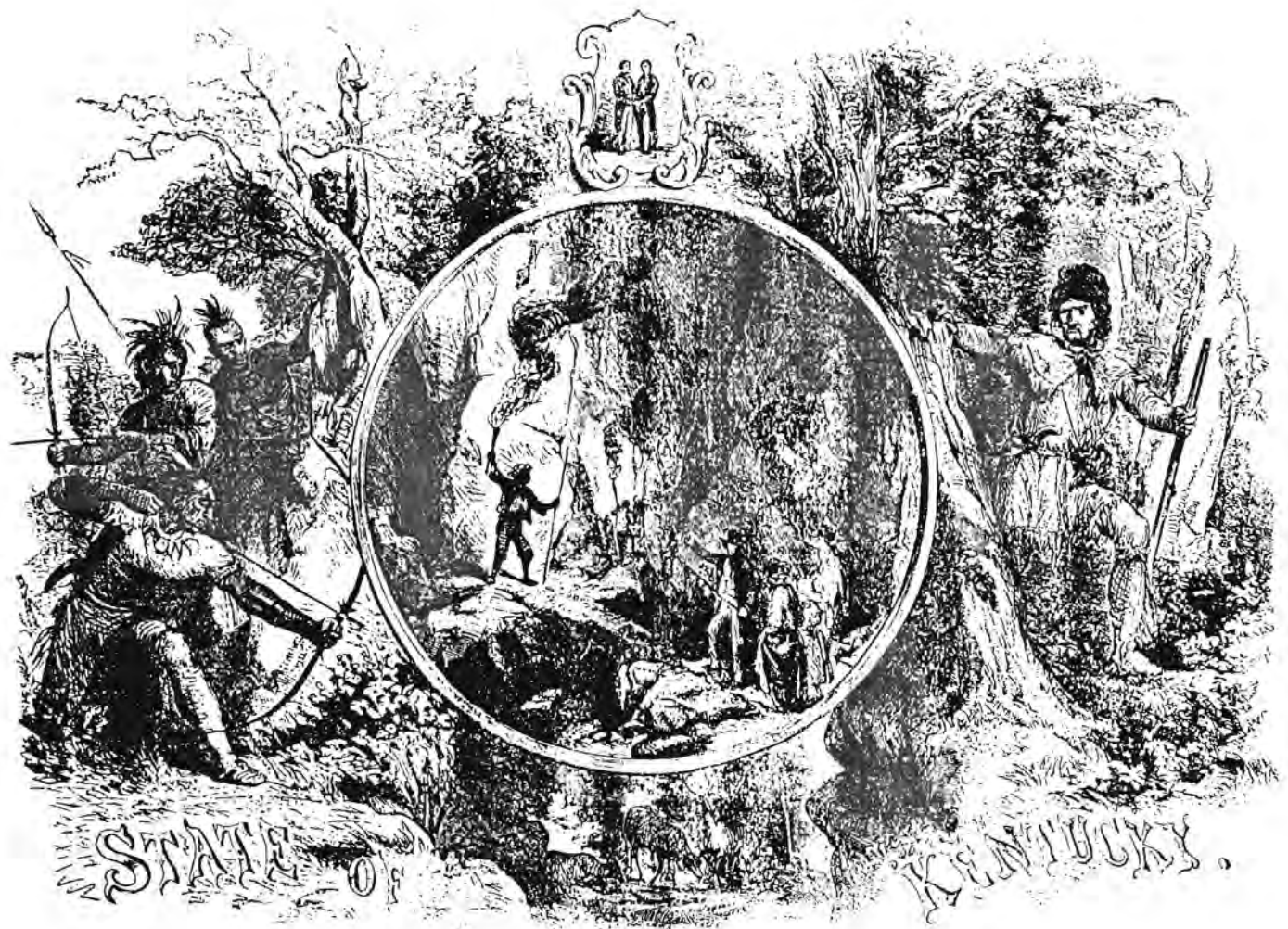


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# The Journal of Spelean History

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# "In Mammoth Cave": John Burroughs's Perceptive Essay

Trevor R. Shaw

## *Introduction*

The subject of this note is yet another century-old description of the Mammoth Cave that has escaped the bibliographies of Jillson (1953) and Wilkes (1962), though it may be known to some members of the American Spelean History Association. While it does not add much to our knowledge of the cave, or illuminate any significant state in its history, there are reasons nevertheless for drawing attention to it here.

The article is clearly superior to the conventional "trip reports" written by many 19th century visitors. It shows every sign of being written by a thinking man, one who recognizes the significant points that need to be made and one who reflects on what he sees. Not surprising perhaps, as the writer was the distinguished naturalist and author, John Burroughs.

Burroughs's account was first published as an article in the English literary *Longman's Magazine* (Burroughs 1887), and then appeared in book form as one of the collection of essays in *Riverby* (Burroughs 1894). This book itself was reprinted in 1895 and later included in his collected works (Burroughs 1904). Such magazine articles often appeared in a United States periodical as well as in Great Britain, e.g. North on Howe's Cavern in the American *The Knickerbocker* as well as in *Sharpe's London Journal* (Shaw 1993). In this case, though, no evidence of this, published or unpublished, has come to light.

## *The Man*

Before coming to his essay on Mammoth Cave, John Burroughs himself should be introduced. Born on a farm in the Catskill Mountains in New York state on April 3, 1857, he earned his living as a schoolteacher for many years, but he was already writing essays at the age of 18. More and more of his work was published, often in *Atlantic Monthly* and as books of essays, and he is now regarded as the writer who made the American "nature essay" an established form. He traveled widely, mainly in North America and Europe, but he became as associated with his native hills as Wordsworth with the English lakes. A close friendship with Walt Whitman, the poet, and an admiration for Emerson may have helped to shape his writing. His interest in the minutiae of nature observation was coupled with an enthusiasm for the life sciences, particularly during the 1880s, and he had a critical as well as a perceptive mind. Close contact with his readers was maintained both by correspondence and in person, and many of his essays read just like a spoken text. In his later years he was awarded honorary degrees by Yale, Colgate, and Georgia, and he died on March 29, 1921, a few days before his 84th birthday. Much of the information is taken from the *Dictionary of American Biography* (Foerster 1929).

Very many photographs of Burroughs have been published, nearly all of them taken when he was relatively old and of picturesque appearance. Many, too, show him in groups, so only a few are suitable for reproduction as a portrait. Figure 1 is taken from a photograph of 1905.

## *His Visit*

Burroughs's visit to Mammoth Cave took place in the spring of 1886, when he was 49 years old. In an undated letter addressed to his wife from Frankfort, Kentucky, he announced his intention "...Then I

go down to the Mammoth Cave, and then through Western Kentucky" (Barrus 1925, p. 280). This was some time after April 27, the date of his previous letter to his wife, so the visit must have been in May or June. Certainly it was not later than that, for on September 25 he wrote in his Journal "Have written three articles since first of July ... and on my Kentucky trip" (Barrus 1925, p. 281). That the Mammoth Cave article was one of these is confirmed by his Journal entry of April 25 in the following year, when he wrote: "Since July I have written the following papers: ... A Taste of Kentucky Blue Grass, In Mammoth Cave, ..." (Barrus 1925, p. 287). Both of these papers appeared together in *Riverby*. Not only was his cave visit before July 1, but he indicates elsewhere that it must have been after the end of May. In the other essay mentioned above he says (Burroughs 1904, p. 242) that he spent the last ten days of May in the Blue Grass region, at the end of which (p. 244) he took the train for Cave City.

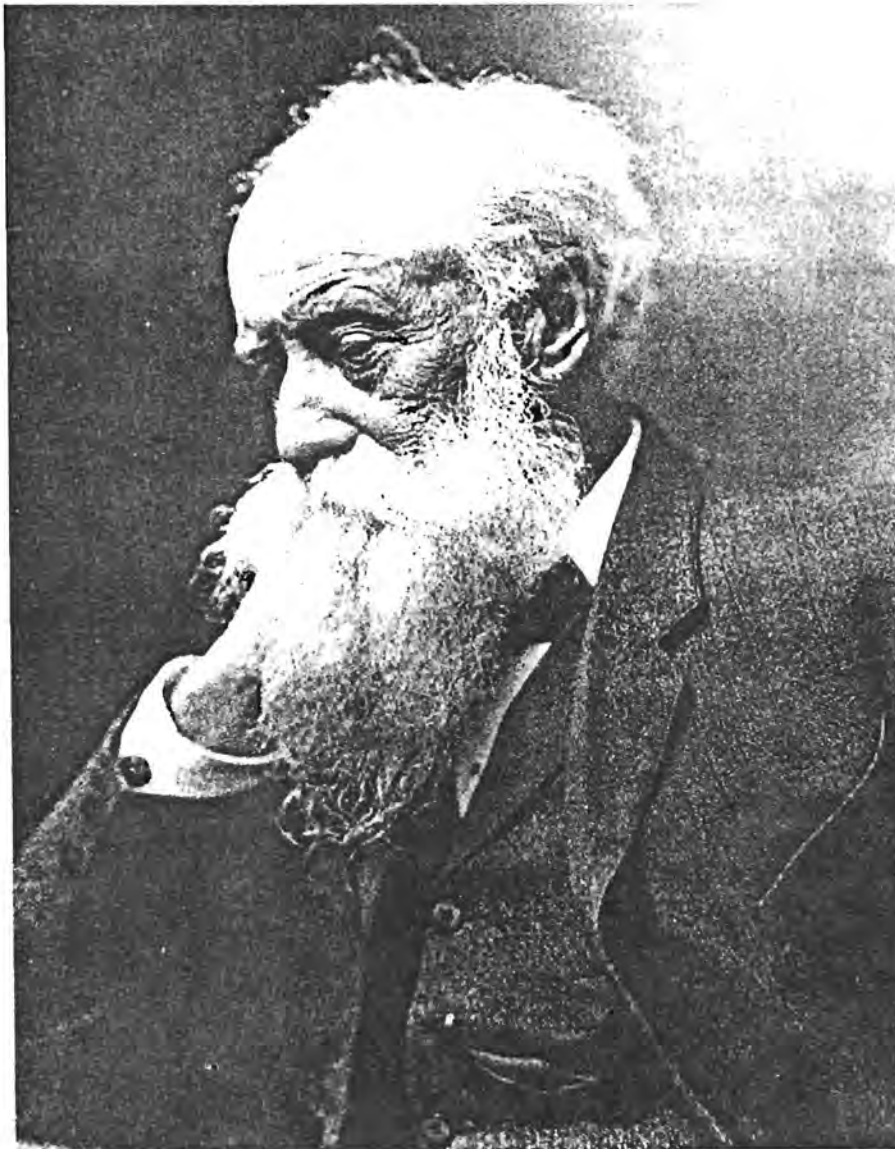


Fig. 1 - John Burroughs aged 67 or 68

His only private comment on the cave visit recorded in the biographies is given by Barrus (1925, p. 280):

*Writing Myron Benton of his two days at the Mammoth Cave, he said that three hours in the Cave satisfied him, and that he was chiefly astonished at his want of astonishment.*

#### *His Description*

Burroughs's entire article is well worth reading but to reprint all six pages of it here would not be justified, as those who are interested can readily find it in his book. Several of his observations deserve particular attention, however, because they are unusual or of special importance to students of karst history. The page references are to the original 1887 publication.

Two short phrases record the use of colored lights in parts of the tour: "... when the guide lights up the more interesting portions with his torches and coloured lights, the effect is weird and spectral ..." (p. 636). Again, "... we come out into a ... spacious court, which the guide lights up with a quick-paper torch, or a coloured chemical light" (p. 634). A "quick-paper torch" is probably a roll of oiled paper as mentioned by Hovey (1882, p. 96). The colored lights were no doubt the "Bengal lights" that Burroughs refers to in his opening paragraph (see below), a Bengal light being a kind of firework used as a signal flare and giving a vivid blue light. They had been used in the cave at least since 1844 (Child 1845, p. 81). Hovey (1882, p. 87) had referred also to the guides lighting "red fire."

His experience (p. 635) with an echo where one passage crossed above another (not on the Echo River which he did not reach) was probably not unusual, but it was well described, making clear (by implication) the importance of resonance.

*Another surprise was when we paused at a certain point and the guide asked me to shout or call in a loud voice. I did so without any unusual effect following. Then he spoke in a very deep bass, and instantly the rocks all about and beneath us became like the strings of an aeolian harp. They seemed transformed as if by enchantment. Then I tried, but did not strike the right key; the rocks were dumb. I tried again, but got no response; flat and dead the sounds came back as if in mockery; then I struck a deeper bass, the chord was hit, and solid wall seemed to become as thin and frail as a drum-head or as the frame of a violin.*

The significance of the several levels of passages in the cave was evident to Burroughs as a naturalist and he describes them thus (pp. 635-6):

*There are four or five levels in the cave, and a series of avenues upon each. The lowest is some two hundred and fifty feet below the entrance. Here the stream which has done all this carving and tunnelling has got to the end of its tether. It is here on a level with Green River in the valley below, and flows directly into it. I say the end of its tether, though if Green River cuts its valley deeper, the stream will of course follow suit. The bed of the river has probably, at successive period, been on a level with each series of avenues of the cave.*

Elsewhere he brings the whole complicated system dramatically to life for the visitor: "There are streets above you and streets below you" (p. 634).

It is the naturalist again who provides this vivid account (p. 637) of the temperature inversion in the entrance depression, already mentioned more briefly by Hovey (1882, p. 70):

*Another very interesting feature to me was the behaviour of the cool air which welled up out of the mouth of the cave. It simulated exactly a fountain of water. It rose up to a certain level, or until it filled the depression immediately about the mouth of the cave, and then, flowing over at the lowest point, ran down the hill towards Green River, along a little watercourse, exactly as it had been a liquid. I amused myself by wading down into it as into a fountain. The air above was muggy and hot, the thermometer standing at about eighty-six degrees, and this cooler air of the cave, which was at a temperature of about fifty-two degrees, was separated in the little pool or lakelet which is formed from the hotter air above it by a perfectly horizontal line. As I stepped down into it I could feel it closed over my feet; then it was at my knees, then I was immersed to my hips, then to my waist, then I stood neck-deep in it, my body almost chilled while by face and head were bathed by a sultry, oppressive air. Where the two bodies of air came into contact, a slight film of vapour was formed by condensation; I would wade in till I could look under this as under a ceiling. It was as level and as well defined as a sheet of ice on a pond. A few moments' immersion into this aerial fountain made one turn to the warmer air again. At the depression in the rim of the basin one had but to put his hand down to feel the cold air flowing over like water. Fifty yards below, you could still wade into it as into a creek, and at a hundred yards it was still quickly perceptible, but broader and higher; it had begun to lose some of its coldness and to mingle with the general air. ... Gradually this cool current was dissipated and lost in the warmth of the day.*

632): Less scientific, but equally perceptive in a different way, is Burroughs's opening paragraph (p.

*Some idea of the impression which Mammoth Cave makes upon the senses, irrespective even of sight, may be had from the fact that blind people go there to see it, and greatly struck with it. I was assured that this is a fact. The blind seem as much impressed by it as those who have their sight. When the guide pauses at the more interesting point or lights the scene up with a great torch, or with Bengal lights, and points out the more striking features, the blind exclaim 'How wonderful! how beautiful!' They can feel it if they cannot see it. They get some idea of the spaciousness when words are uttered. The voice goes forth in these colossal chambers like a bird. When no word is spoken, the silence is of a kind never experienced on the surface of the earth, it is so profound and abysmal. This, and the absolute darkness, to a person with eyes makes him feel as if he was face to face with the primordial nothingness. The objective universe is gone; only the subjective remains; the sense of hearing is inverted, and reports only the murmurs from within. The blind miss much, but much remains to them. The great cave is not merely a spectacle to the eye; it is a wonder to the ear, a strangeness to the smell and to the touch. The body feels the presence of unusual conditions through every pore.*

The writer there has the sensitiveness of a literary man, the sensitiveness and concern with human impressions that has made his many books enjoyed both when they were first published and since. It is no surprise that Burroughs was an admirer of Emerson and that his style is somewhat similar. Even in the narrow world of Mammoth Cave, he refers (p. 634) to Emerson's visit there (some time before 1860) and to no one else's. Emerson had devoted the first two pages of his essay "Illusions" (Emerson 1860) to the cave, remarking that the "mysteries and scenery of the cave had the same dignity that belongs to all natural objects ..."

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## **"The Natural Bridge" by John Davis**

from *The Port Folio*, January, 1809, pp. 82-83

contributed by Bill Torode

When Fancy from the azure skies,  
    On earth come down, before unseen;  
She bade the wondrous structure rise,  
    And haply chose this sylvan scene

The graces too, with spritely,  
    Assisted in the work divine  
The Arch they formed with nicest care,  
    And made the murm'ring stream incline.

Then fancy, from the pile above,  
    Would gaze with rapture, bending o'er;  
And charmed, be hold the streamlet rove,  
    While Echo mocked its sullen roar.

And here, perhaps the Indian stood,  
    With uplift hands, and eye amazed;  
As sudden, from the devious wood,  
    He first upon the fabric gazed!

See Tadmore's domes and halls of state,  
    In undistinguished ruin lie;  
See Rome's proud empire yield to fate,  
    And claim the mournful pilgrim's sigh,

But while relentless time impairs  
    The monuments of crumbling art,  
This pile unfading beauty wears,  
    Eternal in its every part.

## **Thomas A. Jagger, Jr. - Speleologist and Caver**

William R. Halliday

Thomas Jagger is honored by the name of the Jagger Museum on the rim of Kilauea Crater in Hawaii Volcanoes National Park, adjacent to the US Geological Survey's Hawaiian Volcano Observatory, of which he was founder and long-term guiding spirit. Throughout his 60-year professional career, he was a volcanologist's volcanologist. Yet any speleologist systematically reviewing Hawaiian volcanology is immediately impressed by the frequent references to caves in his published reports-- and the near-absence of similar references in the writings of those who succeeded him. His accounts of systematic

observations of the origin and development of the Postal Rift Caverns in Kilauea Crater are perhaps the most notable ever recorded in the field of vulcanospeleogenesis. Beginning in August 1919, the *Monthly Bulletin of the Hawaiian Volcano Observatory* is a treasure trove of unique observations. He also recorded the first exploration of Thurston Lava Tube in August 1913 and described numerous ephemeral caverns of Halemaumau crater in terms which lead any reader to conclude that stalactites and stalagmites were in the forefront of his mind. Thus it is a bit surprising that his posthumous autobiography *My Experiments with Volcanoes* mentions no cave nor lava tube. And his accounts of explorations of Thurston Lava Tube and the Postal Rift Caverns rarely indicate whether he himself made spelean observations. It is left to the writings of others to indicate his role as a speleologist.

From Jaggar's *Weekly Bulletin of the Hawaiian Volcano Observatory* of August 11, 1913 there is no clue that Jaggar himself was one of the party which first explored Thurston Lava Tube. But on page 484 of the visitors' book of the Volcano House, an account signed by Wade Warren Thayer makes clear his presence:

*On Aug. 2nd a large party headed by L.A. Thurston explored the lava tube in the Twin Craters recently discovered by Lorrin Thurston, Jr. Two ladders lashed together gave comparatively easy access to the tube and the whole party, including several ladies, climbed up. No other human beings had been in the tube, as was evidenced by the perfect condition of the numerous stalactites and stalagmites. Dr. Jaggar estimated the length of the tube as slightly over 1900 feet. It runs northeasterly from the crater and at the end pinches down until the floor and roof come together ...*

Contrary to a 1986 newspaper column, this indeed was the first exploration of Thurston Lava Tube. The March 24, 1912 exploration of another lava tube cave, "west of the Keauhou road" by L.A. Thurston, US government cartographer Claude H. Birdseye and others, clearly was of the upper end of the Aīnahou cave system, not Thurston Lava Tube. Jaggar had reached the volcano only on January 17, 1912, and no evidence has been found to show that he went on this earlier expedition also.

The basis of Jaggar's awareness of caves becomes clear on reading his posthumous autobiography *My Experiments with Volcanoes*. In the introduction, he recounts that "[Nathaniel] Shaler of Harvard was my inspiration." Shaler was perhaps the first prominent American professor of geology to take caves seriously, and to give more than passing attention to them in his writing. On page 165 of the autobiography he wrote that he was "trained in physiography by W.M. Davis." Years later Davis published the first great American geological analysis of speleogenesis, in the *Bulletin of the Geological Society of America*. Clearly Davis approved of his pupil. On page 16, Jaggar noted that Davis invited him to "come home and give a course in field surveying." In 1902, Jaggar travelled to Martinique with Edmond O. Hovey, son of Horace C. Hovey, founder of American speleology and a pioneer speleologist in his own right. This association was noted on page 16.

And, perhaps most telling of all, on page 17 Jaggar mentioned that Ralph W. Stone had been one of his students in Massachusetts. Years later Stone was to become president of the National Speleological Society after authoring *Caves of Pennsylvania* and other cave-related works.

It would be an overstatement to assert that Jaggar was a missing link between Shaler, Davis, and Stone. But also it would be a mistake to omit his from considerations of the linkages among the great pioneer speleologists of America merely because his work was in volcanic caves rather than karst. Others like James D. Dana preceded him as pioneer Hawaiian speleologists. But with Lorrin Thurston, Thomas Jaggar began the first wave of Hawaiian speleology and laid a firm basis for much that was to come. His

contributions are still very much in current use. Clearly his name should be added to the list of American pioneers in speleology.

#### *Reference*

Jaggar, *Thomas A. Jr. My Experiments with Volcanoes*, Hawaii Volcano Research, Honolulu, 1956, 198 p.

#### *Addendum*

In May, 1997 I found the daily log of the Hawaiian Volcano Observatory in the US Geological Survey library in Reston, Virginia. Edmond Hovey visited Kilauea at least once with Jagger.

## **The “Covington Grotto” of Robertson County, Tennessee**

Doug Plemons

#### *Preface*

In June of 1995, three members of the Nashville Grotto-- the author, Richard Bunch, and Lyn Ray-- asked a landowner in Robertson County, Tennessee, for permission to go into his cave.

“Which one?” was the reply. We only knew about one.

The owner, Bob Keck, of Cross Plains, Tennessee, took us to the “other one,” and what was found there would turn Cross Plains on its ear and spread like wildfire!

#### *A Brief History of Cross Plains and Thomas Kilgore*

Cross Plains, Tennessee, is located within the Highland Rim Sinkhole Plain region which is a southernmost extension of the Central Kentucky Pennyroyal Plain, located about 30 miles north of Nashville, just off present-day I-65. The primary karst strata in the county are the Mississippian-age Warsaw and St. Louis limestones. A very thin layer of Monteagle exists in the very northern extremes of Robertson County west of where Cross Plains is located.

The town is located on the Orinda topo with the dominant strata in the area being the Warsaw. The cave we were shown in June, 1995, Covington Saltpeter Cave, is in both the St. Louis and the Warsaw. The first 20 to 30 vertical feet of the cave is in the St. Louis, until the chert contact at the top of the Warsaw is passed at the Bucket Room.

The region was settled in the late 1700s; Cross Plains, in fact, is the oldest settlement in the county, settled in 1778. Thomas Kilgore was the first settler; he is locally renowned for a cave on his

property in which he hid several times to escape hostile Indian attacks. Kilgore would run into the upper entrance and hide above the stream passage, then later exit by way of the spring entrance of the 342-foot long cave.

### *Covington Saltpeter Cave*

Caves and springs are plentiful and numerous in the region, a major factor in the settlement of the area, along with the very fertile soil. The interaction of the settlers and their cave-rich environment was inevitable.

Present-day owners Bob and Bettie Sue Keck live on what is locally called Covington Hill (and named as such on the Orlinda quad); it was his base-level spring cave, called Cross Plains Caverns in the Tennessee Cave Survey, that the Nashville Grotto cavers originally sought to enter. That cave, originally explored in 1988, is a 1200-foot long stream cave festooned with formations, and has one old set of initials inside, "HRC." But it was another cave, located 80 vertical feet higher and 1700 feet north, that hid secrets that took 135 years to uncover.

The first day when Bob Keck showed us the upper cave, we entered long enough to briefly reconnoiter, but we saw enough to make us want to return! Entering the cave, a brief crawl from the sink entrance led to a narrow channel which turned quickly to walking passage.

Two days after our discovery, Richard returned with Ken and Annette Oeser and installed a register and protection sign in the cave. They stayed in the cave for several hours and saw most of the readily penetrable cave, approximately 2300 feet of it.

The cave splits into no less than three levels 150 feet from the entrance with five main points of interest being the highlights of the cave: the large Junction Room 150 feet from the entrance, a long, low passage off to the right which runs underneath the entrance passage (and a walking passage leading around it), the Signature Room, the Bucket Room, and the stream passage at base level.

On June 23, 1995, Nashville Grotto cavers Mike Mainstruck and myself began noticing that the multi-level cave held signs of saltpeter mining. There were indications that the entrance passage had been slightly modified to permit easier access, marginal at best. A room developed immediately underneath and to the left of the entrance passage has many obvious banks of earth where pick marks are immediately discernable. There are three or four places in this room alone, including an out-of-the-way alcove where there are more pick marks than natural flaking of eroded clay. In the Junction Room and the passage leading from it to the Bucket Room, there are numerous mattock marks, a poke hole for a torch, and piles of discarded earth. Although there are no casts of peter vats, there is plenty of evidence to support the conclusion that much earth was removed from the cave in a number of places.

There are numerous examples of discarded torch fragments and ash piles all through the cave, although some of these are probably from the several known tourist trips by local residents during the mid 19th century. There are many pieces of wooden artifacts, such as torch poles, a partially burnt ladder step or piece of old bridge, and poles which were apparently used to help remove stubborn breakdown from the earth.

Piles of stacked breakdown are evident in one place, and in another is a group of breakdown pieces which have the "appearance" of being discarded in the wake of mining efforts. In addition, there is one passage which has the general appearance of having been nearly totally excavated and all the earth removed. The area "looks" like a more than minor excavation, down to the bare walls.

Hinderances to the mining efforts include: 1) some of the passages are somewhat damp; 2) the nearest reasonable source of water is a third of a mile away, along the South Fork of the Red River down by the present Keck home, a bit too far for a handy bucket brigade. The water in the cave itself is past several formidable obstacles generally too tight and restrictive for ready use (and there are no signs of the obstacles having been passed by the early explorers); 3) the size of the entrance, a stoopway today. Reportedly, though, it was much larger during the time of original exploration by the settlers of the area.

But it was the many old names and dates that really gave the cave a sense of tangible history and would get the townspeople excited with their heritage again.

In the entrance passage, along with some torch fragments and ashes, are some smoked-on initials and lots of black soot from torches. Due to the proximity to the damp entrance, the smoked signatures are very faint and nearly unreadable. Above the site where a register was placed two days after our first entry into the cave, there is, very faintly, the candled "Wait for Me."

It is eerie that the place where most present day cavers sit and wait for stragglers was also the same place where 135 years ago (or more) other explorers did the same. The site for the register was chosen a month before someone looked up and saw the inscription!

A list of the places where readable names, initials, or dates are found:

1. At a point 125 feet from the entrance are some initials:

JTS (many times) '87 (1887)  
JMH 1889 (or 1809?)  
JNW or JNM (the N is written backward)

2. In the first room of the cave (dubbed the "Junction Room") were the following in candle smoke:

CJJ/JED 1887  
JTS (many times)

3. In the saltpeter room extending below the entrance passage:

CARR 1860 (several times in that location)

4. At the end of the Junction Room, to the left there were a series of passages which end up at the "Bucket Room." In the room the Warsaw limestone contact is where a slot in the floor leads to the lowest levels of cave; the chert marking the contact is very obvious. In one of the several passages leading to this room, saltpeter mining was conducted and the following initials were seen:

JTS (at least five times)  
JJC 1887  
JD  
CWS

5. In a room further downcave from the Junction Room, we found the particular names that soon had all of Cross Plains Talking. Just outside this upper level room we copied the following:

SANDERS COVINGTON 1860  
SOWEL J. YATES 1861  
"WOODY" CARR 1861  
1861  
CAVE J. FREY 1860  
NON COVINGTON (not very legible)

And inside the low ceiling of an upper room were:

LOUISA C. CARR  
S. J. YATES  
ALMADY COVINGTON  
ALMERINDA C  
C. J. FREY 1860  
S. H. MOSELY 1861  
M. E. ESTES  
NONNIE (NINNNIE?) COVINGTON

We told the landowner and his wife, Bettie (maiden name Covington) about the names, and it started a chain reaction that resulted in a family reunion the next weekend. In attendance at this rather gleeful event was the chairperson of the East Robertson County Historical Commission, Ruby Nevil Covington, who had about 40 pounds of notebooks with her, containing the history of most of East Robertson County. Ruby is the official historian for the Cross Plains Historical Commission. She is quite qualified in her duty!

Working with her over the following weeks, we deduced the following, concerning the mid- and late-1800s cave trips and some of the relevant historical details.

#### *The Covingtons of Cross Plains, Tennessee*

The Covingtons of Cross Plains are the descendants of one of three English brothers who arrived in Maryland with Lord Baltimore in 1632. The three brothers went their separate ways, and one of them eventually settled in North Carolina.

The earliest brother that can be reasonably traced is William Covington, born in 1730 in Essex County, Virginia and died in 1778 in Richmond County, North Carolina. He served in the 4th Regiment from 1777-1778 during the Revolutionary War. He and his wife Mary (maiden name Wall) had seven children, one of whom was named John (birth and death dates unknown).

John Covington stayed in Richmond County, North Carolina and married Hannah Dockery, who died soon after, whereupon he married his cousin, Nancy Wall. John and Nancy had nine children, one of which was Henry.

The date is uncertain when the John Covington family crossed the Smoky Mountains into Tennessee, probably when it was still part of North Carolina, but they settled in the Pleasant Grove

community near Cross Plains. This settlement is known on the Orlinda, Tennessee quad, near the present-day I-65.

### *Oh, Henry?*

Henry Covington married Winnifred Stone (she was 14 years old at the time!) in 1797. Henry was a farmer with 330 acres of land and was a slave owner. They were his initials, HRC, which were found in Cross Plains Caverns in 1996. It is so far the oldest known signature in any Robertson County cave, and had to have been placed there prior to 1814. Apparently some of the Covingtons had settled this land by that time, and had begun to use the cave stream as a private water supply. It has been used as such by descending families of Covingtons from that time until recent years.

Henry enlisted in November, 1814 as a private during the War of 1812 in the 2nd Tennessee Regiment, serving under Col. Coke and Captain Richard Crunk. Henry was either wounded or took ill at the Battle of New Orleans, and died at Camp Henderson, New Orleans, on March 11, 1815. Or did he?

There has come to light a reputable story where Henry may have faked his death so that Winnie could receive a pension (which she did), and that he ran off with his nurse from the hospital in New Orleans! According to this tale, he then made a whole new life for himself somewhere in Mississippi with this nurse. Over 175 years later, information reached Ruby Covington that a woman from Mississippi claimed to be Henry's descendant! This story has yet to be confirmed but certainly was, and still is, possible during the stress of war. Any variation of "Two Lives to Live" could have happened.

The 1830 Census lists "Winney" Covington and their eight children, one of whom was Leroy. Was Winnie a widow at this time? We may never know.

Leroy Covington (January 28, 1799 - September 21, 1865) married Elizabeth Frey (June 30, 1812 - September 30, 1899) in 1833 (date uncertain). It is believed by reputable yet unconfirmable sources that Elizabeth's great-uncle was Andrew J. Johnson, President of the United States after the assassination of Abraham Lincoln, but this may be untrue. Andrew Johnson was also the Lincoln appointed provisional governor of Tennessee during the years of Union occupation of Nashville. It is possible that either Henry or Leroy Covington's slaves provided the manpower needed to mine the cave, although there is no documentation whatsoever of this in any of the family journals or records, which are well preserved. It is unusual that no record of the saltpeter mining exists, but quite obviously it was done, and over a fair period of time, too.

### *The Sweethearts Go Caving: Adventures of the "Covington Grotto," 1860*

Leroy and Elizabeth had 11 children, Henry, C. Sanders, Jacob, Raglin Malcom, Almenda, Almerinda, Madora, Mary, Bascom, Lina, and Virginia. The first of the children was born when Elizabeth was 23 and the last when she was 42. C. Sanders Covington was born March 24, 1835, Almenda on August 15, 1842, and Almerinda on June 22, 1845.

The young Covingtons knew about the lower cave spring (present-day Cross Plains Caverns) because it was their water supply, but there are several ways they could have learned about the upper cave. Perhaps the saltpeter mining was even still occurring or had just started (we do not know the time of actual operations at the cave), perhaps they found the cave on their own while exploring the farm, or perhaps their neighbors, the Carrs told them about it. The family of John Carr held title to the next, westernmost tract of lands, and had no less than three caves on their property. Cave exploring had been

documented by early Carrs and Yates from the mid 1800s period on their land. Rumor had it that Covington Saltpeter was physically connected to the Yates Cave, but no way has yet been found in that direction (perhaps such a connection has collapsed since that time).

Sanders Covington married Eveline McMillin on July 16 or August 16, 1854, (thus establishing another link to the McMillin Cave mentioned in another article) but Eveline died soon after her first childbirth, and Sanders remarried yet another close neighbor, Nancy (Nannie) Carr (May 3, 1838 - September 2, 1892).

One day Sanders, Nancy, Alameda, and Alverinda got together some of their friends and close neighbors from the large farms surrounding Cross Plains, and they went exploring in Covington Saltpeter Cave.

Just west of the Covington property lies the Yates farm. On a portion of that farm, nearest the Covington tract, were a family of Carrs. A Carr cemetery is noted on the Orlinda quad at this location. The house marked on the topo next to the cemetery is no longer in existence, having burned down some time ago. Apparently, R.W. Carr (April 29, 1810 in Virginia - September 30, 1881) and his family lived in the house at this site; this site may also have been John Carr's home (September 12, 1782 - August 13, 1845.)

He and his wife Elenoir (Nellie Randolph Carr [August 12, 1815 in North Carolina - ?]) had 11 children between 1833 and 1861, when Elenoir was 46! Their children were Elizabeth, Martha Ann, Mildred, Nancy M., John N., Lucinda, Louisa Caldwell, George Lucas, Lucy, Lydia Jane, and Emma.

Sowell Jefferson Yates ( May 1, 1841- October 23, 1897) and his fiance Louisa Caldwell Carr (August 1, 1845 - February 2, 1930), Nancy's sister, were two of the "Covington Grotto" and somewhat-kin. Another set of friends were Cave John Frey (September 17, 1835 - June 8, 1911) and his future wife, Mary Elizabeth Estes (May 29, 1843 - March 12, 1901). The latter couple would marry on February 25, 1866. Although the Civil War took up several years of C.J. Frey's time, it did not stop Sowell and Louisa from marrying soon before the War, on June 6, 1861. Sanders Covington was related to the Freys; his maternal grandparents were Jacob and Mary Johnson Frey. Mary was the daughter of Henry Johnson who settled near Springfield in 1796.

The seven of them-- Sanders, Nancy, C.J., Mary, Almerinda, Alameda, Sowell, and Louisa-- entered the cave probably in the summertime, when caving was very popular in the region. Before the invention of air conditioning in the 1900s, any place such as a cave which was cooler than the humid Tennessee summer was quite welcome. Nearby Yates Cave has a history of being a popular attraction during the late 1800s. Mary Alice Yates, a daughter of Sowell Yates (grandson of the 1861 Yates) has a photo from the turn of the century showing dozens of well-dressed men and ladies arrayed outside the blowing entrance of Yates Cave, possibly a church outing. Since the photo is in the Yates family heirlooms, it is possible that Yates family members are in the picture, and also possible that several of the people in the "Covington Grotto" are there as well.

The seven carried candles and they signed their names in the "Signature Hall," a rather low room in the uppermost levels of the cave about 400 feet from the entrance, which at the time of exploration and saltpeter mining was walking sized. (The entrance has since partially infilled from debris and siltation.)

It is possible that some mining was being conducted at the cave at the time of the 1860 cave trip, and that the Covingtons and friends were checking up on the operation. The Covington party never went very far from the areas of the cave which were mined. A person with the last name of Carr signed in at the room below the entrance passage in 1860, conceivably on the same trip as the "Covington Grotto."

Sowell J. Yates returned again the next year, 1861, along with his father-in-law, R.W. ("Woody") Carr, for purposes unknown. They both signed their names again in the same area as before. If the Yates or the Carrs had anything to do with the mining operation, it is unknown at this time. They came with S.H. Mosely, a person of whom we know nothing at this writing except that he signed his name in the same room as the Covington clan had the year before.

Following these excursions, the curse of the Civil War erupted across the South.

### *The Covington Men Go to War*

According to documents in possession of Ruby Covington and the author, a number of Covington men signed up at Red (Boiling) Springs in October, 1861, 30th Regiment, K Company, Tennessee infantry. Cave J. Frey was also in Company K. Sanders and his brother Jacob, along with one of his brothers-in-law, Lorenzo Sanders (husband of Alameda) and several cousins, and the rest of Company K, were present as Fort Donelson, near Dover, Tennessee, fell, in February, 1862, just prior to the occupation of Nashville.

The captured men of Company K were sent to Camp Butler, near Chicago, Illinois. In September, 1862, they were exchanged and sent to Vicksburg and participated in the battles for Vicksburg, Raymond, Port Hudson, and Jackson. They moved across Mississippi into Georgia.

Jacob Covington was wounded in the battle of Chickamauga. His wounds resulted in frequent periods in the hospital. According to military records from Company K, Jacob (whose name is not in Covington Saltpeter Cave unless we have overlooked it somewhere) was wounded in his left hand at Chickamauga, September 19, 1863. He lost his index finger and two metacarpal bones which resulted in the loss of his left hand. He was detailed to special duty as issuing Sergeant under Capt. W.G. Pond.

Sanders Covington made 3rd Corporal on June 30, 1863, but was given sick furlough sometime thereafter. The Covington men were paroled at Greensboro, North Carolina on May 1, 1865. They made their way home, across the Smoky Mountains, walking until they reached Greeneville, Tennessee, a considerable distance on foot and through some very treacherous territory! East Tennessee had a good amount of pro-Union sentiment, and the way to Greeneville was probably made furtively and discreetly. They caught a train for part of the way back to Nashville, again to get them back into pro-Rebel territory and to the waiting arms of their loved ones as fast as possible.

Sanders was not finished with tragedy. Prior to the war, his first wife Eveline McMillan Covington died after childbirth. After marrying Nancy Carr in 1857, one of their four children, William, aged three, burned to death under unknown circumstances. After the war, on July 26, 1866, another son, Robert, five years old, died. And finally, C. Sanders Covington died at the relatively young age of 50, on December 31, 1885.

### *Another Generation*

The caving tradition was passed along to the next generation. One of Sander's four children by Nancy, James Jones (born October 26, 1872), entered the cave in 1887 at age 15, along with an older boy, Jesse Taylor Spain, who was 18. Jesse left his initials, "JTS," all through many parts of the cave where the elder generation did not leave any. "JTS" is seen over 20 times in the cave! James Jones Covington only left "JJC" once, next to one of those of his friend. Perhaps they talked about growing up and becoming doctors, with the strong possibility that, at age 18 Jesse Spain already had his mind made up to go to medical school. The other (presumed) 1887 cave trip members, "CJJ," "JED," "JJE," "JD," and

"CWS" are presently unknown. There are other initials in the cave which have no dates whatsoever and possibly will never be researched.

James Jones Covington grew up to become a well-known and widely respected doctor who graduated with decent grades from Vanderbilt University in 1897. He died in 1911 at the unusually young age of 34. The cause of death has not been found by this writer.

Jesse Taylor Spain became a similarly well-known dentist who had a practice in his home town of Cross Plains. The age at death is not known by the writer.

Many, but not all, of the participants of these caving adventures, including C. Sanders Covington, are buried in the Carr Cemetery, located on the Orlinda quad some 2250 feet west-northwest of Covington Saltpeter Cave, the scene of quite a bit of activity during the middle 19th century.

And Sanders Covington was recently honored, 110 years after his death, in August, 1995, with a commemorative footstone provided by the Veterans Administration, for his service to this county, in the Confederate Army. For those who still hold to the Rebel philosophy, this honor might seem oddly appropriate!

#### *One Last Word*

Before we held the commemoration at the Carr Cemetery, a comment from Ruby Covington, kin by marriage to her husband's great grandfather, seemed oddly accurate, just as the faint inscription of "Wait For Me," scrawled near the entrance of Covington Saltpeter cave brought a funny feeling to me when I saw it. Why that message?

She said, "You know, it's real funny how the Veterans Administration sent this footstone to us, just at the same time all this commotion about Sanders came up. We'd sent off for it a long time ago, and forgotten about it, but it didn't show up until you boys found his name in that cave, and got this whole town all stirred up again about their ancestors. It's got everyone here really proud, thinking about their heritage again."

"It's almost as if Sanders himself wanted this to happen, there was so much sadness and tragedy in his life. Maybe he just wanted to be remembered for something besides that."

Wait for me, indeed. Maybe he was waiting for us.

#### *Acknowledgements and Final Comments*

A most sincere thanks is due to Ruby Nevil Covington, whose voluminous genealogical records of the eastern half of Robertson County gave credence to the list of names that the author copied from the ceiling and walls of Covington Saltpeter Cave. Preserved in her records are Civil War payroll sheets and an old tintype photo of Sanders Covington, extensive land surveys of the Cross Plains tracts, old will, and a host of other material. The enigmatic photo of the Yates Cave church outing was also in her possession. I had no idea what I was walking into when I innocently wandered onto the porch of the Kecks the day after finding the names, but I thank Ruby, now a personal friend, for allowing me to raid her files for what I needed for this article and the one I published for her magazine.

Most certainly, thanks are extended to Bob and Bettie (Covington) Keck, who responded not only positively to a caver's request to look at a hole in their farm, but who virtually adopted me as family, I wound up escorting the great-grandsons and daughters to see the writings of great-grandfathers and mothers. On at least five trips with the 1990s version of the "Covington Grotto" (as I call them) I had the privilege of seeing the great-great-great-great grandson of Sanders, Jay Wright, gaze in awe at these signatures. The caving tradition is still alive in the family, for Jay has the caving bug.

And a final thanks to C. Sanders Covington himself, for taking his sisters and friends into his cave and leaving the hidden legacy that would one day be found by someone. Perhaps old Sanders simply wanted people to enjoy his cave again, the way he had. Who really knows, but I get the feeling that Sanders was an explorer who simply loved his cave and those of his neighbors, and may have enjoyed caving in the pure and simple way that we do today, as a healing way of escaping the pain in his life. Now his legacy has been made public, and is hopefully complete. If so, rest easy.

The address of the Cross Plains Historical Commission of Tennessee is P.O. Box 86, Cross Plains, Tennessee 37046. Address all correspondence to Ruby Covington. If anyone knows more about the mining efforts in Cross Plains, Tennessee either at this cave or in any others in Robertson County during the 1800s please notify the author: Doug Plemons, c/o United States Saltpeter Cave Survey, 700 Westminster Dr. #K-6, Franklin, Tennessee 37067.



Signature of Cave Johnson Frey, 1860, in Covington Saltpeter Cave (photo by the author)

# Late 1940s and Early 1950s NSS Clippings From West Virginia

contributed by Marion O. Smith

Recently, in an effort to learn biographical data about Greenbrier and Monroe County, West Virginia, saltpeter workers, I ordered the 1872-84 *Union Border Watchman* newspaper through the Interlibrary Loan department of the University of Tennessee. Through a mistake, I received the *Union Monroe Watchman* for 1948 through part of 1955. I searched it anyway and found the death dates of several miners via a "Fifty Years Ago" column. Also, to my surprise, I located the following articles regarding early NSS activities in West Virginia, especially those in Monroe County.

## NATION'S SPELEOLOGISTS TO VISIT PATTON CAVE HERE

The spelunkers of the United States will make a field trip to the famous Patton's Cave near Gap Mills on April 29, as a part of the program for the 8th annual convention of the National Speleological Society.

The Charleston Grotto (chapter) will be host to the convention which will be held in Charleston April 27 and 28 and the field trip will be made the following day. More than 100 members of the organization from its 20 grottoes are expected to attend. Emmons Graham of the Charleston National Bank, is chairman of the convention committee.

Patton Cave, among the largest in Monroe county, is located at the head of a branch of Second Creek 1.4 miles from Gap Mills. The cave is developed as a disrupted rectangular pattern in a series of intersecting "T"-shaped passages. It has over 5,000 feet of passages which vary from broad, low-arched tunnels, 30 to 40 feet wide and 8 to 15 feet high, to those with rectangular cross-section 10 to 15 feet wide and 8 to 20 feet high.

Formations of considerable size are found at a number of places throughout the cave. A picture of them appeared in Life Magazine a year or so ago in an article featuring the activities of the speleologists.

Union *The Monroe Watchman*  
March 4, 1948, p. 3, c. 2

## CHARLESTON SPELEOLOGERS EXPLORE GREENVILLE CAVE

The historic Head-of-Mill-Pond cave at Greenville, Monroe county, also known as the Maddy caves, was explored during the Washington birthday holiday by members of Charleston grotto of the National Speleological Society. Using a compass and tape survey method, they measured more than 6,400 feet of passages in this limestone cavern.

Heretofore, no cave east of Kentucky which has been mapped by the society, according to J. L. Bennetts, chairman, has been found to contain more than one mile of passages. The 14 hours required to survey this portion of the cave, he said, is only a fraction of the time which will be necessary to complete the "fascinating job" of exploring and mapping the many tunnels which radiate from the surveyed passages.

The cavern, he said, consists mainly of solid rock tunnels varying from 10 to 70 feet in width and from two to 30 feet in height. Besides an enormous room the size of "two football fields," he said, is another about half that size, which also has a ceiling of five-stories height.

The historic interest is particularly in a dry section of the cavern, where in Civil War days, men, aided by donkeys dissolved salt petre from the clay in the cavern floors. That material is an important component of gunpowder. Historic traces include numerous V-type leaching vats, old boards and tracks of wheels and of the animals' hoofs.

The spelunkers who made the survey are H. P. McGriff, Q. R. Flack, Miss P. Baume, Mr. and Mrs. J. L. Bennetts.

Union *The Monroe Watchman*  
July 8, 1948, p. 1, c. 5

## 82 CAVERS VISIT HERE

Nat'l Speleological Society At Greenville For Field Trip

A total of 82 speleologists camped at Greenville from Saturday to Monday and explored three Monroe county caves during the period. Sixty-four of this number were from outside the state, and 18 from the Charleston Grotto of the National Speleological Society acted as hosts.

Among notables in the party were: Wm. J. Stephenson of Silver Springs, Md., executive vice president of the National Speleological Society; John S. Petrie of Arlington, Va., national secretary; Lawry Bennetts, president of the Charleston Grotto, and Emmons Graham of Charleston.

The explorers were joined by Dr. William Davies, who has been employed by the West Virginia Geological Survey to map the caves of this state, and his assistant, Thomas Richards. They will be in Monroe county during most of July engaged in this work.

The speleologists visited three caves—Head of Mill Pond Cave, Laurel Creek Cave and Indian Draft Cave, making several trips through each. The visit to Coburn's Cave near Peterstown was omitted because of lack of time.

During their visit the cavers, who came from North Carolina, Virginia, Maryland, Pennsylvania and the District of Columbia, as well as West Virginia, camped in the N. C. Bishop pasture at Greenville. As they were departing Monday afternoon, members of the party expressed appreciation for the fine hospitality and cooperation shown them by the people of the Greenville community.

Union *The Monroe Watchman*  
February 15, 1951, p. 1, c. 5

## THE CAVEMEN ARE COMING!

(From Charleston Gazette)

West Virginia will play host April 27-29 to a particularly interesting group. The 100 or 200 people who will visit the state on those dates are members of the National Speleological Society. They will wear "city clothes" in Charleston for the presentation of papers and pictures on the first two days of their visit. Then they will change to "working" costume, so to speak, and visit Patton's Cave, in the vicinity of Gap Mills, Monroe county, the final day of their stay in the state.

That they are here for this, the first national meeting of the organization ever to be held away from Washington, D. C., is a tribute to the activity and popularity in the national organization of the members of the Charleston Grotto, or chapter, evidently one of its most energetic units.

Acquaintance with the membership and literature of this group of cave explorers is a revelation to the layman. Most of us are accustomed to think of inspecting caves in terms of the commercial caves which have lights, walks, guard rails and other conveniences for the public. Actually, the cave explorers of the National Speleological Society frequent the non-commercial caverns. The society estimates that not one-tenth of the world's caves have been properly investigated. Its members are doing their best to accomplish these investigations so far as the United States is concerned.

There are two general groups,

the speleologists, or scientists, either amateur or professional, and the "spelunkers" whose chief interest in caves is exploration, photography, mapping and kindred subjects. The scientific aspect of cave exploration takes in such things as paleontology, archaeology, geology, history and biology.

West Virginia and western Virginia, it seems, constitute one of the most notable hunting grounds for speleologists and spelunkers, alike, in the entire East. It is appropriate, therefore, that this state should have been selected for this first annual conference held outside of Washington, D. C.

West Virginia, in general, and the people of Charleston and Monroe county in particular, are honored that this group has selected our home for their annual gathering. We should do what we can to assure them of their welcome and assist them in any way possible to enjoy themselves. Some of the nation's top scientists and most daring explorers will be in the group which comes here the last weekend of the month.

They are doubly welcome.

### "SPELUNKERS" HERE AGAIN

Monroe county will be host again this week-end to members of the National Speleological Society, who will come here to conduct stream-tracing experiments in the area Saturday and Sunday. The speleologist, or "spelunkers" as they are familiarly known, will place dye in certain streams of the county to observe their courses. The dye, known as "fluorescein," is absolutely harmless to all forms of life. It will turn the water a bright yellow-green.

The main part of the experiment will be conducted at Patton's Cave near Gap Mills with between 20 and 30 members of the Charleston and Virginia Polytechnic Institute grottoes expected to attend. Patton's Cave was explored earlier this year during the convention of the National Speleological Society in Charleston. The work this coming week-end will be done at the request of cave owners and will trace underground streams in particular.

The "spelunkers" plan to camp overnight in the area and continue exploration of parts of the cave.

## 65 SPELEOLOGISTS VISIT MONROE CO.

Convention Delegates Explore Patton Cave At Gap Mills

Sixty-five members of the National Speleological Society came to Monroe county from Charleston Sunday on the field trip to Patton Cave near Gap Mills. Accompanied by several guides from Charleston, who had explored the cave last year, the visitors admired the towering rock formations, rimrock pool formed by mineral deposits, ponderous stalagmites and stalactites, and natural stone drapery found in the cavern's 5,000 feet of passageways. The formations are built from water deposits at a rate of an inch per 100 years.

The cave entrance is located at the bottom of a steep pit, and from that point it extends in a meandering course for more than a mile. Near the entrance the roof is only about three feet high, but farther into the cave are vaulted rooms and tricky passageways. Much of the cave has been mapped, but at least two narrow passages never have been followed to the end.

Robert Handley of Charleston, who headed the field trip, listed among the cave's points of interest a giant limestone column more than 80 feet in circumference.

"In one place, too, there is a rounded space we call 'Heartbeat Chimney,'" Handley continued. "When you climb up into this place your heartbeat sounds as loud as a drum."

Members worked in groups, wearing carbide lamps on their caps, and carrying extra carbide lamps and wearing safety shoes. Most were mud coated to varying degrees at the end of the trip.

The sportsmen and scientists, who clambered through the cave spent the afternoon hours in photography, geological studies and exploring for the pure adventure of it.

The geologists made a "find" during the trip discovering the bones of several small rodents and bats not usually found in caves of this sort.

The visit to Patton Cave climaxed the society's 8th annual convention, the first held outside the city of Washington, D. C. The business sessions of the meeting were held in Charleston Friday and Saturday. More than 250 members from 39 grottoes or chapters attended the convention.

Union *The Monroe Watchman*  
April 26, 1951, p. 3, c. 4-5

Union *The Monroe Watchman*  
April 26, 1951, p. 3, c. 4-5

Union *The Monroe Watchman*  
May 3, 1951, p. 1, c. 1