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Shadow of Death: A Fantasy Theme Analysis of the Floyd Collins Tragedy

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SHADOW OF DEATH:
A FANTASY THEME ANALYSIS OF THE FLOYD COLLINS TRAGEDY

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Presented to
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Master of Arts

By
Leslie Ellzey Witty

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SHADOW OF DEATH:
A FANTASY THEME ANALYSIS OF THE FLOYD COLLINS TRAGEDY

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ABSTRACT

Floyd Collins, a Kentucky caver who suffered a lengthy entrapment and eventual death inside Sand Cave in 1925, has had his story told repeatedly and in numerous forms. Although the countless genres (and their historical accuracy) vary, they are basically retellings of the same story—a story filled with drama, suspense, and heroics. Because of these characteristics, the rhetoric of the Floyd Collins ordeal lent itself to examination using Bormann’s (1972) fantasy theme method. By using a fantasy theme analysis to explore the saga, I advanced beyond the retellings and gained a greater understanding of why seventy-seven years after he died alone in a Kentucky cave, Floyd Collins’ story survives.

Specifically, this researcher identified and examined dominant rhetorical visions and communities that emerged from the tragedy and how these influenced the story's perpetuation and continued audience appeal. The method for this study consisted of collecting and analyzing rhetoric produced both during and after Collins' entrapment to reconstruct rhetorical visions. Four dominant rhetorical visions of Floyd Collins were explored: Collins as a tragic hero, Collins as a victim of greed, Collins as a devoted suitor, and Collins as an uneducated hillbilly.
Chapter I

THROUGH THE VALLEY

During the 1920's, Kentucky's Mammoth Cave region was an area of conflict and fierce competition. The focus of all the hostility originated from an unusual place—underground. Due to the region's incredible number of caves, tourism had become a rapidly growing industry. Travelers from all over the world came to view the mysterious underground passageways of the area's most popular attraction, Mammoth Cave. Other commercial caves were quickly developed as Mammoth's success flourished; landowners whose properties contained caves would clear trails and give guided tours of the passages. The battle to have the "best" cave was an intense one that eventually led to a story that gripped the nation and the slow torturous death of one Kentucky man, Floyd Collins.

Floyd Collins, an avid caver, became trapped in Sand Cave on January 30, 1925. The logistics of his entrapment presented attempted rescuers with a tremendous undertaking. Efforts to free Collins proved so difficult that the entrapment itself lasted seventeen days with Collins perishing somewhere around the fifteenth day. It seemed the longer the entrapment continued, the more media attention it gathered. Reports on Collins filled state, national and even a few international papers. The Floyd Collins saga "...as a newspaper story may be summed up by the description of a snowball rolling down hill. It started quite inconspicuously but gathered weight with astounding speed..." (Hartley, 1925, p. 17).
Collins' lengthy entrapment became a true media event, one of the most sensational in modern history. His story gripped the nation during the time of his entrapment, and it has been told and retold in numerous forms ever since. The tragedy has been the topic of books, poems, plays, movies, television shows, songs, and even an off-Broadway musical. An obvious question was, “Why?” What makes this particular story so engaging that it has been retold continually and in so many different forms? Bormann’s (1972) fantasy theme method of rhetorical analysis offers insight into understanding the longevity of the Collins saga. Specifically, this thesis identifies and examines dominant rhetorical visions and communities that emerged from the tragedy and how these influence the story’s perpetuation and continued audience appeal.

Upon learning of the Floyd Collins’ entrapment, many people wonder what led Collins to such a dangerous position. Some perceive caves to be claustrophobic and would not enter them voluntarily. For Floyd Collins, however, caving was a passion. Collins had already discovered Crystal Cave on his own property and opened it for tours, but its poor location and lack of easy access to the public kept it from becoming a moneymaker. Floyd wanted to find a cave that was closer to both the main highway and to Mammoth Cave so he began exploring land on neighboring farmer Bee Doyle’s property. The two agreed with two adjoining landowners to become partners if Collins found any caverns suitable for tourism. Floyd quickly located what is now known as Sand Cave and began extensive digging to find larger passageways. Collins left for one such day of caving on Friday morning, January 30, and he never returned.
It was while attempting to exit Sand Cave that Collins became trapped. He was crawling up a passageway so narrow that he had to put his arms out in front of his body in order to fit. Collins was kicking with his legs, trying to push himself up when he dislodged a large rock that pinned his left ankle. During the rock fall, his lantern tipped over and went out. Alas, “He yelled his voice away, gouged his fingers bloody raw….Fifty-five feet down, the earth held him in a grip of stone”(Fincher, 1990, p. 139).

Collins was discovered the following day and news of his entrapment quickly spread. Several men, small enough to fit through the narrow passage, were able to crawl down to Floyd and feed him, thus sustaining his life. As the days passed without a successful rescue, curious spectators and numerous reporters began to arrive on the scene. One reporter, William B. “Skeets” Miller, actually crawled down and interviewed the trapped man. The reporter was able to speak to Floyd, as well as assist in his feedings, up until the fifth day of Collins’ entrapment when a cave-in, it was said, closed up the passageway.

Although the cave-in further delayed the sluggish rescue attempt, public interest in the story continued to grow rapidly. Murray and Brucker (1999) state, “...the Collins tragedy by February 7-8 had transcended that of a news story and had become a social and cultural event...”(p. 164). Enormous crowds gathered around the cave entrance, (during its peak, crowd size was estimated to be between ten and thirty thousand) further hampering the rescue. Floyd Collins was the primary focus of conversations all over the nation.
After sixteen incredible days, the end was in sight. A lateral tunnel was about to be completed that would intersect with the passageway entombing Collins. The fate of Floyd Collins was not yet known, as all communication with him ended after the reported cave-in, but hopes were high. Reporters geared up for the final news.

Floyd Collins was reached on the following day. Doctors on the scene estimated from the condition of the body that Collins had been dead at least twenty-four hours. Newspapers all over the United States were filled with the details of the discovery of Collins’ body: “The Louisville Times printed three extras on the day he was found. That same day, The Philadelphia Inquirer devoted eight columns to the event and The Chicago Tribune nine” (Murray and Brucker, p. 219). After seventeen days, Collins was declared dead; his story, however, had already begun to take on a life of its own.

**Rationale**

Without question, Floyd Collins’ story is fascinating. Upon hearing about it for the first time, most people are immediately interested in learning more. For example, while I was employed as a park ranger at Mammoth Cave National Park, the rangers’ “secret weapon” for controlling a disorderly group on a cave tour was to start talking about Floyd Collins. Even the rowdiest of individuals would usually quiet down to hear all the details of Floyd’s saga.

The Collins tragedy has always been of personal interest. Growing up a few miles from Sand Cave, I have heard stories about Collins’ 1925 entrapment since I was a small child. My interest continued to grow when I worked as a tour
guide at Mammoth Cave. In addition, my grandfather, Judge C.E. Nichols, ruled on a court case involving Floyd’s brothers (they were trying to have their father declared incompetent as executor of Floyd’s estate primarily because of his repeated attempts to sell Crystal Cave). Lastly, my husband, David, portrayed Floyd’s brother Homer in the film The Floyd Collins Story.

In researching the Collins saga, I was surprised at the enormous quantity of works that focused on the entrapment, such as Skeets Miller’s one-on-one interviews with Collins, Robert Penn Warren’s novel The Cave, “The Death of Floyd Collins” (a record that sold millions), Billy Wilder’s film Ace in the Hole, Murray and Brucker’s book Trapped! The Story of Floyd Collins, and current off-Broadway musical Floyd Collins, just to name a few. Quite literally, massive volumes of material have been produced focusing on Collins as their subject, with some of these works including fictionalized elements and many having inaccurate information. Although their forms may differ, their content is essentially the same—a repeating of the story.

Clearly, Floyd Collins’ story is important, as evidenced by the scope of rhetoric produced. It was surprising then to discover that little effort had been put forth for understanding the appeal of the saga itself. After extensive searching throughout sources including Digital Dissertations, ComAbstracts, Sociological Abstracts, ERIC databases, university libraries, Mammoth Cave National Park’s library, The Kentucky Library, and private collections, I was unable to locate a single scholarly published work devoted to examining the rhetoric of the Floyd
Collins tragedy from a theoretical communication, sociological, or historical perspective. For this reason alone, a thorough study was warranted.

Exploring the public’s fascination with the Collins ordeal resulted in valuable insight into how people interpret the same event differently through different rhetorical visions. Insights were facilitated by using Bormann’s fantasy theme method of rhetorical analysis. Bormann (1972) states, “once we participate in the rhetorical vision of a community or movement...we have come vicariously to experience a way of life that would otherwise be less accessible to us...we have become more fully human” (407). Bormann (1977) also explains, "If rhetorical criticism can find widespread patterns, such recurring features of discourse can form the basis for...'enduring criticism' because analysis of recurring patterns can aid in 'explicating the essential processes of human symbolization' " (130). By exploring the tragedy of Floyd Collins through a fantasy theme analysis, I was also able to learn more about the human communicative process as a whole.

**Literature Review**

Fantasy theme analysis is especially useful in examining “...how the dramatization of unfolding events...creates a social reality for those who are caught up in the portrayal” (Bormann, 1982a, p. 134). General truths are conveyed in the fantasy theme through the use of characters, primarily heroes and villains, and significant events such as human suffering. The audience becomes caught up in the dramatization (in this case, Collins’ entrapment) and bonds together due to a shared reality.
Bormann (1972) initially explored the concept of fantasy chains in the publication *Speech Communication: An Interpersonal Approach*. In this work, he credits Robert Bales with coining the term “fantasy chain” for describing the way in which dramas are shared among members of a small group, thereby causing increased cohesiveness among group members. Bormann briefly explores Bales’ concept on a larger scale in statements such as “…if the appeal of the [small group] drama is strong enough, it catches on….Gradually, these successful group fantasies are worked into the mass media, are broadcast, and are again processed and vitalized in other groups” (171).

Whereas Bormann briefly related small group fantasy chains to larger groups in his previous work, his next publication explored it thoroughly. In “Fantasy and Rhetorical Vision: The Rhetorical Criticism of Social Reality,” Bormann (1972) presents an expanded description of a new theoretical perspective. His theory centers on the concept of fantasy, which can also be thought of as a story or drama. Dominant ideas or concepts in a fantasy are “fantasy themes.” If a fantasy theme is communicated through a group, (in other words, the story is passed along to others) then Bormann describes this process as “chaining.”

When a fantasy theme successfully chains out through a group, then a “rhetorical vision” is created. Bormann describes rhetorical visions as “The composite dramas which catch up large groups of people in a symbolic reality,” and as “…[containing] dramatis personae and typical plot lines that can be alluded to in all communication contexts...” (398). Bormann proposes that a critic can
construct a group’s rhetorical vision by using “…the concrete dramas developed in a body of discourse and [examining] the social relationships, the motives, [and] the qualitative impact of that symbolic world as though it were the substance of social reality for those people who participated in the vision” (401).

Bormann (1973) states, "A drama to be compelling requires plausibility, action, suspense, and sympathetic characters" (152). The Floyd Collins saga embodied all of these elements, making the rhetoric produced especially suited to fantasy theme analysis. Another aspect of Collins’ rhetoric that lent itself to this type of criticism was the fact that so much misinformation has been produced on the tragedy, especially while it was taking place. Bormann (1972) explains:

Whenever occasions are so chaotic and indiscriminate that the community has no clear observable impression of the facts, people are given free rein to fantasize within the assumptions of their rhetorical vision without inhibition. On such occasions fantasy themes become the main explanatory systems for the events.

(405).

Bormann (1982a) also addressed this area by stating, "Fantasies always provide an organized artistic explanation of happenings and thus create a social reality which makes sense out of the blooming buzzing confusion of the experience" (134).

Much of the misinformation about the Collins’ entrapment originated in newspaper and radio reports. Once the distortions and/or fabrications were presented to the masses, many fantasies began chaining throughout various
groups. Bormann (1973) states, "The media rhetoricians' artistry in selecting from the materials presented...and their skill in weaving new materials of their own manufacture into an interpretative frame has much to do with the way the story catches on...and with the persuasive impact of the chaining fantasy" (152). Bormann's point is illustrated in the fact that four dominant rhetorical visions of Floyd Collins caught on with the American public: Collins as a tragic hero, Collins as a victim of greed, Collins as a devoted suitor, and Collins as an uneducated hillbilly. These visions emerged in large part due to the media's creative "interpretative framing" of materials.

The dominant personas of Floyd Collins that emerged both during and after his entrapment are quite diverse. Whereas his perceptions of being a hero and a faithful suitor were more positive in nature, his assessments of being a greedy sinner and of being a hillbilly were obviously negative. Bormann (1985) explains that this type of contradictory interpretation often occurs. He states, “…the same historic personages may be heroes in one community and villains in another; or one group may celebrate certain courses of action as laudable while the other denigrates the same scenarios” (33). Nevertheless, it is the single rhetorical vision of each group that brings its members together, while at the same time, separating them from groups that share a conflicting vision.

The uniting of people who share the same rhetorical vision is of particular interest to Bormann. He developed the symbolic convergence theory of communication to explain the process in relation to fantasy themes and chains.
Bormann (1985) explains:

Symbolic convergence theory has a three-part structure.
The first part deals with the discovery and arrangement of recurring communicative forms and patterns that indicate the evolution and presence of a shared group consciousness.
The second part consists of a description of the dynamic tendencies within communication systems that explain why group consciousnesses arise, continue, decline, and disappear and the effects such group consciousness have in terms of meanings, motives, and communication within the group. The third part of the theory consists of the factors that explain why people share the fantasies they do when they do. (29).

Bormann’s (1985) symbolic convergence theory is basically an extension of his earlier works devoted to fantasy themes and rhetorical visions. He explains, “[Symbolic convergence theory] assumes that human beings are storytellers who share fantasies and thus build group consciousnesses and create social realities” (34).

Bormann’s work provides the rhetorical critic with an invaluable tool for understanding the communicative process of fantasies and how they bring people together. In addition to Bormann’s research and writings, it was helpful to examine how different critics used fantasy theme analysis to understand different rhetorical visions, communities, and movements. By exploring how fantasy
theme analyses applied to the Floyd Collins story, I was able to gain an enhanced perspective into the Collins’ rhetoric itself.

One of the most interesting works I discovered while searching for fantasy theme analyses was a doctoral dissertation that examined the rhetorical vision of a decade’s worth of country-western songs. Initially, I thought that the study might provide some modest insight into the popularity of the million-selling record “The Death of Floyd Collins.” However, in addition to shedding insight on the song, the work provided stimulating insight into the overall fantasy theme concept. Winebrenner (1985) states, “Popular songs express personal fantasies which have gone public. An audience which accepts a song is one which finds in the song a psychodynamic common ground” (22). The rhetoric produced on the Collins tragedy is much the same, with audiences accepting various "slants" to the Collins story.

Winebrenner discovers three common rhetorical visions in country-western music. He explains:

A heroic fantasy introduces the dramatis personae consistently cast in country narratives and identifies presumptions about heroic people and heroic behavior. A romantic fantasy examines the ways country characters relate to each other in romantic settings, addressing the role of romance in country life and introducing conventions for loving. Finally, an escape fantasy reveals the ways country characters see and relate to the world in which they live. (211)
It is interesting to note that two of the dominant rhetorical visions are the same for Winebrenner's study and also my own: the heroic and the romantic. Winebrenner states, "The heroic fantasy is revealed through contrasting characterizations of esteemed and contemptible country personae" (211). Simply put, there cannot be a hero without a villain. Winebrenner's commentary in this area was extremely helpful when applied to the Floyd Collins saga. It helped me to gain a better perspective on the polarities of the Collins' fantasies. For example, in some of the fantasies, Collins was "good" and many of the attempted rescuers were "bad" and vice-versa. For one person or group to be perceived favorably in a fantasy, another person or group must be perceived negatively.

Another interesting similarity in Winebrenner's findings and my own in the heroic fantasy deals with the concept of the "villain." Winebrenner states, "Villains either reject heroic values or they are responsible for the plot devices which antagonize the heroes. Thus, contemptible characters are cast as city folk, dissenters and powerbrokers" (216). In the fantasy that cast Floyd Collins as tragic hero, the "outlanders" (persons not from the immediate cave area) were portrayed as being the enemy. These "city folk" were depicted as not having practical cave knowledge and experience; as a result, in the heroic Collins fantasy, these outsiders were held responsible for bungling the rescue and causing Floyd's death.

Floyd Collins entrapment was a tragic story and, according to Winebrenner, country-western songs are much the same. He explains:

The composite drama of country music is set in a here-and-now
and filled with the kinds of disasters and injustices which fuel a sense of powerlessness and victimization. However, the sheer volume of misfortune encountered by the characters who act out the drama dwarfs that experienced by persons who share the vision. Those who share the vision become members of a symbolic community who...through their sharing, aid and comfort each other. (231).

This concept related especially well to the Collins tragedy in that the entrapment addressed the universal fear of being buried alive. Winebrenner raises the interesting point that by sharing in such a horrific drama, members of rhetorical communities are able to work through some of their own innate fears.

Materials

A wide variety of materials dealing with the Collins tragedy were examined and used to construct the four named rhetorical visions: Collins as tragic hero, Collins as victim of greed, Collins as devoted suitor, and Collins as uneducated hillbilly. Countless communication media have been employed to produce the rhetoric of the tragedy--newspapers, magazines, books, poems, songs, reports and productions for radio, television, and film, and various other forms. The primary focus of this thesis was on the print media due to its greater accessibility.

The quintessential publication about the Floyd Collins tragedy is the book *Trapped! The Story of Floyd Collins* by Murray and Brucker (1999). Their extensive research, interviews, and actual cave exploration led to the most
comprehensive and historically accurate account of the events surrounding the entrapment. Although *Trapped!* is primarily a retelling of the story, it is vital because it is based on fact rather than fantasy. It was used extensively as a reference for determining authenticity in much of the rhetoric of the tragedy.

Another important reference is the article "Dark Carnival: The Death and Transfiguration of Floyd Collins" produced by Lesy (1976). In it, Lesy examines the influence of newspaper reports about the entrapment on the American public. His article was the first to focus on the media’s role in the Collins’ tragedy. Although he does not apply Bormann's fantasy theme analysis, he explores some of the same basic principles such as a "slanted" story. For example, Lesy states, "Each of the local papers that had carried Floyd's story used his predicament as an occasion to tell moral tales" and "The Courier's version of events resembled a pleasant fairy tale in which a worthy man was helped by a young prince...." (45).

A similar type of work is Zaniello's (1994) "The Odyssey of Floyd Collins in Literature, Film, and After Death." Zaniello's main focus is an examination of how Collins' story influenced Robert Penn Warren's novel *The Cave*. Zaniello states:

Stories about Collins when he was alive were quickly absorbed into contemporary Appalachian folklore--mostly such traditional narratives as the sorrowful true love from the hills waiting for her man's return, his faithful dog's nose pointed at the cave, [and] his loss of faith and its restoration...Warren built on the considerable folklore of Collins' imprisonment and even...a few of the details
of his fabled journey after death...(86-87).

Method

With Murray and Brucker's work as a factual reference point and Lesy's and Zaniello's as analytical references, the other sources that I focused on were pieces of the rhetoric itself. Newspaper articles, magazines and books provided the primary sources for the print rhetoric of the Collins’ entrapment; television programs, films, music and other materials were used as well. From my sources, I was able to, as Bormann (1972) puts it, "...view motives as embedded in the rhetorical vision rather than hidden in the skulls and viscera of people..." (407). Simply put, I examined the rhetoric of the Floyd Collins tragedy and from it identified dominant rhetorical visions and fantasy themes. The rhetoric provided a tangible source for determining the fidelity of these insights.

Bormann provides basic guidelines to follow when producing a fantasy theme analysis. Bormann's (1972) three-part plan will be implemented in this thesis. The design is as follows:

1. The critic begins by collecting evidence related to the manifest content of the communication.... He [or she] discovers and describes the narrative and dramatic materials that have chained out for those who participate in the rhetorical vision.

2. When a critic has gathered a number of dramatic incidents he [or she] can look for patterns of characterizations...of dramatic situations and actions and of setting...
3. The critic must then creatively reconstruct the rhetorical vision from the representative fantasy chains...(401).

After the rhetorical visions were constructed, thorough examination and analysis were carried out. Specifically, I examined how the rhetorical visions surrounding the Floyd Collins' tragedy influenced the perpetuation of the story and contributed to its continued audience appeal.

Outline

This thesis was organized in a chronological manner with chapters focusing on important time spans both during and after the tragedy. This organization preserved the continuity of the events, made the drama easier to understand, and enabled me to compare different forms of rhetoric during a specific time period, revealing differences in perception and interpretation for the same event or events.

This first chapter titled "Through the Valley" provides crucial background information on Floyd Collins' entrapment and efforts to save him. It also serves as the rationale for the thesis, a review of literature and materials, and description of the methods used in the work.

The second chapter titled "In the Presence of Mine Enemies" focuses on January 30, 1925 through February 18, 1925. These dates cover the time from the day when Collins became trapped until the day after his funeral. It was on January 30 that Floyd Collins became trapped in what has come to be known as "Sand Cave." On February 16, rescuers finally broke through to Collins, only to find him dead, with reports of Collins' funeral running on February 18. This span is
significant in that there was direct contact with Collins up until the fifth day of his entrapment when a cave-in was reported; after that, little new factual information was available. From February 6 on, the number of fictitious reports increased tremendously, thereby causing much conflict between “locals” and “outsiders” and also causing the origination of many fantasies.

The third chapter titled “Restoreth My Soul” focuses on the first forty years following the tragedy, from the day after Collins’ funeral on up to the year 1965. Although this chapter covers a wide span of time, it became apparent that much of the rhetoric produced during these years promoted many of the same fantasies, thereby keeping the Collins’ story alive. Significant works of each era are examined.

The fourth chapter titled “In the Paths of Righteousness” covers the Collins rhetoric from 1965 on up to the present time. The year 1979 was an especially pivotal one for the Collins’ story because the first edition of the book *Trapped! The Story of Floyd Collins* was published that year. This publication revealed many of the historical inaccuracies and also uncovered many new factual elements to the saga. It was the first major study on Collins that presented the entire story in historically accurate detail, thereby clarifying many misconceptions from previous works. Its influence on the fantasies surrounding the Collins’ entrapment is still evident today.

The fifth chapter titled “My Cup Runneth Over” provides a thematic review and a summary of my findings. It also draws conclusions from the fantasy
theme analysis and presents its implications. Lastly, it makes recommendations for future studies in this area.
Chapter II

IN THE PRESENCE OF MINE ENEMIES

Floyd Collins was a caver. He felt at home underground, in passages that many would find to be claustrophobic. Caves were an obsession with Collins who spent much of his time crawling through and exploring their chambers. Whereas many property owners in the cave region feverishly looked for caves with the sole purpose of converting them into tourist attractions, Floyd Collins, by all accounts, genuinely enjoyed the adventure of it all.

Collins did, however, also see the potential profitability of caves. The thought of actually being able to make a successful living doing what he loved drove Collins—he was constantly looking for the cave that would provide a more affluent life for himself and his family. With his family’s Crystal Cave being almost five miles past Mammoth Cave down a twisting dirt road, the Collins family saw little profit from its tours. Floyd thought that the key to success was to find a cave that was both right ahead of Mammoth and also along the main road; thus tourists would pass by his cave on their way to and from Mammoth Cave, increasing their chances of visiting Collins’ cave in addition to, or perhaps instead of, Mammoth itself.

This pattern of thought led Collins to establish a deal with some local farmers who owned land close to the main road into Mammoth Cave. Collins made a deal with Bee Doyle and two other neighboring landowners, Ed Estes and Jesse Lee, that if he located a cave suitable for tours on their properties, the men would be partners in a caving business.
Murray and Brucker explain:

Floyd offered to search their land for a cavern in return for one-half the profits. The three farmers were to split the remaining half between them. Floyd would conduct the exploration; while he worked they were to give him room and board on a ‘week-about’ basis… [Doyle, Lee, and Estes] feared that if they did not [agree to the deal] a caver of Floyd’s reputation would easily get others to sponsor him. (p. 49)

Collins began this new business venture by exploring Bee Doyle’s property first. He quickly located an underground opening (what later came to be known as “Sand Cave”) and began digging to determine where the passage might lead. Collins was convinced that many, if not all, of the region’s underground passageways were interconnected and that if he pushed on far enough this opening could lead to something big—huge rooms, impressive stalactites and stalagmites, beautiful gypsum flowers—in other words a cave that would rival Mammoth.

"In a Lonely Sandstone Cave"

On January 30, 1925, Collins had been working in Sand Cave for about three weeks when he set out for another routine day of digging and exploration. It was while attempting to exit Sand Cave midday Friday that he became trapped. While crawling up an extremely narrow passageway, Collins pushed his lantern up ahead of himself when it suddenly tipped over and went out. He squeezed his arms down to his sides and began attempting to push himself up the tight fissure
in the darkness. While kicking with his legs in an effort to move upward, he
dislodged a large rock that pinned his left ankle. He became confined, as if in a
straitjacket, in total darkness with only slight movement possible in his left hand.
Collins spent the rest of the day and the entire night stuck in the cold, wet,
confining underground tunnel. No one knew he was there.

When Collins did not return Friday evening, no one was overly concerned
about his absence; Floyd was known to crawl around caves for hours on end.
When the Doyle household awoke Saturday morning, however, and discovered
that Collins still was not accounted for, concern grew. Bee Doyle, Doyle's son
Jewell, and Ed Estes went to the opening of Sand Cave and began calling for
Floyd. When they received no answer, Jewell, the smallest of the men, cautiously
crawled back into the opening and called out to the trapped man. Floyd weakly
replied that he was trapped; he then asked the young man to get Johnnie Gerald
for help and he also asked for his brothers Homer and Marshall. Collins hoped
that this three-man rescue team could find a way to get him out of Sand Cave.

News of Floyd’s entrapment quickly spread through the small town of
Cave City. In the length of time it took Bee Doyle and Ed Estes to bring Marshall
Collins to Sand Cave by horseback, a small crowd had already started to gather at
the cave entrance. Marshall took advantage of the crowd and “...organized a
rescue party from among the twenty-five or so persons standing about in the wind
and cold “ (Murray and Brucker, p. 55). Although some rock was cleared,
Marshall and the makeshift rescuers accomplished little else.
Homer Collins soon arrived home from a trip to Louisville. After hearing of his brother’s plight, he quickly drove to Sand Cave and began surveying the situation. When he discovered no one had reached his brother, Homer immediately entered the cave and eventually became the first person to make it to where Collins was trapped:

A problem immediately confronted Homer that frustrated every subsequent rescuer. If a person came into the chute headfirst, he was forced to work upside down...If he dropped feetfirst, as Homer had just done, he could not bring the upper part of his body down to Floyd’s level without contorting himself into almost impossible positions. (Murray and Brucker, p. 57)

The Media Circus Comes to Town

Homer spent eight grueling hours in the cave with his brother, clearing as much rock away as possible in the claustrophobic conditions. When he came out of the cave early Sunday morning, February 1, Homer Collins discovered that reporters were on the scene. Two Kentucky newspapers, *The Courier-Journal and Times* and *The Louisville Herald-Post*, had stories called in from Cave City that made their February 1 editions. Both reports were filled with misinformation.

*The Courier-Journal* reported that Collins was "...pinned under several tons of rock..." (the actual rock that trapped Collins' ankle weighed approximately thirty pounds) and that "...the [cave] entrance had been blocked by a cave-in..." when in actuality, none had occurred (1925, February 1). Whereas these inaccuracies were relatively minor, the story published in the *Herald-Post*
claimed that Collins had recently been rescued and removed from the cave. Their report explained:

Collins, who had been pinned down in a pool of water by the falling rock, was extremely weak but still conscious, when reached. He has a broken hand, a crushed foot and severe bruises on his legs but is suffering chiefly from exhaustion. His recovery is expected. (1925, February 1)

The misinformation in these reports contributed to the confusion surrounding the details of Collins entrapment, thus setting the stage for fantasies to take flight among audiences. *The Courier-Journal* laid initial groundwork for a Collins as victim fantasy in their February 1 report by using phrases such as “helpless prisoner” and “victim” to describe Floyd Collins’ plight and by also later saying that Collins was “in intense pain” (1925, February 1). By using words and phrases that carried a connotation of victimization, reports such as these influenced some readers to view Floyd Collins’ persona as being that of a victim—weak, defenseless, and vulnerable.

Numerous papers from all over the nation began running brief reports on Collins the following day. *The Courier-Journal* continued to present Collins as being a victim, frequently referring to him as a “prisoner”; however, *The Courier-Journal* also introduced the concept of Collins as hero. The February 2 story explains, “Collins, despite the gravity of the situation, which he seems to realize as well as anyone, still is hopeful that the many workers striving to save him will succeed” (1925, February 2). The same report later describes how Collins had
been trapped in a previous caving accident for forty-eight hours and was able to escape. Similarly, their February 3 edition positively stated that Collins “...was bearing his prison with utmost fortitude” (1925, February 3). Attributing characteristics of hope, triumph and bravery to Collins set in motion a heroic fantasy.

Other papers across the country echoed the Courier by describing Collins in the same heroic manner. The Chicago Tribune reported, “The last rescuing party to come out tonight said [Collins] was cheerful and expressed the belief that he would be rescued soon” (1925, February 3). The New York Times stated, “Collins tonight was quoted as having told a man who crawled to him that he could stay where he is for another week without particular harm to his health...” and later “Collins...remains optimistic despite the many failures...” (1925, February 3). Again, these statements portray Collins as being hopeful and brave amidst horrible conditions.

**Rescue Efforts Proceed**

Rescue efforts continued into the next day with workers clearing as much rock out of the passageway as possible. Curious onlookers as well as numerous new reporters were quickly showing up at Sand Cave. A prominent Louisville native made his first appearance that same day--Lieutenant Robert Burdon from the city’s fire department. Primarily seeking a promotion from a successful rescue, Burdon volunteered to bring the department’s compressed-air drill to assist efforts.
Burdon tried to take over rescue efforts upon arrival, planning to sink a shaft in order to reach Collins. Homer and Marshall Collins, as well as recent arrival on the scene Johnnie Gerald (a friend and caving companion to Collins), quickly rejected Burdon’s ideas. The three men explained that the geological characteristics of Sand Cave would not provide enough stability for a rescue shaft.

Burdon then devised a plan to pull Collins out using a harness and rope. Gerald protested and refused to participate in what he saw as a barbaric attempt, thus beginning a volatile relationship with Burdon. Lieutenant Burdon eventually convinced a weary Homer to try this method. The plan failed miserably and caused Floyd intense pain and anguish.

At this point, Johnnie Gerald, along with the Collins brothers, adopted the role of “rescue leader.” He believed frequent trips by inexperienced people weakened the passages leading to Collins; therefore, one of his first decisions restricted “outlanders” from entering the cave, citing their limited knowledge of caves and caving. In effect, Gerald clearly drew a line between the locals and the outsiders. Above ground, the conditions grew more hostile. Fights between the natives and the outlanders occurred frequently, as did excessive drinking among the growing crowd of onlookers.

**Interest in Collins’ Story Continues to Grow**

Many newspapers continued to portray Collins as being a tragic hero. *The Atlanta Constitution* referred to Collins as having an “...iron nerve” (1925, February 4) and *The New York Times* said that Floyd Collins was “...ready for anything and once more radiating confidence” (1925, February 4). Likewise, *The
Philadelphia Inquirer used a quotation from Collins’ father Lee to further enhance Floyd’s heroic persona. Mr. Collins explained:

'There is a kind of feeling in the blood that gets into a fellow when he is discovering things in a cave. It makes him go anywhere. It must be the thrill that Columbus felt when he discovered America.'

(1925, February 4)

The inclusion of Lee Collins’ description of his son in the report is important in that it illustrates Bormann’s concept of interpretive framing. Without question, Lee Collins made many statements that day regarding his son and his entrapment; however, by including this particular one, The Philadelphia Inquirer encourages its readers to view Collins as an energetic explorer, a hero, and a modern-day Columbus.

Whereas The Philadelphia Inquirer used subtle interpretive framing to present Collins as a hero in their report for the day, The Courier-Journal opted for a more direct approach. William Burke “Skeets” Miller, their primary reporter on the scene, repeatedly crawled down into Sand Cave to help with feeding Collins and to assist in his rescue; while underground, Miller would also have conversations with the trapped man. Miller went beyond the conventional "objective" reporting and included his own thoughts and feelings in his account for Wednesday, February 4. Mr. Miller’s report states:

Death holds no terror for Floyd Collins, he told me when I fed him tonight, more than 115 hours after he was trapped in Sand Cave, but he does not expect to die in the immediate future. ‘I believe I
would go to Heaven,’ Collins said as I placed a bottle of milk to his lips, ‘but I can feel that I am to be taken out alive and—with both of my feet’....It is terrible inside. The cold, dirty water numbs [myself and other rescuers] as soon as we start in. We have come to dread it, but each of us tell [sic] ourselves that our suffering is as nothing compared to Collins’... (1925, February 4)

Presenting Floyd Collins as being both brave and hopeful under such terrible circumstances further perpetuated Collins' image as a hero. Miller’s inclusion of Collins' statement about going to Heaven also contributed to readers perceiving Floyd Collins as being a hero. Heroes are regarded as being “good,” and many readers naturally presumed that Collins must be morally upright (as is the classic hero) based upon his personal belief that upon death he would go to Heaven. *The Courier-Journal* further contributed to Floyd Collins' heroic image by reporting in an accompanying article that “[Collins] suffers, it seems, as only a superman could suffer” (1925, February 4).

Possibly influenced by Collins’ comments regarding Heaven the previous day, the February 5 edition of *The Louisville Herald-Post* printed an article with the headline “Collins is Converted by Terrible Experience.” The story detailed how Floyd Collins had experienced religious salvation and found the Lord while underground. The article quoted Lee Collins as saying, “Upon her deathbed Floyd’s mother implored him to get converted. And now at last he has fulfilled her wish. He is going to his mother in heaven” (1925, February 5).
Upon initial examination, the story appears to promote the heroic Collins fantasy but upon closer review, it encourages a different perception. Simply put, the article reports that Collins came to know God only after he was trapped, meaning that he was an unbeliever when he entered Sand Cave. Floyd’s father Lee purportedly described how Floyd did not honor his own dying mother’s request for him to “convert,” only choosing to do so when he was facing death himself. The same story went on to suggest that Floyd Collins was losing his sanity, describing him having “…incoherent mutterings that suggested a breaking mind” (1925, February 5). The Herald-Post report was one of the first to present Collins in a negative manner, hinting that Floyd Collins may have been a victim, but not an entirely innocent one.

The Courier-Journal printed an accompanying article that same day that attempted to establish a new “hero” at Sand Cave. The story headlined “Skeets the First is Cave City Ruler” reported the following: “Cave City is ‘Skeets’ crazy. In fact if Cave City were a kingdom, ‘Skeets’ could be the reigning monarch, without the slightest hint of revolt among his loyal subjects” (1925, February 5). The story received mixed reviews from readers. Murray and Brucker state: Fittingly, in the midst of all this personal praise, it was Miller’s interviews with Collins more than anything else that continued to remind everyone that the man with the most guts was not a young newspaperman nor any other rescuer, but the hapless victim who still lay trapped and buried after four horrible days. He was still the central figure in the story emanating from Sand Cave. (p. 113)
The Courier-Journal printed another of “Skeets” Miller’s interviews with Collins alongside their story about the reporter himself. In the report, the trapped man describes his thoughts while confined in the cave. Floyd Collins is quoted as saying:

‘Surely,’ I thought, ‘no man was ever trapped like this.’

I prayed as hard as I could. I begged God to send help to me….Sunday night I slept some. I dreamed of angels and I awoke praying…I have faced death before. It doesn’t frighten me. But it is so long. Oh God be merciful….I keep praying. I say ‘Oh Lord, Dear Lord, Gracious Lord, Jesus All-Powerful, get me out if it is Thy will, but your will be done.’ I know I am going to get out. I feel it. Something tells me to be brave and I’m going to be….tell everybody outside that I love every one of them and I’m happy because so many are trying to help me. (1925, February 5)

By using Floyd Collins’ own words in the story, the article not only presents Collins as being a hero through his hope, bravery, and faith; it also allows the reader to perceive him as an actual human being. Unfortunately, this was one of the few final communications with Collins. On the fifth day of his entrapment, a cave-in reportedly sealed up the passageway in which he was trapped and cut off communication.

The State Takes Over Rescue Efforts

Due to growing crowds above ground, Cave City officials requested state aid to coordinate rescue efforts and assist in crowd control. By Thursday
morning, February 5, both guardsmen and an official rescue leader, Lieutenant Governor Henry H. Denhardt, had taken over. Against much opposition from the locals, Denhardt decided to blast an alternate shaft in order to reach Collins.

Workers began the tedious process of digging out the alternate shaft, but there was no major progress or new developments in the rescue. When the reported cave-in cut off communication with Collins, reporters found themselves with a nation hungry to hear more from the trapped man. With Floyd Collins no longer having a "voice" of his own, reporters began attributing new traits to his character, thus building on existing fantasies or establishing new ones with the public.

**Creative Reporting**

Some papers began elaborating on Collins' portrayal as victim by suggesting that Floyd had lost his mind while underground. *The Louisville Herald-Post* reported, "With consciousness waning or mercifully gone, and with sanity certainly broken, the man remains rigid in a form-fitting grip of rock..." (1925, February 6). Likewise, an article in *The Los Angeles Times* states, "...if Floyd Collins is not dead he will be a hopeless, helpless lunatic for life" (1925, February 6). The same story went on to describe Johnnie Gerald's exit from Sand Cave prior to the reported cave in:

As the wiry little product of the hills of old Kentucky slowly inched his way from [Collins], in his ears rang the horrible laughter of a maniac, the voice of a man of steel who had boasted he could live two weeks in the hole but who had now
been broken by the underground world he had loved. (1925, February 6)

By using phrases such as "hopeless lunatic" and by describing Collins as laughing maniacally, these reports cast Floyd in an unsympathetic light. Rather than explaining how, under the circumstances, most individuals would experience mental anguish and exhaustion, reports focused instead on dramatics. Readers who accepted this particular type of victim fantasy believed that Collins had become a raving, deranged madman while underground.

Another new facet to the Collins as victim fantasy also began appearing in newspapers at this time—the element of greed. By suggesting that Collins' desire for fortune led him to take unnecessary risks, some began to perceive that Collins was receiving his comeuppance and seemingly justifying his entrapment as a type of punishment. *The Chicago Tribune* reported:

...Floyd Collins dared death for a fortune....It is the life dream from boyhood of every man hereabouts to find a cave on his farm....That has been Floyd Collins' dream, too, and he thought he had discovered it....Death lurks at every slippery bend in the darkness. The only problem is to make your discovery and your fortune before the moment when nature shifts a ten ton boulder [sic] half an inch. (1925, February 6)

Reports that Floyd Collins “dared death for a fortune” may have led many readers to perceive Collins as both reckless and materialistic, caring more about potential wealth than his own personal safety. *The Louisville Herald-Post* also
published a story of this nature claiming that Collins was "forewarned by nature of the dangers that existed..." and later that "[Collins] was to share whatever profits might accrue [from a cave discovery.] That's why he went in the hole" (1925, February 6).

A Love Story?

Not all of Floyd Collins’ “new” newspaper portrayals were negative. Stories began appearing that presented Collins as a devoted suitor for his one true love. *The Louisville Herald-Post* printed a brief article headlined “Collins’ Bride To Be Comes To Sand Cave.” The article reported:

A rickety old taxicab jolted its way over rough roads ten miles into the country tonight and brought back a weeping girl. The girl was Alma Clark, 31, and today was to have been her wedding day if fate had not intervened. The driver of the taxicab stopped beside a long line of automobiles parked at the roadside. He assisted the girl for a few hundred feet thru a muddy field and down a moss-covered cliff to a point near the entrance of Sand Cave. She bent over the dark opening, ‘Floyd,’ she called. ‘Floyd, F-l-o-y-d,’ and then, ‘Floyd my husband,’ and she fell into a faint. (1925, February 6)

*The New York Times* printed a similar story that claimed, “In a log cabin behind Floyd Collins’ prison, a mountain woman waits for him...The girl, Miss Alma Clark, was his sweetheart and they planned to wed...as soon as Floyd had won his fortune by his cave discoveries” (1925, February 6). In a related article,
The Park City Daily News credits the love of Miss Clark as being a life-sustaining force for the trapped man. The story suggests, “And this may be why Floyd Collins wouldn't give up his fight for life when he knew the fight for life seemed lost....It may reveal how Collins endured torture with a smile at times...” (1925, February 6).

The emergence of articles about Alma Clark was significant for several reasons. Obviously, these stories put forth a new romantic persona for Collins, casting him as a devoted suitor. This fantasy allowed people who might not have been interested in the events otherwise a chance to embrace them as a tragic love story. For example, whereas male readers may have been interested in the “rugged” aspects of the tragedy from the beginning, this new angle allowed for increased interest in female readers. Secondly, this fantasy borrowed some momentum from the “victim of greed” perspective. Persons who had previously accepted this interpretation had another alternative—they could still view Collins’ plight as being driven by the desire for money, but in this fantasy it was not for his own fortune; it was so that he could provide a suitable home for his future wife.

It is unclear as to who initially started the Alma Clark stories. Her name, perhaps was given to or overheard by a reporter. Whatever the reason, the stories circulated rapidly. They were also deceptive. Regarding the historical accuracy of the Alma Clark stories, Murray and Brucker explain:

All this was interesting but hardly factual. The Clarks did live eight miles from Sand Cave and had a daughter, Alma, who was
seventeen....She thought of [Collins] as an ‘old man’ like her own father and never as a sweetheart. Once, when he brought her some candy from Munfordville, she refused to accept it so as not to be embarrassed by friends her own age....More significant, at no time did Alma appear at the Sand Cave rescue site. Her activities there were entirely figments of journalistic imaginations. (p. 159)

Collins’ Character Is Reflected In Others

Just as reporters used Alma Clark stories to suggest a romantic facet to Collins’ persona, correspondents also used stories on other area inhabitants to reflect aspects of the trapped man’s character. When no longer able to communicate with Collins directly, The Courier-Journal’s “Skeets” Miller was able to use himself as a source. By using his own recollections, Miller continued to encourage readers to view Collins as he himself did—a hero. Miller states, “I close my eyes and again vividly, I see Floyd Collins as I crawl and squirm over him. I feel anew the thrill that his prayer sent to me...I come to know as the picture swims before me how much I admired the man who lived through torture where others would have died” (1925, February 6).

Many papers of the day focused on Collins’ family and friends in order to perpetuate the “uneducated hillbilly” fantasy theme surrounding Floyd. The basic premise is that if these people are all ignorant hill-folk, then the same could be assumed of Floyd. The San Francisco Chronicle printed one such story, an interview (which Murray and Brucker assert to be entirely fictitious) with Jane
Collins, Floyd’s stepmother. According to the article, Jane Collins said that Floyd had a premonition of his entrapment just before it happened.

The story quotes Jane Collins as saying:

‘[Floyd] came down in the mornin’ … and said to me: ‘Lor’, Ma, I got three days more work in that cave, and Lor’ how I wish it was over. I been a-dreamin’ of bein’ caught in some rocks and some men a-clawin’ at me.’ ‘And I says to him: ‘You stay home here today. We ain’t got no wood chopped’. (1925, February 7)

Similarly, The Washington Post described Collins’ stepmother as a “tiny wrinkled crone” who had “the sagged shoulders that years behind the plow on the rocky Kentucky hillsides give its women.” The same article also goes on to quote Mrs. Collins’ dialectally when she uses the phrase “furriners from the outside” to describe persons from beyond the immediate cave area (1925, February 7).

The New York Times also contributed to the hillbilly image of Floyd Collins by using the terms “hillmen” and “Kentucky hill people” to describe area residents and by describing the “…ice-cold mountain water” running down into Sand Cave (1925, February 8). Such expressions conjure up images of Appalachia and the stereotypical hillbilly. It should be noted that the geographical structure of the land in the cave region is relatively flat; in fact, the county where Sand Cave is located was named “Barren” because of its lack of large hilly areas. Regardless of this fact, many reporters used such wording, thus advancing a negative perception of both Collins and area residents.
It should be noted that the locals did not respond favorably to such reports.

In a taped interview from the Cave Research Foundation’s oral histories, Cave City resident Mrs. Earl Dickey describes how one particular reporter from Chicago promoted negative stereotyping of area residents. Mrs. Dickey explains:

She was reporting about all of us going to Sunday school and church, talking about the natives, and we felt that she was talking about us. We just didn’t go to church like she said—she said we walked to church holding hands and barefooted and there wasn’t any truth in it. They just [made up] lies...like we’re all barefoot and pregnant. (1964, May 29)

Most Kentucky papers did not promote the hillbilly fantasy as many of the out of state papers did. In fact, *The Courier-Journal* increased its framing of Floyd Collins as being a brave, moral hero. Without question, the paper was influenced by its desire to present its own heroic reporter “Skeets” Miller favorably; therefore, the man Miller was trying to save needed to be valiant as well. *The Courier* described Collins as “...a stalwart young Kentuckian, adventuresome in spirit and daring in exploration.” An accompanying article described Collins before the cave-in:

Floyd Collins from his prison chamber prayed for freedom, for strength to bear the burden, but he realized escape was not assured and he also prayed: ‘But if my death in Sand Cave be Thy will, Thy will be done.’ (1925, February 8)
Again, *The Courier* portrays Floyd Collins heroically by showing him as a religious man bravely facing death. Similarly, *The Indianapolis News* presented Collins as a brave and heroic explorer. Their report states, “There are always those who will dare for the sake of accomplishment. Without them there would be little in the way of sustained progress. The elemental can sometimes be bad…but often…it is glorious” (1925, February 8).

Carnival Sunday

As the slow process of digging an alternate shaft to reach Floyd Collins continued, people from all over the United States were wanting to know more and more about the trapped man. Many of these people decided that rather than simply reading about Sand Cave, they would actually go there and see it for themselves. Crowd size had been a constant problem beforehand, but when *The Courier-Journal* and *The Louisville Herald-Post* both published driving directions to Sand Cave in their Sunday, February 8 morning editions, crowd size multiplied dramatically. The day was nicknamed “Carnival Sunday” because Sand Cave more closely resembled a county fair than a rescue site on February 8.

People from all over the country flocked to Sand Cave in droves. Curious onlookers, reporters, and vendors flooded both the rescue site and the nearby town. Cave City’s two hotels were overflowing with rooms filled beyond capacity; restaurants and stores were quickly depleted of food. Properties suffered damages from both the tremendous tourist traffic and carelessness. Crime, as well as public intoxication, rapidly increased as thousands of outsiders flooded the tiny town.
Murray and Brucker describe the massive crowds:

The actual number of individuals attending the site on Sunday was a matter of conjecture. The low estimate was ten thousand and the high fifty thousand...In any case, the presence of so many people at so remote a spot stretched the credulity of even the most unimpressionable observer and easily made Sand Cave, Kentucky, the most popular and best known place in America on Sunday, February 8. (p. 170)

As reports on Carnival Sunday filled newspapers the following day, the fantasy of Collins as victim was indirectly encouraged. By detailing how thousands of people were picnicking, drinking, and playing above ground while Collins lay trapped, many readers found themselves having a deeper sympathy for the trapped man. Many viewed Collins as being a victim of the insensitivity of curiosity seekers and greedy vendors in attendance.

*The Louisville Herald-Post* reported, “Fifteen thousand men, women and children sat on the wooded hillside surrounding Sand Cave this afternoon....They came because human morbidity impelled them...” (1925, February 9). Similarly, *The Philadelphia Inquirer* printed, “It was a holiday crowd, by whom the imprisoned man had largely been forgotten, and whose interest was in the spectacle brought about by the rescue efforts” (1925, February 9). *The Washington Post* stated, “The ghoul who blows fast upon the trail of every disaster, has reached Cave City, the profiteer” (1925, February 9).
Likewise, *The New York Times* described the scene:

The rugged road from Cave City to Sand Cave was packed with cars all day. Lines of automobiles facing each other made a midway from the high road to the cavern. It looked like a country fair. Hot dog vendors, dealers in apples and soda pop, sandwich makers and jugglers vied for nickels and dimes of the thousands who visited Sand Cave...Down this lane raced the thousands, eager for a morbid peek at the rocky prison. (1925, February 9)

Descriptions of those above ground as “ghouls” and “morbid” unquestionably cast Collins in the role of victim. Again, in this particular fantasy he is a victim of greed; however, unlike the fantasies that had Collins as a victim of his own desire, here he is a victim of others.

**Rumors of Possible Hoax**

Collins’ portrayal as victim on February 9 was not universal; in fact, several of the very same newspapers that published sympathetic stories about Carnival Sunday also printed accounts of the entrapment possibly being staged. An Associated Press story was printed in *The Louisville Herald-Post* and countless other papers across the nation that asserted many of the “cave country folk” believed that Floyd Collins was not actually trapped inside Sand Cave, that he had staged the entire event just to draw attention to his family’s Crystal Cave. The story also claimed, “The near neighbors of the Collins family are outspoken in their characterization of Floyd Collins as a shiftless fellow, supported by his
father, altho [sic] he is 38 years old, who spent all his time crawling around the numerous tunnels and caverns of the region” (1925, February 9).

A similar story in The Chicago Tribune described rumors that “...[Collins] may have been in the cave for some days, [but] is no longer there and has disappeared by a rear exit to some other hiding place in the hills” (1925, February 9). Both the published and on-site rumors of an alleged hoax did bring about the announcement of a military court of inquiry into Collins’ entrapment. The probe forced many individuals to stop assisting in rescue efforts so they could testify before the court in Cave City the following day.

On February 10, The Courier-Journal published a statement issued by Kentucky Governor Fields in which he blamed the media for instigating the probe. He is quoted as stating:

I keenly regret the unfortunate A.P. [Associated Press] dispatch from Cave City, under date of February 8, to the effect that many people of Cave City and vicinity believe that Floyd Collins is not entombed in Sand Cave...I am reliably informed that at least five persons reached Collins in Sand Cave and saw him in his unfortunate condition...this unwarranted dispatch, whether through the ignorance or evil design of its author, can but have an ill effect upon the morale of those engaged...to reach the entombed man. (1925, February 10)
Alternate Shaft Inches Toward Completion

Amidst all the rumors and controversy surrounding Collins’ status, the digging of an alternate shaft to reach the trapped man continued. Many asserted that Collins could still be alive inside the chamber, his life sustained by water dripping down from the cave entrance. A light bulb that had been brought down before the cave-in to keep Collins warm was used to conduct experiments on Floyd’s health status. The wires running down to the bulb were used to “listen” for slight changes in the position of the bulb. Radio experts claimed that because of the frequency and duration of these changes, they could be representative of Collins’ breathing patterns. As late as February 9, (ten days after becoming trapped) these radio tests indicated that Collins was still breathing.

A Few Sensational Stories

During this time, press coverage shifted more toward the military inquiry and the progress of the shaft rather than on Collins himself. Over the course of the next few days, daily transcriptions of testimony were printed in newspapers as were progress reports on the alternate shaft. Occasionally interspersed among these reports was a sensational story that promoted a fantasy theme. One such story dealt with a reporter’s receiving a death threat. The note containing the threat was allegedly scrawled on a piece of paper and thrown into the reporter’s hotel room. Numerous papers, including The Chicago Tribune printed the following, reportedly written by someone who believed local resident Johnnie Gerald was being portrayed negatively:

If you don’t quit writing up Jonny Geral [sic]...we will
shoot your head off he never done no one harm take our advice and get out of town or you are gone to wake up dead. (1925, February 10)

Focus on this story helped to promote the Collins as hillbilly fantasy for several reasons. First, the repeated misspellings and grammatical errors indicate the writer to be of limited intelligence, with ignorance being a trait of a stereotypical rural Kentuckian. Secondly, in the author’s desire to protect Johnnie Gerald, an area resident, it would indicate that the author, too, is from the cave area. Lastly, threatening violence and death against the reporter reinforced the hillbilly “shotgun-logic image. Although Collins obviously was not connected with the writing of the note in any way, he too is associated with the cave area and with Johnnie Gerald, linking him to the same type of stereotypical characterization.

Another sensational story that emerged during this relatively slow news period was about a man in Kansas who claimed to be Floyd Collins. The Courier-Journal reported:

A man claiming to be Floyd Collins, prisoner of Sand Cave, has put in his appearance at Haddam, Kan., according to a telegram received here tonight by Lieutenant Gov. Henry H. Denhardt. The message says: Floyd Collins here has identified himself by a scar on left of umbellicus about two or three inches long....Weight 144 pounds and five feet five inches in height....We are holding him here until we hear from you. Has no money. (1925, February 12)
Although the man in Kansas did not match Collins’ physical description in any way and upon investigation proved to be a complete fraud, the fact that the story was printed gave credibility to the “victim of greed” fantasy. Questions over Floyd Collins’ whereabouts made rumors of a hoax seem even more plausible. The final line of the telegram “Has no money” reinforces the idea that Collins was perhaps motivated to participate in a hoax to gain wealth.

A story printed in *The Boston Globe* also reinforced Collins image as a victim, but on two different levels. The first part of the story tells of a “vaudeville man from Chicago” who arrived on the scene ready to offer Floyd Collins five hundred dollars a week to tour with his company if he was brought out alive. In this story, money again appears to be a possible motivator for Collins’ plight. The second part of the story tells of another arrival to Sand Cave—some undertakers from Bowling Green vying for the job of embalming Collins, should he turn up dead. The story explains, “Dr. William Hazlett of Chicago…declared the solicitation made by the undertakers was the worst inhumanity that he had ever heard of” (1925, February 14). Here, too, Floyd Collins is seen as a victim of greed, but it is the greed of others rather than his own.

*The San-Francisco Chronicle* published a story that reinforced Collins’ hillbilly fantasy in their February 16 edition. The article quotes C.L. Owen, an anthropologist who met Collins during a three-year stay in Kentucky, as saying that he believed it possible for Collins to still be alive inside Sand Cave. Owen states, “I found people of Collins’ type a marvelous study…A higher intelligence, suffering from the thoughts of the danger and horror, could not survive so long”
(1925, February 16). Obviously Owen considers the “Collins’ type” to be a person of lower intelligence. In other words, the anthropologist believes that because of his ignorance (a hillbilly trait) and inability to comprehend the dire circumstances of his entrapment, Collins might still be alive.

“Kiss Me Goodbye”

The majority of the testimony at the military court of inquiry had already been printed in previous articles. One new story that emerged, however, centered on attempted rescuer Everett Maddox. It came out during the military inquiry that Maddox had the final face-to-face contact with Collins prior to the reported cave-in and fulfilled the trapped man’s final request. A report in *The Courier-Journal* quoted Maddox as saying:

> Early Wednesday morning...I went back to Floyd. That was before the shaft was started and while we could get through...I tried to do what I could but I couldn’t get back. Finally, Floyd said, ‘Kiss me goodbye, I am going,’ I did so and I noticed as I did one of his upper front teeth is gold...The passageway caved in a short time later. (1925, February 16)

This last act was open for many interpretations based on several different fantasy themes. Viewed from a victim fantasy perspective, Collins’ request for a kiss goodbye could be viewed as a reflection of the man’s desperate need for human contact. Viewed from a romantic fantasy perspective, Collins’ request could be perceived as a reflection of Collins’ final thoughts being of his “sweetheart,” Alma Clark. Finally, from a tragic hero perspective, Collins’
request could represent Floyd Collins’ coming to terms with his own impending death and bravely accepting the inevitable.

Maddox’s story was published on February 16, 1925. At the same time thousands of people around the country were reading his report, workers at Sand Cave were breaking through the alternate shaft, finally intersecting with Collins’ path. At around 2:00 that afternoon, Collins was finally reached. He was dead. A doctor on the scene estimated Collins to have been dead at least twenty-four hours based on the body’s condition.

News of Collins’ death broke the following day in newspapers all over the country. The vast majority of reports promoted either a victim or hero fantasy, sometimes both. Skeets Miller reported, “Earth’s barricade into Floyd Collins’ trap in Sand Cave gave way this afternoon, but the life of the prisoner was gone. Still held in the relentless grip of a natural shackle, the daring explorer is dead” (The Courier-Journal, 1925, February 17). The Chicago Tribune quoted Floyd’s father Lee Collins regarding his son’s death:

‘Well it’s all been in the hand of God from the beginning. I cannot complain of divine providence. My boy was converted down there. He asked the boys that got to him to pray for him and he would be taken care of by the Powers above. I know Floyd is with the angels.’ (1925, February 17)

Whereas Miller’s words reflect both a victim fantasy (“prison” and “shackle”) and a heroic fantasy (“daring explorer”), Mr. Collins’ use of religion to describe his son suggests a morally strong tragic hero.
Some papers, however, such as The Washington Post published stories that encouraged negative perceptions of Collins. In their story headlined “Efforts to Rescue Collins From Cave Watched by World,” the paper describes Collins by using many characteristics of the stereotypical hillbilly. For example, Collins is described as being “illiterate,” a “gaunt mountaineer,” and a “lean hill youth.” Residents of Cave City are described as “country folks of the hills.” The article goes on to reference a previous term accredited to Floyd’s stepmother Jane. The account states:

Sand Cave is nine miles south of Cave City, where every boy growing up knows that it’s either a case of going out among the ‘furriners’ and getting a job as a cave guide, or, best of all, discovering a cave for himself. (1925, February 17)

Stories such as this one encourage readers to view Floyd Collins as being more of a caricature than a person, thus seeming to make his death less significant.

A Final Report

Because of the dangers involved for rescuers in removing Collins’ corpse from Sand Cave, it was decided to leave it inside, sealing up the passageway. Therefore, the Collins family decided to have Floyd’s funeral beside the cave entrance itself. Papers were filled with descriptions of the funeral and quotations from the various preachers who spoke. Some reporters, however, used the occasion to write about Collins himself. Orville Dwyer of The Chicago Tribune reported:

So they consigned Floyd Collins’ body late today to the rocks
that claimed him, that held him fast until he died a lonely, black death, entombed alive far down in the earth, with no human voice nor hand to comfort him, no human ear to hear his futile frenzied cries—the rocks that held him so jealously even in death that it meant death itself to take him from their clutches. (1925, February 18)

In dramatizing Collins’ plight through his descriptive words, Dwyer forces the reader to perceive Collins in the role of victim. He also personifies the rock itself, giving it the human characteristic of jealousy, therefore casting it as the “villain” and Collins as its “prey.” Similarly, Courier-Journal reporter and attempted rescuer Skeets Miller casts Floyd Collins in an obvious victim role by describing Everett Maddox’s task of washing Floyd’s lifeless face:

As he worked there in the cold, clammy chamber, Maddox read on the face a story of agony and suffering and despair. As clearly as print he could read the anguish of this man who had been buried alive, who had seen cause to rejoice over what he believed was soon-to-be freedom only to be shut off in a twinkling from his friends, his relatives, and finally, life itself. (1925, February 18)

Likewise, The Louisville Herald-Post printed a colorful description of Collins’ plight as a victim. The article stated, “Never was known a doom prepared with such cunning ingenuity of torture. Inhumed on a bed of blackness...over all the ghastly, gaunt grimness of death” (1925, February 18).
Final Chapter or Chapter One?

When describing Floyd Collins’ funeral at Sand Cave, *The Chicago Tribune*’s headline read—“Simple Rites Spell Finis To Cavern Drama” (1925, February 18). Ironically, Floyd Collins’ death was just the beginning of his story. Many fantasy themes had been generated in newspaper reports during the time of his entrapment—Collins as a tragic hero, Collins as a victim of greed, Collins as a devoted suitor, and Collins as an uneducated hillbilly. Newspapers of the day had put forth many different pictures of Floyd Collins during the tragedy. What fantasies would take flight among audiences and what fantasies would fade away? By examining the first forty years following Collins’ entrapment, the answer to this question should become more apparent.
Chapter III

RESTORETH MY SOUL

During the time of his entrapment and immediately after his death, Floyd Collins was front-page news across the nation. After his funeral, however, newspaper coverage relating to Collins was practically nonexistent. The occasional story appeared, such as when Floyd’s brother Homer toured the country lecturing on the tragedy or when Skeets Miller won the Pulitzer Prize for his coverage of the Collins’ story, but stories such as these were increasingly rare.

Although newspaper reports died down quickly, Floyd Collins’ story began finding its way into other genres. Not long after Collins’ death, Louisville reporter Howard Hartley published a book on the entrapment. *The Tragedy of Sand Cave* (1925) consisted of reworked versions of stories Hartley had written during the tragedy itself (many of which contained inaccurate information).

Overly dramatic and verbose, Hartley’s work primarily presented Floyd Collins as a tragic hero, using such terms as “man of destiny” and “a true soldier of fortune” to describe him. Hartley describes Collins in the following manner:

That the teeth of the cave dragon closed upon him in Sand Cavern was the natural course of events. Floyd had often been warned and had laughed at those who feared. For his was the courage of the Vikings. They scoffed at the perils of the uncharted seas as he made light of even more fearful dangers of the land below the surface. (p. 4)
Two other books were also published around this same time: *The Official Story of Floyd Collins* (1925) and *The Entombment of Floyd Collins in Sand Cave, Kentucky* (1925). Collins’ historians Murray and Brucker describe *The Official Story of Floyd Collins* (1925) as “[containing] only a meager and error-strewn narrative, concentrating instead on a verbatim report of the testimony given in the military probe” and *The Entombment of Floyd Collins in Sand Cave, Kentucky* as being “ridiculously romantic” (p. 247).

Whereas most newspapers are read and soon discarded, the permanence of these books helped to repopularize many of the half-truths and fabrications of earlier newspaper stories. For example, many readers may have initially perceived the Collins’ tragedy as a love story, based on the “Alma Clark” articles. When that news story faded after a few days, some readers may have started to perceive Floyd Collins in a different manner, such as being a victim of his own greed. After the publication of these three books, however, and the reworking of the old fantasies (such as Collins as the devoted suitor) many readers did not know how to interpret the events. All of this new confusion regarding the details of the Collins’ tragedy merged with the previously existing chaos, thus helping to pave the way for different fantasy themes to begin chaining out through the nation.

Bormann (1972) explained, “…a person who tries to get a fantasy to chain out often uses the technique of attributing motives to characters…. [He] can characterize a hero by attributing praiseworthy motivation, or create a bad image by suggesting unsavory motives” (407). Both during and immediately after the
Floyd Collins tragedy, reporters attempted to get different fantasies to chain out with the public through newspaper articles and compilations—some of these portrayed Collins favorably while others depicted him in a negative manner. A massive amount of material had been written about the trapped man in a relatively short period of time, with much of the information being contradictory. How would the public make sense of it all? Bormann (1985) explains:

[Humans have the] tendency to try to understand events in terms of people with certain personality traits and motivations, making decisions, taking actions, and causing things to happen...

Interpreting events in terms of human action allows us to assign responsibility, to praise or blame, to arouse and propitiate guilt, to hate and to love...[fantasy themes] provide a rhetorical means for large segments of the audience to account for and explain the same experiences or events in different ways. (32)

New stories and slants appeared daily during the entrapment itself and many of these resurfaced in the books immediately following Floyd Collins' death. The nation had been flooded with practically nonstop material on the trapped man; people were reading about and discussing the crisis daily during Collins' entrapment, but the stories coming out of Sand Cave kept changing. With the cessation of news reports and the initial rush of publications, the public was able to catch its collective breath and begin to make sense of the whole saga.
“The Death of Floyd Collins”

The public’s need to interpret the Floyd Collins tragedy through different fantasy themes is apparent in the evolution of the song “The Death of Floyd Collins.” Originally produced in the spring of 1925, the song retold the Collins’ tragedy in nine verses (see Appendix A). The record was immensely popular, selling over three million copies by 1927. It presented the entrapment as a moral tale in which Collins was repeatedly warned by his stepmother and father about the dangers of caving, yet he did not listen; as a result, he perished. The final verse of the song warns young people to “get right with your Maker” and later states, “It may not be a sand cave in which we find our tomb /But at the bar of judgment we too must meet our doom” (Jenkins and Spain, 1925).

Even though an early verse of the song refers to Floyd Collins as possessing a “true and brave” heart, it is the fantasy theme of Collins’ fate being justified that dominates the lyrical content. The fantasy conveyed through the song is that Collins put himself in a dangerous position that eventually resulted in his death. Although the word “sin” is never used, the religious and moral overtones are apparent—at least in the original lyrics. Murray and Brucker explain the song’s eventual transformation:

“The Death of Floyd Collins” remained in its original form for only a very short time. Adopted by the rural and backwoods areas of the border states and upper South, it was quickly modified to suit local conditions... By the early thirties it was being sung as far west as Utah and as far north as Wisconsin. In the process, the
structure of the lyric was constantly changed. Sometimes a moral was emphasized by adding verses. Sometimes new events were inserted. In the end, no fewer than thirty-seven different versions existed. (p. 248)

Although Murray and Brucker do not utilize Bormann’s theory by name, the process they describe in the preceding section is basically the same as “chaining.” Various groups, in different parts of the country, adapted the lyrics of the song to reflect their perceptions of the Collins’ saga, thus perpetuating different fantasy themes.

Bormann (1985) explains, “The public can most easily understand disturbing issues...by placing symbolic personae in dramatic action in which they contend with other personae symbolizing other positions” (33). For instance, in the original song “The Death of Floyd Collins” the Collins’ personae symbolizes apathy both toward life and Christian principles, while his father and stepmother symbolize righteousness. In the song, Collins did not care enough about himself or his family to heed repeated warnings; consequently, through Divine judgment, he met his doom. The final verse of the song appeals to its listeners to learn from Collins’ mistake so that they do not repeat it themselves. Here, the “disturbing issue” (Collins’ entrapment and eventual death) is turned into a cautionary moral tale, therefore making the tragedy easier to understand for those who accepted this interpretation.

For those who did not accept this particular slant, other versions of the song were readily available to help make sense out of the saga. Many of these
adaptations were not published; rather, they were passed along through public performances of the song. As an oral history set to music, the song changed frequently, molding itself to whatever group happened to be in attendance. For example, if the song were performed in urbanized areas, the “hillbilly” element may have been emphasized; in contrast, if performed in the cave region itself, no doubt locals were presented as heroes and outsiders were cast as villains. Undoubtedly, too, the tragedy itself was often discussed among listeners following the song’s presentation. In this manner, “The Death of Floyd Collins” served as a vehicle for keeping Collins’ story alive for many years.

No Rest for Collins’ Corpse

For quite some time, songs and public discussion were the primary means of hearing about Floyd Collins. His name had virtually disappeared from the newspapers of the nation. The disappearance of his name did not mean, however, that there was no “news” coming from Sand Cave. Conflict arose within the Collins family soon after Floyd’s death when his brothers attempted to have their father Lee removed from overseeing Floyd’s estate. The brothers claimed that their father was not competent to operate Crystal Cave:

The main reason for their concern was Lee’s continued desire to sell the cave. The three brothers wanted him to retain it, convinced that the publicity surrounding Floyd’s entrapment and death would now make it profitable. Whatever the reasons,
Judge C. E. Nichols [see Appendix B]...ordered that Lee be removed temporarily as estate administrator... (Murray and Brucker, p. 231)

Two months after the ruling made by Judge Nichols, Homer Collins had raised enough money from touring on the vaudeville circuit to pay to have his brother’s corpse removed from Sand Cave. In April of 1925, Floyd Collins was given a second funeral, following which his newly exhumed corpse was buried in a casket close to the entrance of Crystal Cave. It did not remain there for long.

In 1927, Lee Collins (who had since regained control over his son’s estate) sold Crystal Cave to Dr. Harry Thomas, a Horse Cave dentist, for the sum of $10,000. Thomas purchased Crystal Cave under the stipulation that he be allowed the option of moving Collins’ corpse into the cave itself. Not long after the deal was completed, Thomas began making arrangements to move Collins’ body. Murray and Brucker explain:

After poor Floyd was again dug up, he was put in a glass-covered bronzed metal coffin...on June 13, 1927, with suitable publicity, Floyd’s new casket was plunked down in the middle of the tourist trail in Crystal’s main concourse where visitors could pass by and look at him. (p. 234-235)

Floyd’s brothers battled in court for years to have the sales contract declared unlawful, claiming that Dr. Thomas had intentionally deceived their incompetent father. Their claim was eventually denied and Floyd’s body remained on display in Crystal Cave.
Again, Collins’ body did not remain at rest for long. In March of 1929, thieves broke into the cave and removed Collins’ corpse. When the theft was discovered, Dr. Thomas led an extensive search for the body. The following passage describes the effort:

The casket was dusted for fingerprints, and bloodhounds, after being given Floyd’s scent, were sent scurrying through the countryside. Before the day was over, Floyd’s body with its left leg missing was discovered no farther than eight hundred yards from the cave, wrapped in a gunny sack and half hidden in brush on the edge of the Green River. (Murray and Brucker, p. 235)

Collins’ corpse was returned to its casket inside Crystal Cave the next day. No one was ever arrested for the crime and Collins’ missing leg was never recovered. Many different theories surfaced regarding the theft. Some believed that Homer Collins had hired men to steal the body so that he might remove his brother from public display but somehow the theft went awry. Others thought that rival cave owners, jealous of the revenue that Collins’ corpse brought for Crystal Cave, stole the body in an attempt to hurt Dr. Thomas’ business. Some people believed that Dr. Thomas himself had been behind the robbery, staging it as a huge publicity stunt. Regardless of the reason behind the theft, its occurrence added yet another interesting facet to the Collins’ story.
While the Collins’ saga continued to be a constant topic of importance and debate among residents of the cave region, mass media interest in Floyd Collins declined dramatically for many years. Murray and Brucker explain:

With the coming of the Great Depression, the hero-making process of the 1920s slowed down. Hard times were unkind to the champions of the previous decade, and Floyd Collins was no exception. From 1930 to 1940, his name appeared only occasionally in print and was infrequently spoken of in the nation at large. (p. 253)

Renewed Interest in Floyd Collins’ Story

With the onset of World War II, the concepts of “hero” and “heroic ideals” became increasingly popular with the American public. In addition to publishing “here-and-now” stories about valiant soldiers fighting in battles, the mass media also began focusing more on historical figures, individuals who had been brave during horrific circumstances, to further accentuate the idea of the American hero. As a result of this trend, Floyd Collins’ story once again was in the media—over fifteen years after his death.

Because of the terrible conditions inside Sand Cave at the time of the entrapment, Collins’ story was a likely one to be recounted in the media. However, the “hero” of the Collins’ saga appeared open for interpretation. For example, in Harlow’s (1942) *Weep No More, My Lady*, media attention during Collins entrapment is described as “…a classic example of the power of the press to create heroes and martyrs out of obscure and unimportant material” (p. 409).
By describing Floyd Collins’ entrapment and subsequent death as “obscure” and “unimportant,” Harlow declares Collins’ life to be insignificant. He further dehumanizes Collins when describing his corpse upon its removal from Sand Cave:

Rats had eaten off the ears and a part of the face, and decay had set in. When the poor remnant was brought to an undertaker’s shop in Cave City, the odor almost drove the population out of town. After three days, the morticians got it into some sort of preserved condition, and in a glass-windowed coffin, it was placed in the great room—the ‘Floyd Collins Memorial Hall’--of Crystal Cavern, where you may shock yourself with a glance at it, if you wish. (p. 411)

Through his graphic descriptions of the body and repeated use of the word “it” to refer to Collins’ corpse, Harlow further demeans Floyd Collins. In this respect, Harlow’s work most closely resembles the early “Collins as victim” fantasies. Because of his harsh words, however, Harlow’s work could also be considered “anti-heroic” in nature, because it seems to be attempting to undo any previous heroic portrayals of Collins. Although no one clear “hero” emerges from Harlow’s writing, the attempted rescuers are portrayed in a much better light than Collins.

A similar (albeit more sympathetic) adaptation of the victim fantasy appeared in a story by Hart (1947) in Coronet. Hart uses such phrases as “the captive’s horror” and “narrow imprisoning gallery” to cast Collins in the role of
victim while terms such as “heroic,” “unrelenting,” and “dauntless” were used to describe the attempted rescuers. Whereas Hart’s work does little to change the preexisting victim fantasy, it is important in that it acknowledges how audiences were and continued to be caught up in the Collins’ drama. He explains:

Correspondents and news photographers rushed in to tell the world of one man’s hideous torment. It was something that could be understood, for Floyd’s torture was rooted in the dread of being buried alive. Every individual could feel the breath of this unknown man fighting for air...In millions of American homes the suspense became personal, the sound of the miners boring was an almost audible throb. (13-14)

Floyd in Film

Hart’s earlier commentary in Coronet was indicative of a growing realization within the media—that Floyd Collins’ story was still very much alive. Just as the onset of World War II had brought about a slight increase in attention to the Floyd Collins’ story, the end of the war intensified coverage as well. Not only was Collins’ story being told more frequently in the 1950s, it was being told in different ways, as well. Film was one such genre.

A motion picture, produced in 1951, borrowed heavily from the Collins’ tragedy. The film Ace in the Hole (later retitled The Big Carnival) was written, produced and directed by Billy Wilder, perhaps best known as director of the cinema classic Sunset Boulevard. The film's main character Chuck Tatum is a
ruthless reporter who is desperate for a big story. When he learns of a man trapped in a cave-in, he sees an opportunity. Shriver (1997) explains:

Tatum remembers the “Floyd Collins story,” in which a man was trapped in a cavern for 18 days; the story earned a Pulitzer Prize for the reporter who crawled in to interview Collins. Tatum finagles a deal with a crooked sheriff to give him exclusive access to [the trapped man]....Engineers say they can get [him] out in 16 hours...but under Tatum's guiding hand, the sheriff orders the workers to drill in through the top of the mountain...[taking] at least six days; by then every paper in the country will be clambering to hire Tatum. (2)

As with the Collins' story itself, the ending of the film is a tragic one, with the victim dying underground. Although fictional, the movie does specifically reference the Collins' tragedy and it also borrows heavily from it. For example, during rescue efforts in the film, a circus-like atmosphere exists above ground just as it did at Sand Cave (thus, the film's second title The Big Carnival.)

Shriver describes the movie as being primarily about "...media figures so used to seeing human lives as fodder for entertainment they ignorantly endanger a human life" (2). Although the movie was fiction, it did serve to promote a Collins as victim fantasy because of the similarities between Collins and the main character. The film also cast Skeets Miller and other reporters in a negative light due its incensed portrayal of the media. Finally, Ace in the Hole added to the confusion surrounding the Floyd Collins story in that many viewers thought the
film was fact, rather than fiction, thus perpetuating a whole new round of falsehoods.

Another dramatization of the Floyd Collins' tragedy appeared that same year, this time on television. *The Philco Playhouse* broadcast "Rescue" in which Shaw (1951) adapted Skeets Miller's 1925 newspaper articles into dramatic form. While the production was relatively accurate regarding the facts of the story, it was also quite melodramatic. For example, after Collins' death is discovered, Skeets Miller asks *Courier* editor Neil Dalton why Collins had to die; Dalton replies in the following dramatic soliloquy:

> We're only human beings, Skeets. We can't always know why and for what. No, the whole world couldn't save him but what's more important, Skeets--the whole world tried to. If you're trying to make any sense out of this tragedy, that's the way to look at it. We fought a war not so long ago. We learned to live with casualty lists and laud killings as the great kind. We think we're getting callused and hard, unfeeling. Then one day a man, one single man comes along, gets trapped in a hole and every decent person in the country wants to save him. They came by the thousands. They came because a fellow human being was fighting to keep alive and they wanted to be near him and help dig him out if possible. That's an important thing, Skeets, and it's more important than you or me Floyd Collins, or anybody. (Tamburri, 1951)
In "Rescue," practically everyone associated with the events at Sand Cave is portrayed in a positive light, even the sightseers who crowded the scene. Neil Dalton (in yet another dramatic soliloquy) explains:

...When I first got down here and saw all those sightseers, I hated them, considered them parasites, getting some sort of vicarious thrill out of Floyd Collins' misfortune. There were times when I gladly would've blown up those special trains that come in...just to keep them away. But not now. They're out there digging that shaft like madmen, those same people...and they'll dig down to China if they think it'll help Collins. (Tamburri, 1951)

In this modified Collins as hero chain, the suggested fantasy theme is that not only was Floyd Collins a hero, but everyone else was as well. This fantasy theme did not chain out very far with audiences primarily because of its lack of conflict. Simply put, it is difficult to have triumphant heroes without also having convincing villains for them to oppose.

Floyd Collins—A Man's Man

In the 1950s, magazines directed solely toward male readers were becoming increasingly popular. Due to its action and heroics, the Floyd Collins' tragedy was a natural subject to cover in this type of magazine. While many of these targeted publications met with success initially, few were able to prosper. As a result, locating and obtaining copies of these rare publications is extremely difficult, particularly when searching for a specific subject covered within. One such publication, however, was found in the private collection of Dr. Tim Donley.
Herndon's (1956) story "The Death of Floyd Collins" was included in the September issue of *Saga*. As might be expected given the magazine's target audience, the story adopted a Collins as tragic hero fantasy theme. Herndon sets the tone early on by stating, "To those whose hearts are true and brave, to those who dare to explore underground, beyond the last frontier, [Kentucky's cave region] is a paradise of adventure" (18). Collins' bravery and extensive knowledge of caving are highlighted throughout the story. Herndon also presents the opinion that Floyd Collins was obsessed with exploring. He explains, "Some men are driven by devils. They must climb mountains, they must penetrate artic wastes and tropic jungles. Floyd Collins had to crawl on his belly in caves" (20).

In relating the events that led up to Collins' entrapment, Herndon attempts to make the circumstances more realistic for the reader by actually putting him/her in Collins' position. He states:

> How do you measure time? By the agony of pain? By shivers of cold? By the numbness of paralyzed imprisonment? By the pangs of hunger? The cravings of thirst? Look at your watch now, you who are reading this. You are Floyd Collins, entombed in a lightless cave. It will be 24 hours before you hear the sound of a human voice. Can you face it? (21)

By forcing the reader to question how he/she would react in the same situation, Herndon inadvertently evokes the fact that Collins did "face it," the horrors of being trapped for over two weeks, thus further highlighting Collins' bravery.
The *Saga* story is also worthy of note due to its accompanying illustration (see Appendix C). A full-page sketch appears on the story’s second page showing an attempted rescuer spoon-feeding Collins. The two men are shown in a large room with a flat floor. Collins resembles someone who has been buried in the sand with his upper chest and head completely exposed. The rescuer seems to be stooping or kneeling but again, has a wide area of space around him. The inaccuracy of the illustration no doubt confused readers who thought (rightly so) that the tunnel was much more confining. While illustrations are meant to enhance a story, this one served only to complicate by confusing the reader.

“Recycled” Newspaper Stories

Much of the material being produced about Floyd Collins was based on reports printed during the time of the tragedy itself. Due to the common practice of reworking old articles, many of the original fantasies continued to appear. In a section of the book *Old Kentucky Country* (McMeekin, 1957), Collins is once again cast as a typical hillbilly. In the following, Floyd and his father are about to discover Crystal Cave on their property; the hillbilly fantasy is apparent from their dialogue:

Standing there in the brush, Lee poked the hole with a stick, stared doubtfully at his son, Floyd. Floyd nodded. ‘I aim to have a try, Pa. Might be something big in it for us. Anyways, I like a crawlin’…we’ll have to do some tradin’, the ole sow. Maybe the calf, too.’ (p. 191)
By all accounts, Floyd Collins was alone when he discovered Crystal Cave. That McMeekin dramatizes the discovery in such a way is interesting. He creates an event and stages it in such a way as to cast Collins as a typical country bumpkin. Although the remainder of McMeekin’s segment on Collins is more objective, he creates a character in the reader’s mind early on and thus adds a new link to the hillbilly fantasy chain.

Presenting... Floyd Collins

A second television dramatization of the entrapment was produced in 1957. Robert Montgomery Presents broadcast a play titled “Crisis at Sand Cave” in which the events at Sand Cave were portrayed. Murray and Brucker describe the production as “long on excitement and short on accuracy” and as being “sensational” (p. 255). Although the cave-interior setting for the play was realistic, the depictions above ground were not. For example, “Crisis at Sand Cave” had drunken mobs on the scene only hours after Collins became trapped. Later in the production, on “Carnival Sunday,” a human fire-eater makes an appearance outside the cave entrance and then a group of bystanders participates in an organized square dance.

In Robert Montgomery Presents’ production, it is the rescue that is the primary focus, and not Floyd Collins himself. The play devotes more attention to activities and characters above ground than to Collins. Skeets Miller (who was also listed in the end credits as a “Technical Advisor”) emerges as the play’s main hero. Area residents are portrayed not so much as hillbillies but rather as cruel tormenters—thus, linking “Crisis at Sand Cave” as a modified Collins as victim
fantasy theme. Unlike Philco’s previous television production “Rescue,” in which practically everyone is portrayed as being a hero, “Crisis at Sand Cave” presents almost everyone involved in a negative light.

**Homer Collins Gives his own Account**

According to Collins’ historians Murray and Brucker, Homer Collins was incensed with the production of “Crisis at Sand Cave.” They explain that Homer “saw the show on a TV set in Louisville and angrily stated afterward that there was nothing accurate about it at all—[reportedly stating], ‘Any eight-year-old kid could’ve beat it,’” (p. 255). In reaction to the play and countless other fictionalized versions of his brother’s story, Homer Collins decided to write his own account of his brother’s entrapment, hoping to set the record straight. In January of 1958, *Cavalier* magazine published a story titled “Floyd Collins in Sand Cave—America’s Greatest Rescue Story” co-written by Homer Collins and Lehrberger. Although the story includes little new factual information, Collins’ article is interesting in that it incorporates many of Homer’s private thoughts and feelings during the time of the tragedy. Not surprisingly, Homer Collins establishes the fantasy theme of Collins as tragic-hero early on by describing his brother’s love of cave exploration as being “greater than his fear of danger” (40).

Homer continues to portray his brother as having heroic qualities, as in the following excerpt, in which Homer describes feeding his brother for the first time inside Sand Cave:

There were nine sausage sandwiches and a pint bottle of coffee.

With all the rock that I had removed…Floyd still could not get his
hands to his mouth. I held his head up for him and placed the food in his mouth. That strange meal was like a feast for Floyd. I crouched there holding his head away from the rock, feeding him like a baby... It was obvious that he was in pain and his strength diminishing, but in spite of his suffering he did not complain. I could not help crying. (69)

By describing both the meal and the horrible surroundings and circumstances in which it was given, Homer draws attention to his brother’s heroic character. Even though Floyd is being fed “like a baby” and is “suffering,” it is Homer who breaks down and cries, rather than Floyd, implying that of the two men, Floyd possesses the stronger character.

It is not difficult to determine from reading Homer’s story that he views his own brother to be a hero; it is similarly easy to identify Homer’s “villain”—the outsider. Practically everyone from outside the immediate cave region with the notable exception of Skeets Miller, is portrayed negatively in Collins’ work. Describing rescue efforts, Collins states, “There was too much confusion—too many new ‘experts’ constantly arriving, each with his own plan—and too much ‘curiosity’ cluttering the area with onlookers” (71). On reporters, he writes, “…the throng of reporters around the cave hunted eagerly for any big news to send out. Any rumor or suspicion... was immediately pounced on, elaborated, and fed to the press” (74).

Here the use of this particular fantasy chain is somewhat understandable. It is natural to portray a loved one in a positive light; as Floyd’s brother, Homer
perceived many of his brother’s actions as being “heroic” whether they actually were or not. It is also reasonable to assume that Homer, still mourning his brother’s death, blamed many people for contributing to the problems that plagued rescue efforts, thus their negative representations. In other works, however, motivation is not so straightforward.

*The Cave*

A fellow Kentuckian produced a similarly negative view of the entrapment the following year—this time in fiction. Robert Penn Warren published his novel *The Cave* in 1959. Warren’s character "Jasper Harrick," based on Collins, was similarly trapped while exploring a cave for a possible commercial venture. Harrick, like Collins, died a painful and well-publicized death; however, there were differences between the actual events and the story they inspired.

Zaniello (1994) states, "To create the drama of his novel, Warren relied not only on the 'facts' of the Collins story but also on the considerable folklore and fable that accompanied Collins virtually from...the first day people knew he was trapped in Sand Cave" (86). As in Floyd Collins' entrapment, rescuers in *The Cave* continuously took food and drink inside the cave for the victim. In Collins' case, roughly half of the food reached him while fearful men hid the remainder of it along side passages. In *The Cave*, however, Jasper Harrick never received any nourishment--all of those who took food inside lied about delivering it to the trapped man. Exaggeration of such detail appears throughout the novel, with many of these exaggerations used to cast Harrick in the role of victim.
Through casting the character of Harrick in the victim role, Warren correspondingly encourages the Collins as victim fantasy theme. Murray and Brucker explain:

[The Cave's] similarity to the Collins affair easily caused its fictional aspects to rub off onto the real thing. The net impact was to reinforce in reader's minds a belief that Floyd Collins, too, had been done in by opportunists, money-grubbers, his friends, and especially his partners. The morbid nature of the crowd, the unending carnival atmosphere...the impure motives--these remained when all other details were forgotten. (p. 257)

Fabrications and Falsehoods

Robert Penn Warren was inspired by the Collins tragedy and then composed his own fictional account loosely based on the events at Sand Cave. Woodbury (1964) did the same; however, he wrote his as being factual. In an article for The American Legion Magazine titled “The Death of Floyd Collins,” Woodbury repeated virtually every error and half-truth that was ever previously printed about the Collins saga. In addition, he also created some of his own, thus giving new life to both old and new fantasy themes.

On the first page of his story, Woodbury includes a photograph of Floyd Collins looking up out of a cave passage (see Appendix D). The caption of the photo reads, “'Note crystal formations,' remarked caption of this photo of Collins after ten days of his entrapment in the cave” (10). The photograph had actually been made of Collins while he was inside Crystal Cave (not Sand Cave) and long
before he was ever trapped. However, by describing the photograph as he did, Woodbury created the impression that the picture was made during the entrapment at Sand Cave, specifically on the tenth day.

This description confused readers for several reasons. First, it created a false image of the conditions at Sand Cave. Many readers had to question that if someone had been able to manipulate his camera in such a way to take that picture, could not someone have also been able to assist with Collins’ release more effectively? Secondly, it appears in the picture that the majority of Collins’ left arm is free. If that had been the case, then what kept Collins from helping with his own rescue? Lastly, the picture and its description made readers question the truth to the story that a cave-in sealed up the passage leading to Collins on the fifth day of his entrapment. If it had, then how was this picture taken on the tenth day?

While Woodbury’s caption of Floyd Collins’ photograph was deceiving, his account of the Collins family’s business ventures was a complete fabrication. Murray and Brucker explain:

[Woodbury’s] most eye-catching false claim was that the Collinses, after unearthing Floyd’s body, had placed it on display in an ornate casket to ‘bolster the tourist business.’

‘During the dull seasons at the cave,’ the account continued, ‘the Collins family—father, stepmother, and children—took the casket on tour. They played small theaters and tent shows…and the highpoint of their act came when they all stood around Floyd’s
casket and sang, ‘The Death of Floyd Collins.’ (p. 258)

Although many of the same old stories are dredged up in *The American Legion* article, it seems to most strongly promote the Collins as victim fantasy theme, primarily due to its (entirely fictional) account of Collins’ touring corpse. By reading descriptions of how Floyd’s family removed his body during the slow months at the cave, toured with it and regularly sang to it, readers undoubtedly felt sympathy for Collins (or at least his memory) due to his family’s depiction as being greedy and disrespectful. It did not really matter that the story was false or that the magazine was later successfully sued by the Collins family—it was just another link in the growing chain.

**A Look Back and A Look Ahead**

After covering a forty-year time span of Floyd Collins rhetoric, some patterns in fantasy themes become more apparent. The dominant fantasy theme that emerged during this period was of Collins as victim. Variations in chains were evident—in some chains Collins was innocent, while in others, he received his comeuppance, but the overall theme of “victim” prevailed. Whether he was a victim of apathy, unscrupulous businessmen, the media, or even his own family, Floyd Collins was usually portrayed as some type of victim during this period.

A second fantasy theme that emerged to some extent was that of Collins as tragic hero. Although this type of chain was not as common as the “victim” portrayal, it did continue to reappear in different forms as well. Additionally, earlier fantasy themes of Collins as hillbilly and Collins as devoted suitor continued to appear occasionally but only as minor elements.
In the year 1964, there was still much confusion as to the facts of Floyd Collins' entrapment of 1925. Not surprisingly, many different fantasy themes had been generated over the years due to the lack of concrete information. Would new enlightenment on the tragedy change the fantasy themes that were associated with Floyd Collins? An examination of the rhetoric from 1965 on up through the present day should clarify this question.
Chapter IV

IN THE PATHS OF RIGHTEOUSNESS

The date January 30, 1965 marked forty years since Floyd Collins became trapped in Sand Cave. During that time span, countless stories appeared on the man and his entrapment. Even though this period included the forty-year anniversary, commentary on Collins decreased from the mid 1960s through the early 1970s. Perhaps influenced by the repercussions of the 1964 Woodbury article from *American Legion* (the Collins family successfully sued the magazine for its false claims), the vast majority of media did not focus on the Collins’ story again until the early 1970s.

Poor Floyd

Roskolenko published the book *Solo* in 1973. The book’s front cover reads, “Thrills, Excitement, Suspense of the Men and Women Who Dared to Try” and “The Great Adventure Alone.” From these words, one would presume that the chapter on Floyd Collins (“Ordeal at Sand Cave”) would present Collins as a hero; however, this is not the case.

As with many before him, Roskolenko presents the fantasy theme of Floyd Collins as victim. For example, when describing the crowds at Sand Cave, he states, “With the journalists came hordes of riffraff, bringing their local moonshine, to stage orgies and riots at the entrance of the cave” (p. 171). This description would tend to lead the reader to see Collins in the role of victim because of the stark contrast in the two situations. While alleged drunkards are
participating in “orgies and riots” above ground, below ground a single man is dying a torturous death.

Roskolenko also uses images and associations of childhood and infancy to convey a Collins as victim fantasy. When describing Collins inside Sand Cave, he states, “He was reduced to the state of an infant, forced to urinate and defecate in his dungarees” (p. 171). A similar type of description appears later in the chapter:

At 38, his stocky, dogged body, used to privations, was reaching the limits of human endurance. He was babbling like a child in a strange surrounding, unable to comprehend the walls of his cave-prison. He was losing his sanity under the tattoo of the dripping water, returning to dreams of childhood when everything was warm, clean and gentle. (p. 173).

Roskolenko compares Collins to both an infant and child; in addition, he describes Collins’ “dreams of childhood.” Since the concept of “innocence” is frequently associated with children, by comparing Collins to both infant and child, Roskolenko succeeds in presenting the trapped man as being an innocent victim.

In addition to his symbolic use of infancy and childhood, Roskolenko additionally brings in religion to portray Collins as an innocent victim. For example, when describing the logistics of the entrapment, Roskolenko states, “…[the rock] crushed down on Collins’ left ankle, smashing him to the earth and
pinning him there as securely as if he had been nailed” (p. 169). The image of being nailed in a torturous position is obviously Christ-like in nature. Here, too, the association with Christ (as the one man without sin) portrays Floyd Collins as being an innocent victim in the entire ordeal.

Bayley (1975) also perpetuated the Collins as victim fantasy theme in his article titled “The Birth of a Legend.” While the story is primarily a retelling that marks the fiftieth anniversary of the tragedy, Bayley’s word choice in some areas is less than objective. For example, he refers to Collins as “poor Floyd” three different times in his article. He states, “But fate was against poor Floyd,” “[Miller] realized that he had catapulted against poor Floyd,” and lastly “…the idea was to pull poor Floyd up and out by main force” (8, 10, 11). In addition, Bayley later uses the phrase “this poor man” to describe Collins (13). Clearly from his repetition of the word “poor” in describing Floyd Collins, Bayley conveys the idea that the reader should feel sympathy for the trapped man. In doing so, he consequently encourages the reader to adopt the fantasy of Collins as being a victim.

A New Way of Looking at an Old Story

A different type of story about Floyd Collins appeared the following year. Lesy (1976) first published “Dark Carnival: The Death and Transfiguration of Floyd Collins” in American Heritage’s October issue. In the article, Lesy not only recounts Collins’ story but he also examines some of the influence and impact of newspapers on the tragedy itself.
In describing the events leading up to the digging of the alternate rescue shaft, Lesy states:

The newspapers explained it this way: Homer and Marshall had passed out; Lee was an old wreck; Johnny Gerald had threatened a fireman and chased away a young hero. The only thing Floyd’s friends and relatives had managed to do was start arguments with nice people and bring the roof down on their own heads. They were amateurs who had made fatal mistakes. The experts would solve everything. (41)

Although he does not use Bormann’s fantasy theme theory by name, Lesy illustrates the concept of interpretive framing by showing how some newspapers slanted the same events to create different stories.

Lesy also examines the surfacing of rumors during Floyd Collins’ saga that the entire entrapment was a hoax, contrasting how The Louisville Herald and The Courier-Journal handled the story. He states:

The Herald was joined by three other newspapers in three other major cities of the region [in printing stories of the rumors], but it was not joined by the Courier. The Courier refused to elaborate this new parable because the story denied the salvation offered by the archetypal young hero from the Courier’s own staff [Skeets Miller]. The Courier’s version of events resembled a pleasant fairy tale in which a worthy man was helped by a young prince who, in turn, was aided by wise men and
warriors, while the *Herald*’s version sounded like a paranoid delusion.

(45)

Here, too, Lesy illustrates Bormann’s concept of divergent fantasy themes coming out of the same event(s). Bormann (1985) states, “Two rhetorical communities living side by side in the same culture may have mirror-image rhetorical visions. That is...one group may celebrate certain courses of action as laudable while the other denigrates the same scenarios” (33). In Lesy’s example, the two “side by side” communities (the *Herald* and the *Courier*) are based in the very same city of Louisville and yet, the two newspapers publish diametrically opposed versions of Collins’ story. With reporter Skeets Miller on the scene, *The Courier-Journal* chose to perpetuate a more positive portrayal of Collins amidst rumors of a possible hoax while rival *The Louisville Herald* did exactly the opposite.

In describing how newspapers of the day twisted facts and “created” news, Lesy states, “The stories were elaborations of news accounts that were themselves transformations and elaborations of actual events” (36). Ironically, Lesy himself illustrates his own chief criticism of 1920s publications. In addition to his factual errors such as claiming that Floyd Collins was one of nine children (the number was eight), reporting that the temperature inside Sand Cave was 16 degrees (it was actually a much warmer 54), stating that the rock that trapped Floyd weighed seven tons (it was 27 pounds) and describing how Homer Collins was “passed out” during the harness attempt to release Floyd (in fact, he was one of the key
participants in the effort), Lesy also advances his own fantasies on the Collins’ drama.

Lesy describes Collins as having little money and as having “made a bare living” (37). Collins’ historian Roger Brucker (2000) reports to the contrary that Collins’ bank book (which was recovered from Floyd’s body upon removal from Sand Cave) showed he had “…about $1200 in his bank account [equivalent to one year’s worth of wages during the time]” (personal correspondence with author, March 21). By portraying Floyd Collins as being poor, Lesy casts Collins in a negative light, thus paving the way for negative fantasy themes.

Lesy also describes an alleged pre-entrapment incident involving Collins and another rival cave owner. He states, “Another [cave owner] picked a fight with Floyd and tried to run him off, but Floyd gave him a beating” (37). Whether the altercation was real or fictitious is not as important as the fact that Lesy chose to include this account in his article (although it should be noted that Lesy’s account was the sole fight mentioned from all the bibliographical sources used.) By describing Floyd’s giving another man “a beating,” Lesy again creates negative associations with Collins, specifically as being a “hillbilly” who thrashes another in order to settle a score.

Finally, “Dark Carnival” also contains the sole mention of a supposed interaction between Collins and Jewell Estes. Lesy describes: “The day before Floyd went down [into Sand Cave], he showed Estes a skull he’d found in a cave and then gave it to Estes’ son, Jewell ” (37). This incident also relates to the Collins as hillbilly fantasy theme due to its offensiveness. Simply put, “civilized”
people respect the dead. The fact that Collins removed a skull [presumed to be
human] from its final resting place and then gave it to Estes suggests that Collins
lacked the sophistication and civility of a more cultured individual.

Despite Lesy's factual errors and slanted view of Collins, he does offer
some interesting insight into why readers may have interpreted the events of the
entrapment and subsequent rescue negatively. He explains:

Between 1923 and 1925 stories of fraudulent business deals and
crimes of passionate betrayal filled the front pages of city
newspapers... Each year there were stories of business frauds on
a grand scale... There were constant stories of partners against
partners, brothers against brothers, death at opportune moments,
and marriages of convenience... The people who had learned about
all these things remembered them as they read about Floyd Collins,
the small businessman who was trapped by his own greed, failed
by his own partner [Johnnie Gerald], betrayed by his own father,
and libeled by his own neighbors. (45)

Lesy's observation that readers are influenced by social conditions of the
time is reflected in Bormann's work as well. In describing fantasy chains,
Bormann (1972) states, "Often the drama is a mirror of the group's here-and-now
situation and its relationship to the external environment" (397). In other words,
Lesy believes some readers had been so influenced by previous news stories about
greed, fraud, and betrayal that they perceived Collins' story as possessing these
characteristics as well.
The Birth of Another Legend

In 1978, Bayley published his second story on the Floyd Collins saga. His first “The Birth of a Legend” (in which he repeatedly refers to Collins as “poor Floyd”) appeared three years earlier. Unlike his previous work that primarily focused on Collins, “The Man Who Tried to Save Floyd Collins” chiefly concentrates on Skeets Miller. As a result of predominantly glorifying Miller, Bayley minimizes Collins’ merit.

Bayley begins his work by stating, “Not all the old-time heroes are dead and have monuments erected to their memory...” (180). He proceeds to tell the story of Collins’ entrapment and simultaneously praise Miller’s efforts. Bayley describes Miller as “daring,” “heroic,” a “real live hero,” “unique,” “courageous,” and “plucky.” Bayley ends his story by describing the monument set up inside Crystal Cave after Collins’ burial there. He then states:

To my thinking, another monument should be placed thereabouts to honor the intrepid reporter, who never forgot to file his nightly stories, but who devoted days and hours to help a fellow man in dire distress—a man whom he had never before heard of and whom, but for a twist of fate, he might have saved from death. (188)

While Miller’s efforts to rescue Collins were without question admirable and heroic, it should also be remembered that Miller used his trips inside Sand Cave as opportunities to sell papers. Countless other individuals who, like Miller,
did not know Collins also risked their lives in attempts to free him. Many of these did not profit from their efforts as Miller did.

Through his profuse praise of Skeets, Bayley reduces Floyd Collins’ role in the tragedy to that of a secondary character. For this reason, Bayley’s work represents a variation of the Collins as victim fantasy chain. In this fantasy, Collins is an unfortunate victim whose only hope is the heroic reporter from Louisville. Bayley describes the first few days of the rescue effort in great detail (when Miller played a more active role) yet, after the cave-in was reported and Miller’s role diminished, Bayley glosses over an entire two-week time period. He states:

That evening a shaft was started from the cliff above, a core drill preceding the digging to ascertain the nature of the soil and rock.

For 14 days a volunteer band of workers...toiled day and night, directed by a professional crew. (187-188)

It is interesting to note that in his summation of the last 14 days of the rescue effort, Bayley does not mention a single attempted rescuer by name, further singling out Miller’s role.

A contrasting image of Skeets Miller can be found in Finkel’s poem *Going Under*, also written in 1978. In one section of the lengthy poem, Finkel explores Miller’s conflicting thoughts and feelings during Collins’ entrapment:

I brought him a light so he could see himself die

I warmed myself
at the furnace of his hunger
in the name of mercy and the fourth estate
I stuck my thumb in his agony
and pulled out a Pulitzer (cited in Murray and Brucker, p. 261)

Like Bayley, Finkel uses characterizations of Skeets Miller to inadvertently project a persona for Collins. However, unlike Bayley’s work, Finkel’s characterization of Miller does not glorify the reporter—rather it explores how he benefited from the Collins’ tragedy. In doing so, Finkel’s poem projects a modified version of the Collins as victim fantasy in which Collins is a victim of exploitation by others.

Finkel continues this fantasy later in the poem when he describes the scene at Sand Cave on Carnival Sunday. In it, he depicts people on the scene who are victimizing the trapped man. He writes:

His brother Homer plowed through the rabble
Muttering in his weeklong beard
--Where were you when he needed you?
picking his way among
pickpockets and preachers
guardsmen and concessionaires
peeping rubes and gaping Samaritans
pimps, hucksters, suckers, seekers
moonshine and black balloons
marked SAND CAVE... (cited in Murray and Brucker, p. 261)
"Trapped! “Frees” Floyd Collins"

For over fifty years, Floyd Collins’ story had been marked by an enormous amount of confusion and misinformation. With the initial publication of *Trapped! The Story of Floyd Collins* in the year 1979 much needed facts about the 1925 tragedy finally surfaced. Through the use of personal interviews, taped interviews from the Cave Research Foundation’s oral history collection, thorough and intense examination of published materials and actual caving experience within Sand Cave itself, Murray and Brucker were able to piece together a comprehensive and historically accurate portrayal of the Floyd Collins story.

*Trapped!* is explicit in its detailed descriptions of people and events relating to the Collins’ saga, including a wealth of information that had previously not been put together. The book is invaluable not only because of this information but also because of its insights. Many fascinating details emerged from the publication of *Trapped!*—one such detail relating to Sand Cave itself.

While making historical surveys of the cave, (which had been sealed closed since 1925) the authors discovered a crack in the “cave-in” which had reportedly totally barricaded Collins from rescuers on the fifth day of his entrapment. Albeit with effort, Brucker and others were able to squeeze through the nine-inch crack in the collapse. Regarding the discovery, Brucker states:

I was struck dumb by the implications. If the last parties of rescuers...had squeezed through this nine-inch crack, they would still have been able to feed Floyd, keep him warm, and work to release him. Instead, they had abandoned the scene because of
fright and exhaustion... In any case, we know that by squeezing through the nine-inch crack, we ultimately came within inches of the exact spot where Floyd Collins had rested. The ironic conclusion is inescapable: The Carmichael shaft was unnecessary, and the work to free Collins could have continued inside Sand Cave. (p. 284-285)

For some people, this new information was “proof” that the digging of the alternate shaft (and simultaneous abandonment of the main passage) had caused Collins’ death. However, the authors concluded that even if work had continued in the main passage where the nine-inch opening was discovered, Collins would have more than likely met the same fate, stating, “The rescue effort at that time suffered from inadequate observations, insufficient experience in caves, and a poverty of resourcefulness” (p. 288).

In addition to geological aspects of Sand Cave, *Trapped!* also examines the rhetoric of the Collins’ saga. In one of the latter chapters of the book, Murray and Brucker examine the constant “interpretive framing” of the Collins’ story. They explain:

Every journal, every editor, every interest group saw something in the incident applicable to their particular situation or belief. … prohibitionists seized upon the affair to help promote their attacks on current national enforcement failures. Floyd Collins could have been saved, declared ‘dry’ journals, if it had not been for John Barleycorn’s appearance at Sand Cave.
Fundamentalists, in turn... used the Collins story as a textbook case of salvation redeeming a sinful man. Fundamentalist spokesmen maintained that it was impossible to relate the Sand Cave saga without making Floyd’s belief in God the central theme. The key aspect of the story was how ‘faith that moves mountains’ came to a man ‘trapped by a mountain of rock.’ Indeed, Christians everywhere saw much in the event that was meaningful. (p. 222)

Murray and Brucker’s observations correspond with the concept of a shared group fantasy. Bormann, Knutson, and Muslof (1997) describe a shared group fantasy as “a dramatizing message that has been publicly displayed and has been appropriated by the sharers so that each has, as it were, made the dramatization part of his or her consciousness” (255). This concept is illustrated in Murray and Brucker’s quotation attributed to the “Fundamentalist spokesmen.”

By saying that it was “impossible” to tell Collins’ story without focusing on his belief in God, fundamentalists show just how much power the fantasy theme had on their perception of the saga. For them, it was impossible to separate the two.

Fantasies about Floyd?

As a reference tool on the Floyd Collins tragedy, *Trapped!* is essential; its scope and accuracy of information is exceptional. However, is it objective? Bormann (1972) states, “A total rhetoric consists of both discursive material and fantasy themes” (405). In other words, totally objective material is practically unattainable. *Trapped!*, however, does offer a more balanced portrayal of Floyd Collins than do many other works.
Murray and Brucker describe Collins in a variety of ways. For example, in describing Collins’ love for caving, the authors state, “...the same spirit that led others to scale mountain heights caused him to go into the depths. Even now, despite the danger, he thrilled at the thought of exploring the underground unknown” (p. 23). Similarly, the authors later explain:

Those few patrons who did dribble in to Crystal [Cave] received a real treat if Floyd, himself, showed them through...

His enthusiasm sometimes caused him to break off a gypsum flower and hand it to an astonished guest. His rapture as well as his confidence was captivating. (p. 45)

While these descriptions of his adventurous spirit and his “captivating confidence” tie in with the heroic Collins’ fantasy, descriptions that relate to other fantasy themes appear in the book as well.

Contrasting depictions of Floyd Collins appear throughout the book, such as in the following passage:

Floyd’s explorations in Crystal were always filled with chances. He seemed to relish risks and at times acted downright foolhardy. He would go into places where rocks were still falling, and if warned by others would merely reply, ‘I don’t care, I ain’t afraid.’ While caving alone, something no sensible person would ever do, Floyd...worked for days at dangerous breakdowns...As for Floyd such experiences merely made him more reckless and added to his confidence. (p. 47)
Unlike the previous heroic descriptions of Collins, this characterization most closely resembles the victim fantasy theme (although the use of the colloquial “ain’t” and the description of Collins’ behavior as “something no sensible person would ever do” could arguably be categorized as part of the hillbilly fantasy as well.) In this particular victim fantasy, Floyd Collins is primarily a victim of his own foolish carelessness and reckless behavior. Later in the book, the authors likewise state, “Who, then, is to blame for Collins’ death? Floyd himself bears the primary responsibility. Hence, it is hardly fair to shift the blame to the rescuers for their limitations and decisions” (p. 288).

By using different elements from both the heroic and the victim fantasies, Murray and Brucker offer a more evenhanded portrayal of Collins. The Collins’ persona that emerges from *Trapped!* is one of complexity, possessing characteristics not only of a hero, but also of a victim. In addition, because of the authors’ scrutiny of previously published depictions of Collins, a more realistic persona surfaces in the book. The authors present a more balanced view of Collins by offering a wide variety of descriptions of the man. For example, in showing how one newspaper presented Collins negatively and another positively, *Trapped!* allows its readers to decide for themselves which view to personally accept.

The publication of *Trapped! The Struggle to Save Floyd Collins* in the year 1979 shed much needed light on a story filled with shadows. Ironically, the book served to simultaneously bring attention to the Collins’ story while also
silencing it. Simply put, *Trapped!* told the Collins’ tale so effectively that for many years after its issue, few others attempted to address the story as a subject.

“The Tragedy of Floyd Collins” appeared in *Rural Kentuckian* six years after *Trapped!* was first published. Bell (1985) presents a historically accurate account of the events of the entrapment; however, he also presents his own version of an old Collins fantasy. Immediately following the title of his story, Bell describes Floyd Collins in the following manner: “He was unknown, uneducated and undeserving of the attention he received as he lay trapped inside a Kentucky cave” (6). By describing Collins in such a manner, Bell immediately associates Collins with such negative qualities as insignificance and ignorance—typical “hillbilly” characteristics. He also refers to Collins as being “an uneducated, backwoods fellow” and later describes Collins’ media coverage as being “the greatest a ‘nobody’ had ever received” (7).

Bell continues his hillbilly fantasy by alluding to “backwoods” superstitions. He states:

The ghost of Floyd Collins is said to haunt Flint Ridge to this day. Serious cave researchers claim to have seen it at the old Crystal Cave ticket office. Others claim to have seen it in the Collins house. One story claims that...a field telephone was left...only a few yards from the Collins house...The wires to the phone had been disconnected but, according to the story, the phone rang one time and when it was answered, the song ‘The Death of Floyd Collins’ was heard through the receiver. (10)
The concepts of “ghosts” and “hauntings” have long been associated with the South. Similarly, an individual’s belief in these occurrences is often attributed to a lack of education. For these reasons, Bell’s inclusion of his Floyd Collins’ ghost story can be viewed as a way of perpetuating the Collins as hillbilly fantasy theme.

A Fifth (and Final) Burial

A new chapter in the Floyd Collins saga was added in the year 1989—his fifth burial. (His first, which included a funeral service, occurred while his body was still inside Sand Cave; his second, when he was buried near the entrance of Crystal Cave; his third, when Dr. Thomas moved his body inside Crystal Cave; and his fourth, when his body was returned to Crystal Cave after being stolen.) Floyd’s remains had been inside his last bronze coffin within Crystal Cave since 1929. Crystal was privately owned up until 1961 when the National Park Service purchased it. Although Mammoth Cave National Park made the cave (and Collins’ remains) inaccessible to the general public, the Collins family was not satisfied. After much effort, the family received official permission from the Department of the Interior to move Floyd’s body from Crystal Cave to the Mammoth Cave Baptist Church Cemetery (at the government’s expense.)

On March 24, 1989, a small group of Collins’ descendants attended a private graveside service for his reinterment. A few reporters were also present although they did not venture close to the service itself. Reverend Gary Talley, a local Baptist preacher, led the memorial service.
An excerpt of Talley’s message follows:

Perhaps it was his courageous struggle to live
that gripped the hearts of men and moved them to risk their
own lives to free Floyd Collins from his underground tomb.
These courageous efforts and others before and since should
challenge us today to reach out to those in our society that find
themselves entrapped in less dramatic, but no less dangerous,
circumstances. The end results of oppression, exploitation,
ignorance, and abuse are the same. These kinds of challenges
require the same kind of faith that the Psalmist David so
confidently expressed when he wrote Psalm 40: 1-4. ‘I
waited patiently for the Lord; and he inclined unto me, and heard
my cry. He brought me up also out of a horrible pit, out of the
miry clay, and set my feet upon a rock’...Perhaps, Floyd Collins, if
he could speak today would also affirm this same confidence in
God, because I am persuaded to believe that men that are caught in
similar hopeless situations cry out to God and that God hears, and
I am certain that Floyd Collins cried out and I am equally confident
that God heard. (Mammoth Cave National Park transcript, 1989)

Talley evokes the Collins as victim fantasy theme by relating Collins’
entrapment to others being trapped either in or by such sinful practices as
“oppression, exploitation, ignorance, and abuse.” He continues this fantasy when
he cites the Biblical quotation in which God lifts David “out of a horrible pit, out
of the miry clay.” Not only does the pit and clay imagery relate to Collins’ surroundings in Sand Cave but it also continues the concept of God saving sinners from desperate situations.

Floyd’s Story Continues to be Told

The following year, the popular magazine *Smithsonian* published a feature article on the Floyd Collins’ saga, framing the story around Collins’ recent cemetery burial. Fincher (1990) offers a work similar to *Trapped!* in that it presents Collins in a variety of ways—thereby allowing the reader to decide for himself which fantasy theme to accept. For example, early in the piece, Fincher states, “Collins’ pluck and endurance transformed him, in the public’s mind, from a pitiful victim into a folk hero who remained unsullied by the tawdry carnival atmosphere that enveloped the entire proceedings” (138). Obviously, this description coincides with the Collins as tragic hero fantasy by showing Collins’ strength in the midst of hideous surroundings.

Later in the article, Fincher offers a contrasting view of Collins. In describing Collins’ immediately after he became trapped, Fincher states:

He yelled his voice away, gouged his fingers bloody raw.

It was no use. He couldn’t escape and nobody in the world was going to hear him. Fifty-five feet down, the earth held him in a grip of stone. (141)

Here, Collins is portrayed as being a helpless victim in the battle of man against nature. Fincher uses the phrase “grip of stone” to personify the earth as a living entity that has the physical ability to grasp onto Collins.
Fincher also includes a few allusions to the Collins as hillbilly fantasy theme as well. In describing Collins’ caving techniques, he states, “he vanished ‘like a rat in a cornpile,’ as one crony described his scrambling style” (138).

Fincher’s use of the colloquial quotation attributed to a “crony” serves to remind the reader of Collins’ geographical whereabouts (and the associations thereof.) Similarly, in describing Collins’ motivation for cave exploration he states, “Like a legion of other Kentuckians [Collins] had learned that such subterranean displays could be as lucrative as moonshining…” (140). Finally, when describing locals at the rescue site, Fincher says, “Natives blamed outsiders for wasting precious time with the shaft; they even blocked supply trucks in sullen groups and muttered about making their point with squirrel rifles,” thus bringing to mind the concept of hillbilly shotgun logic (147). Had Fincher used only the hillbilly fantasy theme (or any other fantasy theme, for that matter) in his article, the fantasy would have carried much more of an impact; however, by using elements from different fantasies, he creates a more balanced portrait of Floyd Collins.

_Floyd Collins: The Musical_

In 1925, the ballad “The Death of Floyd Collins” (sometimes known as "The Ballad of Floyd Collins") was originally produced, inspiring countless modified versions to be sung around the country for years. In 1994, however, a completely new “Ballad of Floyd Collins” appeared in melodic form—this time as a song in an off-Broadway musical. Guettel and Landau’s musical production _Floyd Collins_ premiered at the American Musical Theater Festival in April of

The dominant fantasy theme generated in *Floyd Collins* is one of Collins being a tragic hero. Use of the heroic persona is easily understandable due to the fact that Floyd Collins was the lead character in the production and most “leads” are portrayed in a positive light. The following excerpt, from the opening song “The Ballad of Floyd Collins,” illustrates Collins’ heroic portrayal:

Now Floyd was a reasonin’ man;
He knew what he wanted an’ he had a plan.
He was jes’ as smart as he was brave;
He was gonna find him the perfect cave. (*Floyd Collins*, 1997)

By attributing the characteristics of sound judgment, intelligence, and bravery to Collins, “The Ballad of Floyd Collins,” without question, perpetuates the heroic Collins fantasy.

A similar heroic portrait of Collins can be found in “The Riddle Song” which is performed by the Homer Collins character. In the song, Homer is attempting to distract Floyd from his dismal surroundings while trapped inside Sand Cave. Homer repeatedly asks Floyd riddles (in song form) in an effort to cheer his brother. At one point in the song, Homer asks a riddle in which he is describing Floyd himself. Homer sings:

What’s strong as a bull an’ smart as a fox,
Quick as a hare an’ stubborn as a mule?
Kin make like a snake through the tiniest hole,
Git hung up fer days an’ turn out fine? (Floyd Collins, 1997)

As in “The Ballad of Floyd Collins,” “The Riddle Song” encourages a heroic
Collins fantasy by characterizing Floyd with the traits of strength and intelligence.

One song from Act II of the musical does offer its own version of the
victim fantasy in which overzealous reporters victimize not only Floyd, but the
entire Collins’ family as well. In “Is It Remarkable?” big-city reporters call in
stories to their editors about the happenings at Sand Cave. In the following
excerpt, the reporters describe the character of Nellie Collins (Floyd’s sister) and
then, the entire Collins family. The reporters shout out:

   Cave City, comma, capital K, capital Y.

   February five…

   The virginal sister is a colorful example
   of the folkways and eccentricities of the
   hillbilly life, period.

   Remarkably enough, comma,
   Although they live such simple lives, comma,
   The Collins family manages to own a car
   And even wear shoes. (Floyd Collins, 1997)

   Although the song references the hillbilly fantasy, here it is presented in
the context of the reporters victimizing the Collins’ by stereotyping them
negatively. Although it makes hillbilly references, it does not encourage the
Collins as hillbilly fantasy. Rather, the song uses the example to cast reporters in a villainous role.

Similarly, the song later illustrates how reporters used rumors, half-truths, and, in this case, misunderstood words to “create” stories. In the following excerpt, the character of Bishop (based in part on Johnnie Gerald) makes a comment that is misheard and immediately twisted into a story:

**BISHOP**

*I'm freezin*.  

**REPORTERS**

*What?*

*He's free!*

*Floyd Collins is free!*

*He's free!*

The song concludes with the reporters singing the following:

I only want the goodies,  
The mother lode scoop!  
I only wanna scoop,  
I only wanna scoop,  
I only wanna scoop the poop! *(Floyd Collins, 1997)*

Obviously, the phrase “scoop the poop,” references the fact that reporters at Sand Cave “shoveled” many fictitious stories. Again, by highlighting the reporters’ unscrupulous methods, “Is It Remarkable?” portrays Floyd and the rest of his family as victims. While the song is effective, it is a singular example from
*Floyd Collins*; the remainder of the songs, and thus the musical itself, promote a heroic persona for Collins.

**Literature Inspired by Collins' Tragedy**

In describing Floyd Collins, Zaniello (1994) discerningly states, “He had already passed into folklore and fable long before he was declared officially dead…” (85). Primarily an analysis of Robert Penn Warren’s *The Cave*, (although he briefly explores Billy Wilder’s film *Ace in the Hole/The Big Carnival*) Zaniello’s work “The Odyssey of Floyd Collins in Literature, Film, and After Death” can be easily applied toward a fantasy theme analysis of the saga.

Zaniello explains:

Stories about Collins when he was alive were quickly absorbed into contemporary Appalachian folklore…To a certain extent, the distinction is rhetorical, since both folklore and fable about Collins are mythical, that is, they create a mythos about a tragic hero whose transparent (“real”) life simply was not complex enough (or interesting enough) for the mythopoetic-hungry audience. Thus, another Floyd, the creation of folklore and fable, took the place of Lee Collins’ son Floyd. (87)

Zaniello’s description of stories creating "another Floyd" parallels Bormann's concept of a "persona." Bormann (1973) explains the fantasy theme element of persona as being "...the public personality or mask that an individual uses to meet a public situation" (143). In the case of Floyd Collins, others, primarily the media, created the "public personality" for him. However, the end
result was the same—the various Collins' personas (associated with different fantasy themes) soon overshadowed the actual man himself.

A work similar to Zaniello's was published the following year. Carpenter's (1995) "Floyd Collins and the Sand Cave Tragedy: A Possible Source for Faulkner's As I Lay Dying" recounts the Collins' saga and examines similarities between the events and Faulkner's narrative. In addition to retelling Collins' story and finding parallels between it and Faulkner's work, Carpenter also incorporates some elements of the Collins as victim of greed fantasy theme.

Carpenter describes the Collins family as being one of the "dirt-poor farm families" in the cave area although this characterization had been successfully refuted years before in the book Trapped! (5). Carpenter's characterization implies that Floyd Collins and his family were in desperate need for money. He goes on to describe Collins as being "reckless" and later, in describing one of Faulkner's characters, he states, "[his] injuries are the result of the same kind of carelessness and greed displayed by Floyd Collins in his spelunking adventures" (5, 13).

Poet "Finds" Floyd's Missing Leg

Many examples can be found of writers using personification to explore Floyd Collins' story—with the majority frequently giving Sand Cave itself human characteristics. In 1996, however, Survant used an entirely different approach. In his poem "Floyd Collins' Leg," the trapped man's missing limb is the main character. The poem, in its entirety, follows:

I found Floyd Collins' missing leg this morning.
Beneath the leaves
it lay,
silent and hidden.

Carefully,
I exposed it with my rake
to air and light,
sent it writhing
to cover
in untouched leaves.

Sixty years now
it has been free
of the man it killed.
Rid of him
it flourished,
took on the browns and grays
of forest floors.

Now it had grown fat
on toads and freedom
and threatened me
when it could not hide:

"Remember Floyd Collins,
I caught him in a hole
and ate him slow."

All the while
it burrowed and twisted
seeking heat
beneath the leaves.
Its eyes shine
like his eyes
in the lantern light.
The cave contracts
like a belly.
He looks startled
and is gone.

I turn
and let it go. (27-28)

Survant's poem illustrates yet another modification of a Collins as victim fantasy. Here, Floyd Collins is cast as the innocent victim and his leg (which is
now free from his body) is cast as the villain. Survant refers to the leg repeatedly as "it," giving the limb an animal-like quality, which is further enhanced by his description of the leg becoming "fat from [eating] toads" (27). Survant also depicts the leg as devouring Collins himself, with the appendage claiming, "... I caught him in a hole and ate him slow" (27). Floyd Collins the man surfaces only briefly in the poem; a vision of him being caught in the "belly" of the cave appears for a moment and then is gone. His leg, "the killer," is the focal point--Collins is but a blameless victim.

Forgotten?

In 1998, Smith published *Raw Deal: Horrible and Ironic Stories of Forgotten Americans* featuring a chapter devoted to the Floyd Collins entrapment. Like others before him, Smith offers a balanced portrayal of the Collins persona, alternating between hero and victim fantasies about the trapped man. For example, Smith describes Collins with the heroic characteristics of being "self-reliant and independent" and of being "tough and strong" (p. 139, 141). Smith later describes Collins' victimization by others. He states, "In contrast to Floyd's continued isolation, the hillsides surrounding Sand Cave were clogged with people...many of them curiosity seekers who were more interested in the diversion than in the well-being of Floyd Collins" (p. 145).

As detailed in the title of *Raw Deal*, Floyd Collins' story is both "horrible and ironic"--horrible due to the conditions and circumstance and ironic in that Collins was frequently portrayed as being a hero, a victim, or sometimes (as in Smith's work) both. (However, the title's claim that Floyd Collins is one of the
"forgotten" is arguable.) Smith effectively sums up the complexities of the combined hero/victim fantasies in the following passage describing Collins' after thirteen days inside Sand Cave:

A weaker man would have died of shock, thirst, starvation, exposure, exhaustion, or pain. A more fortunate man would have been quickly crushed under a cave-in or suffocated in mud. Floyd Collins was neither. Amazingly, he had survived. (p. 147)

*The Floyd Collins Story*

In 1999, the Cave City, Kentucky Chamber of Commerce and Peridot Pictures jointly produced a video titled *The Floyd Collins Story* that recounted the Collins saga through the use of reenactments, historic photographs and film, and interviews. The picture makes a resolute effort to portray Collins objectively; however, some elements from the Collins as tragic hero fantasy theme are apparent.

Early in the film, the narrator describes Floyd Collins in the following manner: "He is a sincere, honest man whose passion for cave exploring would earn him a solid reputation built on thirty years of experience" (Walker, 1999). The qualities of sincerity and honesty are, without question, common heroic character traits. Similarly, in an interview, Roger Brucker (co-author of *Trapped!* ) attributes the characteristic of bravery to Collins when he explains that as a youth, "...[Floyd Collins] was described by his neighbors and friends as having no fear" (Walker, 1999).
Later, in describing the time when Collins was discovered to be dead, the narrator states, "Floyd Collins' defiant battle with nature is over" (Walker, 1999). In addition, the narrator's closing statement explains, "Although Floyd Collins lost his courageous duel with Sand Cave and the forces of nature, his story of grit, determination, and the American spirit lives on" (Walker, 1999). By describing Collins as being in a "defiant battle" and a "courageous duel" with nature, The Floyd Collins Story casts Collins himself in the role of a heroic warrior against a worthy opponent.

Recurring Fantasies about Floyd

During and immediately after the entrapment of Floyd Collins, four major fantasy themes began chaining out with audiences: Collins as tragic hero, Collins as victim, Collins as hillbilly and Collins as devoted suitor. For the first forty years following the tragedy, the dominant fantasy theme in Collins' rhetoric was of Floyd Collins being some type of victim. From the year 1965 on up through the present, two dominant fantasy themes relating to Collins overshadowed the others: Collins as victim and Collins as hero. Although there were variances of each theme, the dominant concepts were the same. The earlier hillbilly theme appeared infrequently; when it did, it was only a secondary element. The portrayal of Collins as a devoted suitor became practically non-existent during this time. A new variation of established fantasy themes surrounding Floyd Collins also began appearing during the last forty years—a combination of Collins as victim and Collins as hero. Combining the two different fantasy
themes resulted in an alternate, more balanced persona of Floyd Collins that began chaining out through audiences.

In this and previous chapters, the various fantasy themes surrounding the Floyd Collins tragedy have been illustrated by examining rhetoric produced during different eras. At this time, what conclusions can be drawn from this information? What insights can be gained from examining the Collins' rhetoric from a fantasy theme perspective? By examining each theme individually over time, patterns and their subsequent conclusions should become more apparent.
Chapter V

MY CUP RUNNETH OVER

Floyd Collins' saga is compelling. During the time of his entrapment, Floyd Collins' story was the most dominant one in the nation. Harrison states, "The Floyd Collins' incident was simply one of the great news stories of the early part of the twentieth century. The only story that... rivaled it in national interest was the Lindberg kidnapping" (Walker, 1999). Today, nearly 80 years after his death, Floyd Collins continues to be an interesting subject for many. Whereas Collins is the primary focus of a countless number of works, his character has not been universally portrayed. Vast arrays of characterizations have been produced—ranging from admirable hero to corrupt villain. Bormann’s fantasy theme theory explains the extreme differences in audience’s interpretations of Collins.

Four dominant fantasy themes relating to Floyd Collins emerged during his entrapment: Collins as devoted suitor, Collins as an uneducated hillbilly, Collins as a tragic hero, and Collins as a victim of greed. Both during and after the saga, variations of these key themes surfaced as well. Fantasies about the trapped man grew from both the media’s interpretive framing of events and also audience identification with particular fantasies.

The preceding chapters provided concrete examples of slanted depictions of Floyd Collins, ones that perpetuated one or more of the dominant fantasies. Although some are more popular than others, it is evident that each one of the major fantasy themes is still chaining out (in some form or other) in the present day. Due to their obvious success through their continued perpetuation, these
dominant fantasy themes could be classified as “rhetorical visions.” By examining the progression of each rhetorical vision individually, from its initiation through its chaining out over time and up to its present form, insight should be gained into why the rhetorical vision worked for a particular community.

“Let Me Call You Sweetheart”

Floyd Collins became trapped in Sand Cave on January 30, 1925. Newspaper stories about the rescue efforts began appearing the following day. It was not until five days later (six days into Collins’ entrapment) that papers began featuring stories about Collins’ supposed love interest Alma Clark.

When interviewed in 1978, Alma Clark was asked if she ever visited Sand Cave. She replied, “‘No, I’ve never been there—I had no reason to...I had no feeling for Floyd Collins...There wasn't anything between Floyd and me’” (Murray and Brucker, p. 265). Despite the fact that she never visited Sand Cave during Collins’ entrapment, reporters wrote detailed and varied (albeit fictitious) descriptions of how she appeared at the cave entrance on February 6 and cried, screamed, and/or fainted. No previous mention of Clark’s name had been given nor any hint of a love interest suggested in earlier stories. When stories relating to Alma Clark began appearing, no explanation was given as to why she had waited six days to show up on the scene as her “true love” battled death. The actual origination of the Alma Clark love-angle is also puzzling. Reporters offered her emergence simply as a new chapter in the Collins’ story. Their motivation, of
course, was fueled by the desire to increase interest in the Collins' saga and to attract a new target audience.

The saga of Floyd Collins' entrapment included many appealing characteristics such as action, drama, and suspense. One marketable characteristic missing from the story was romance. By creating the Alma Clark angle, reporters began generating a new fantasy theme among readers—Collins as devoted suitor. In doing so, the reporters increased the appeal of the story to a particular audience, women.

Although the image of the “flapper,” the independent, carefree, (and at times immoral) woman is often associated with the 1920s, this representation was not truly typical of the majority of women. Kurtz (1986) states:

The highly publicized ‘flapper’ no more represented the average woman of the 1920s than the *Playboy* centerfold represents the average woman of today. The majority of women continued to regard marriage as their natural, desireable [sic], and permanent station in life. (p. 38)

Kurtz describes marriage as being a goal for many women of the time; in this respect, the Collins as devoted suitor fantasy theme was appropriate for most of the female audience in 1925. The traditional ideas of love and marriage appealed to males of the time as well, making this fantasy appropriate for both genders. When audiences read about someone whose true love was facing death in order to ask for her hand in marriage, they identified with the emotional appeals of the fantasy and sympathized with both Clark and Collins.
Following its emergence on February 6, the Alma Clark angle was a major source of material for several days. Murray and Brucker explain:

Of course, this sweetheart angle had tremendous reader appeal, particularly to women, and newspapers played it up big. Between February 6 and February 9, pictures of Alma, one of which showed her dressed demurely in calico milking a cow, appeared in virtually every American newspaper. (p. 158)

Lost Love

Immediately following the initial rush of stories that encouraged a romantic persona for Collins, reports relating to Floyd Collins and Alma Clark's "romance" decreased dramatically. An occasional understated reference to Collins' romantic persona appeared in the rhetoric of the tragedy over the years, but essentially, the fantasy disappeared as quickly as it had emerged.

This romantic rhetorical vision of the entrapment had sprung up quickly, yet it failed to thrive within its community. A variety of factors contributed to its lack of staying power. First, since the romance was fictitious, there was the obvious lack of material. For the devoted suitor fantasy to grow, tangible evidence was necessary—such as photos of the couple together, love letters from Floyd to Alma, and other tokens of affection. Had reporters been able to include occasional reinforcements such as these in subsequent stories, it would have helped to keep the fantasy alive. Similarly, the fact that Alma Clark never visited Sand Cave during Collins’ entrapment also was a problem. Naturally, readers would expect to see a photograph of the heartbroken Clark by the cave entrance or
with an attempted rescuer sooner or later. Although materials such as these were not essential for the fantasy to continue chaining out, the complete absence thereof definitely contributed to its decline.

Another factor in the lack of growth for the romantic rhetorical vision was the emergence of other females claiming to be love interests of Floyd Collins. Murray and Brucker state:

…the Alma Clark story was certainly fictitious, and even it lost its uniqueness when, not long [after stories about Clark became popular] three publicity-seeking women from other areas came forward to claim that Floyd really intended to marry them. (p. 160)

This development posed a problem for the reporters who had created a fictional romance between Floyd Collins and Alma Clark. If one of the three women claiming to be involved with Collins were actually telling the truth, she might expose their falsehood; if all were lying, it still weakened the impact of the Collins/Clark story. In the end, most reporters chose to stop reporting on Collins’ romantic life altogether.

A final component in the decline of the romantic rhetorical vision of the Collins’ saga was the changing role of women in society. In the months and years following the tragedy, more and more women began going to college, seeking jobs outside the home, and becoming more independent. On the other hand, the image of Alma Clark consisted solely of a devoted sweetheart. Bormann (1985) states, “A viable rhetoric must also accommodate the community to the changes that accompany its unfolding history” (33). In this case, much of the rhetorical
community was changing and yet the rhetoric was not. Simply put, the Alma Clark slant became passé.

Variations of the Collins as devoted suitor fantasy have appeared infrequently over the years, primarily in works of fiction "inspired" by the Collins' ordeal. For example, the trapped characters in both Wilder's film *Ace in the Hole/The Big Carnival* and in Warren's *The Cave* have female love interests. However, in both of these works, the female characters are neither devoted nor faithful, as was the Alma Clark persona. The exuberance and love felt toward Floyd by the character Nellie (Collins' sister) in the musical production *Floyd Collins* might also be considered a symbol of romantic love, as well. However, none of these examples mirror the "true love" fantasy that chained out in 1925 during the saga itself.

**Making Mountains out of Caves**

During the time of Floyd Collins' entrapment, many reporters encouraged the Collins as hillbilly rhetorical vision. In this type of rhetorical vision, the geographical location of Sand Cave in a small Kentucky town and its accompanying stereotypical associations were highlighted. Stories of Collins' entrapment were "enhanced" by colorful (and often humorous) descriptions and portrayals of area residents and of Collins himself. Unlike the previously discussed romantic rhetorical vision, the Collins as hillbilly fantasy has been featured much more prominently and frequently in the Collins' rhetoric over the years.
In addition to characterizing Floyd Collins as being a hillbilly, reporters portrayed Collins’ family, friends, and neighbors in this same manner. In fact, many of the stereotypes that emerged during 1925 are still being perpetuated today. An examination of social changes and trends over time can lead to a better understanding of the longevity of this rhetorical vision.

**Y’all Come Back Now, Ya’Hear**

A variety of factors have contributed to the continued popularity and perpetuation of the Collins as uneducated hillbilly rhetorical vision. First, it is important to acknowledge the societal conditions at the time of Floyd Collins’ actual entrapment. In the year 1925, society was experiencing major demographic fluctuations. Kurtz explains:

In the 1920s, over five million people moved from the countryside to the city. Combined with a steady birth rate and a declining death rate, the cities’ population increased by fifteen million between 1920 and 1930. Places like Atlanta, Houston, Miami, and Los Angeles mushroomed from small cities to large metropolitan areas...Dozens of other metropolitan areas underwent similar expansion in the 1920s, luring millions of new residents with the attractions of rapid transit systems, growing white- and blue-collar employment opportunities, and the cosmopolitan atmosphere of big city life. (p. 33)

As many people all over the country abandoned rural farms in favor of big cities, the general “hillbilly” stereotype grew more popular. This trend could
perhaps be explained as a way in which the new urbanites could reassure themselves that they were in the “best” location. Basically, by accepting the hillbilly concept and its rural associations, city dwellers were able to view themselves as being superior to the ignorant, illiterate hillbilly and his way of life. Through being amused by the comical country bumpkin, city residents felt better about their own situations. Taking this way of thinking into account, it was only natural that with the Floyd Collins’ tragedy taking place in rural Kentucky in 1925, the hillbilly fantasy emerged in some of the rhetoric.

Although the social conditions of the 1920s may explain the initial popularity of the Collins as hillbilly rhetorical vision, what other factors have contributed to its longevity? The hillbilly fantasy of the Floyd Collins’ saga is but one of countless media portrayals of “hillbillies” over time. For many, this type of stereotype is believed to be less offensive in that it depicts persons from a particular region rather than persons of a specific race, religion, or culture. In this respect, the “hillbilly” has become a “safe” stereotype—an easy target of the media. One only has to look at the country bumpkin’s portrayal through the years to become aware of the public’s acceptance—characters such as Li’l Abner, Ma and Pa Kettle, The Beverly Hillbillies, and The Dukes of Hazzard speak for themselves. Simply put, because of the overall longevity and popularity of the stereotype itself, the rhetorical vision of Collins as hillbilly has endured as well.

The 1920s Hero

As previously discussed, the 1920s were a decade of dramatic social change. With society changing so quickly around them, many people sought out
stability in other sources, namely “heroes” of the generation. Murray and Brucker explain:

...the 1920s was a floodtime for heroes. Perhaps the rapid economic growth and the drastic social and cultural changes that characterized the period forced the nation to create them. Certainly the abounding materialism and the changing moral patterns made Americans feel a bit guilty as they looked back over their shoulders at their more sober puritanical past. Heroes, after all, could be endowed with the older historic virtues of thrift, strength of character, and godliness. (p. 245)

In other words, by attributing heroic characteristics to others, people were able to reassure themselves that even though society was changing, it still included good, old-fashioned heroes as part of its composition.

In the book *The Hero in America*, Wecter (1966) describes some of the characteristics that made Charles Lindbergh a hero in 1927, after his trans-Atlantic flight. Many of these same characteristics had been attributed to Floyd Collins just two years earlier. Wecter describes Lindbergh’s appeal:

He was unmarried, but had a mother—the ideal situation for young heroes. He had made his own way, and into the venture had put all his savings...An inquiry into his record showed that he had coolly faced death before...[he was] alone...

By the mathematics of hero-worship, a single handed victory is far better than the combined efforts of two...A hero must be
simple, not sophisticated—for even sophisticates in the blasé Twenties wanted simplicity in a hero...Of Lindbergh’s personality little was known. But his clean-cut face and boyish grin...were enough for creation of a role. A serious-minded, hard-working lad who had done his best on a shoestring...[he] did much to reassure the 1920’s that youth was not going to the dogs. (p. 423-424, 427-428)

Essentially, one could apply the greatest part of Wecter’s heroic description of Lindbergh to the heroic persona of Floyd Collins as well. Many similarities exist in the two personas—their characteristics, personalities, and histories correspond considerably. Both men reflected moral strength and simplicity of character that many in the 1920s longed for themselves. Both were unmarried, self-made, simplistic “loners” about whom only sketchy details were known.

In viewing the similarities between the two personas, it is apparent that the 1920s era favored a certain type of hero, and both Collins and Lindbergh fit the bill. Boorstin (1971) defines a hero as “…a human figure—real or imaginary or both—who has shown greatness in some achievement. He is a man or woman of great deeds” (p. 49). In essence, Lindbergh was considered a hero for enduring his courageous flight and Collins for enduring a long, torturous death.

The Continual Rise, Fall, and Rebirth of the Hero

Although Floyd Collins does not exemplify the classic Aristotelian “tragic hero,” (primarily because Collins did not fall from great prominence or nobility) he has been continually portrayed as a daring hero who met with a tragic death.
In this sense, in the Collins as tragic hero rhetorical vision, it is Collins’ situation that is tragic rather than his character. This type of heroic fantasy theme is practically universal in its appeal. Drucker and Cathcart (1994) state:

The hero myth...has been studied as an important manifestation of the struggle to understand the world, to make order of crisis and chaos, and to bring understanding to the unexplained and unexplainable...The hero myth, told and retold, created heroes and has become one of the great basic myths...(p. 2)

Although the concept of the hero is timeless, the Collins as tragic hero rhetorical vision has experienced varying degrees of popularity over the years.

With the onset of the Great Depression, the overall “heroic ideal” became less popular with audiences who were dealing with the harsh realities of real life. Kyvig (2002) states:

The immensity of the Great Depression caused virtually every American to feel personally vulnerable. Daily life went on, in many respects much like the previous decade, but the reality of hard times cast a shadow few could escape. (p. 177)

A feeling of hopelessness and despair shrouded the country. Audiences had little desire to hear about glorious heroes—something far removed from their own bleak existences.

The impact of the Great Depression was felt for many years. It was not until the year 1941, with the onset of World War II, that heroic fantasies started regaining popularity with audiences. As a result, the Collins as tragic hero
rhetorical vision began resurfacing. Tales of battles and the brave men who fought them began saturating the media. Likewise, the “hero” himself became more popular in various media depictions as well. Americans wanted to perceive themselves as brave and hopeful, even in the midst of horrible conditions; in reading about heroes who possessed these traits, people thereby gained confidence about their country’s role in the war and also in themselves as a people. McLennan (1994) states:

The selection of heroes is one way in which people of a society order their world. The hero actually embodies those qualities which people of a society revere and with which they want to be identified. (p. 113)

Rhetorical communities that emerged during the tragedy itself began expanding once again. Almost twenty years after the saga, countless individuals who originally accepted the Collins as tragic hero fantasy were now passing it on to another generation. They presented Collins as being a hero from “the good old days” who possessed many of the desired characteristics of a modern day soldier.

The Heroic Quest

Similarly, with the end of World War II, America saw adventure and exploration rhetoric grow in popularity. The 1950s were a time of growth and discovery. From Hillary and Norgay’s triumphant climb of Mount Everest to the onset of the space age, the decade was filled with a sense of adventure and an admiration for those who dared to explore. Davy Crockett “King of the Wild
"Frontier" was exceedingly popular in large part due to his role as a frontiersman and adventurer. Collins’ heroic persona easily adapted to this type of ideal.

Whereas in the time of war, the Collins as tragic hero rhetorical vision highlighted his bravery and endurance, the postwar vision accentuated Collins’ adventuresome spirit. For example, in a previously cited quotation from a 1956 article in *Saga* magazine, Collins is described in the following manner: “Some men are driven by devils. They must climb mountains, they must penetrate artic wastes and tropic jungles. Floyd Collins had to crawl on his belly in caves“ (Herndon, 20). Here, it is not Collins’ toleration of terrible conditions that is highlighted, but rather his intense desire to explore. Boorstin’s description of “the hero” relates well to this change in Collins’ depictions. Boorstin states:

- The hero was born of time: his gestation required at least a generation. As the saying went, he had ‘stood the test of time.’
- He grew over the generations as people found new virtues in him and attributed to him new exploits. Receding into the misty past he became more, and not less, heroic. (p. 62)

“*The Times They Are A-Changin*”

The turbulent times of the 1960s saw a marked decrease in traditional heroic rhetoric. Unlike World War II, which sparked a renewed interest in the “hero,” the conflict in Vietnam turned many against established heroic ideals. Heroes from the past, such as Collins, faded from prominence during what many call the “decade of discontent.” As Wecter states, “…over the long reaches of our
history, there are visible changes of taste and spirit in our hero-worship as well as in our patriotism” (p. 489).

The trend against traditional heroes continued well into the 1970s. During this time, characterized as the “me” era, more attention was placed on the individual rather than the hero. At the time, people were reading popular “self-help” books in order to feel better and checking the “mood rings” they were wearing in order to see if they did. Pleasure activities such as skateboarding, dancing, and even streaking were indicative of an era that stressed finding happiness and inspiration from within. Heroes, in a traditional sense, were practically obsolete.

A Hero Once More

The rhetorical vision of Collins as tragic hero did not resurface significantly again until the year 1979 with the initial publication of *Trapped! The Story of Floyd Collins*. Although the heroic persona is not presented exclusively in the book, it is worthy of mention due to the scope of the work itself, which has sold over twenty-five thousand copies to date. It is also interesting to note that the reappearance of the Collins as tragic hero rhetorical vision coincided with the onset of the 1979 Iran Hostage Crisis. This correlation is significant in that the crisis sparked a trend toward patriotism (countless yellow ribbons were symbolically tied around trees in hopes for the release of the hostages) and simultaneously, the heroic ideal in rhetoric of the period.

The story presented Collins in a variety of personas, with a major one being the tragic hero. The article states, “Collins’ pluck and endurance transformed him, in the public’s mind, from a pitiful victim into a folk hero who remained unsullied by the tawdry carnival atmosphere that enveloped the entire proceedings” (138). This rhetorical vision was reinforced when, a few months later, President Bush sanctioned “Operation Desert Storm.” Public response to this military action was similar to that of World War II, with overall approval. The “good soldier” was once again popular, as was the traditional hero. Consequently, Collins as tragic hero began appearing more frequently in rhetoric—such as Guettel and Landau’s musical production *Floyd Collins* in 1994 and Smith’s chapter on Collins in the book *Raw Deal* in 1998.

A new development in the perpetuation of the heroic Collins’ persona is a direct result of recent events. In July 2002, nine coal miners became trapped in the Quecreek mine in Somerset, Pennsylvania. The rescue effort (which lasted over three days) received massive media attention. Influenced by public interest in the miners’ story, filmmakers Rob Rosenheck and Sam Hoffman renewed a previously purchased 1998 option to produce a movie version of the book *Trapped!* (R. Brucker, personal communication, September 12, 2002). Without question the filmmakers will be inclined, at least to some degree, to portray Collins as a tragic hero given the heroic images of the miners. In addition, following the terrorist attacks on September 11, 2001, current public sentiment strongly favors the traditional heroic ideal and the concept of the American hero. In this respect, Collins’ story is as applicable now as it was back in 1925.
Sinner or Saint?

During the time of Floyd Collins’ entrapment, one of the most popular fantasies perpetuated was of Collins as victim. The overall theme of “victim” has remained a constant. Over the years, however, many variations on this theme have emerged, thereby illustrating the ever-changing design of this rhetorical vision.

Initial fantasies portrayed Collins as being a seemingly innocent victim against the forces of nature. During the first days of rescue efforts, Collins was frequently described as being a “helpless prisoner” or “victim” of the cave itself. However, on February 5, 1925, The Louisville Herald-Post published a story that claimed Floyd Collins had found religious salvation only after becoming trapped inside Sand Cave. This report was the first one to suggest that Collins was a sinful man (at least at the time of becoming trapped.)

Stories such as this one, in which Collins is portrayed as a “sinner,” soon began appearing regularly, no doubt influenced by the fundamentalist backlash against changing morals of the 1920s. Fundamentalists directly opposed the drinking of alcohol and also the teaching of evolution in schools. The religious movement was powerful enough to oversee enactment of prohibition in 1920 and victory over the teaching of evolution in 1925 (popularly known as “The Scopes Monkey Trial.”) Many fundamentalists of the day were quick to associate Collins’ circumstance with the idea that “the love of money is the root of all evil.” By turning Collins’ saga into a moral tale, in which the “greedy sinner” meets with a justified fate, fundamentalists used the entrapment to show the power of God’s wrath.
The attributes of sin and greed were not solely limited to Collins, however. The same fundamentalist influence was applied to others on the scene at Sand Cave as well. Particularly in their coverage of “Carnival Sunday,” reporters portrayed Collins as being a victim of others’ greed, chiefly those profiting from his plight. In both scenarios, the dominant purpose was the same—to reveal the ugliness of sin and its horrible repercussions. Although some might argue that these are actually two different rhetorical visions (Collins as his own victim/Collins as victim of others), based on their similarities of theme and function, they appear to be derivatives of the same vision. The rhetorical vision of Collins as victim of greed continued to chain out among audiences well into the late 1920s until the onset of the Great Depression.

Despair Silences Greed

Just as Collins’ heroic persona faded from view during the years of the Great Depression, the Collins as victim of greed rhetorical vision did as well. At a time when many were barely able to scrape by, people were unable to relate to a rhetorical vision that focused on human greed and excess.

In describing the desperate situations of many during the time, Kyvig states:

…destitute urban dwellers literally scrambled to get something to eat. By 1931, adults and children were digging in St. Louis and New York garbage dumps. Orderly lines formed at some dumps as people waited their turn to hunt for food; elsewhere they rushed frantically to each new pile of refuse. (p. 191)
Accordingly, during the Great Depression, the notion of greed spurned more anger and resentment in audiences than genuine interest; therefore, this rhetorical vision faded from popularity for quite some time.

Same Victim, New Villains

As the fundamentalist movement gradually became less dominant in society, the rhetorical vision of Collins’ being a victim of sin-cursed greed did as well. When the Collins as victim of greed rhetorical vision resurfaced prominently again in the 1950s, the “greed” that victimized the trapped man was not his own, but solely the greed of others. Perhaps influenced by the “beat” generation’s rebellion against conformity, Billy Wilder’s fictionalized retelling *Ace in the Hole/The Big Carnival* (1950) portrayed not only the reporter (Chuck Tatum) as villainous, but also Tatum’s audience themselves.

In the film, it is Tatum’s greed for glory and the masses’ greed for a good story that cause the death of the Collins-based character. Wilder’s attack on the mob-mentality of audiences hungry for more appears to correlate with the sharp criticism of conformity popularized by the beat generation at the time. When the film was initially released, the fantasy of Collins being a victim of the media and audience’s greed did not chain out significantly. Basically, as persons within the media industry, movie critics viewed Wilder’s attack as being too personal. Movie-goers did, too.

Although the rhetorical vision did not chain out extensively at the time of the film’s release in the early 1950s, it has gained popularity over the years. For critics and audiences alike, time has made Wilder’s commentary less “personal”
in nature. In fact, many critics now hail the film as being one of Wilder’s better works.

This overall rhetorical vision has become more popular, too, as evidenced by its use in Robert Montgomery Presents’ “Crisis at Sand Cave” (1957), Homer Collins’ Cavalier story (1958), Roskolenko’s Solo (1973), Lesy’s “Dark Carnival” (1976), Finkel’s Going Under (1978), and more recently, the musical Floyd Collins (1996). The public’s growing understanding of sensational journalistic practices, particularly those practices employed at the time of the entrapment, no doubt has influenced the rhetorical vision’s chaining. Much of the rhetoric produced on Floyd Collins in the last twenty years has highlighted the exaggerated and at times, completely fictitious stories generated back in 1925. It is likely that after learning of these “creative” reporting techniques, many contemporary audiences attribute greed as a dominant motivating factor for reporters’ fabrications.

The Final Four

Although countless fantasies about Floyd Collins emerged both during and after his entrapment, four primary fantasy themes can be considered “rhetorical visions” in that they successfully circulated within and among significant groups: Collins as devoted suitor, Collins as uneducated hillbilly, Collins as tragic hero, and Collins as victim of greed. Although some of these visions have been more popular than others, they all have effectively been passed along over the years.

Whereas some of these visions remained relatively constant, (such as the “hillbilly” fantasy) others have evolved dramatically through the chaining out
process, such as the in the victim fantasy. Initially in the rhetorical vision, Collins was innocent. The vision then changed to one in which Collins was full of sin—only to change again with Collins emerging as innocent once more. Without question, all of these rhetorical visions will continue to change and adapt along with their communities.

Summary

When Floyd Collins first became trapped in Sand Cave on January 30, 1925 he was basically an unknown. When his corpse was discovered on February 16, 1925, he was the most talked about man in America. Since Collins’ death, he has been the focus of an enormous amount of rhetoric—from poems and books to songs and films. His story once held the attention of the nation and, in many respects, still does today. Bormann’s fantasy theme analysis helps illuminate why Collins’ story continues to be told.

Floyd Collins’ saga possessed all the elements of a good story—drama, suspense, action, and interesting characters. It also lent itself to having fantasy associations due to the large amount of misinformation produced at the time of the entrapment itself. Fantasy themes helped audience members to “fill in the gaps” of the story, thereby creating a new one. When a significant number of people share the same fantasy and bond together in the process, it is known as a “rhetorical vision.”

At the time of his entrapment, four dominant rhetorical visions caught on with the American public: Collins as devoted suitor, Collins as uneducated hillbilly, Collins as tragic hero, and Collins as victim of greed. These rhetorical
visions became popular with different communities at different times. By interpreting the saga through a particular rhetorical vision, audience members were able to have a more personal connection, not only with Collins, but also with others who shared their view. Because of this communicative process, the Collins' story continues to be told today.

Implications

The implications of this study relate to the interconnected fields of sociology, history, and communication. Correlations between societal patterns and changes in rhetorical visions were established and examined using a communication-based fantasy theme analysis. The historical inaccuracy of much of the early Collins' rhetoric paved the way for the emergence of fantasy themes; however, a post-modern communicative theory would attest that these fantasy themes themselves created a symbolic reality that was just as valid as one based on "history." Beyond these generalities, indications of a deeper connection between society, historical "time," and fantasy themes became evident during this study.

Although the fantasy theme analysis offers insight into why Floyd Collins' story continues to be told, it does not account for the story's massive media coverage from the onset, before fantasies had begun chaining. Basically, Floyd Collins became trapped in Sand Cave during a national news dry spell. At the time of Collins' entrapment, newspapers were desperate for a major story. Murray and Brucker explain:

The major national news at that time was President Coolidge's
economizing in the White House, the pending trial of Harding’s corrupt Veterans’ Bureau chief, Charles Forbes, and a big jump in stock prices. Only the emergence of the Nome diphtheria epidemic late in the month held out a promise of more interesting material. Even sports news was in the doldrums…It was January, after all; the football season was over and the baseball season had not yet begun. (p. 70)

Another factor in Collins’ initial widespread coverage can be found in the role of the newspaper itself at the time—as primary national news source for the American public. Regarding the function of the newspaper in 1920s society, Kyvig explains:

Newspaper…reading was a widespread activity in a [sic] era when it remained the best means to obtain low-cost, detailed, up-to-date information about what was happening in the world beyond a person’s immediate reach…The advent of newspaper syndicates and wire services meant that, other than on local matters, the identical…or similar report would routinely appear in newspapers across the country. While more than 2,000 daily and 6,000 weekly newspapers…were being published throughout the period, the bulk of the news came from relatively few sources…What Americans read became increasingly standardized. (p. 161-162)
In other words, most Americans turned to newspapers as their source for national information. Because of massive story syndication, many people across the United States read the same exact article on the same day.

During February 1925, many of these articles were about Floyd Collins. He was the number one topic of conversations all over the country. Present audiences know that this type of universal, overwhelming interest would be extremely difficult to achieve today—especially on a story about one man trapped in a cave. The primary reason for this difficulty is simple: Americans have innumerable news sources available to them at any given moment. Even if different mediums are covering the same story, they are presenting it in their own unique manner. On the other hand, at the time of Floyd Collins’ entrapment, one could pick up a newspaper in New York City and read the exact same Collins’ story as was printed in a paper in Little Rock.

Because of the lackluster news period, the power of the newspaper as primary news source, and the extensive mass syndication at the time, the stage was set for Floyd Collins’ story to become big. After a couple of days of coverage, Floyd Collins was front-page news across the country. It was at this point that fantasies began to take flight and rhetorical visions became established, many of which are still chaining out today.

Just how powerful are these rhetorical visions? They are powerful enough to keep alive a story of a previously unknown Kentucky man who was trapped in a cave almost eighty years ago. Had these rhetorical visions not taken flight among audiences, Floyd Collins’ story would have died long ago. To illustrate, a
story with an obvious parallel to Collins’ entrapment is that of Jessica McClure, who in 1987 was trapped for three days in a well. At the time, she was only eighteen-months old and the press dubbed her “Baby Jessica.” During rescue efforts, McClure’s story was followed intensely by the viewing public. Regular television programming was interrupted as the toddler was successfully rescued.

McClure’s story possessed many of the same characteristics of Collins’—suspense, drama, and sympathetic characters. In addition, it focused on a child, eliciting additional sympathy and compassion from audiences. Baby Jessica’s story received widespread media attention at the time of her entrapment. In fact, many people still remember the story today.

However, McClure’s saga has not had the staying power of Collins’. Other than a made-for-television movie soon after the entrapment and a few “Where are they now?” stories, Jessica McClure’s story has virtually disappeared. Baby Jessica’s tale has not been retold via a million-selling record, numerous Hollywood films or a touring musical production as has Collins’. The reason, of course, is that McClure’s story did not produce the potent fantasy themes that Collins’ did.

The rhetorical visions connected with Floyd Collins all involve basic human emotion. Collins as devoted suitor visibly relates to love. The hillbilly fantasy concerns the idea of identity or status—basically, in buying in to this rhetorical vision, one was able to “innocuously” look down on others, and consequently boost his/her own self-esteem. Collins as victim addresses many innate fears, such as being buried alive, and also addresses the constant struggle
between good and evil, sinner and saint. Lastly, the heroic ideal is a vital part of every person, “...a manifestation of the struggle to understand the world, to make order of crisis and chaos, and to bring understanding to the unexplained and unexplainable” (Drucker and Cathcart, p. 2).

Because of the fundamental human characteristics of each rhetorical vision, it would simply be conjecture to describe a specific rhetorical community at any given time. Any one individual may accept one fantasy initially and then reject it later, based on the “here and now” conditions of that person at the time. In addition, because of the universality of the dominant fantasies, it is safe to venture that just as rhetorical visions have developed and changed over time, so has the makeup of rhetorical communities. Overall, however, the dominant rhetorical visions of Floyd Collins have stood the test of time.

Perhaps the public knew too much about McClure's rescue. By watching it on television as it was happening, little was left to the imagination. Also, the drama did not have the many interesting and identifiable characters that Collins' saga did. At eighteen-months old, Baby Jessica resembled most other children that age—she had not yet "come into her own" with an easily observable personality (at least not to audiences.) No family members or rescuers emerged as especially memorable either. Finally, with McClure's rescue ending successfully after three days, public interest did not have as much time to grow as it did in Floyd Collins' case. Whatever the reason(s), circumstances kept strong fantasy themes from developing in McClure's story.
Bormann, Knutson, and Musolf explain that when conditions are right (as in Collins’ case) "...audience members may...become involved in the dramatic action. They find some aspect of the message that catches and focuses their attention until they imaginatively participate in images and actions stimulated by the message" (255). A key concept from this quotation is the idea of "right" conditions. No matter how appealing a drama may be, if circumstances are not favorable for fantasy themes to chain out successfully, rhetorical visions will not be established.

At the time of Floyd Collins' entrapment, everything "clicked." The time was right for a major story to hit the country. The drama itself contained all the necessary characteristics of a "good" story. Lastly, the fantasy themes that emerged appealed to a wide variety of audiences. Floyd Collins' saga illustrates the power of fantasy themes within a superlative set of circumstances; Jessica McClure's story shows what happens if the conditions are not quite right. In this respect, this study of the Floyd Collins saga reinforces the conditional nature of successful rhetorical visions.

Conclusions

A fantasy theme analysis of the Floyd Collins' rhetoric offers valuable insight into the popularity and longevity of his story. Clearly the story itself is intriguing. It is filled with action, suspense, and, at times, even hope. Its memorable characters simultaneously embody both the best and the worst of the human condition. Secondly, at the time of the entrapment, conditions were extremely favorable for fantasies to take flight among audiences. Both societal
and chronicled factors (as well as the unending chaos and confusion surrounding the rescue effort) influenced audiences to fill in the gaps via their fantasies. Finally, the fantasy themes themselves were characterized by a universality—almost everyone could relate to the story through one or more of its fantasies.

Stories such as Floyd Collins' are rare. Because of its universal appeal, longevity, and symbolic elements, it could be considered a modern legend. Murray and Brucker state:

There were, of course, inherent qualities in the Collins story that assured its continued appeal and also encouraged mythologizing. The utter hopelessness of the victim's situation as well as the Man versus Nature theme contained epic possibilities. Also, for legend purposes, it was essential that Collins lost rather than won his struggle to survive. The manner of his death and the circumstances surrounding it were all highly symbolic—the snow, cold, rain, and mud, and the loneliness, darkness, starvation, and isolation.

(p. 246)

To put it simply, a story like Floyd Collins' does not come around very often. When initially told to audiences in 1925, they recognized something in Collins' story that appealed to them. The same holds true for audiences today.

Recommendations for Future Studies

As with most research, the answers one seeks usually end up leading to further questions. Bormann’s fantasy theme analysis is an excellent method for examining the Floyd Collins’ story. However, due to the enormous amount of
rhetoric produced on the saga, a more tightly focused study would be additionally
helpful. For example, in the epilogue to the 1999 edition of *Trapped!*, a brief
mention is given of a man in France who has collected over twenty-five different
versions of the song “The Death of Floyd Collins.” An analysis of the various
versions and their cultural contexts would be an interesting course of study. This
example is just one of many. Other areas of possible focus include an analysis of
the nonverbal communication used in the news photographs and newsreels of the
Floyd Collins story, an examination of the impact of the entrapment on the cave
region of Kentucky, and even the process of groupthink among rescue
communications.

Farewell to Floyd

When Floyd Collins became trapped in Sand Cave on January 30, 1925,
he was immersed in darkness. He cried out for someone, anyone to hear his
voice. Nearly eighty years later, Floyd Collins is still being heard. Through the
continual telling of his story, in a sense, he is still with us. He will never really
"die." Floyd Collins will remain instead, forever, in the shadow of his own death.
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“Skeets the first is Cave City ruler.” (1925, February 5). The Courier-Journal and Times, p. 1.


Transcript provided by Mammoth Cave National Park library.


APPENDIX A

“Death of Floyd Collins” song lyrics
"The Death of Floyd Collins"

Rev. ANDREW JENKINS

Music by
MRS. IRENE SPAIH

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A brother's heart—

His face was fair and handsome; His years;

A broken-hearted father, Who had;

I dreamed that I was prisoner; My

heart was true and brave;

His body now lies tried his boy to save;

Will now weep tears of life I could not save; I cried, "Oh! must I

sleeping In a lonely sandstone cave.

sorrow At the door of Floyd's cave.

perish with in this silent cave?"
The Death of Floyd Collins

Additional Verses

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<th>5</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>&quot;Oh, Floyd,&quot; cried his mother</td>
<td>His father often warned him</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Don't go my son don't go</td>
<td>From folly to desist</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>'Twould leave us broken-hearted</td>
<td>He told him of the danger</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>If this should happen so</td>
<td>And of the awful risk</td>
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<tr>
<td>Tho Floyd did not listen</td>
<td>But Floyd would not listen</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Advice his mother gave</td>
<td>To the oft advice he gave</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>So his body now lies sleeping</td>
<td>So his body now lies sleeping</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>In a lonely sandstone cave.</td>
<td>In a lonely sandstone cave.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Oh, how the news did travel</td>
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<td>Oh, how the news did go</td>
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<tr>
<td>It traveled thru the papers</td>
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<tr>
<td>And over the radio</td>
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<tr>
<td>A rescue party gathered</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>His life they tried to save</td>
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<tr>
<td>But his body now lies sleeping</td>
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<tr>
<td>In a lonely sandstone cave.</td>
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<tr>
<td>But on that fatal morning</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The sun rose in the sky</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The workers still were busy</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>We'll save him by and by</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>But oh how sad the ending</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>His life could not be saved</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>His body then was sleeping</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>In a lonely sandstone cave.</td>
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APPENDIX B

Judge C.E. Nichols

(Author’s maternal grandfather)
APPENDIX C

Saga Illustration
APPENDIX D

Collins’ photograph from *American Legion* article