

CAVE ACCIDENTS BEFORE 1900 °

by Angelo I. George

Cave exploration is not without some danger that in many ways is related to the skill of the explorer. Most of the pre-1900 cave accidents revolve around the loss of light. There are no examples of people actually getting "lost" in caves. In most cases, cavers usually get lost only in the mind of the rescue party or the newspaper press. There are four tragic accidents of death and several involve an encounter with foul air in caves. Several of the accidents are obvious hoaxes. Most of the accidents occurred in mineral exploitation caves or caves opened to tourism.

Robert Montgomery Bird (1837, p. 434-435) gives us a hint of even more cave accidents during the saltpeter mining era (1808-1815) than heretofore known. He says:

cave hunting, in fact became a kind of mania, beginning with speculation, and ending with hair-brained young men, who dared from the love of adventure the risks that others ran for profit. As might be expected, this passion was not always indulged without accident; and several caves in Kentucky and Tennessee obtained a mournful celebrity as the scenes of painful suffering and disaster....Accidents, not attended with loss of life, were of frequent occurrence; and as for frights, they were lumped together in report, in the style of a constable's inventory, as too tedious to mention.

The cave guides at Mammoth Cave would recite horror stories of people getting lost in Mammoth Cave or killed in nearby caves. The stories served two functions: (1) it entertained their charges; and (2) kept the party together from individually straying down side passages.

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Over thirty cave accidents have been abstracted from a cursory examination of the literature. This is by far not a complete inventory. The most recent cave name followed by its synonym is used in these accident report.

○ Woodland 445 B.C. Mammoth Cave, Edmonson County, Kentucky.

The mummified American Indian, Lost John was found on Mummy Ledge on June 7, 1935. He was a selenite miner about 45 years old, who was crushed to death by a six ton boulder (Robbins, 1974, p. 139; Munson et al., 1989, p. 129). The Indian had under mined a large boulder in search of selenite. During the process, the boulder teetered over and crushed him to death. Lost John has the distinction of being the first known casualty in an American cave.

○ Adena 10 B.C. to 30 A.D. Salts Cave, Edmonson County, Kentucky.

The mummified American Indian, Little Al (a.k.a. Little Alice) died in a side passage off of Mummy Valley. He was 9 years old when he expired (Robbins, 1974, p. 140, 142). Robbins (1974, p. 144) said "that the burial of Little Al was the most recent prehistoric activity in the cave. He "died rather suddenly from an internal hemorrhage resulting from a fall or blow to the thoracic area." The body was recovered in 1875. This was not an Indian burial, rather after the accident, Little Al was prepped for burial by his Indian companions and laid to rest on a ledge off of Mummy Valley.

○ c. 1760 Wolf's Den Cave, Windham County, Connecticut.

Israel Putnam and hunting party chased a wolf into a small pit like cave near Pomfret. Putnam tied a rope about his legs and then crawled downward into the cave. By kicking his feet, a signal would be transmitted along the rope back to the surface party with instructions to haul him out of the hole. Misread signals caused the surface party to pull him out on two false occasions. He experienced brushed elbows and knees. The final extraction confirmed his wolf kill. (Humphreys, 1788; Perry, 1946, p. 28-31).

Winter (?) 1798 Great Saltpetre Cave, Rockcastle County, Kentucky.

John Baker discovers the great cave on Crooked Creek. Enters with wife and two or three children. Used hand held wood splinter torch. Wife carries extra fuel supply. Goes about 400-500 yards into the cave from the north entrance (then the only one known), drops his torch, there by extinguishing the flame. For two days and two nights they remained in darkness with no other provisions. Mrs. Baker groped her way out of the cave by feeling wet muddy foot prints left by the exploring party. All emerged safely (Brown, 1809, p. 237).

1801 Cave, St. Louis County, Missouri.

L. R. Lorimer (1828) recalled a secret solo hallucinatory cave trip he experienced as a young married adult. While in the cave, he wants to collect a rock formation. He achieved this by taking another rock and used it as a battering ram. This activity initiated a rock fall that sealed his exit way to the entrance. After what seemed like three days, he suffered cold, fatigued, and practically had given up all hope. Then a rain storm commenced. The inwash from the storm poured through the break above the roof collapse. This process opened up into a sinkhole on the surface. In the morning he could see the sun shining through the fresh opening. The article is written in a melodramatic style and reads as a work of fiction or hoax.

Pre-January 21, 1810. Mammoth Cave, Edmonson County, Kentucky.

The Sick Room received its name because the first explorer "first felt a nausea and general debility, which was succeeded by violent puking...we supposed the existence of mephitic gas..." (Anon., 1810). Exploration and tourism generally avoided this passage in the cave.

Summer 1811(?) Longs (Wrights, Grand Avenue) Cave, Edmonson County, Kentucky.

A saltpeter speculator, Mr. Wright in the company of an inexperienced miner explored Longs Cave. Deep into the cave, their only candle burned low and then went out. Their main supply had been left at the cave entrance. They proceeded to grope their way in the wrong direction down a side passage flanked by deep pits. By throwing stones ahead of their travel, the pits could possibly be circumvented. Wright in the lead, fell head long into one of the deeper shafts. The miner called to Wright, but there was no answer. The miner (who already suspected they were traveling in the wrong direction) turned in the opposite direction and made it out of the cave. This was a cleaver feat, especially since the pit is located over 1350 feet from the entrance, opens into a huge trunk passage with at least two major side passages. He made it back to Mammoth Cave to summoned a rescue party. Wrights dead body was recovered from a 50-60 feet deep pit (Farnham, 1820, p. 359; Bird, 1837, p. 436-437).

pre 1814 Mammoth Cave, Edmonson County, Kentucky.

A black slave saltpeter miner in the lower reaches of Gothic Avenue (Haunted Chambers) is missed by his companions. He tries to make his way out, only to stumble and fall, there by extinguishing his light. He starts to hallucinate that there were devils in the cave bent on tormenting him. His very rescuers were perceived to be these very devils (Bird, 1837, p. 539-530). The passage became known as the Haunted Chambers and only later change to Gothic Avenue about 1845. From 1810 (Anon.) until Bird (1837), the Haunted Chambers received its name from the echo produced in several parts of the avenue. The lost slave in the "haunted" avenue may be a manufactured story by Mammoth Cave management.

Pre August 6, 1823 Hinman's Hole, Massachusetts.

A deep pit was discovered and on three separate descents foul air was encountered at 14, 20, and 30 feet below the lip. C. W. Smith made the deepest penetration; his candle would not burn at the 30 foot level and had difficulty in breathing. The air got better at greater depths (Anon. 1823). Carbon dioxide levels probably were in the 3% range or greater.

December 1828 Half Moon Mountain Cave, Gallatin County, Illinois.

An exploration party of sixteen from the Saline Salt Works explored a nearby cave. Deep in the cave they encountered a foul air environment that put their candle out. A hasty retreat was made. "The effect on the man who held the candle, was a giddiness of the head, with sickness and plucking; but on an immediate application of cold water, he soon recovered." They were about 3/4 of a mile from the entrance. They encountered on the way out, two of their party sitting in total darkness. They had let their candle fall and could not relight it (S.C.C., 1830). Carbon dioxide levels were probably in the 5% range or higher.

n.d., pre 1833 Grand Caverns (Amens, Weyer's, Weir's, Grottoes of the Shenandoah), Augusta County, Virginia.

A French gentleman (M. Suntag) and the cave guide (Mr. Mohler) candle went out while in the cave. The guide knew the cave well enough that he escorted the Frenchman out of the cave to the light of day. They were 500 feet from the entrance at a place that would be commemorated as The Frenchman's Hill or Suntag's Hill (Cooke, 1840, p. 45; Suntag in Anon., 1849).

Spring 1833 Grand Caverns (Amens, Weyer's, Weir's, Grottoes of the Shenandoah), Augusta County, Virginia.

Robert L. Cooke, his brother and cave guide explored a pit off of Congress Hall called the Infernal Regions. The pit received its name "for many years it has been supposed to contain fixed air, so that visitors avoid it." The exploration party descended about 29 feet to a ledge where the effects of carbon dioxide started to take its toll on the group. Their candles started to burn dimly and four of them went out. They "experienced no difficulty in breathing, or any other indication of the presence of this much dreaded gas." And "when we emerged from the pit into which we had first entered, our candles again shone brightly." Cooke (1840, p. 45). Carbon dioxide levels in the 3% range.

n.d., pre 1835 Grand Caverns (Amens, Weyer's, Weir's, Grottoes of the Shenandoah), Augusta County, Virginia.

A man by the name of Patterson upon hearing of the exploits of the Frenchman in the cave of darkness, wanted to duplicate the adventure. He proceeded alone from the Ball Room toward the entrance without light. Ascending the steps at the end of the room, he slipped and fell "into an aperture, where he lay unhurt." His friends returned when he did not show up at the entrance. They rescued him from the area that would become known as Patterson's Grave (Cooke, 1840, p. 45).

1838 Mammoth Cave, Edmonson County, Kentucky.

Charles F. Harvey (nephew of Franklin Gorin, owner of the cave) was "lost" for 39 hours. He went down a cave passage and experienced light failure, and there he remained. A large search party was assembled from locals in the vicinity of the cave. When they found him, "he was almost wild" (Shackleford, n.d., p. 5). The passage today is now known as Harvey Way. Substance connected with this event added to guide patter on the lore of the cave. Especially horror stories of people getting "lost" and going "mad" in the cave.

1847-48(?) Grand Caverns (Amens, Weyer's, Weir's, Grottoes of the Shenandoah), Augusta

County, Virginia.

One third of a mile into the cave, the guide would extinguish their torches and thereby give his charges the experience of perpetual night. The guide had axillary matches in which to relight the torches. Wet matches prevented the relighting of their lights. Several ladies and gentlemen remained in total darkness for an hour or more until the guide returned with fresh torches (Anon., 1849). Apparently, the extinguishing of the lights was a common entertainment trick performed by the management in this commercial cave.

November 7, 1848 Mammoth Cave, Edmonson County, Kentucky.

Mary Loving Bliss of Buffalo, New York, on her wedding trip is killed by a rock fall in Mammoth Cave (Dolbee, 1948).

December 1848 Penn's Cave, Centre County, Pennsylvania.

Two lovers while exploring Penn's Cave experienced light failure. They were unable to relight their torches and remained in the cave for three days. Their hungry horses were discovered at the cave entrance by a passing farmer who reasoned someone may be in the cave (Folson, 1956, p. 198). This account may be more folklore than a real event.

Winter pre 1851 Wyandotte Cave, Crawford County, Indiana.

Three brothers by the name of Kesner and a neighbor boy by the name of Byerly entered the Old Cave on Sunday morning. While there their candles went out. They had left their auxiliary candles in their coat pockets deposited near the cave entrance. At 3 o'clock Monday morning, "old man Kesner" went to George Sibert's house to enquire about his sons. By 4 o'clock, Sibert and Kesner had found the stranded explorers in the cave. The boys were "about starved to death." The boys thought they had been in the cave for three days. Actually they had been in the cave for only eighteen hours (Rothrock, 1915).

September 1858 Mammoth Cave, Edmonson County, Kentucky.

William C. Prentice was being pulled out of the Maelstrom when the rope caught fire from the friction produced over the beam used to support the rope. The fire was put out with water from a bottle. This was a serious moment, for Prentice was 100 feet from the floor and 90 feet from the top where the fire occurred (Anon., 1858).

Spring(?) 1856 General A. W. G. Davis's farm, Greenbrier County, West Virginia.

A young man was plowing a field when a catastrophic sinkhole opened up and he and his horse fell 150 feet into a cave stream. The horse was killed. For 48-hours he wandered down stream in pitch blackness, pushed through a 30 foot long full syphon into more air filled cave. He finally reached the spring cave entrance at a distance of 6 miles from where the sinkhole had opened (Anon., 1870). Story has a high degree of improbability.

1862 Bell's Tavern Cave, Barren County, Kentucky.

During the Civil War, Cyrus C. Hodges injured in cave by rock fall while looking for water. Was taken to a hospital in Louisville for recuperation. He was discharged for this disability from the Union Army on July 16, 1862.

Pre April 8, 1866 Dead Man's Cave, Crawford County, Indiana.

Lyman E. Knapp was lowered into a pit where he was bitten by a bat on the face. Upon extraction he nearly fainted. In going through a small orifice, portly E. R. Hawn, M.D., became stuck for three hours. Going back to their boat on Blue River for a crowbar, their lamps began to run low on oil. It began to look grim for all involved. The party panicked and left Knapp and the stuck doctor in the cave. Knapp could not get out because the doctor blocked the way. The cavers returned to Leavenworth for tools, lamps, oil and a larger rescue party. In the mean time,

Knapp had found a sinkhole exit to the surface after being in the cave for 56 hours. He was found wandering in the woods by a hunter. The where about of Dr. Hawn was unknown (Anon. 1866a). Apparently Hawn made it out alive because we next see the rotund fellow at the Wyandotte Cave 4th of July lawn and cave party.

Pre 1866 Bear Cave, Westmoreland County, Pennsylvania.

"A number of years ago a lady from Pittsburg lost herself in this cave, and being unable to regain the course to the mouth, perished; her whitened bones were found a few years afterward by an exploring party.... She had probably entered the cave unguided, and thus unthinkingly subjected herself to an awful death by starvation." (Anon., 1866b). Thomas J. Metzgar (personal oral communication, 5 September 1992) could find no conformation for the "whitened bones" in the cave. He thought the story is a concocted romantic hoax. After all, bleached white bones is a terrestrial phenomena and not one in a dark cave, away from sun light.

April 5, 1873 Hannibal Cave, Marion County, Missouri.

Five boys explore one of the complex maze caves recently opened up during quarry operations. They ran out of string to mark the way and used up all their candles. They waited for fifteen hours before a rescue party from the town found them.

October 21, 1875 Bear Cave, Westmoreland County, Pennsylvania.

Two youths by the name of J. Herron and Anderson experienced light failure while exploring the complex maze cave on Thursday. A rescue party from the town entered the cave at 9 A.M. on Friday, and with in two hours Herron and Anderson were rescued from their dark confinement (Anon. 1875).

Spring 1878 Wyandotte Cave, Crawford County, Indiana.

Biologist, David Starr Jordan is separated from a party of twelve or fifteen and is lost in the south end of the cave (Rothrock, 1915). Starr had parted company with his caver friends and was exploring alone beyond the Australian Continent. He realized this part of the cave was new to him, so he sat down to wait for his companions who he could hear in the distant. In a short time he went to sleep. Awaking, he could not hear anyone and then ran in the direction of the last voices. In the process, his candle went out. He sat down in hopes he would be discovered. Edward T. Cox, the State Geologist of Indiana was in the same cave exploring party and suggested they all go top side and have dinner. Perhaps Jordan will catch up, they thought, because Jordan knew the cave better than anybody. After dinner Cox and party returned to the cave and found him cold, shivering, and had the appearance of having been beat up. The site is now known as Jordan's Wait. Jordan had been in this part of the cave from about 10 A.M. to 1 P.M.

July 27, 1879 Lost River Cave, Warren County, Kentucky.

W. H. Phillips, "Bud" Coombs, John Bailey, J. B. Sumpter, and an African America were a half a mile back in the water cave when they heard a high water surge coming from the cave entrance. The mill gates had been opened to start the mill wheel. The cavers were knocked down by the surge wave and carried along with the high water. They lost their lights and sustained body bruises. They made their way out of the cave in pitch blackness (Anon., 1879).

Pre 1882 Mammoth Cave, Edmonson County, Kentucky.

Matt Bransford, a freed slave guide, hid from some dirk revelers who had partook too much wine and were in rare spirits for mischief. Matt extinguished his light. After they had past his hiding spot, he tried to relight his lamp, but had forgotten his matches. With care, he made his way out of the Bottomless Pit area along a trail he knew well, all the while feeling his way with his staff. Then his staff detected one of the chasms; he stopped, became dizzy, and fainted at

the edge of the drop off. He came to, adjusted his composure, and crawled along the path, feeling with his hands. In this fashion he made it back to the surface (Hovey, 1882, p. 121).

Pre 1883 Bear Cave, Westmoreland County, Pennsylvania.

A rain storm occurred during the exploration of this complex maze cave. The cavers witness the cave stream on the rise. This caused some consternation, and one of the ladies in the party fainted. She was revived and all exited the cave safely (Anon., 1883).

March 16, 1884 Lookout Mountain Cave, Hamilton County, Tennessee.

Two men, Charles Gower and Christopher Schmitzins were 2 1/2 miles back into the cave when Gower stumbled, dropped his lantern in a crevice and broke their bottle of reserve oil. Groped around without any luck and they finally sat down to await a rescue. They were thought by the gate keeper to have already exited the cave while he was at dinner. Two weeks later another exploration party accidentally discovered them in the cave (Anon., 1884).

November 21, 1885 Lisamby Cave, Caldwell County, Kentucky.

John Verhoeff in the company of two or three boys and several young ladies went cave exploring on Saturday morning. Young Verhoeff chose to explore a side passage on his own. While in there his candle had only two inches left and finally went out. His companions called to him from the main cave without any answer. They became concerned and exited the cave to call out a rescue party. A 100 man rescue party was assembled just after dark at the cave entrance. After four hours of searching, they found him perched atop of a 20 foot high rock. How he got up there no one could guess. "Mr. Verhoeff was brought into town amidst the cheers of the people, and escorted in a torchlight procession to the College, and there, after he had publically thanked the crowd for his delivery, they left him." (Anon. 1885, p. 2).

c. 1880-1900 Mammoth Cave, Edmonson County, Kentucky.

Cave guide Ed Bishop had four of his party disappear from the group. They went on their own exploration of Mammoth Cave. Their lights went out all but one. They sat down and awaited to be rescued. After finishing work for the day he went back into the cave in search of his lost charges. He found them at one o'clock in the morning (Jeffers, 1918, p. 155).

pre-1897 Mammoth Cave, Edmonson County, Kentucky.

Cave guides Nick and Mat Bransford save a tour group from drowning on Echo River in Mammoth Cave (Wright in Schmitzer, 1993, p. 243; I have not seen the Wright reference).

18 JAN 1904 p.1 New York Times (Boat sinks Echo River, Mammoth Cave)

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