

## **Tales from the Deep: Mammoth Cave and American Literature**

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Eight green buses nose up to the curb in the crowded parking lot. Eager visitors emerge from a nearby building where they have waited patiently within roped lines to come to a counter that rivals that of any airport terminal's. They have judiciously selected from almost a dozen tours. They now settle excitedly into their seats while the buses begin to take them through central Kentucky's deep green foliage, pock-marked by sloping sinkholes. Virginia pine, pin oaks, elms, and red cedars dapple the wild turkeys strutting below. Some buses turn right, others left along the miles of paved park road to reach one of the thirty cave entrances. Tourists fiddle with their cameras, hold their admittance passes, and ask questions of the park ranger who sits at the front of the bus. All visitors think of their particular tour as a destination: the Violet Lantern Tour or the Frozen Niagara Tour. But in actuality they are already whizzing above the cave, mile after spinning mile. Below them are five layers of interconnecting cave passages, with the Echo River 360 feet below their bus, still carving through the darkness at the lowest level as it has done for over twenty million years. Already below them snake nearly three hundred and fifty miles of black passage—Mammoth Cave, the longest cave in the world.<sup>1</sup>

### **Introduction**

Caves in literature have always signaled something going on beneath surfaces. From Plato's "Allegory of the Cave" to the reverberations of the Marabar cave in Forster's *A Passage to India*, caves are instigators of magic, action, or revelations. In his study of Spenser's labyrinthine caves in *The Faerie Queene*, William Blisset reminds the reader that caves can be places of "psychological consolidation or regression, wisdom and illusion [. . .] the cave will take what meaning the context gives it."<sup>2</sup> Both Coleridge and Wordsworth used caves as metaphors for the human imagination. Greek mythology features caves heavily: they are birthplaces for deities, homes for seers, prisons for horrific creatures, and magical shelters for lovers. Jung felt caves were archetypes of the unconscious and Joseph Campbell has commented extensively on their myths and the hero's journey into the underworld. The ballads, folklore, and stories inspired from Mammoth Cave are stories not far from these earlier traditions.

But because they are inspired from an actual place, they often contain more immediacy and realism. Mammoth Cave-inspired works praise the spectacular beauty of nature but often include warnings of human foibles.

The cave has been inspiring writers and artists for over two-hundred years: poetry, short stories, novels, travelogues, and narratives have all taken inspiration from the deep darknesses of the cave that catch hold of the imagination. With the early twentieth century's growing tourism industry of Mammoth, locals to the region realized that a cave could provide a huge economic boon for their families struggling to maintain the old traditions of farming. People began to desperately look for caves in their backyards. Rivalry over tourist dollars escalated and the Cave Wars of Kentucky erupted, pitting neighbor against neighbor. Floyd Collins's 1925 entrapment and death in nearby Sand Cave created a national interest, a media circus, and a ballad which swept the newly transmitting Nashville radio airwaves. Stories, folklore, and ballads of caves began circulating wildly—still told and embellished today. The history of Mammoth Cave literature begins as early as John Muir and Ralph Waldo Emerson; it continues to Robert Penn Warren and the award winning poetry of Davis McCombs, a former Mammoth Cave guide. One can see that Mammoth Cave literature is actually a historical topography, charting not only the growth of environmentalism but American tourism itself.

### Early Literature: 1850—1920

Pictorial studies, smatterings of poetry, and descriptive travel writing make up the bulk of early writings influenced by the cave. Dr. Robert Montgomery Bird of Pennsylvania visited the cave in the summers of 1833 and 1835, publishing *Peter Pilgrim, or a Rambler's Recollections* in 1838, which contains one of the earliest descriptions of the cave. (Bird was most well known for his novel *Nick of the Woods* about the 1780s settlement of Kentucky.) Poet and novelist Bayard Taylor visited the cave in 1855; his 1860 book *At Home And Abroad* describes his experience. In 1844 Alexander Clark Bullitt's classic book about Mammoth cave was published: *Rambles in the Mammoth Cave During the Year 1844, By A Visitor, 1845*. Poet Nathaniel Parker Willis toured the cave in 1852; his 1853 book *Health Trip To The Tropics*, included descriptions of the proper dress for the cave (including the women's attire) and his tour by slave guide Stephen Bishop. In 1850 Emerson had traveled through the cave and his description of the Star Chamber remains a central metaphor in his essay "Illusions." This particular chamber of the cave contains crystals on the ceiling, and even today guides will have visitors turn off their lights to see a perfect illusion of a starry sky above them. Emerson states this experience was one of his most powerful:

But I then took notice, and still chiefly remember, that the best thing which the cave had to offer was an illusion. On arriving at what is called the "Star Chamber," our lamps were taken from us by the guide, and extinguished or put aside, and, on looking upwards, I saw or seemed to see the night heaven thick with stars glimmering more or less brightly over our heads, and even what seemed a comet flaming among them. [. . .] Some crystal specks in the black ceiling high overhead, reflecting the light of a half-hid lamp, yielded this magnificent effect.<sup>3</sup>

Emerson admits that "I did not like the cave so well for eking out its sublimities with this theatrical trick. But I have had many experiences like it, before and since. [. . .] Our conversation with Nature is not just what it seems. [. . .] The senses interfere everywhere, and mix their own structure with all they report of."<sup>4</sup> In a letter to his wife

he wrote that “I considered that this was the best thing in the cave, & that this was an illusion!” His long letter includes a chamber-by-chamber reenactment of his tour – a tour which was led by the slave guide Stephen Bishop, one of the most knowledgeable and enthusiastic cavers of Mammoth’s history.

The tour was a “long & trying tramp,” he notes, particularly for the “ladies” in his group (who were at least somewhat unencumbered by the Turkish pantalettes they wore, a practicality provided for women explorers by the Mammoth Hotel). Emerson’s comment on the foibles of human perception in the cave is in line with a tradition of warnings in cave literature. Such warnings from the Mammoth area include the warnings from cave guides (often hair-raisingly embellished), and moral warnings, which we will see later with the 1925 ballad of doomed caver Floyd Collins.

As well as Emerson, John Muir was similarly impressed with the cave in 1867 as he stopped there on his walk from Indianapolis to the Gulf of Mexico. Although he records his distaste of the nearby “fashionable hotel grounds,” he loved the wild beauty of the cave itself: “I never before saw Nature’s grandeur in so abrupt contrast with paltry artificial gardens [. . .] with many a beautiful plant cultivated to deformity, and arranged in strict geometrical beds, the whole pretty affair a laborious failure side by side with Divine beauty.”<sup>5</sup> Muir also explored Horse Cave, where he noted that many crowds from Horse Cave village (now called Cave City) took refuge from the summer heat in the “cold air that issues from its fern-clad lips.” He wrote: “It seems like a noble gateway to the birthplace of springs and fountains and the dark treasures of the mineral kingdom,” and in exploring other local caves Muir took notes and samples of the plant life which grew in the cool “zone of climate” of the cave entrances.

Nature writer John Burroughs was also greatly impressed by the cool rush of air from Mammoth’s entrance during his visit in 1886. In nearly a dozen pages of “In Mammoth Cave,” he describes the heightening of the senses, the silence, and the common tourist trips of the caverns. He scientifically noted the temperature of the day (86°) and the temperature of the cave air (52°) but then quite poetically compared the phenomenon to a “fountain” of water, filling the entrance basin and then flowing down to the lowest point. He “immersed” himself neck-deep, noticing the visible layering of the airs: “I waded in till I could look under this as under a ceiling. It was as level and as well defined as a sheet of ice on a pond.”<sup>6</sup> Like Emerson thirty-six years earlier, Burroughs was also impressed by the Star Chamber with its “silence of the interstellar spaces.” In other areas of the cave, he listened to his guide shouting for echoes—a common practice then to exemplify the musical reverberations of the cave.<sup>7</sup> “Such wild, sweet music,” he recorded, “I had never before heard rocks discourse.”<sup>8</sup>

Emerson, Muir, and Burroughs were visitors to the area, but there was a local Kentucky writer who also found inspiration from Mammoth Cave. John Uri Lloyd was a pharmaceutical chemist and writer whose early 1895 science-fiction novel *Etidorpha; or, the End of the Earth* describes a journey through a massive cave to the center of the earth. (The book was published privately and went through many editions.) All of the above writers’ recorded impressions of their visits to Mammoth Cave are small literary gems and snapshots of early American tourism. Geographer Kevin Patrick has noted that cave guides’ fanciful descriptions of the formations and cave discovery (often written by the cave owner himself and passed down verbatim to generations of guides) reflect a unique American oral history—one that is being lost as modern guides focus more on education and accurate scientific information.<sup>9</sup> The tour descriptions and early writings from Mammoth Cave reflect a time of American hopefulness; Western expansion was still sweeping across the plains and visitors were eager to see traditionally named mythical marvels (the River Styx, Lake Lethe,

Fairy Grotto) juxtaposed to those uniquely American (Indian Graves, Cleaveland's Cabinet). The guides' willingness to accommodate the visitors' wishes – either writing their names in soot on the ceilings, allowing them to take a rock or two, or letting them wander off trail to find “new” passages – was the beginning of the now well known tourist's “commodified experience,” although environmental awareness and conservation has thankfully changed some of these caving practices.<sup>10</sup> Additional marketing and development of the cave was to follow. As more and more visitors during the nineteenth century were struck by Mammoth Cave, penning guidebooks and publishing pictorials, by the turn of the century Mammoth Cave was becoming even more popular as a tourist attraction. Turmoil was soon to come.

### **Ballads and Cave Wars: 1920s—1950s**

In the early twentieth century, promotional literature about Mammoth Cave abounded and the locals began to see that outsiders were willing to travel great distances to see caves, just as Emerson and Muir had done earlier. Trains, cars, and new roads were leading visitors directly to Mammoth. The area was no longer as isolated. Local farmers, who were already struggling financially, began to look for new caves nearby. They taught themselves basic geology and the names for different cave formations. “Unlike bottomland farmers, who specialized in corn, tobacco, and stockraising, many upland farmers owned soil that was none too good anyway. [. . .] If Mammoth was any example, there was more money to be made by crawling around under the ground than tilling the top of it.”<sup>11</sup> Land has always been an important aspect of Kentuckians' identity, but so has independence and resistance to modernization. With such a transition that was about to take place, nerves began to get raw.

With caves like Colossal Cave, Salts Cave, Unknown Cave, Great Onyx Cave, and nearly a dozen smaller others all in competition, the struggle over tourist dollars began to escalate. There were lawsuits, illegal surveys, arrests, feuds, and rumors. Unfortunately, much of the ruckus helped reinforce outsiders' views of the stereotypical “dumb hillbillies.” Homemade information booths were mysteriously burnt down. Directional signs were torn down and replaced by others. Even up to the 1950s shots were being exchanged and there were billboards along the road to Mammoth asserting “No one has the right to stop you on this road!”<sup>12</sup> A common method of diverting tourist traffic was to spread rumors that Mammoth was flooded (or crowded, or sooty), but other methods included rock throwing at Mammoth tourists or paying out-of-state car license holders to express disappointment in the Mammoth tour in front of other would-be tourists. Other tactics included jumping on motorists' running boards and delivering cave sales pitches, or even saying that all the caves in the area were interconnected and so it didn't matter which one was seen. “Some natives,” according to Robert Murray and Roger Brucker, “estimated that by 1925 as many as a third of all visitors to the Mammoth area were diverted to the smaller, private caves by nefarious means.”<sup>13</sup> Yet the Cave Wars were relatively localized and nothing compared to the national frenzy that would erupt when a local caver, Floyd Collins, became trapped in Sand Cave.

Floyd Collins had discovered Crystal Cave on his family's property in the winter of 1917, but Crystal Cave was over four miles down the highway beyond Mammoth. Most visitors did not reach it. Floyd was convinced that all the caves in the area were connected and he was desperate to find a commercially viable cave opening that could link either to Crystal or to Mammoth itself. In January of 1925, Floyd was digging alone in a narrow passage in Sand Cave when a twenty-seven pound rock shifted onto his leg. Floyd's brother discovered him a day later and rescue efforts ensued.

It quickly became a media circus. According to David Brison, "It became not only the first 'media event' of the 1920s but also one of the most publicized news events involving one individual in that decade, taking second place behind Lindbergh's solo flight across the Atlantic."<sup>14</sup> (Lindbergh himself was present to fly pictures to waiting newspaper editors.) Kentucky-born rookie journalist William B. "Skeets" Miller won a Pulitzer Prize for his coverage of the event; the small twenty-one-year old had gone down on several occasions to bring Floyd supplies. For more than two weeks Floyd survived by drinking hot coffee and eating food brought down to him in his tortuous crawlspace, which was called nothing more than a "wet rat-hole." (It was later discovered that some of the food intended for him was hidden in recesses far above him, as the "rescuers" had grown too afraid and turned back.) Tragic elements such as this would later be included in the novel, *The Cave*, by Robert Penn Warren, who was twenty years old and living in Kentucky during Floyd's plight.

The National Guard was called out. A mine shaft was attempted. One estimate has 20,000 people gawking and milling near the cave; there were lunch wagons, soda pop, hotdogs, balloons, prayers, and even jugglers.<sup>15</sup> The rescue effort became a tangled mess of emotions and confrontations between locals and miners, farmers and engineers, and knowledgeable cavers versus the boys. In many ways these confrontations were a microcosm of struggles which many communities across the Appalachians were facing in the 1920s. Just three years earlier was the Herrin Massacre of Illinois; similar, but less bloody, confrontations between unionizing mine workers and coal companies were still ensuing. Floyd Collins's helpless situation could be sympathized with by many:

The decade of the twenties was a time of intense social and cultural insecurity involving the erosion of status and the decline in political control by the old native Protestant stock. Floyd's entrapment in Sand Cave provided these Americans with a source of identification [. . .] a feeling of being threatened and even trapped by forces over which they no longer had control.<sup>16</sup>

In the end, nothing worked to free Floyd. The event was ripe for becoming folklore. An unsubstantiated claim is that a week before his entrapment Floyd had told his stepmother he had had a dream of being trapped by rocks and was finally rescued by angels. This gave the tragedy an added pathos but it was nothing to compare to what happened later. When Floyd's body was finally brought up from the ground three months later, cave crickets had eaten the ears and part of the face. His repaired body was placed on display in a glass-covered coffin near the tourist trail in Crystal Cave; that is until someone stole the body in 1929. The corpse was soon discovered, missing a leg and wrapped in a gunny sack, at the edge of the Green River. (The missing leg was never found.) Floyd Collins was finally given a proper burial at the Mammoth Cave Baptist Church cemetery in 1989.

With a story such as Floyd's, it was sure to go down in history. Less than six months after the tragedy, there were three books about it (all were privately published). "The Death of Floyd Collins" ballad, sung by Vernon Dalhart and written by Andrew "Blind" Jenkins, sold over three million copies in the next two years (Columbia Records, 1925). It was one of the first big hits in the history of recorded country music. Part of its success was timing—the Collins incident came at a rise of "hillbilly music" in the twenties.<sup>17</sup> The 78 rpm phonograph record helped propel the ballad's reach, and it even appeared on a song roll for player pianos. At one point nineteen different record labels had versions of the ballad. The ballad was adopted by the rural areas of the

border states and quickly modified to suit local tastes. It passed into the oral folk song tradition and in the '30s and '40s the Archive of Folk Song at the Library of Congress collected it from three singers on non-commercial field recordings.<sup>18</sup> By the end, there were at least thirty-seven versions of the ballad. The writers of *Trapped: The Story of Floyd Collins* remark that part of the popularity is that the Collins incident is unique among modern legends: "As the years have passed with their reburials and body snatchings, renewed cave wars, national park developments, and cave connections, the Collins story has indeed taken on the aspects of a modern legend. [ . . . ] Floyd, however, remains unique. The central personalities in most legends are remembered for how they lived. Collins is remembered for how he died."<sup>19</sup>

The ballads of Floyd Collins were more than just capitalizations on a tragedy, but were literature of morality and of the Everyman—an individual trapped in an uncontrollable horror. Many have seen the nation's intense interest in Collins as stemming from the plight of the individual in the early twentieth century, trapped in the impersonality of industrialization and the war-time dog-tag.<sup>20</sup> New recordings of the ballad continued to come out: 1944, 1957, 1959, 1961, 1976, and 1986, many versions using traditional Appalachian vocal methods and bluegrass.<sup>21</sup> The music propelled the story of Floyd even further, and actually may have influenced the creation of the national park for Mammoth.

The national park was authorized in 1926, the year after Floyd died, and many hoped an official park system would lessen the pressures on private land owners and subdue the cave wars. It did not. Mammoth Cave became a national park on July 1, 1941. Its formal dedication was postponed until the end of WWII, until September 18, 1946. The National Park service closed public access to other government acquired caves, and the previous local-against-local owners' battles now became a David versus Goliath battle of private cave owners against government takeover<sup>22</sup> (Another prickly issue was the government's permanent "furlough" of all of the black cave guides.) However, by the mid-twentieth century, Mammoth Cave was still one of the most popular tourist attractions of Kentucky, and its new status as a national park was enticing even more visitors. From that period on, one can see that many writers and artists were still being influenced by the dark mystery of the caverns, as well as the story of Floyd Collins.

### 1950s—Present

Several movies were made from the Collins incident, like the 1951 *Ace in the Hole* (retitled *The Big Carnival*) starring Kirk Douglas. There were television movies and documentaries as well, the most recent one *The Story of Floyd Collins* (1999). In 1959 Robert Penn Warren published *The Cave*, a novel whose plot line is similar to the Collins story. Warren grew up in Kentucky and observed the 1925 media frenzy first-hand: "*The Cave* goes back to the Floyd Collins case which happened around my home," Warren said in an interview.<sup>23</sup> His novel is introduced by a selection from Plato's *Allegory of the Cave*, and the subsequent story is a tale about a rescue attempt of a young man trapped in a Tennessee cave. The cave itself is used as a metaphor for secrets and guilt in the human heart; many of the townspeople have motives for not wanting the man saved. One critic has said the entrapment is also "the central metaphor for the difficulties of establishing personal identity."<sup>24</sup> Warren has said the original title was *The Man Below*, and that "the man below is the man inside, of course, inside you. The submerged man in you and the man in the ground."<sup>25</sup>

*The Cave* is told via seven major characters. A certain amount of plot awkwardness

arises from the fact that the perspective of the trapped man, Jasper, is nonexistent. There is no true protagonist. The never seen, only talked about, Jasper becomes near myth in the novel—he is a young Korean War hero, a favorite son, a woman's man, and an avid caver. Such personality constructs were not of his making; his mother remembers an explanation of his love of caving that he once gave: "Well, in the ground at least a fellow has a chance of knowing who he is."<sup>26</sup> The media circus which Warren had observed in 1925 during Floyd's rescue attempt is reconstructed here. Even a ballad is created by Jasper's brother Monty, which sweeps through the crowds like wildfire:

The crowd had begun to sing:

All the bullets in Korea  
 Could not make my Brother fear,  
 My Big Brother, he was brave,  
 But he's lying in a cave—  
 Oh, God, bring him out to daylight bright and clear! (237)

Other elements similar to the Collins tragedy include an aspiring journalist, caves and tourism as an economic hope for a rural family, and characters who claimed to have reached the trapped man but lied. The style of *The Cave* marks a "crucial shift in Warren's technique."<sup>27</sup> It is very unlike *All the King's Men*, which won him a Pulitzer Prize in 1947, although the psychological themes of self and inner-conflict are still present. As for the Floyd Collins affair, Warren admitted: "I couldn't care less about it then, because I was interested in John Donne and the Greeks by that time. I couldn't even be bothered to go see the place. But later on I crawled every cave in that whole region. I've done a lot of caving, just to see what caves were like—but only when I was writing the book. I'm afraid of caves."<sup>28</sup>

As well as novels like *The Cave*, Mammoth Cave and its area have also inspired poetry. The long poem *Going Under* (1978) by Donald Finkel was awarded the Theodore Roethke Memorial Award. Finkel was introduced to caving in Mammoth Cave and he later "mastered a particular brand of book-length poem, using what some critics have called his 'collage technique' to assemble an eclectic cast of voices—from diaries, letters, newspaper accounts, scientific writings and his own unique narrators—to create worlds far larger than any sum of those parts."<sup>29</sup> *Going Under* first begins with a narrative describing slave guide Stephen Bishop, who says that caving was the only freedom Bishop had known: "she was boundless, / fathomless / great veins, thicker than cathedrals / and the deeper he knew, the freer he was."<sup>30</sup> The second half includes a narrative voice by Floyd Collins. The heavily female personification of caves is a trope seen throughout *Going Under* and one which is unfortunate in its staleness. Floyd dreams of the cave's "creamy breasts / her spangled mound."<sup>31</sup> But such personification does remind the reader of landscape being raped, as well as the ambiguities of cave as comforter, killer, and victim. With an ecocritical eye, reviewer Harry Marten describes the motivations Finkel portrays: "The caves with their glittering beauty that can be chiseled off in pieces, offer up their treasures more easily [than other landscapes] and man in his inevitable impulse to fix, possess, and utilize that which attracts him with its seemingly inexhaustible loveliness, grabs for more."<sup>32</sup> Such truths of greed and human nature create a firm reverberation in the work. However, it should be noted that the truths of the Floyd passages are, like the

cave itself, still half-submerged in shadow. Finkel reveals a particularly harsh view towards journalist Skeets Miller, the young reporter for the *Courier-Journal* who tried to free Floyd:

. . . I brought him a light so he  
could see himself die  
I warned 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.

The writers of *Trapped! The Story of Floyd Collins* treat Miller with a much more sympathetic eye.<sup>33</sup>

Another poet influenced by the Collin's tragedy is Davis McCombs, a former park ranger at Mammoth Cave who now teaches for the University of Arkansas. His poem "The River and Under the River" was included in *The Best American Poetry of 1996* and his book *Ultima Thule* was awarded the Yale Younger Poets Prize. (The title in this case refers to the last known chamber of Mammoth Cave.) McCombs's poem, "Floyd Collins Interview, Sand Cave, 1925," is one of the most accurate of any poems describing the tragedy, including details like Floyd's family life, his gold tooth, and the compass needle he kept in his pocket.

. . . I've made my peace.  
Death don't frighten me none—  
but it's so long sometimes  
I get a flickering  
like when my coal-oil's running low  
and there ain't flame enough to light this hole.<sup>34</sup>

A pair of sonnet sequences frames this collection and, like Finkel's work, it opens with poetry written in the voice of the slave guide Stephen Bishop. In "The Star Chamber," the Bishop persona relates how a doctor visitor had scientifically explained natural phenomena: "He told of tides and how the ocean is affixed as with a chain / to moonlight [. . .]. I think it must be different / in the Cave."

Some critics have been skeptical of McCombs, who is Caucasian and well-educated, writing a slave's voice. (According to the Academy of American Poetry, thirty-four year old McCombs earned a BA from Harvard University in 1993 and an MFA from the University of Virginia in 1995.) Joel Brouwer has said, "McCombs uses Bishop purely as a trope, a means of conveying his own thematic agenda."<sup>35</sup> Even if the poetic vocabulary does seem a stretch for the persona, the Bishop passages have a mesmerizing quality:

It is the women  
on the tours that give me pause, delicate  
ghost-white, how, that night, I'm told,  
they wake to find themselves in unfamiliar  
beds, and lost, bewildered, call my name.<sup>36</sup>

Much of McCombs's works also seem quite Thoreauvian. Compare *Walden's* "I went



to the woods because I wished to live deliberately, to front only the essential facts of life, and see if I could not learn what it had to teach" to a passage from "The River and Under the River":

Tonight the river is at work dissolving, solving  
over and over the riddle of its loosening.  
I want to know how to hear it, and what it might teach me:  
how to inhabit this thing of bone, gut, and blood,  
this part of me that would not vanish if I vanished.

McCombs has explained, "I didn't go into Mammoth Cave until I was seven years old and I absolutely fell in love. And I was, from that moment on, obsessed. [...] Mammoth Cave is like an island, and it always has been and I suspect it always will be."<sup>37</sup>

Today, many people are enjoying the current writings from the Mammoth Cave area and the music it inspires. As unlikely as it seems, the tragedy of Floyd Collins has even been turned into a musical. *Floyd Collins* was commissioned by the American Music Theater Festival (now the Prince Music Theater) in Philadelphia and written by Adam Guettel. The musical premiered at Plays & Players in Philadelphia from April 9-24, 1994; with its rights available through the Rodgers & Hammerstein Theatre Library, many productions have been mounted all across the country. Staged with realistic-looking stalactites, stalagmites, and upper scaffoldings to represent the ground, the character of Floyd stays "trapped" while members of his family and media recreate the circus up top. Floyd is eventually rescued by an angel, a conclusion which alludes to Collins's premonitory dream told to his stepmother in 1925. The music keeps true to many of the Appalachian traditions of instrumentation, and the original ballad of Floyd Collins is a running motif through many of the musical numbers.

The ballad is also kept alive by members of The National Speleological Society, who sing many of its versions around campfires across the country. It has been performed with guitars, mandolins, fiddles, harmonicas, reed whistles, kazoos, and a capella—with many a hat (or bottle) tipped to Floyd. Other recent projects include the 1999 music CD called *Compassion*, which was recorded in the famous Star Chamber with Tibet's Drepung Loseling Monastery Choir. In May 2002, film crews for the Face of America series spent three days filming modern dance performances created by choreographer Doug Varone. That year a compilation of Mammoth Cave ghost tales was published, complete with tales of strange occurrences, Floyd Collins's ghost, and the lesser known freakishness of Mammoth's underground tuberculosis houses, which once housed doomed sufferers during 1842-1843. (The cave air was thought to be pristine and the perfect healing environment for sufferers.) The National Speleological Society's Speleobooks project keeps up-to-date tracks on current and upcoming publications related to Mammoth Cave, as does Cave Books, an affiliate of the Cave Research Foundation.<sup>38</sup>

## Conclusion

From early writers such as Muir and Emerson, to the tradition of cave ballads and the reach of modern poetry, Mammoth Cave has continued to be an inspiration to visitors for centuries. Much of the early literature is valuable, descriptive travel writing that gives great insight to nineteenth-century American tourism. Later literature broaches a traditional Appalachian theme: the importance of land and the conflict between tradition and encroaching industry (in this case tourism as industry). Writers like Finkel, McCombs, and Warren have used the cave as a metaphor for the secrets

in the human heart as well as for the depths of history. It is what lies below unseen. Mammoth Cave-inspired literature praises the Everyman trapped in unthinkable situations, the grandeur of nature, and the mysteries beneath our earth.

Between 1.7—2.5 million visitors per year visit Mammoth Cave; some sources list it as one of the ten most visited National Parks. Upon looking up at the sooty inscriptions on the cave's ceiling, Emerson remarked that "hundreds & thousands of people have held up their lamps & torches & smoked their names on a surface so inviting to the love of fame."<sup>39</sup> The cave inspires its sojourners to leave their mark, to show that they were indeed there, and that they have a story to tell.

Today, the cave is still being explored—its length grows longer with each survey shot. The green busses keep lining up at the visitor's entrance and wheeling their passengers over the miles and miles of passageway resting dark and hollow beneath the park roads. The underground rivers keep running and the limestone still dissolves. Both the body of the cave itself and the body of literature inspired from it keep expanding, unfolding, delighting the observant and the curious. Here, creation and discovery go hand in hand.

## Endnotes

1. 1972 was the year of the Grand Kentucky Junction, the connection of Mammoth Cave to the Flint Ridge Cave system, which gave Mammoth its status as the longest cave in the world. Although technically the cave is called the Flint-Mammoth Cave or "system," for the purposes of this paper the area will simply be referred to as "Mammoth Cave."

2. William Blisset, "Caves, Labyrinths, and The Faerie Queene," in *Unfolded Tales: Essays on Renaissance Romance*, eds. George M. Logan and Gordon Tesky (London: Cornell UP, 1989), 285.

3. Ralph Waldo Emerson, *Nature, the Conduct of Life and Other Essays*. (New York: Dutton, 1963), 300-1.

4. *Ibid.*, 301.

5. John Muir, *A Thousand-Mile Walk to the Gulf*, (New York: Houghton Mifflin, 1916), 11-12.

6. John Burroughs, *The Complete Writings*. (Riverby, New York: Houghton Mifflin, 1906), 9:271.

7. Emerson also notes, as did Burroughs, the effect of singing in the cave. In research on 19th century tourism and music in Mammoth cave, writer Joseph Douglas confirms that this was a common practice of tours. Not only did the Mammoth Cave hotel frequently hire musicians to play in the cave, guides typically sang for the tours or encouraged visitors to sing. In fact, one of the most talented singing guides was Stephen Bishop himself: "Although his biographers have neglected this aspect of Bishop's career at the cave, he had a solid reputation as a singer in his own day." "Music in the Mammoth Cave: An Important Aspect of 19th Century Cave Tourism." *Journal of Spelean History*. 32.3 (1998). Avail. 24 Jul. 2003. [www.echoriver.com/jsh/index.htm](http://www.echoriver.com/jsh/index.htm)

8. Burroughs, 267.

9. Kevin Patrick, *Pennsylvania Caves & Other Rocky Roadside Wonders* (Mechanicsburg: Stackpole Books, 2004), 205.

10. Julian Dibbel, "A Marketable Wonder: Spelunking the American Imagination," *Topic Magazine*, 2002

11. Robert Murray and Roger Brucker, *Trapped! The Story of Floyd Collins*. (Lexington: U of Kentucky P, 1982), 31.

12. William Halliday, *Depths of the Earth: Caves and Cavers of the United States*. (New York: Harper, 1976), 32.

13. Murray and Brucker, 37.

14. David Brison, "The Early Floyd Collins Ballads," *The Journal of Spelean History* 34, no 3 (2001): 3-11.
15. Halliday, 42; Murray and Brucker, 172.
16. Murray and Brucker, 245
17. Archie Green uses "hillbilly music" as a term which encompasses "old time, familiar tunes, Dixie, mountain, sacred, gospel, country, cowboy, western, country-western, hill and range, western swing, Nashville, rockabilly, and bluegrass" as noted in his essay "Hillbilly Music: Source and Symbol," *Journal of American Folklore* 78, no 309 (1965): 204-228.
18. Brison, 5.
19. Murray and Brucker, 244.
20. Ibid., 245.
21. Brison, 5-6.
22. Murray and Brucker, 239.
23. Richard Sale, "An Interview in New Haven with Robert Penn Warren," in *Talking with Robert Penn Warren*, eds. Floyd Watkins, John Hiers, and Mary Louise Weak. (Athens: U of Georgia P, 1990), 136.
24. James Justus, "The Uses of Gesture in Warren's *The Cave*," *Modern Language* 26 (1965), 8.
25. Sale, 136.
26. Robert Penn Warren, *The Cave* (New York: Random, 1959), 241.
27. Justus, 3.
28. John Baker, "A Conversation with Robert Penn Warren," in *Talking with Robert Penn Warren*, 262.
29. David Clewell, "Donald Finkel's Measure of Gold," Special to the *Post-Dispatch*, June 27, 2003, <<http://www.stltoday.com/stltoday/entertainment/stories.nsf/Entertainment/Books>> (accessed July 21, 2003).
30. Donald Finkel, *Going Under and Endurance: An Antarctic Idyll, Two Poems* (New York: Atheneum, 1978), 7.
31. Ibid., 25.
32. Harry Marten, "Finkel, Stallworthy, and Stevenson," *Contemporary Literature* 21 (1980): 146-58.
33. The writers interviewed Miller in 1978 and noted "there is a sadness in his voice. Looking back over it, he does not yet see how Floyd could have been saved, but at the same time he berates himself [ . . . ] 'I will regret it all my life that we didn't save Collins [ . . . ] I worked so hard, and did not accomplish a thing. [ . . . ] It still makes me shiver'" (Murray and Brucker 268).
34. Davis McCombs, "Three Poems by David McCombs," *Blue Penny Quarterly* (1995): 30.
35. Joel Brouwer, "Clio Rising" in *Parnassus: Poetry in Review* 26 (2002): 298.
36. Davis McCombs, *Ultima Thule* (New Haven: Yale U P, 2000), 5.
37. Bob Edwards, "Interview: Park Ranger Davis McCombs describes Mammoth Cave and how it inspired him to write poetry" *Morning Edition* (NPR), June 19, 2000, <http://infotrac.galegroup.com> (assessed July 24, 2003).
38. Lesser known trivia includes that the 350 miles of passageways reflected in Mammoth cave maps were the base design for the first computerized role-playing game, *Adventure*, in the mid-70s: "the primal ancestor of all those that followed" and part of the "history of modern fantasy." Julian Dibbell in "A Marketable Wonder," *Topic Magazine* 2002.
39. Ralph L. Rusk, ed., *Ralph Waldo Emerson: Letters*, (New York: Columbia UP, 1939): 6.213.

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### Other Mammoth Cave-related Literatures:

- 1838** *Peter Pilgrim, or A Rambler's Recollections*. Includes one of the earliest accounts of the cave by Dr. Robert Montgomery Bird (1806-1854). Bird came to Mammoth Cave in the summers of 1833 and 1835
- 1839** *A Wonderful Discovery! An Account of a Recent Exploration of the Celebrated Mammoth Cave of Edmonson County, Kentucky, By Dr. Rowan, Professor Simmons and Others, of Louisville, to its Termination of the Earth*. Anonymous. New York: R. H. Elton. A novel about a fantastic underground world which could only be reached through Mammoth Cave's passages; the sunlight to this world was received through openings in the earth at the North and South Poles. Predates Jules Verne's *Journey to the Center of the Earth* by twenty-five years.

- 1840** *The Mammoth Cave And The Barrens Of Kentucky, with some notices of the early settlement of the state.* Rev. Robert Davidson. Included information on the early settlement of Kentucky, Mammoth Cave owner John Croghan, and guide Stephen Bishop.
- 1845** *Rambles in Mammoth Cave, During the Year 1844, By A Visitor, 1845.* Alexander Clark Bullitt. Included a map of the cave drawn by Stephen Bishop. Morton and Griswold: Louisville, Kentucky, United States
- 1851** *Pictorial Guide To The Mammoth Cave.* Rev. Horace Martin
- 1870** *An Historical And Descriptive Narrative Of The Mammoth Cave Of Kentucky.* Dr. William Stump Forwood. Twelve engravings were included in the book, taken from the first photographs ever made in the cave by Charles Waldack in 1866. Publisher unknown: Philadelphia, PA.
- 1879** *The Sucker's Visit to the Mammoth Cave.* Ralph Seymour Thompson. An account of a trip leaving from Indiana traveling across the land and the adventures encountered along the way. Possible alternate title: "Western Kentucky above ground and below."
- 1893** *Mammoth Cave By Flash-Light.* Frances Benjamin Johnston. Believed to have been the first woman to have produced photographs underground, Johnston was from Grafton, West Virginia, and came to Mammoth Cave in 1891 on a commission from Demorest's *Family Magazine*. Best known for her photography but also a gifted writer, she wrote the text and took the photographs for the publication.
- 1895** *Etidorpha.* John Uri Lloyd. A fantasy of an underground journey in Kentucky. Full title: *Etidorpha: The Strange History Of A Mysterious Being AND The Account of a Remarkable Journey By John Uri Lloyd As Communicated In Manuscript To Llewellyn Drury Who Promised To Print The Same, But Finally Evaded The Responsibility Which Was Assumed By John Uri Lloyd.*  
Note that the author was a prominent Kentucky-born pharmaceutical chemist of his time; the novel is said to be a cult classic — a cave "trip" on several levels.
- 1911** *Mammoth Cave Romance.* William Lee Popham. Part of "Seven Wonders of the World Series (American)."
- 1912** *Wonders of the great Mammoth Cave of Kentucky, containing thorough and accurate historical and descriptive sketches of this marvelous underground world, with a chapter on the geology of cave formation.* James. W. Turner. Publisher unknown: Carrier Mills, IL.
- 1935** *Mammoth Cave in Third Dimension.* This 3-D book contained 24 stereo pictures and a pair of ortho-scopes in the back cover's envelope. Orthovis Company, Chicago.
- 1963** "Beast in the Cave" in *Dagon and Other Macabre Tales.* H. P. Lovecraft. The main character gets separated from his tour group in Mammoth, is stalked by a strange beast and must resort to killing it. The ending has an additional horrific twist: "The creature I had killed, the strange beast of the unfathomed cave was, or had at one time been, a MAN!!!!".
- 1978** *Under Plowman's Floor.* Richard Watson. A recent novel loosely based on making connections between Mammoth and Flint Ridge.
- 2002** *Scary Stories of Mammoth Cave.* Colleen O'Conner Olson. A recently published collection of old and new Mammoth Cave legends.
- 2002** *Mammoth Cave and the Kentucky Cave Region.* Bob and Judi Thompson. A newly published work which features nearly 200 vintage black and white photos of the Kentucky Mammoth-area caves in the stages of exploration, development, and tourism. It includes the first photos of the cave in 1866 and also photos of early cave guides.

According to Bob Thompson, primary researcher of *Mammoth Cave and the Kentucky Cave Region*, other important 19th century authors of Mammoth Cave include Lewis Collins (1850), Charles W. Wright (1860), Adam D. Binkerd, M. D. (1869 and 1888), Thomas Knox (1879), John Thompson (1879), and James Hoyes Pantton (1890).

### Other Mammoth Cave Music:

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*Floyd Collins: The Musical*. Adam Guettel. Premiered in 1994 at Plays & Players in Philadelphia. CD available from Amazon.com

*Grand Kentucky Junction*. Barb MacLeod. Winner of the 1973 NSS cave ballad contest (commemorating the Mammoth-Flint Ridge cave connection).

*Dirty Dreams*. Roger W. Brucker and Fred Anderson. A ballad protesting the proposed development of a Mammoth Cave area airport and transportation park. Song can be heard at <<http://www.stoptranspark.org>.>

*Bluestone Mountain*. Don Rigsby. CD entitled *Empty Old Mailbox*. <[www.sugarhillrecords.com](http://www.sugarhillrecords.com).> A fictional story about a mother going into Scott Hollow Cave looking for her son.

*Nylon Highway*. John Foster. A mid-1980's album about caving. The "nylon highway" refers to vertical descents on rope.

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