

Underground Discoveries Reveal Kentucky's Past

By Gary A. O'Dell

In late September of 1897, workmen excavating for a pool in northern Fayette County, Kentucky, uncovered a sand-filled cavern 9 ft beneath the surface. Following a blast in the cave, one of the workmen shoveling the rubble picked up a mastadon tooth, over 5 in long. Within a short time, other workmen found a jaw, containing two more teeth, and by afternoon more of the jaw and part of the skull had been removed. The blasting had uncovered a small spring which began to fill the cavity, but pumps were set to work and more fragments of the animal were discovered on the following day. This was but the first of a series of finds in Bluegrass regional caves, and it presaged a local renewal of interest in the disciplines of archeology and paleontology.

A noted archeologist and explorer of European caverns, Dr. N. C. Nelson of the American Museum of Natural History, spent the summer and fall on 1916 conducting cave excavations in Kentucky. Nelson believed that "...the caves of Kentucky, being similarly situated with reference to the southern margin of the glacial drift as those of France, should offer as good a field as the French caves for the discovery of evidence of glacial man." In May, Nelson visited Lexington and was taken to examine the caves in the nearby Valley View area. Dr. Nelson was quoted in the *Lexington Herald* of May 7 as stating that as these and other caves of Central Kentucky are rich in relics such as arrowheads and bones of prehistoric men and animals, he would make this region his next area of research. Local students were enlisted to aid in the cave excavations. It is not known which Fayette County caves may have been examined by Nelson, but that noted researcher did visit the Mammoth Cave and was reported to have left with "a goodly collection of archeological material excavated at the entrance."

Arthur M. Miller, dean of the University's College of Arts and Sciences, accompanied Nelson on at least one field trip in the Lexington area and afterward began a similar project, searching actively for caverns, rockshelters, and man-made structures that might yield fragments of the distant past. His initial interest was soon shared and pursued even more fervently by Dr. William D. Funkhouser and professor

William S. Webb, both also attached to the University. Aided by their students, they began the first systematic study of archeology and paleontology in the state. Funkhouser's interest lay in excavating and classifying artifacts and remains of the prehistoric peoples and animals that had dwelt in the state of Kentucky. Kentucky abounded in mounds and other earthworks, many of these having been described by Rafinesque and other writers in the early 19th century; through the years many of these had been destroyed, both by the farmer's plow and by souvenir hunters who had dug into them for their contents with little regard for scientific study.

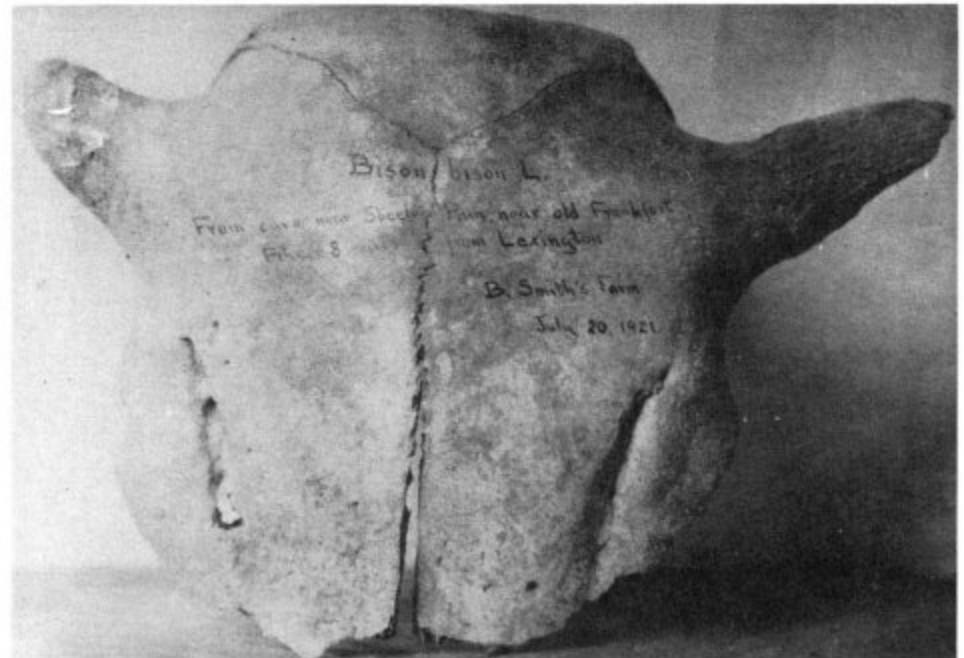
Funkhouser began careful excavations of the numerous remaining mounds and burial places, recording all the artifacts and bones found and their positions when discovered. This ambitious undertaking occupied many years and took him and his colleagues across the width and length of the state.

Discoveries were not limited to surface structures, many of the caverns in Kentucky also contained traces of the prehistoric peoples. Findings were made by the University researchers in caves in Lee County and in Wayne County's Hines Cave.

In Hines Cave, in 1922, Funkhouser and his associates, found 20 graves from which were obtained nine skeletons. Within the graves and uncovered elsewhere in the cave, were many artifacts of stone and of bone including arrowheads, skinning knives and beads. Found also in great profusion were the skeletal remains of dozens of species of animals and birds.

The attention of these thorough researchers was quite naturally attracted to their own home county of Fayette, in which the city of Lexington and the University of Kentucky were located. In that area were to be found many of the same sort of earthworks that they had dissected elsewhere, as well as numerous caves. In a few of the caverns near Lexington, they found remains of early wildlife, some of which dated to the Pleistocene Epoch. The Fayette County caves which they recorded as having explored were Russell Cave, Phelp's Cave, Breck Smith Cave, and the Reed's (Picadome) Cave.

Russell Cave proved disappointing, the stream issuing from the mouth of that cave had been dammed, causing the entrance area to flood periodically. Funkhouser and Webb noted in one of their reports,

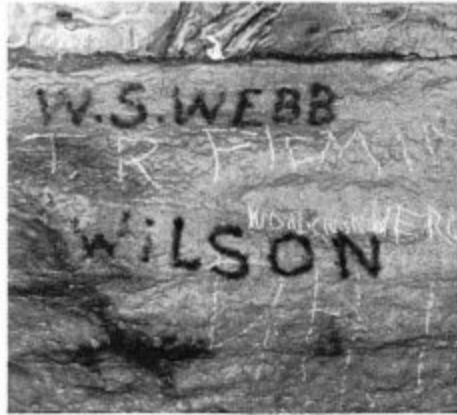


This bison skull, along with other remains, was discovered in Breck Smith Cave by Dr. W. D. Funkhouser and associates. Photo from McCollum, 1923, by permission of University of Kentucky Libraries.

however, that the "...cave is reported to have been used by aborigines and to have yielded many artifacts." In the Phelps Cave and in the Breck Smith Cave, they were far more successful. Much of the Phelps Cave had been well-known to locals for at least a century, but during the time when Funkhouser was engaged in his research, a new passage was discovered in that cave by a 15-year-old boy and reported to him. In this new passage they uncovered many animal bones including those of a black bear.

The Breck Smith Cave was even more noteworthy. Discovered by farm workers while plowing, the cave was first explored by three young women residing at the farm. As Funkhouser's interests were well-known through the community, the researchers were called to investigate the new cavern. The cave yielded remains identified as belonging to such diverse species as bear, deer, bison, and a species of grey fox found only in the western portion of the United States. To their great delight, the jawbone of a human was found along with a bone awl.

Archeological investigations usually require much tedious and often back-breaking hand labor, but working under the conditions imposed by a cavern interior made the process considerably more difficult. Caves are cool, often damp, and lighting must be provided. Frequently, there



Signature of Professor William S. Webb in Phelps Cave. Photo by G. O'Dell.

is not enough room to stand, and on occasion, the sediment accumulation is so near to the cave ceiling that the work must be performed while laying on the ground. Floyd L. McCollum, a student who assisted with these and other excavations, wrote that: "In some cases, horsepower could have been used to great advantage had the entrance been sufficiently large to permit the entrance of horses and scraper.

In only one instance was horsepower used to further cave excavation, and that was at the Breck Smith Cave where horses were used to clear debris and accumulated dirt

and rubbish away from the spot where an entrance was prepared. Needless to say, however, the interior excavation of the cave was done entirely by pick and shovel and the material handled was carried from the cave to the surface by wheelbarrow." In the Phelps Cave, the cavern geography saved them much labor. Excavated soil was dumped in strategic channels near at hand which were cleansed by flooding of the cave during wet weather. In most of the cave excavations, as with the surface earthworks, the entire layer of earth fill was not removed due to the enormous amount of work that would have been required. Instead, a systematic series of trenches were dug into the soil, allowing a thorough sampling of the area under investigation.

Although many remains of wild animals were uncovered, both of modern species and of those either extinct or no longer found in the region, no direct evidence was discovered to indicate that the caves in the Inner Bluegrass had been occupied by primitive man for any length of time. The skeletal fragment found in the Breck Smith Cave was believed to have been relatively recent in origin, perhaps even from the early days of the settlement of the state. One can speculate as to why the remnant of the Indian came to be in the cave. Was he perhaps injured in a battle with another



Entrance to Breck Smith Cave as it appeared shortly after its discovery. Note hemp plant to left of entrance; hemp was a major legal crop in Kentucky prior to WWII. Photo from McCollum, 1922, by permission of University of Kentucky Libraries.



Dr. Thomas C. Barr, Jr., in the "new" extension of Phelps Cave (1980). It was in this section that Funkhouser and associates performed their excavations. Phelps Cave was sealed shortly after the 1980 visit due to actions of a group of trespassers. Photo by G. O'Dell.

tribe or with the white settlers, and having crawled into the cave to hide or recover there, died of his injuries? Or was the body, already dead, thrown into the cave for concealment or as a crude burial? It may even be that the jaw fragment and awl washed into the cave from the surface.

Funkhouser and Webb continued to study the prehistoric life, animal and human, for the rest of their active lives. William D. Funkhouser came to be regarded by the public as an authority on caves and cave exploration and was sent as the personal representative of the governor to aid in the ill-fated 1925 rescue attempt of Floyd

Collins. Together and separately, Funkhouser and Webb published reports of their researches as late as 1932, but the culmination of their efforts was the 1928 publication of the book, *Ancient Life in Kentucky*. This book, still considered today as a classic in the field, outlined the prehistory of Kentucky as then known and detailed the numerous discoveries they had made, both above ground and in caves.

In 1964, members of the Blue Grass Grotto entered a local cave and discovered bones of extinct camel, sloth and reindeer. The following year grotto members discovered a new cave in Franklin County which contained more remains of long-vanished wildlife. A skull found in this cave was tentatively identified as that of a peccary. Dr. Thomas C. Barr, an invertebrate zoologist at the University and one of the founders of the Grotto, contacted the Carnegie Museum in Pittsburg. The newsletter of the Blue Grass Grotto recorded that Carnegie sent "Three paleontologists from the museum and a visiting doctor from Germany...to Lexington to see the caves and make further explorations.

In 1½ days, an area 2½-ft wide, 4-ft long, and 3-ft deep was excavated. This trip yielded one dire wolf skull...the second largest found and the best preserved east of the La Brea tar pits; two peccary skulls along with some fetal skeletons; post cranial material; one horse toe; and a piece of rib from some kind of elephant. Two weeks later one of the men returned and made further excavation into the bone layer. Identified at the site were two peccary teeth, one wolf tooth, and one bear tooth. The peccary was identified as *Platygonus sp.*, now extinct and approximately 11,000 years old." Additional remains found at the site were identified as a vertebra from the sloth *Paramylodon*, and a complete femur of the

giant extinct short-faced bear, *Arctodus*. The latter has in recent years been on display at the Museum. These discoveries include many of the species that roamed the Bluegrass region in ages past.

It is important that any person who finds ancient remains or artifacts should contact experts qualified to complete the work of excavation. Much valuable information has been lost through the efforts of untrained persons. Dr. William Funkhouser, in *Ancient Life in Kentucky*, laments the case of a man who found a cavern full of Indian artifacts, who set about digging up the floor of the cave in a fruitless search for buried treasure. This man uncovered skeletons and pottery, all of which he discarded or destroyed as worthless. Funkhouser concluded that "...there must still remain a quantity of...artifacts, still but little damaged, in the caves and other ancient sites of our state...if the present ignorance of the historic value of such things remains, only a very insignificant portion of such artifacts, when discovered, will ever reach museums or the hands of collectors where they will be saved from destruction" (Funkhouser and Webb, 1928). Such an observation is as appropriate today as it was over a half-century ago.

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