

THE OBITUARY OF PICADOME CAVE

Gary A. O'Dell

Picadome Cave, located in the bank of a sinking tributary of Vaughns Branch near the intersection of Clays Mill and Harrodsburg roads, was one of the most frequently visited caves in Lexington, Kentucky before its closure in 1957. There is considerable evidence that the cave referred to variously as Reed's or Reid's Cave in the early part of this century is the same that was later known as the Picadome Cave, named for the close proximity of the Picadome School and subdivision. The cave has now been sealed for over 30 years, but through interviews and scattered references in the literature, reconstruction of the history and physical appearance of Picadome Cave has been possible.

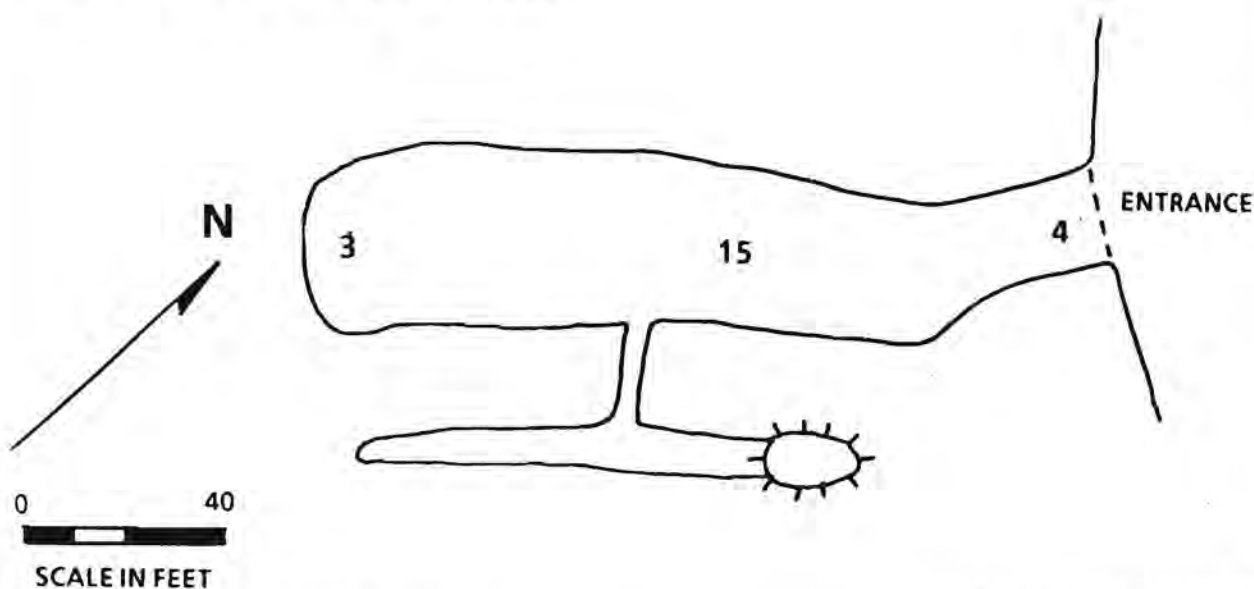
There are several references to a Reed's or Reid's Cave prior to the 1930's. Arthur M. Miller, head of the University of Kentucky's Geology Department at the time, stated in 1919 that Reed's Cave was about a mile from Lexington on the Harrodsburg Pike. Another writer gave the location as one and one-half miles from Lexington. The site of the Picadome Cave entrance, measured from the courthouse in the center of the city, is actually one and three-fourths miles. Further evidence linking the two caves is the 1877 map of Fayette County, showing a house occupied by a Mrs. Reed at the Picadome site, and today, two blocks from the buried cave entrance, is a street called Reed Lane. The name was probably changed by a more recent generation of cave explorers when the Picadome school and subdivision were constructed during the outward expansion of Lexington.¹

Constantine S Rafinesque, who resided in Lexington from 1818-1826, was possessed of an insatiable curiosity regarding all natural phenomena and, among numerous other endeavors, explored and described several of the local caves. He made no mention, however, of a cave in the Picadome area and nothing is recorded of the early history of the cave, though undoubtedly it was quite familiar to local residents. The first brief, non-descriptive reference to the Reed's Cave is from an 1898 University of Kentucky student thesis.²

By the early twentieth century the cave was well-known and much favored by large numbers of children who attended the nearby Picadome Elementary School. Mr. Lewis Sherrod, of Lexington, recalled that as a child attending the school in about 1918, he spent the noon hour of nearly every favorable day inside the cave, where he ate his lunch. According to Mr. Sherrod, the cave was very popular with the more adventurous children and they had their own special names for all the outstanding features within, such as the "Fat Man's Misery" and others along similar lines. A few years later, the cave was one of many examined by Dr. William D. Funkhouser of the University and his associates and students, as part of his statewide investigation of caves for ancient human and animal remains. Unable to discover anything of interest to them in the cave, little was reported of its physical appearance. In 1924 Sigma Rho, an honorary mining fraternity at the University, used the cave to initiate Samuel M. Cassidy, of Lexington, and three or four others: "A total of about fifteen were present, including two of the faculty who were members of Sigma Rho."³

PICADOME CAVE FAYETTE COUNTY, KY.

BASED ON A SKETCH BY
DR. THOMAS C. BARR, JR. (1980)



NOTE: DIRECTION AND DISTANCE ARE APPROXIMATE

CARTOGRAPHY BY G. O'DELL

In 1927 a brief commercial venture utilizing the cave was made by a local farmer, who installed irrigation pipes leading into the cave and raised mushrooms in the dark interior. This story was confirmed by Mr. Sherrod, who added the information that the cave was leased, rather than owned, by the enterprising agriculturist, a man named Hefner.⁴

The presence of a growing subdivision around the cave, in what was once a rural setting, intensified visitation to Picadome and ultimately led to its closure. Mr. Cassidy recalled that "a few cans and bottles were scattered about, which led to the mouth being sealed in a later year." A story is related by Johnny Colliver, onetime custodian of the Picadome School, that once two small children of the neighborhood were missing, and after much frantic searching were discovered playing happily in the mouth of the cave. Perhaps the greatest spur to the closure of the entrance occurred in 1956, when Lexington police found a quantity of dynamite secreted in the cave; it was believed that the explosives had been stolen from a nearby construction site, but whether the act was a mere childish prank or had some destructive design is unknown. Mr. James Ishmael, retired principal of the nearby Lafayette High School, stated that the cave was ultimately sealed because school officials believed it to represent a potential danger to small children.⁵

Regardless of the rationale, the cave was first closed by covering the entrance with boards nailed together. This soon proved insufficient to keep out the more determined children, so in 1957 a more permanent barrier was constructed. A wall of concrete blocks was built across the mouth of the cave, but even this solid structure was not enough; only a few years later, many of the blocks had been knocked out. Permanent closure of the cave was assured in 1961 by dumping several loads of furnace ashes over the entrance.⁶

One of the more interesting legends associated with the cave is that of a secret passageway leading to an entrance in the old Knights of Pythias home nearby, allegedly covered by a wooden door in the basement of that building. As the story is related, "the basement of the Pythian home was used as a storeroom for foodstuffs. One day...food started to be missed from the stocked shelves in the basement. Much later, it was discovered that some adventurous boys were making their way through the cave--sneaking in through the wooden barricade--and stealing the food from the shelves." Mr. Sherrod remembers hearing tales of a connection between Picadome Cave and the Pythian home, although neither he nor anyone else interviewed could recall anyone who had actually traveled from one to the other. This legend is probably based on the fact that the Pythian home did truly have an underground tunnel that connected several buildings, but it was entirely man-made and it is fairly certain that there was no boarded-up entrance to a natural cavern in the basement. The tunnel was closed in 1949 after one of the buildings burned down.⁷

With the passage of three decades since the closure of Picadome Cave, it is understandable that eyewitness accounts of the physical appearance of the interior would be distorted by time and be at variance with one another. Considering too, that many of the accounts given are based upon experiences as small children, most reports probably describe the cave as larger than it actually was. In addition, true for all caves and all manner of explorers, distances and dimensions underground are difficult to judge accurately.

Tom Fuller, now a Louisville resident, explored the cave as a boy before 1930 and reported its length to be between 400 and 450 yards. An anonymous local historian, reported in a newspaper story many years after the event, is said to have crawled back into the cave for half a mile. Art Lawson, of Lexington, saw the cave as a child and described it as low, wet, and muddy, so that even as a boy he had to duck his head inside.⁸

Dr. John Keller, of Lexington, explored the cave as a boy of about ten in the 1930's. Although he went only a short distance inside, he reported that some of the older boys went much further. As he recalls, the entrance was about eight feet high and led into a room 15 to 20 feet high and littered with large slabs of breakdown. The passage gradually decreased in height and also inclined downward until, about 100 feet from the entrance, stooping or crawling was necessary. The passage was straight from the entrance, wet and muddy, although there was no flowing water.⁹

An adult explorer, Samuel Cassidy, saw the cave on his fraternity initiation: "Immediately after walking through a rather small mouth the cave widened to about 20 or 30 feet and to a height of about six or seven feet in the middle, less around the sides. At least one passageway led off this room, but of a lesser height and not very wide. The room was dry and had a few fallen slabs of rock on the floor."¹⁰

What is believed to be the most reliable description of the cave is an account by two French biospeleologists, Jeannel and Bolivar, who were touring the United States in 1928 to study the life forms of this nation's caverns; Jeannel was many years later made an honorary member of the National Speleological Society in this country. Their report, referring to a "Reid's Cave" and published upon their return to France, states that:

"When exploring this cave, we had the help of Professor J. Garman, of the University of Kentucky. In a small cliff, near a path, the opening of the cave consists of a depressed vault hidden by undergrowth. One enters first into a weakly lit forerom, about 20 meters deep, the floor of which is littered with stones. At the far end, near the remains of an ancient wall, there is a narrow passage that leads into a dark, horizontal, rather dry corridor, the left wall of which is pierced by several openings that allow a descent into another passage on a lower level. In a recess of this second corridor a rivulet cascades from the vault and fills a clay floored basin before it disappears into the cracks of the limestone rock. Debris of all kinds, pieces of wood, cask staves, fragments of metal and glass containers indicate that this brook was utilized and that its flow should be constant. The total length of this small cave is approx. 100 meters. The walls do not contain (limestone) concretions, but the floor, which is littered with stones and wooden debris, is very humid almost everywhere."

Dr. Thomas C. Barr, Jr., of the University of Kentucky's Department of biology, a noted speleologist specializing in invertebrate cave fauna, provided the original of the above account and had himself explored Picadome Cave before its closure. Dr. Barr also believes the Reed's or Reid's Cave and the Picadome Cave to be one and the same, as his recollections tally closely with the observations of the French scientists.¹¹

Picadome Cave again received attention in 1975 with the demolition of the old school building in September and the beginning of construction of the new Picadome Elementary on the level ground above the sealed cave. The possibility of a large cave underlying the construction site was naturally of concern to the engineers, who drilled numerous test holes about the site to determine if the presence of underground passages would endanger the stability of the new structure. No actual cave passages were located in this manner, though one test hole slightly to the southwest of the old school revealed an underground solution cavity completely filled with sediment.¹²

Hydrologically, Picadome Cave is probably part of a groundwater network that includes the tiny Mason Headley Cave (located beneath the parking lot of the annex to St. Joseph Hospital) and the Big Elm Sink; the stream on which Picadome is situated sinks at Big Elm, less than 2,000 feet due north. Nearer to the Picadome Cave, there are numerous small sinks and swallets. One such, located behind a house on Woodbine Avenue, has an unusual background. The property owner relates that many years ago, this small, shallow sink was quite a nuisance to her as it filled with water after a rainfall and was very slow to drain. About 1950, she recalled, a Mr. Cardwell of the Kentucky Highway Department, using water dowsing techniques,

claimed to have located a cave some distance directly beneath the sink. A hole was subsequently drilled, and as he had predicted, at a depth of 75 feet, a cavern was broken into. Runoff is now directed into the 12-inch diameter hole which is covered by a beehive grating.¹³

Picadome Cave has been shut away, but an older generation of Lexington carries it in their memories.

The author would like to extend appreciation to the many individuals who shared their recollections of Picadome, and to Angelo George for sharing information and an interest in this particular cave.

FOOTNOTES

1. Miller, Arthur M. (1919) *The Geology of Kentucky*, Kentucky Geological Survey Series 5:2, p. 204; Boliver, C., and R. Jeannel (1931) "Listing of the Caves Visited: Speleological Campaign in North America in 1928," *Archives de Zoologie Experimentale et Generale*, Vol. 71, p. 309; (1877) *Atlas of Bourbon, Clark, Fayette, Jessamine, and Woodford Counties, Ky.*
2. Rafinesque, Constantine S. (1832) "The Caves of Kentucky," *Atlantic Journal, and Friend of Knowledge*, 1:1, pp. 28-29; Downing, G. C. (1898) *The Geology of Fayette County, Kentucky*, University of Kentucky M.S. thesis.
3. Interview with Lewis Sherrod of Lexington, 1980; McCollum, Floyd L. (1923) *Bones from Kentucky Caves*, University of Kentucky M.S. thesis; Cassidy, Samuel M. (1970), letter to the author dated Feb. 22.
4. George, Angelo I. (1975) "A Short History of Picadome Cave, Fayette County, Kentucky," *The Karst Window*, publication of the Louisville Grotto, NSS, 5:2, pp. 11-14.
5. Cassidy (1970); Interview with Johnny Colliver of Lexington, 1978; Interview with Mrs. Richard Sherrod of Lexington, 1977, daughter-in-law of Lewis Sherrod, above; McAdams, Raymond (1965) "Bluegrass Caves: Use and Misuse Part II," *The Kentucky Caver*, publication of the Bluegrass Grotto, NSS, 1:3, pp. 56-59; Interview with James Ishmael of Lexington, 1978.
6. Ishmael interview, 1978; Interview with Dr. Thomas C. Barr, Jr. of Lexington, 1980.
7. McAdams (1965); Ishmael interviews, 1978.
8. George (1975).

9. Interview with Dr. John Keller of Lexington, 1977.
10. Cassidy (1970).
11. Bolivar and Jeannel (1931)
12. Interview with Robert Wickline of Stanton, Kentucky, 1976, construction supervisor; Drilling performed by Gregg Laboratories of Lexington under the supervision of Bill Foy.
13. Interview with Mrs. Robert Wilson of Lexington, 1976,

AN 1828 ILLINOIS CAVE DESCRIPTION

Tom Metzgar

The following description of Half Moon Mountain Cave appeared in *The Blairsville Record and Conemaugh Reporter*. This rare Pennsylvania newspaper was published at Blairsville, Indiana County, by T. M'Farland on Thursday mornings. The date on this issue is 20 May 1830. It is further identified as Volume 3, Number 34, Whole Number 138.

The Henry E. Huntington Library and Art Gallery in San Marino, California holds this newspaper in its collections. Clarence D. Stephenson, author and historian of Indiana County, Pennsylvania, kindly permitted me to use his photocopy of this paper.

This cave description was originally written for the *Bedford Gazette* by a traveler known only by his initials - S. C. C.. Bedford, Pennsylvania was noted for its mineral water at Bedford Springs. Many famous people, including President James Buchanan, vacationed there during the 19th century. The health spa was widely known to travelers passing through Bedford on one of Pennsylvania's principal east-west highways, the Pennsylvania Road, forerunner of present-day U. S. Route 30. This may explain why the mysterious S. C. C. stopped at Bedford in about 1830 and took the time to write about a unique experience encountered during a trip through Illinois, hundreds of miles to the west.

A copy of the *Bedford Gazette* containing this cave description could not be located to compare with the version printed here. Newspapers during that era commonly exchanged and reprinted material verbatim. Publication in a newspaper appears to have placed printed matter in public domain. With due acknowledgement, reprinting entire articles was apparently taken as a compliment by the quoted newspaper instead of resulting in copyright infringement litigation. At any rate, this practice has preserved for us today an excellent 19th century cave description.