

## “An Education is Not All Derived From Textbooks”: A Century of Interactions Between Mammoth Cave and Western Kentucky University

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South central Kentucky's Mammoth Cave System is by far the most extensive known cave system on Earth. The cave and landscapes that overlie it have been designated not only as a US national park, but also by the United Nations through UNESCO as both a World Heritage Site and an International Biosphere Reserve to codify their global significance. In addition to the unique natural landscape, there has been a rich human history in the area for at least 10,000 years and within the cave itself for more than four thousand.

Just 50 km to the southwest is Western Kentucky University (WKU) in Bowling Green, which including various precursor institutions has had numerous interactions with the cave system and its proprietors for more than 100 years. These relationships

have been remarkably synergistic, for example providing the University with a nearby, world-class learning environment while offering the cave managers, particularly in recent decades, the expertise of faculty and student scholars (and cavers) in interpreting the cave system, landscape, and associated resources.

Early interactions included many school field trips to the cave. Among the earliest of these were trips in the early 1900s from the Potter School for Young Girls. In the same era, students entering the Bowling Green Business College “on the Seventy Dollar Scholarship” who paid “for same at time of entering” were offered a free trip to Mammoth Cave with all expenses paid including



Figure 1. Students from the Western Kentucky State Normal School and Teachers College, a precursor to WKU, at the Historic Entrance to Mammoth Cave in 1927.



Figure 2. A recent group of WKU students at the Historic Entrance to Mammoth Cave (photo by Chris Groves).

“railroad fare, cave fare, and hotel fare to and from Mammoth Cave.” An article from 1927 describing the benefits of such excursions to the cave (Figure 1) correctly claimed that “An education is not all derived from textbooks.”

Many early trips involved multi-day excursions. While some of these were by train between Bowling Green and the cave, at least in some cases the boys would make the 100-kilometer round trip on foot accompanied by horse-drawn wagons loaded with girl students who, while riding ahead of the boys, would sing songs to encourage (or taunt) and provide energy to their walking colleagues. A camping trip along the Green River after one such cave trip was described as having festivities occurring to a level “not seen since the celebrations of the Danes on the morning after the slaying by Beowulf of the sea-monster Grendel.”

In 1925 explorer Floyd Collins was trapped while exploring Sand Cave within the current bounds of Mammoth Cave National Park, and a large rescue effort ensued. For several days rescuers could carry food to Floyd who was stuck not far from the entrance, but they were unable to free him from a tight squeeze where he had been trapped by a ham-sized rock that had slipped and pinned him in place. After a collapse between Floyd and the entrance made subsequent visits to him impossible, it became a race against time to free him, and a shaft



Figure 3. 2004 Signing ceremony for the Mammoth Cave International Center for Science and Learning, including Ms. Lujana Wilcher, Park Superintendent Ron Switzer, WKU President Gary Ransdell, and Senator Mitch McConnell (photo by Chris Groves).

was initiated to reach the passage where he could be freed. Among the men who strained for days to dig through the rock to reach Floyd was the WKU football team, and the sheet signed by the players as they arrived on the scene can still be seen on the wall of a local museum of Floyd Collins artifacts at the office of Dr. Tim Donnelly in Bowling Green

In 1980 the Karst Field Studies Program at Mammoth Cave National Park was established by at WKU by Dr. Nick Crawford as a unique opportunity to study cave and karst topics at the university level. These courses continue today and have been taught by a number of the world's leading experts in their respective fields or of the cave itself, a partial list of whom includes, in addition to Dr. Crawford, the likes of Will White, Art Palmer, Patti Jo Watson, Stan Sides, Roger Brucker, Tom Barr, Derek Ford, and Horton Hobbs.

Class field trips still continue regularly to the cave (Figure 2), and in recent decades several departments have developed interactions at the cave including professional funded research, graduate thesis and undergraduate research projects, and extensive educational experiences within, in the close vicinity of, or closely relevant to MACA. The Park-related graduate research emanating from WKU has been extensive and wide ranging, with numerous thesis studies focused on biology (19 completed), hydrogeology (9), water quality (6), geochemistry (7), cultural geography and policy (4), atmospheric science (3) and others in folk studies, remote sensing, and environmental education. One MS thesis from WKU's Department of Communications even used Bormann's (1972) fantasy theme method to

examine dominant rhetorical visions and communities that emerged from the 1925 tragedy of Floyd Collins.

For decades students with an interest in cave exploring have been attracted to WKU's karst studies programs because of the connections to exploration in south central Kentucky including Mammoth Cave and there is also a history of interactions between WKU and the Cave Research Foundation (CRF), with three current and former WKU faculty and staff having served as CRF Presidents. Numerous WKU students have also served as seasonal or permanent guides as well as scientific and management positions at Mammoth Cave and other national parks, and indeed other federal agencies.

The Mammoth Cave International Center for Science and Learning was established in 2004 (Figure 3) as a cooperative initiative between the Park and WKU, one of 17 such centers operating within the national park system. The Center facilitates Park-related research and environmental education to a wide range of students and scientists, as well as implementation of citizen science programs.

The future is bright for such mutually beneficial interactions to continue on into the future. New on tap for fall 2015 is the first time offering of a WKU Honor's Program Colloquium simply called *Mammoth Cave National Park*.

## Reference

Bormann, E.G. "Fantasy and Rhetorical Vision: The Rhetorical Criticism of Social Reality" (1972). *Quarterly Journal of Speech*. 58: 396-407.

