

# Spelunking — 1860s style

*"The intrepid spirits of Stanford, not content with the monotonous life our village leads, have been seeking wonders and curiosities beneath it." Bloomington Progress. June 6, 1867.*

Thus wrote a citizen of Stanford, who used the pseudonym of "Nemo." The object of his letter to the editor was to describe a daring spelunking expedition.

Intrigued by the sound of rocks when dropped into "ugly-looking sinkholes," the group of young people put on "old duds" and climbed down a "rail" into one of the holes. Unfortunately, that one proved to be a disappointment.

Their next choice was a place called the "Saltpetre Cave," situated about two and a half miles northwest of Stanford. Equipped with candles and torches, the



## Looking back

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group of seven descended at an angle of 45 degrees for about a quarter of a mile.

Reported Nemo, "When, to all appearances, we had reached its farthest extremity, a sign near the floor communicated to us the happy intelligence to 'Turn under and go to Thunder.'"

The letter-writer did not indicate whether he and the others had thought they were the first to explore the cave. They may have been startled when they stumbled

across the oddly worded sign.

"The turning part was successfully accomplished by crawling quite a distance, when we rose up in an irregular channel or fissure, and after a long walk emerged into a room known as the 'Rock Mountain,' the rocks being piled up for a distance of 60 or 75 feet. From the roof depended stalactites of a transparent rock, resembling glass tubes and icicles."

At some risk, several of the explorers climbed up the rock pile to get some of the crystal specimens. Farther into the cave they descended "a sort of spiral staircase." Wrote Nemo, "A large dome or cupola forms the roof, while the walls are quite symmetrical, and in the flaming light resemble white marble. Upon

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