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Cases of the Mammoth Cave Bug: The Fascination of Exploration at Mammoth Cave

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CASES OF THE MAMMOTH CAVE BUG:
THE FASCINATION OF EXPLORATION AT MAMMOTH CAVE

A Capstone Experience/Thesis Project

Presented in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for

the Degree Bachelor of Arts with

Honors College Graduate Distinction at Western Kentucky University

By:

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2016

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ABSTRACT

Mammoth Cave captures the attention of people from around the world. Its vast passages and amount of darkness entices the creativity of those who visit. For many, it is like a giant puzzle and they are just trying to put all of the pieces together in their exploration and want to see how it all comes out in the end.

Through a series of personal interviews and readings I created a video series and webpage. I seek to find out why people were so enamored with the cave, to show their fascination with the cave, and to honor their contributions to the exploration of Mammoth Cave.

To experience the full project please visit the website at www.mammothcavebug.com.

Keywords: Mammoth Cave, National Park, Bishop, Brucker, Collins, Kamper

Dedicated to
Mammoth Cave National Park,
The Cave Research Foundation, and
all the people who love the cave.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to thank everyone who has helped me with this project along the way as it would not be possible without them. Bryan Lemon for helping me think through how to complete the project with a limited amount of time and the best way to tell these stories. Chris Groves for inspiring me to do this project when I took his Mammoth Cave National Park class and helping connect me with the people who told the stories of the cave. All of my friends that have encouraged me along the way, helped shoot the interviews and review the videos – Lauren Nolan, Daniel Vorlet, Justin Hill, Julie McNeely and Jared Ellenson. My two roommates, Tanner Cole and Cameron Love, for sitting and listening to me ramble about Mammoth Cave and offering creative help. Last but not least I would like to thank Roger Brucker, Chuck DeCroix, George Crothers and Tim Donely, as this project would not be possible without them giving their time to tell the stories.

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

Lying beneath the pennyroyal region of Kentucky is the world's longest cave; twisting around itself for four hundred and five miles is the ever expanding Mammoth Cave. For millions of years, water has been carving out the layers of limestone beneath the sandstone cap of Mammoth Cave Ridge to form the wondrous underground passageways. For centuries, something about Mammoth Cave has kept people returning despite it being a dark, cold, dangerous, mysterious, and cramped place that most people would avoid.

One of the first cave guides, Stephen Bishop, referred to the cave as “grand, gloomy and peculiar” (Phillips). The same words were used to describe the character of Emperor Napoleon Bonaparte in his eulogy by Charles Phillips. With such a description it is easy to see how this might peak someone's interest to the level of infatuation. Since the original discovery of Mammoth Cave, various characters, such as Stephen Bishop, Max Kamper, Floyd Collins, and Roger Brucker, have explored Mammoth Cave and become fixated with what they found.



Figure 1.1: Characters covered: (left to right) Early Woodland Era PaleoIndians, Stephen Bishop, Max Kamper, Floyd Collins, and Roger Brucker

CHAPTER 2

EARLY WOODLAND ERA

In the 1960s, Near Eastern prehistory archaeologist Patty Jo Watson moved to the Mammoth Cave area with her husband Richard “Red” Watson, a speleologist. Most of her research leading up to her time at Mammoth Cave had been focused on prehistoric food production in Iraq, Iran, and Turkey but upon moving to the Mammoth Cave area she focused on prehistoric food production in Eastern North America. In her research at Salts Cave, a part of the Mammoth Cave System, she found that prehistoric people explored miles into the cave using torches made from river cane and in order to mine mirabilite, epsomite, and gypsum. Due to the dry nature of the cave any organic remnants people left there, such as the charred deposits of river cane, paleo feces, and even two bodies, were preserved for thousands of years.

Watson’s research has been sustained by one of her former graduate students, the Director of the William S. Webb Anthropology Museum at the University of Kentucky, George Crothers. With modern technology Crothers was able to rehydrate the paleo feces and examine its contents to see what these people were eating and test the hormone balances to determine if the person was male or female. Crothers found that eleven of the twelve specimen were definitely male and one may have been male or female (Crothers).

With this information combined with other research Crothers was able to hypothesize that the cave was a sacred place for them and most likely used for a coming-of-age rituals by young PaleoIndian boys (Crothers). Crothers presumes that the gypsum they mined was used for body paint and that the dark emptiness of the cave was used for seclusion as these were common elements to similar rituals throughout the world. It is unknown if this is the true reason for the PaleoIndian use of the cave but it is a commonly accepted theory (Crothers). It is clear to see an obsession with the cave as they had no need to go deep within the cave other than having a driving curiosity to explore it.

After the PaleoIndians suddenly stopped using the cave, it remained untouched until the early nineteenth century, when mining for calcium nitrate or “saltpeter” began in the cave. Charles Wilkins and Hyman Gratz bought the Mammoth Cave property for the industrial mining in July of 1812. The saltpeter was vital to the War of 1812 after British blockades were placed on United States, largely restricting the amount of imported gunpowder needed to fight the war. “Saltpeter production stopped shortly after the war’s end as its price plummeted, but a small number of visitors were already seeking out the cave that was considered a natural curiosity and was recognized, even then, for its unusual size” (Algeo).

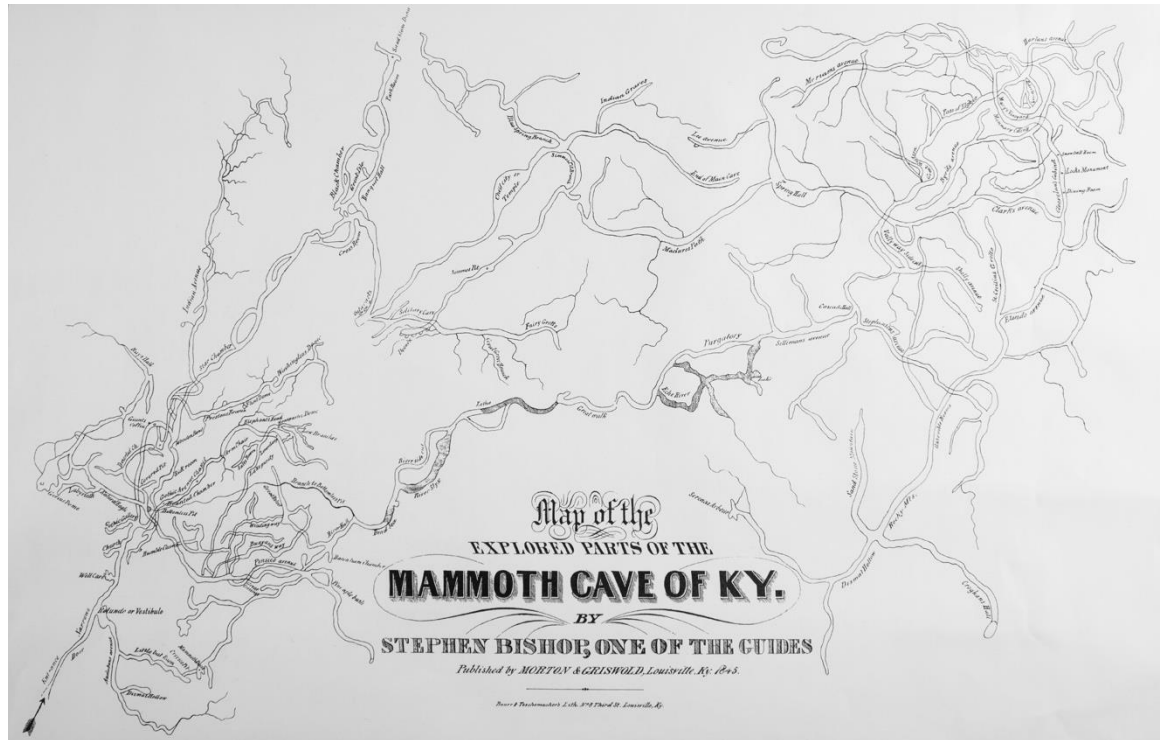


Figure 2.1: Illustration of a PaleoIndian Mining Minerals in Mammoth Cave

CHAPTER 3

STEPHEN BISHOP

In 1838, Franklin Gorin bought the Mammoth Cave property from Gratz and turned it into a tourist attraction, capitalizing on the natural curiosity surrounding the cave. He built a hotel on the property where visitors could stay after being guided on a cave tour. Stephen Bishop, a slave and cave guide for Gorin, is a well known figure in Mammoth Cave history, with books written about him and his experiences in the cave. Bishop was also one of the most passionate people with the cave. As a cave guide, he was only required to lead visitors through the known parts of Mammoth Cave, but, unlike the other guides, he insisted on exploring in the vast darkness off the known trails. He eventually discovered many miles of cave, became the first person to ever cross Bottomless Pit, and created one of the first maps of Mammoth Cave (National Park Service). Bishop's curiosity led to him having some notoriety and being requested to be the cave guide for several visitors. Bishop would frequently size up visitors and if he felt they were adventurous and capable he would bring them across Bottomless Pit and all the way to Echo River in the cave.



People from around the world would come to see Mammoth Cave while Bishop was a guide; they were lured by the propaganda in the newspapers across the nation that claimed it to be “nearly 100 miles long” when in reality they had not even found ten miles yet (Brucker). Bishop’s family continued to explore the cave and work as cave guides after the abolition of slavery.

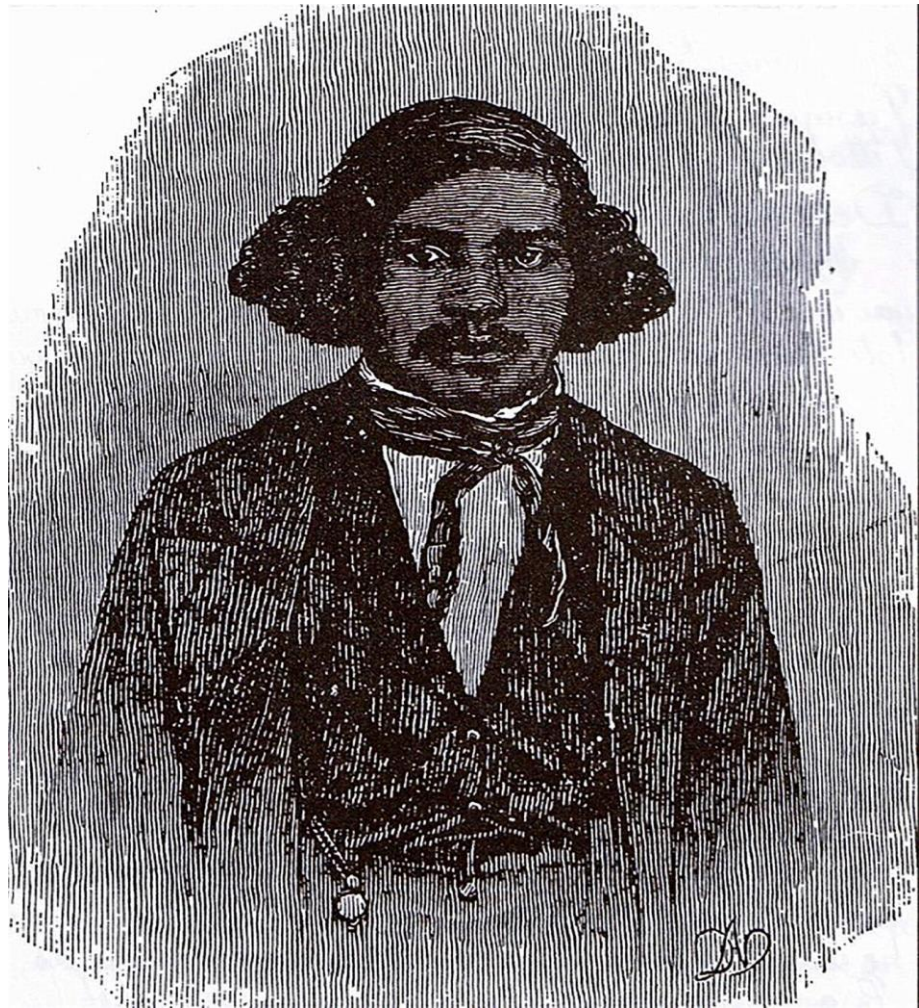


Figure 3.1: Illustration of Stephen Bishop

CHAPTER 4

MAX KAMPER

Stephen Bishop's great nephew, Ed Bishop, was also a cave guide. Ed Bishop assisted Max Kamper in exploring many more miles of cave in the early 1900's. Together they created the first accurate survey map of Mammoth Cave at nearly thirty-five miles (National Park Service). Kamper was a German visitor who came to Mammoth Cave while studying engineering in New York in 1908. Kamper's obsession was almost instantaneous upon his arrival. His trip was only supposed to last eight days but turned into eight months. At the beginning of his stay, Kamper was paying to take a tour every day and surveying while on the tour. When the owner of the cave heard about this mysterious German man surveying the cave he questioned Kamper and decided that having the accurate survey map would be a good resource. He provided Kamper food and housing in exchange for the map. The story of Max Kamper remained a mystery for almost 100 years until Mammoth Cave National Park Interpretive Ranger Chuck DeCroix worked with a journalist in Berlin to track down the remaining Kamper family and invite them to the park. Upon their visit, they did a tour of the cave; at one point during the tour Max's grandson, Klaus Kamper, disappeared down a passage he wanted to explore. At

that point, DeCroix decided that the obsession of Mammoth Cave must run in the family (DeCroix). The owner of Mammoth Cave kept the Kamper Map a secret until the Park Service bought the property in 1941. He was concerned that since the cave expanded outside of his property other people would blast holes into the cave to create new entrances and steal his customers (DeCroix).



Figure 4.1: Max Kamper

CHAPTER 5
FLOYD COLLINS

In the 1920s, the cave wars began and a fight for tourists occurred. The battle was between the long established Mammoth Cave estate and anyone else who owned a property with a cave on Mammoth Cave or Flint Ridges. Some landowners dynamited new entrances into the cave to have their chance in the cave wars, since it was such a profitable venture. A few of the tactics owners would use to stop tourists on their way to Mammoth Cave was to tell them that the cave was flooded but they could sell them tickets to the close by Colossal Cave, to put up fake signs claiming to be the New Entrance to Mammoth Cave, or to find something Mammoth Cave did not have like the Frozen Niagara (National Park Service).

One of the cave owning families on Flint Ridge was the Collins family. They owned Crystal Cave, the farthest cave from Cave City on Flint Ridge. The youngest son of Collins family, Floyd Collins, was obsessed with exploring the cave, going well beyond the tourist trail and explored passageways that would not be found again for almost forty years. As part of the cave wars, Floyd decided that if they were to make money they needed a cave closer to the city. Since Collins was an avid cave explorer, he agreed to work with B. Doyle who owned Sand Cave to explore the cave and determine if

it was worth creating a tourist cave (Lawrence). While exploring Sand Cave in 1925, a fifty-pound rock fell on Collins's leg, trapping him in a small crawlway. Collins remained trapped for seventeen days as people from around the country gathered as part of a rescue effort and out of the curiosity of his fate. Collins eventually died as a result of a failed attempt blocked access to him and rescuers were unable to give him food and water. Collins's death was a major news event in the United States, even earning a Pulitzer Prize for William "Skeets" Miller and the Courier Journal for his first hand report of interviews with Collins inside the cave. Several months after his death, his body was given a burial ceremony by his family and they sold Crystal Cave to a new owner. The new owner put Collins's body in a glass top coffin and on display in the entrance of "Floyd Collins's Crystal Cave." Tourists would come from around the country to view his body and tour the cave. His body remained on display until his family asked park service to remove his body and give it a proper burial again (Donley).



Figure 5.1: Collins's Final Resting Place

CHAPTER 6

ROGER BRUCKER

In 1916, the National Park Service was formed and twenty-five years later in 1941 Mammoth Cave became a national park. This upset many locals because the park was created by forcibly taking property through eminent domain. “By the time the park was granted full national park status in July 1941, over 2000 people had been displaced” (Murray & Brucker, 238). Taking some of the land was particularly difficult for some because they owned the cave and it was their livelihood or because it was land that had always been in their family since people settled in the area (Murray & Brucker, 238).

The park service gaining control also meant restricted access to the cave system and put a stop to exploration. Many explorers would still enter the cave even though it was illegal. The park service suggested to the cavers to form a group and propose a collaboration to do research in the cave alongside the park service. In the 1957 the Cave Research Foundation (CRF) was formed to formally and systematically survey, protect, and explore the cave. As a group, they were rapidly connecting the entrances to each other on Flint Ridge making the Flint Ridge Cave System the longest in the world in 1972 at eighty-six and a half miles but they all knew that it had to connect with

Mammoth Cave somehow. It wasn't until 1983 that the two caves were connected on a CRF expedition. The connection placed the length of Mammoth Cave at three hundred and fifty miles (Brucker).

Roger Brucker, one of the founders and of CRF, played an instrumental role in this connection. Brucker first came to Mammoth Cave in 1936 at the age of eight carrying his five cell flashlight he had saved up for just for the cave tour. He recalls being "entranced by the amount of darkness" and upon reaching the room named The Methodist Church "shining the light up into a high passage there and saying to the guide 'where does that go?' The guide replied '...it doesn't go anywhere it stays right there.' Everyone laughed and [he] thought to [him]self 'boy one of these days I'm going to find out for myself.'" Brucker did just that and went on to be one of the most well-known and one of the most passionate cave explorers in Mammoth Cave history. Now, at the age of eighty-six, Brucker continues to drive from Dayton, Ohio to go on CRF expeditions, discovering and surveying new passageways in Mammoth Cave. When asked why he is still caving in his eighties, he replies, that he wants to see how it will all come out and he has "always been interested in problems bigger than one person can solve;" comparing Mammoth Cave to a giant puzzle and that one is just finding the pieces to make each entrance connect. Brucker has spent most of his life showing his passion for the cave and its secrets by either writing books about it or exploring it (Brucker).

There is no sign of the attraction toward the cave going away anytime soon as it is predicted that there are hundreds of more miles of vast passageways are still to be

discovered (Brucker). Present day CRF is still exploring and surveying new cave expanding it well over four hundred miles. In his book, *The Caves Beyond*, Roger Brucker predicts that the cave will reach a thousand miles by the end of the century. This is a lofty prediction, but if the Mammoth Cave system were to connect with the Fisher Ridge Cave System that would add another 124.6 miles, making Mammoth Cave over five hundred miles in length (Brucker).

CHAPTER 7

CONCLUSION

Obsession with the grand, gloomy and peculiar Mammoth Cave is common theme at the park, capturing all of the historical figures that have explored there (Phillips). Mammoth Cave fills them with curiosity and that curiosity sparks an obsession for exploration. “It’s addictive. The curiosity of knowing what is around the next corner then you find out and there is another corner so you look behind it and it just keeps going” (DeCroix). “People have been exploring caves all over the world for forever but the sheer magnitude of the cave is really what sets it apart in the world” (Kambesis). As long as there is more cave to be discovered there will be more people obsessed with it.

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