

Kentucky

# Phelps Cave

By Gary A. O'Dell

Photos by Author

**P**helps Cave, under the scenic karst pastures of the Busby Farm in western Fayette County, was one of the larger and best-known caves of the area. The cave, adjacent to the mansion owned in recent years by former Kentucky Governor John Y. Brown and Phyllis George Brown, has figured in local history for over 170 years. Many maps of the region, old and modern, show the location of this cavern which has been responsible for several nearby place names.

The first reference to the cave was made in the early nineteenth century by the natural historian Constantine S. Rafinesque, who lived in Lexington from 1818 to 1825 and investigated many natural features and ancient artifacts of Kentucky. The state was then a region that no longer constituted the western frontier, yet had been little subjected to scientific investigation. Kentucky caverns fascinated Rafinesque and he explored and described several in his reports. He referred to Phelps's Cave as the Bryan's Cave, a "...small dry cave in limestone, with a small spring at the entrance. It is like a crooked gallery, 380 steps long, 6 to 10 feet high and wide, with an even floor and roof. It is used by Mr. Bryan as a spring house."<sup>1</sup>

The estate containing the cave was purchased by David Bryan from Colonel Abram Bowman, who had received it as part of a large land grant services in the Revolution. The present stately mansion was built by Bryan in 1821. The house and grounds were inherited in 1834 by his only son, William Bryan, who became a Confederate general officer during the Civil War. Upon the death of General Bryan in 1881, the estate was sold to Judge John Samuel Phelps, a native of Boone County, Kentucky, who lived in the large house with his wife and daughter.<sup>2</sup>

There is some uncertainty as to the name given to the country estate. One writer, Elizabeth Patterson Thomas, referred to the mansion as "Cave Place" in 1939, but only seven years previously Elizabeth M. Simpson wrote that the estate was named Cave Hill "...because of an immense cavern that ran back a quarter of a mile from the road." An 1877 map of the area marks the home of

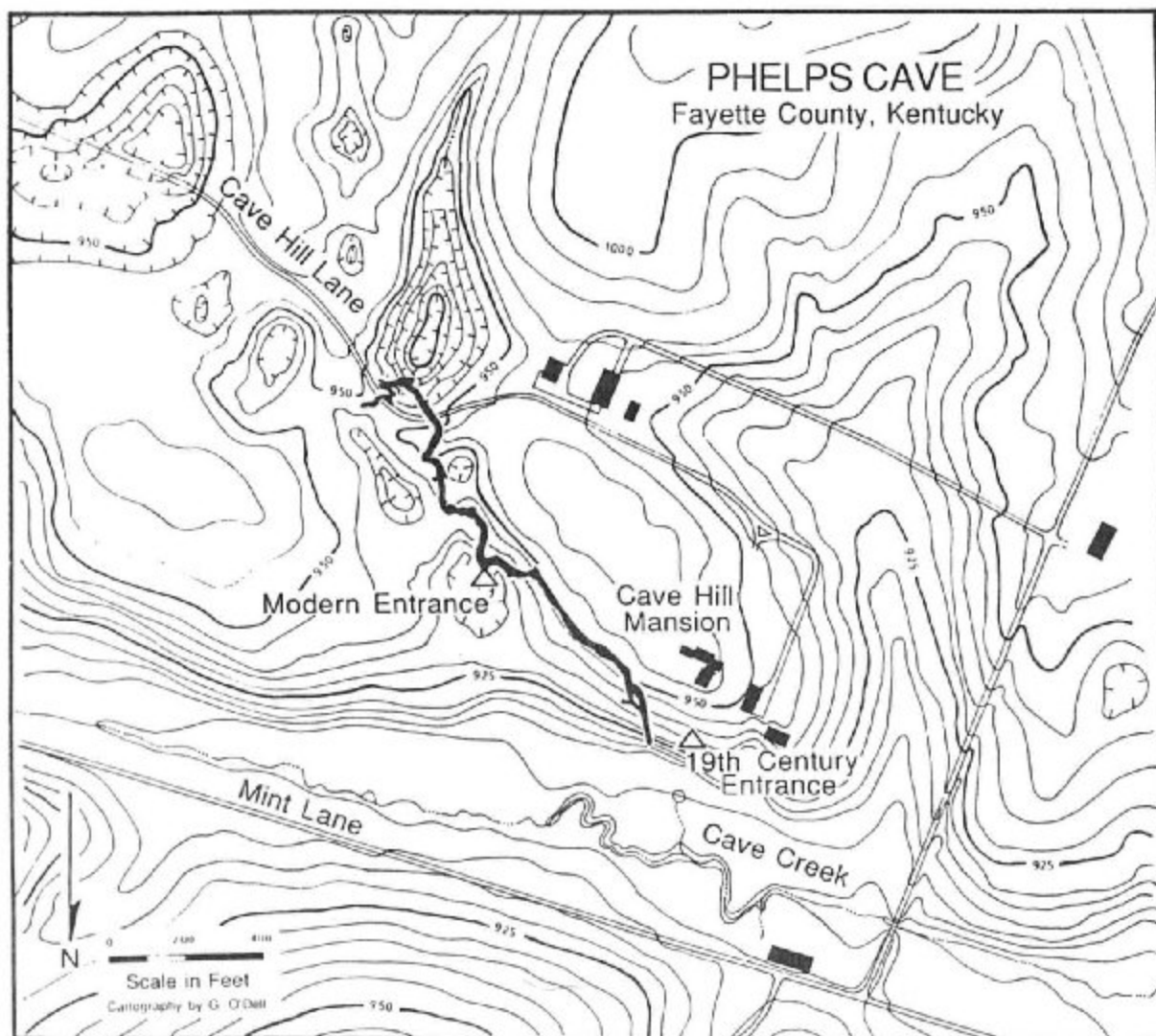
General Bryan with the legend, "Cave Place," yet the modern name for the narrow road that leads back to the mansion is Cave Hill Road. It is possible that the name given to the farm by the Bryan family was changed by Judge Phelps, or that the house was called by one name and the farm by the other. An 1879 newspaper article refers to the farm as "Wildwood," so most likely the names are for the house. In any case, the mansion, now including only a small portion of the former estate, is now known as "Cave Hill."<sup>3</sup>

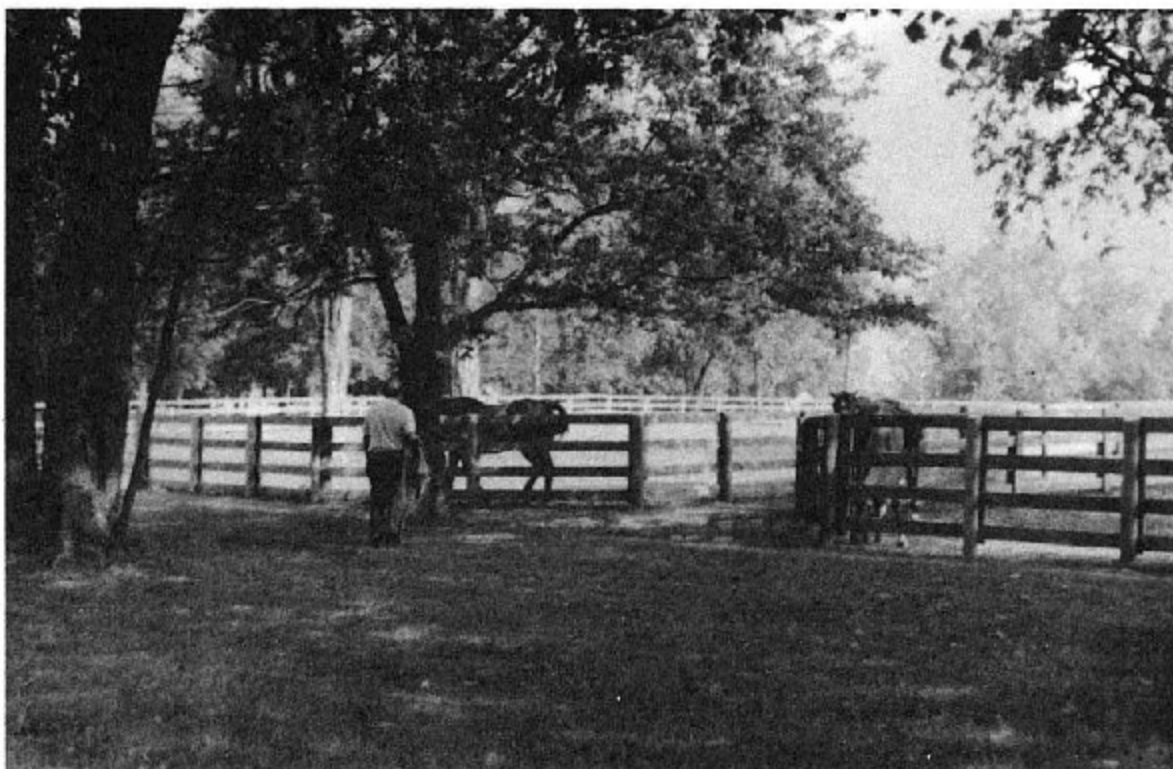
General Bryan established the tradition of Cave Hill as a social center, with frequent parties and fox hunts for the gentlemen. Of the cavern, the June 28, 1879, *Kentucky Gazette* reported that, "To explore this cave is quite a pleasant recreation in which nearly all visitors to the old place indulge. The cave is also a splendid repository for butter and milk, where they are kept fresh and good."

The tradition of hospitality was carried on in good stead by the new owner, Judge Phelps, for

...when summer came, and the harvest moon rode the skies, Judge Phelps gave watermelon feasts, chilling the melons in the depths of the cave, and inviting all the neighborhood to Cave Hill. It was an occasion particularly designed for the meeting of young lovers who found in this genial, kindly old judge a ready confederate in all their romantic schemes."<sup>4</sup>

Phelps's Cave was the site of several excavations in the early twentieth century, one of many Kentucky caves investigated by University of Kentucky professors William D. Funkhouser, Arthur M. Miller, and William S. Webb. At this time, according to one of their written reports, the cave was still being used as a natural refrigerator of fruits and vegetables. A fifteen year-old boy, a resi-





**Above:** T.C. Barr, Jr. takes a short walk to the entrance through the scenic environs of a Bluegrass thoroughbred horse farm.

**Above right:** John Thraikill negotiating the tight entry squeeze. The entrance had been reduced to this size after several attempts over the years to seal the cave. Only a few weeks after this sanctioned visit, the actions of the constant stream of trespassers led to permanent closure of the opening by the farm management.

**Right:** The "rear" entrance to Phelps Cave, once reported to be in a woodland, is now surrounded by pasturelands. Pictured preparing for the 1980 visit are: Dr. Thomas C. Barr, Jr. (left rear), Dr. John Thraikill (right), and Lavine Thraikill (foreground).



dent of the farm on which the cave was located, discovered in 1921 an entirely new, large section; it was in this newly-found passage that most of the important discoveries of Phelps Cave were made. On a wall of this passage, blackened in soot probably from a miners lamp, is seen the name "W. S. Webb." Quantities of bones were uncovered, and among them, of which Dr. Miller wrote:

"...there was found a considerable portion of the skeleton of the black bear, which from the alteration it had undergone and the fact that it was cemented together in places with stalagmitic material, indicates for it a greater age than any of the remains found in the Breck Smith Cave. It is probable that this bear dates back to the Pleistocene."<sup>5</sup>

In addition to the discovery of the remains of ancient animals, the belief was expressed that the cave showed "...undoubted evidence of human habitation in prehistoric times..." Whatever traces that may have led them to this theory have long since been eradicated by the passage of many footsteps through the new section of Phelps Cave, though they may have been influenced in their belief by definite

evidence found in some other caves of the state.<sup>6</sup>

In 1925, the estate changed hands twice in rapid succession. Hal Price Headley, of the adjoining Beaumont farm, acquired Cave Hill and soon afterward sold it to his brother-in-law Christian de Waal, a sugar importer from Holland. Mr. de Waal, on a visit to his wife's family, had fallen enamored of the mansion and grounds and purchased it for a Lexington home, renaming it "Clingendaal."<sup>7</sup>

The cave remained in the hands of Mr. Headley, and that property still belongs to his descendants. According to Chris Green, a grandson of H. P. Headley, it was during his grandfather's time that the interesting constructions within the better-known section of the cave were built. There is a legend of a connection from the cave to the house; not entirely unlikely as the surveyed end of the cave is only about 200 ft from the building. The present end of the cave is terminated by fill near a small side passage that is blocked

by rockfall, reported dynamited by Mr. Headley. The house sits directly on the limestone strata, the bedrock forming the basement floor. Limestone ledges project from the walls. In more recent years, however, remodeling in the basement may have covered up any traces of the alleged secret entrance. Inside the cave, a stone enclosure with an iron gate guards the blocked passage that reputedly leads to the house, although the gate is no longer functional. Two hundred and fifty feet closer to the entrance, in the main passage, is a wall that extends from floor to ceiling and from wall to wall, except for a narrow opening where a door might once have hung. This structure, like that before the blocked passage, is built of small rocks of limestone apparently mortared together with cave mud. Chris Green relates that these were built by his grandfather to block entry into the passage now obstructed by collapse.<sup>8</sup>

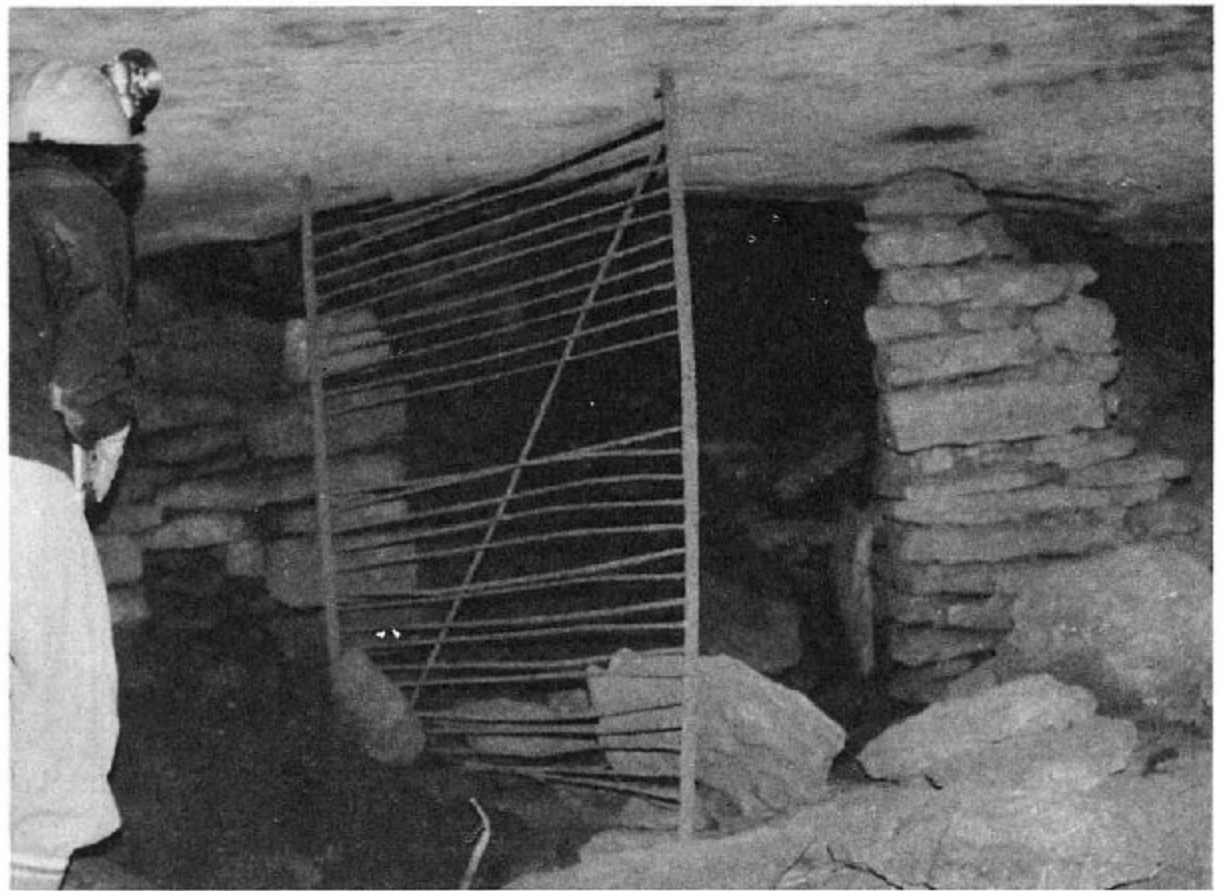
Writing in the newsletter of the Bluegrass



Grotto in 1964, Raymond McAdams speculated that the stone constructions in the cave may have indicated that the cave was used as a station on the "Underground Railroad" prior to and during the Civil War. According to this story, the passage leading from the mansion was used to smuggle escaped slaves into the cave. However, not only were the stone walls built at a much later date, William Bryan, who resided at Cave Place from 1834 to 1881, was a Confederate General. If such a connecting passage ever truly existed, then it's possible use during that period might have included the hiding of rebels, but probably not escaped slaves; at least not with the knowledge of the General.<sup>9</sup>

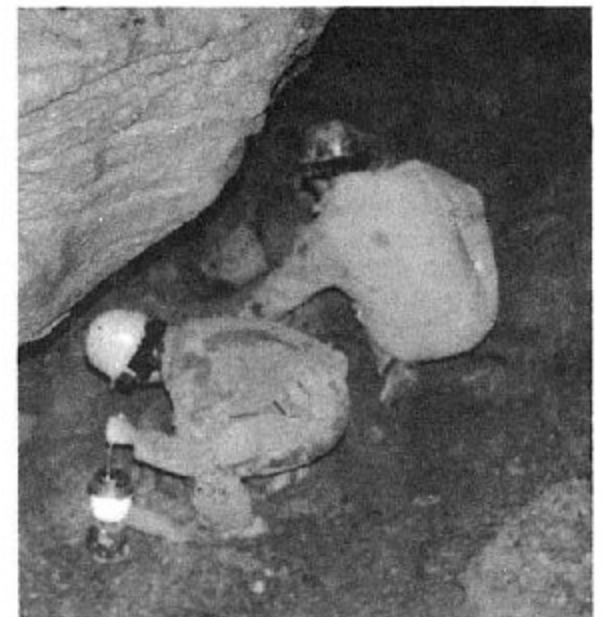
It certainly would have been ideal for the purpose. The entrance known by twentieth century cave explorers as the sole way in and out of the cave, was in the nineteenth century the "back door" of the cave. The 1879 *Herald* described the cave thusly: "In the side of the hill in the rear of the yard, a door opens into a cave which extends several hundred yards with an opening at the other end out into a woodland pasture." The map plot of the cave shows that the end of the passage with the iron gate lies beneath the yard about 200 ft behind the Cave Hill mansion. Obviously this represents the former main entrance of the cave, and the sole twentieth-century entrance was then out in a "woodland pasture." This being the case, nineteenth-century descriptions of the cave must be read backwards. Rafinesque's description fits more closely if this logic is applied. The small spring he reported at the entrance matches the spring in the valley of Cave Creek, below the mansion and exactly aligned with and slightly beyond the cave passage. Inside the cave, not far from the iron gate, is the only place where flowing water may be found in the passage known during the nineteenth century. Phelps Cave prior to 1921 consisted of this single section, which well fits early reports of the length of the cave. The legend of a connection to the mansion itself is evidently a time-distorted account of the backyard entrance.<sup>10</sup>

This still leaves the question as to where precisely was the main entrance during the



**Above: The Iron Gate with passage beyond is blocked by rubble, reported as the result of dynamiting. Perhaps this passage once led to the valley slope outside and was used as the primary entrance in the 19th and early 20th centuries.**

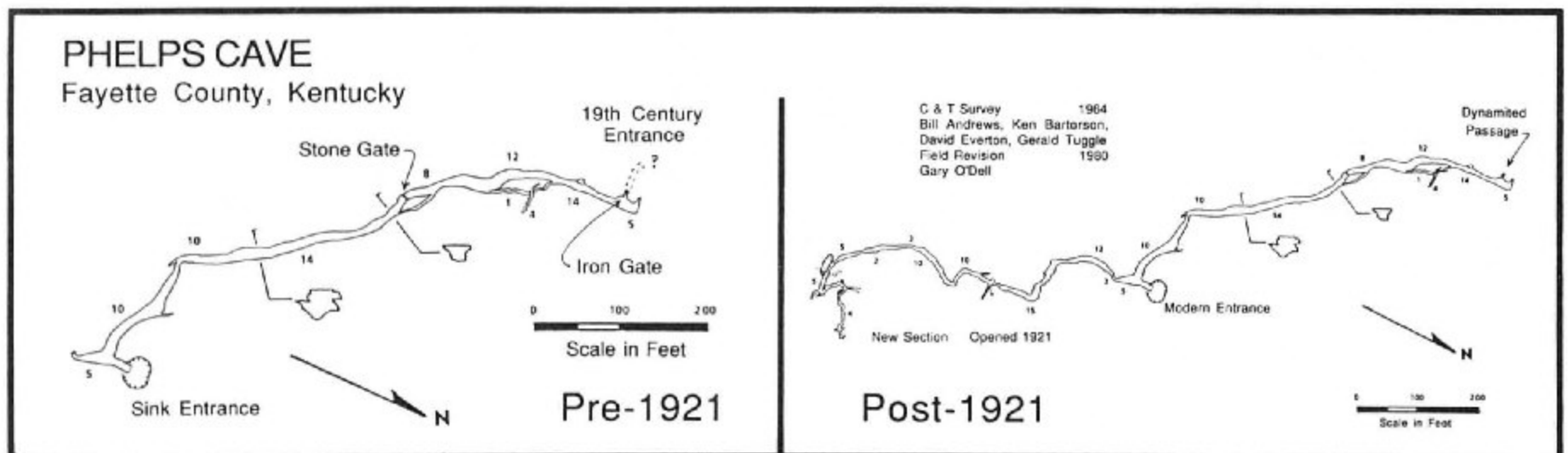
**Right: Dr. Barr (rear) and Kay Harker, a graduate student at the time, collect fauna samples in the "new" extension, discovered in 1921.**

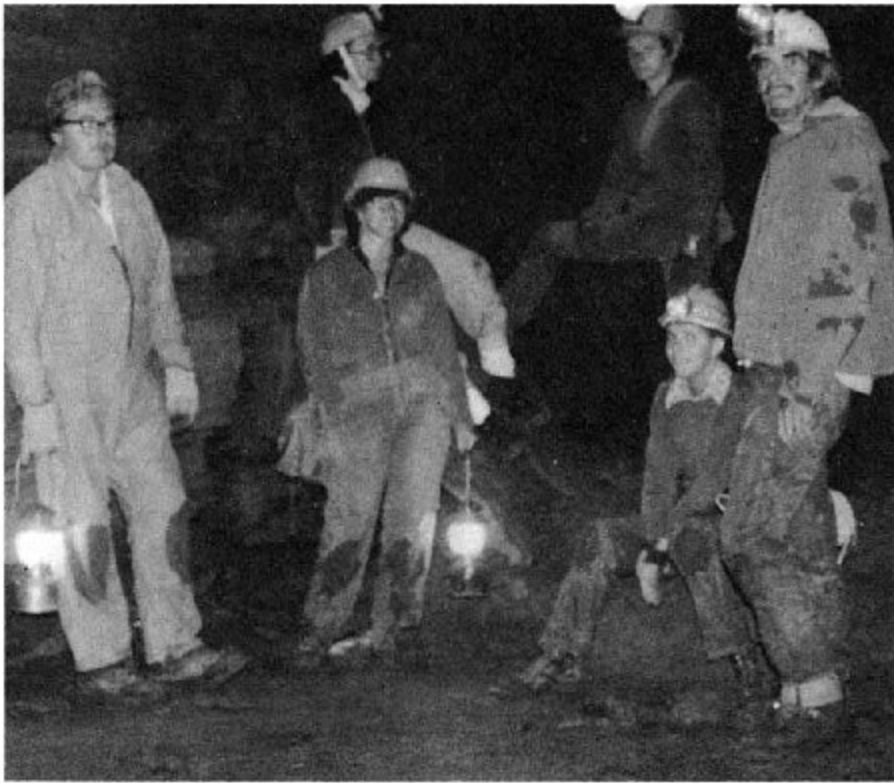


nineteenth century? Two possibilities exist. The northwest passage ends abruptly in fill; was this the natural result of collapse due to proximity to the valley slope, having never been open in recorded history, or was this the original entrance sealed with earth? Alternatively, the iron gate that frames the small blocked side passage must surely have been placed there for a purpose—what point in barring a pathway already secured by rockfall? It seems probable that this passage once

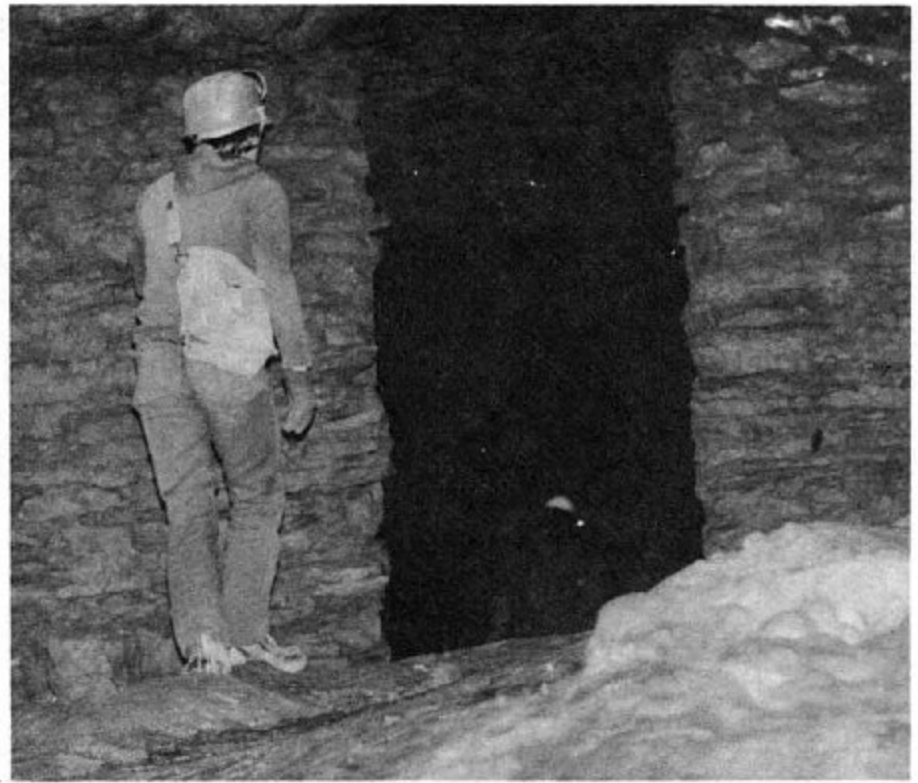
curved a short distance to open on the hillside, and was indeed dynamited, for the sake of security, to prevent people from slipping unseen through the cave and emerging close to the house.

Phelps Cave has suffered the same fate as has befallen many other caves near urban areas. In the 1960s, the cave began to receive





1980 Trip group shot (L-R rear): Lavine Thrailkill, Larry Spangler; (L-R front) Dr. Thomas C. Barr, Jr., Kay Harker, Cincy Spangler (seated), and Dr. John Thrailkill.



Larry Spangler approaches the stone gateway in the older section of the cave. At the time of this trip, Larry was a graduate student under Dr. Thrailkill; today he is a hydrologist in Colorado.

heavy visitation as caving became popular. Although the farm manager did not object to persons exploring the cavern, he was disturbed by their lack of courtesy. The road leading to the farm was often blocked by cars, fences were climbed and broken down, trash was left lying about after many trips, and all too frequently, permission was not asked. The cave entrance, ten feet in width and four feet high, was sealed by a concrete wall when the manager reached the end of his patience. Even this did not deter some trespassers. Eventually the wall was broken into, leaving a hole about two feet in diameter, and the illicit cave exploration continued.<sup>11</sup>

In 1980, the author visited Chris Green, then managing Mint Lane Farm (present Busby Farm) for an interview about the past history of the cave, and unexpectedly received permission to make a trip into Phelps Cave. Speleological researchers, who had for many years been unable to gain entry, accompanied the author on the subsequent visit: Dr. Thomas C. Barr, of the University's Department of Biology, and Dr. John Thrailkill, of the Department of Geology, along with Kay Harker and Larry Spangler. Unfortunately, only a few months after this trip, some persons again sneaked into the cave and left considerable trash near the entrance. This resulted in permanent closure of the cave entrance with soil and rock. Due to the inconsideration of a few, a significant and scenic Blue Grass cave has been lost.

The hydrologic connections of the Phelps Cave cannot be ascertained directly due to its closure. The cave lies at the end and nearly the lowest elevation of a line of northwest-trending sinks and may well drain somewhere into Cave Creek; there are several, probably interconnected, stream passages within Phelps Cave. Dye trace studies made in

recent years by Larry Spangler outlined a groundwater basin that feeds the spring, called Cave Hill Spring, that lies below the mansion at the terminus of the cave. Phelps Cave is included within this basin and can be presumed a part of the system.<sup>12</sup>

The former back door and modern entrance to Phelps Cave was located in a shallow sink overlooking Cave Creek and the scenic pastures of Mint Lake Farm. Right from the entrance, a large passage leads to the northwest for 700 feet, terminating in fill a few feet beyond the side passage possessing the iron gate. This passage averages about 10 ft in height, sometimes as much as 14, and in places it is as wide as 25 feet.

Left from the entrance, a crawl dug through fill, presumably first excavated by the boy on the Headley farm, opens into a passage that for several hundred feet is 12 ft high. This southeast-trending passage is evidently a continuation of the right-hand passage, the short entrance foyer having formed at the midpoint of a single long passage. This southeastern half of the cave is generally narrower in width, wetter, and muddier than the other section. A large column overlooks the passage from the right, about 200 ft from the entrance; it was named the "Weeping Bride" by Funkhouser and his associates. A little distance past this speleothem is a large joint, perpendicular to the passage, in which a small stream flows. Near this location could be seen the name of Dr. Webb, smoked onto the wall.

One hundred seventy feet past the joint, the ceiling height abruptly lowers from 10 ft to less than 3 ft, the passage continuing as low crawl for nearly 150 ft, to the edge of a large, deep pit eroded in the mud fill. At the bottom of this pit flows a stream, most likely a continuation of that encountered at

the bottom of the joint. Approximately 100 feet of low passage lie beyond the pit, perhaps the most scenic area of the cave. There are numerous rimstone pools, soda straw stalactites, and small columns. The final section of the cave is very near the surface, as tree roots could be seen. The surveyed length of Phelps Cave is 1473 feet.

## References

- <sup>1</sup> Rafinesque, Constantine S. (1832)—"The Caves of Kentucky," *Atlantic Journal, and Friend of Knowledge*, 1(1):29
- <sup>2</sup> Simpson, Elizabeth M. (1932)—*Bluegrass Houses and Their Traditions*, pp. 71-73.
- <sup>3</sup> Thomas, Elizabeth Patterson (1939)—*Old Kentucky Homes and Gardens*, pp. 98-99; Simpson (1932), p. 71; Anon. (1877)—*Atlas of Bourbon, Clark, Fayette, Jessamine, and Woodford Counties, Ky*, Philadelphia; Anon. (1879)—"Wildwood," *The Kentucky Gazette*, June 28, p. 3.
- <sup>4</sup> Anon. (1879); Simpson (1932), p. 73.
- <sup>5</sup> Funkhouser, W. D. and W. S. Webb (1928)—*Ancient Life in Kentucky*; O'Dell, Gary A. (1985)—"Underground Discoveries Reveal Kentucky's Past," *The NSS News* 43(7):231-233; Miller, Arthur M. (1922) "Recent Cave Explorations for Animal and Human Remains," *Kentucky Geological Survey*, ser. 6, vol. 10, p. 108.
- <sup>6</sup> Funkhouser, W. D. and W. S. Webb (1932)—"Archaeological Survey of Kentucky" in *University of Kentucky Reports in Archaeology and Anthropology*, Vol. II: University of Kentucky, September.
- <sup>7</sup> Simpson (1932), p. 75.
- <sup>8</sup> Interview with Chris Green, 1980.
- <sup>9</sup> McAdams, Raymond (1965)—"Bluegrass Caves: Use and Misuse, part II," *The Kentucky Caver*, publication of the Blue Grass Grotto, NSS, 1(3):58.
- <sup>10</sup> Anon (1879).
- <sup>11</sup> Anon. (1965)—"Cave Report No. 3—Phelps Cave," *The Kentucky Caver* 1(3):74; McAdams, Raymond (1965)—"Cave Obituary," *The Kentucky Caver* 1(3):64; personal communication from Dr. Thomas C. Barr, Jr., 1980.
- <sup>12</sup> Personal communication from Lawrence E. Spangler, 1989.