

CHAPTER VI

THE CAVE DWELLERS

Probably the best evidences of prehistoric man which have ever been found are those which have been discovered in the caves of central Europe. It has been suggested that if other discoveries as valuable as these are ever made they must be sought for in some part of the world which has about the same latitude as the European sites, the localities must be about the same distance from the glacial drift, the region must have about the same climate as that of southern France and northern Spain and above all it must be some place where there are large limestone caves with southern exposures. Such a place is Kentucky. Moreover, the Kentucky caves were certainly inhabited by prehistoric man—but whether or not he dates back to the time of the Cro-Magnon is of course another question. We are, however, perfectly justified in speaking of the "cave-dwellers" of Kentucky in the same sense as that in which we spoke of the "mound-builders"—namely to designate these ancient people who commonly lived in caves and who apparently preferred that habitat to all others.

Kentucky has probably the largest and most extensive caves of any State of the Union, ranging in size from the enormous caverns such as Mammoth Cave, Crystal Cave, Onyx Cave, Colossal Cavern, Horse Cave, Grand Cave and Salts Cave in the cavernous limestone region of the state, some of which extend for miles under ground and have never been entirely explored, to the smaller caves which are found in great abundance in practically all parts of Kentucky where the limestone is close to the surface.

Most of these caves have been formed by the dissolving out of the beds of soluble limestones by underground waters, leaving a roof of some less soluble material such as sandstone. Many parts of the state are entirely honeycombed with the subterranean passages which are the explanation of the underground streams and "lost rivers" so common in many regions. Often these underground caverns have no entrance and when event-

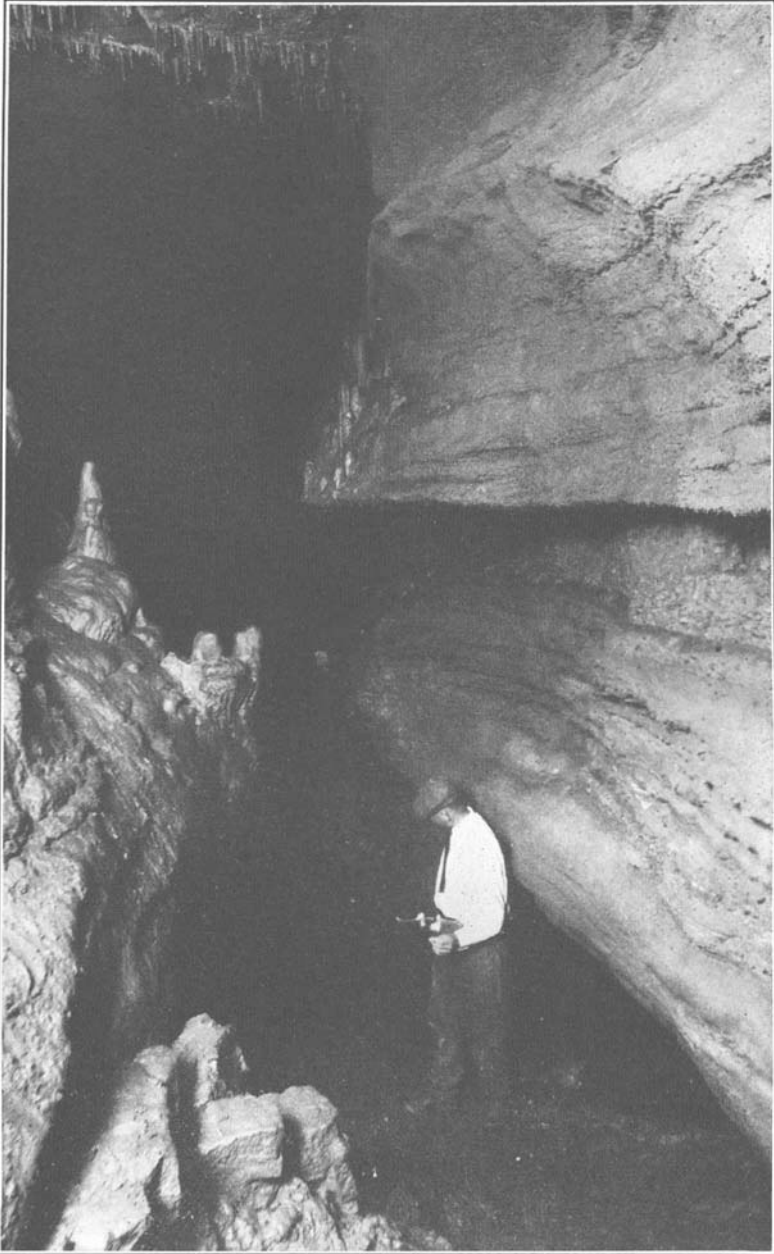


FIG. 64. IN A KENTUCKY CAVE.
Interior of a cavern in Fayette County.

ually the roof caves in, it forms the characteristic "sink-hole" on the surface.

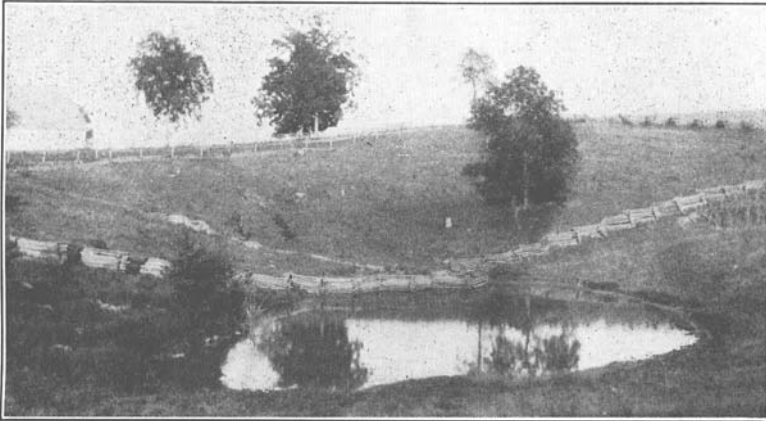


FIG. 65. A "SINK-HOLE."

PHOTO BY A. M. MILLER

Surface depression indicating an underground cavern.

In a previous report in which this subject was discussed ("Wild Life in Kentucky" p. 23) the statement was made that:

"These caves, large and small, are and always have been the homes of animals. They are inhabited today by foxes, coons, skunks and bats, and are used as places of hibernation by snakes, lizards and hosts of other forms; in former years the bears and wolves made them their dens and dragged the carcasses of their prey into their gloomy recesses to be devoured. Today the cattle seek the cool mouths of the caves to escape the heat and flies; a hundred or more years ago the buffalo used them for the same purpose as is mutely testified by their bones. In fact the caves have a very interesting fauna of their own, consisting of blind fish, blind crickets, blind crayfish, peculiar spiders and distinct species of salamanders which are found in large numbers far underground but never on the surface.

"These caves hold many a secret of bygone and even prehistoric days. It doubtless happened in many instances, that a cave, sheltering many animal inhabitants, collapsed, the roof of the entrance giving way, burying its victims under tons of earth and rock, and completely destroying all evidences of the cave's existence. Here, protected from the influences of air and water, and in some cases even becoming covered with mineral deposits, the bones are preserved as valuable records of ancient fauna. In one such cave, opened again by accident, on the Breck Smith farm about eight miles west of Lexington, have been discovered the bones of coons, foxes, wolves, ground-hogs, skunks, a bear, a deer, a buffalo and even a human being—probably an Indian. Surely enough material for romance and tragedy."

That the caves were inhabited by men as well as by the lower animals there can be no doubt, and indeed primitive man



FIG. 66. THE HOME OF THE CAVE-DWELLER.
First chamber of an extensive Kentucky cave.

could hardly have found a more satisfactory type of shelter. Ordinarily, as would be expected, the portion of the cave close to the mouth was most commonly occupied and naturally those caves which were most roomy close to the entrance were the favorite dwelling places. Probably the deeper recesses of the

caverns were sought only in severe weather. Caves which are of sufficient depth have about the same temperature the year round offering protection from frost in the winter and affording relief from the heat in the summer. There is no question, however, but that the inhabitants often used the most remote passages for we find in the deepest and most inaccessible chambers the evidences of their presence. Nor are the lower levels at all unsuited to human habitation; on the contrary many of them are magnificent in their architecture—passage after passage, chamber after chamber, recess after recess, great domed halls and splendid cathedrals—and marvelously beautiful in the rare displays of stalactites and stalagmites and dazzling surfaces of crystal and onyx and ornamented rock.

Mammoth cave which is of course one of the most famous of the caves in the state, has yielded many proofs of man's early occupancy. In this cave have been found not only the usual flint artifacts not susceptible of decay but such perishable articles as moccasins, skins, gourds and cave torches which ordinarily would soon crumble to pieces but which in these cool caverns with their deposits of the preserving salt-petre have remained intact through the years. It seems evident that cave conditions are very conducive to the excellent preservation of objects entrusted to their keeping.

The cave which has yielded the greatest wealth of material of any in the state is Salts Cave, also in Edmonson County near Mammoth. Interesting articles have been found in this cave from very early times, there being records of finds which date as far back as 1851. This cave seems to have been inhabited over a very long period and doubtless by many generations of early tribes for the discoveries have included examples representing many cultures from the earliest neolithic to the modern Indian. Colonel Bennett Young in 1894 made a very careful and extended survey of this cave and reports the finding in addition to the usual flint spalls, flakes and arrows, of the following diversified objects: pestles, awls, reed torches, braided slippers, moccasins, fragments of textiles, mats, plaited rope, cords of bark, wild hemp, cat-tail and grass, baskets, basket head-dresses, wooden agricultural implements, dishes and vessels made of gourds, scraping tools, spoons and dishes made of

mussel shell, platters of sassafras wood, gourd bottles, curious woven bag or reticule, a reed basket, corn cobs, corn and even some leaf tobacco. More recently some of the students of Western Teachers College secured from the same cave a very excellent gourd water jug, a good piece of pottery and part of a human skull besides a number of small artifacts and fragments of other articles.

In Short Cave about eight miles from Mammoth Cave was found many years ago the now famous "Kentucky Mummy" which was for many years shown at Mammoth Cave, was for some time in the National Museum at Washington and is now in the Smithsonian Institution in that city. So far as we know the age of this mummy has never been definitely determined. It was removed from its original resting place before it had been studied in situ and later examinations have not proven entirely satisfactory. The body is that of a female with the flesh and skin perfectly dried upon the skeleton. When found it is said to have been clothed in deer-skin with a mantle made of linden-bark. The hair was short and of a dark-red color which gave rise to the theory of the "red headed Indians of Kentucky." The body was a little above the average size and the skin had apparently been neither red nor black but quite fair. A large sack by her side is said to have contained headdresses made from quills of feathers, a bark cup, a string of seed beads, a necklace of fawn-hoofs, an eagle claw pendant, a bear-jaw pendant, two rattlesnake skins, some pigment wrapped in leaves, some bone needles with thread made of sinews, and two cane whistles—surely a collection which indicated a wide variety of interests. But the antiquity of the mummy is very uncertain. Colonel Durrett says regarding it:

"How long she was an occupant of the cave we have no means of determining or even of rationally estimating, but if the cave was two million years old, as stated by Professor Shaler, she might be allowed a few thousand of these years for her enjoyment of the darkness and solitude of her subterranean abode."

Incidentally, Colonel Bennett Young states that several mummies have been found in the caves in Kentucky encased in clothing.

The cave which has yielded the most material of any which we have personally investigated is at Mills Spring in Wayne

County about half-way between Burnside and Monticello. The cave is located on the farm of Hon. J. S. Hines and is known locally as the "Hines Cave." This region is rather famous historically since it is adjacent to Price's Meadow and Mills Spring where the "Long Hunters" who came to Kentucky from Virginia and North Carolina about 1770 are supposed to have camped for two years or more. Zollicoffer's entrenchments are still visible across the Cumberland River. The cave itself is extensive and is ideally situated for habitation. The land slopes from it gradually to the river, providing an excellent place for the cultivation of crops; the entrance to the cave is wide and



PHOTO BY A. S. HENDRICK

FIG. 67. ENTRANCE TO HINES CAVE.

Once occupied by prehistoric man.

high and the first chamber to which it leads is roomy and dry; the mouth is flanked by high cliffs which protect it from wind, rain and snow; the bottom is level and the light penetrates for a considerable distance from the entrance. Altogether it affords a shelter which must have been most desirable to a primitive race.

The entrance to this cave is about twenty feet high and opens into a room approximately 145 feet long and sixty feet wide and extends back for an unknown distance but the portions beyond the first chamber are separated by narrow passages which are now difficult to pass through because of the long accumulation of soil, rocks and debris which has been washed into them. The rock floor of this first chamber was struck at a depth of about twelve feet at the entrance and about six feet

in the rear. The cave was first examined in 1922 by a party consisting of Professor A. M. Miller, Doctor A. S. Hendrick, Doctor W. E. Tait, Victor K. Dodge, J. W. McCollum, Leland Snoddy, Professor J. M. Davis, Miss Bessie Conkwright and the authors and has been visited at various times and by various parties since that date. On two occasions rather extensive explorations were made and considerable time devoted to the examination of this and other nearby caves.



FIG. 68. A CAMP AT HINES CAVE.
Exploring party of 1922.

The floor of the Hines cave was trenched and found to contain the usual ash layers and the remains of many fires. Around these camp-fire sites were found most of the artifacts not found in the graves, particularly awls, needles and skinning-knives; in the ash beds were numerous animal bones. Also near the surface were layers of light-colored earth which probably represented the leachings from salt-petre which was in early days extensively mined in this cave according to local tradition.

Skeletons were found at different layers and undoubtedly represented different groups. The most superficial graves were found near the walls and contained skeletons which appear quite modern; the deepest graves were near the center and contained skeletons which we believe to be very primitive. Altogether about twenty graves were opened and from these were obtained nine fairly complete skeletons and four additional skulls from

skeletons which were not in condition to be removed. Some of the graves were of considerable interest. In one, for example, was found the skeleton of a dog beside that of the man.

In another was found the skeleton of a young woman who had more than the usual number of ornaments and decorations and who must have been a person of some importance in the tribe if we may judge from these decorations and the care which had been taken with the grave. She lay on her right side with her knees flexed, her right arm beneath and her left arm across her body. An arrow-head was found between her ribs. On both upper and lower arms and on her right leg above the knee were the remains of strings of very small shell beads. Around her neck was a sort of collar made of large shells.

Most curious of all, she held in her hand what must have been her most cherished possession for it remained encircled by her skeleton fingers after all the years; it was simply a shining bit of mica, about three inches in diameter and nearly circular. Its use is of course conjectural. Whether it was her mirror or her vanity we do not know—she must have been a typical flapper of her day—but the evidence of the desire for ornamentation can not be denied. Incidentally the character of this mica would indicate that it came from North Carolina and it is difficult to refrain from conjecturing as to how it was obtained by its final owner. Was she a North Carolina girl? Had her lover found this shining trinket and brought it as a gift? Had it been secured by barter from a wandering brave or had it been taken from the body of a slain enemy? We are tempted into the realm of romance where scientists are not supposed to venture.

Another skeleton—that of an old man—was of a quite primitive type. The skull showed a sloping forehead, strong supraorbital ridges and high cheek bones and the skeleton was very strongly ossified. The peculiarity of this skeleton was the fact that the top of the skull and the front of the tibiae showed lesions which were very suggestive of syphilis. It is an interesting occurrence suggesting that perhaps the venereal diseases of today were prevalent in prehistoric times. This discovery tends to support somewhat a theory which has been advanced to the

effect that these diseases originated in the New World and were first carried to Europe by early sailors.

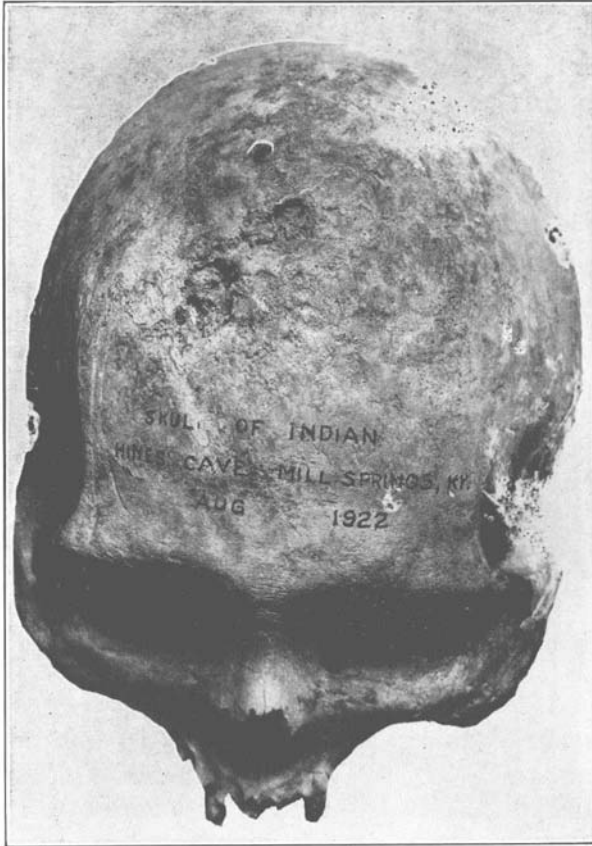


FIG. 69. OLD MAN FROM HINES' CAVE.

Showing lesion on top of skull which may have been caused by a venereal disease.

Another grave contained the bodies of mother and child with the babe against the mother's breast. Still another grave showed on the rocks which were pressed over the skeleton the imprint of a woven bark fiber which might have formed a burial garment and which lends support to a story told by natives that skeletons "wrapped in carpet" had been found in a neighboring cave about thirty years ago. The remains of eight skeletons

were found in one pit and although the bones were in bad condition they did not appear to have been thrown into the grave without regard to position as is so often the case in the multiple burials in mounds, but were carefully placed side by side with the heads bent forward and the knees doubled up under the chin.

This cave was rich in artifacts, the most abundant of which were stone hoes, flint arrow-heads, bone awls, bone needles, flint skinning knives, bone and flint drills and shell beads. A few of the artifacts represent rare and valuable types. Among these was a remarkable pendant of bone, most artistically fashioned and highly polished with the hole drilled horizontally through a flat projection at the top. Other unusual pieces included a clay pipe of unique design, a peculiar type of agricultural implement and several pieces of pottery of curious shape and decoration. The best and most unusual of these objects were found in the deeper graves which quite evidently represented the oldest culture in the cave.

The cave contained an unusually large number of animal bones which were gathered up and carried from the cave by the hundred. From these bones it was possible to recognize the remains of several distinct groups of animals. The carnivores were represented by the wolf, bear, wild-cat, raccoon and fox, the ungulates by the deer, elk and buffalo, the marsupials by the opossum, the rodents by the muskrat, squirrel, rabbit and beaver, and the birds by the wild turkey, crane and quail. The only reptilian remains were turtle shells and the only fish bones were those of the gar which is still to be found in the Cumberland River. Mussel shells were abundant as were also snails. Many of these bones had been washed back under low overhanging ledges at the sides and rear of the cave where they were packed in jumbled masses. The commonest ones were those of the deer and buffalo which seem to have been the chief items of the animal diet of these people.

Of course the always important question as to the age of the skeletons and artifacts is again a moot one. We believe however that they are very old. One reason for this belief is the fact that a number of the artifacts were found beneath a giant stalagmite nearly eight feet in diameter which stood at the entrance to the cave and reached nearly to its roof. How long it

took this colossal mass to form we do not know, for of course stalagmitic growth depends upon the drip of the calcareous water from the ceiling and this varies with the season. We know that in some cases it takes many centuries for even small ones to be deposited and the time required even under the most favorable circumstances to produce a stalagmite of this size must have been very great. Yet when by the use of dynamite this was dislodged we found beneath it many artifacts and some human remains which would indicate that they were buried previous to the time when the stalagmite started to form.

There are many other caves in the vicinity of Hines' Cave for this region is underlaid by the St. Genevieve limestone which is the chief cavernous formation of the state. Three or four of these are within a few minutes' walk from Hines' Cave and may be as rich in archaeological material but they have not yet been explored. Most of these caves are well-known to the inhabitants of the region, who, however, take very little interest in them and visit them only occasionally for a picnic or as suitable places for the storing of potatoes in winter. The children use them as playhouses and go to the entrances to build "campfires," hull walnuts or hunt arrow heads.

One of these caves, called "Cooper's Cave," has extensive clay deposits which have been mined either by the early settlers, by the Indians or by prehistoric people, for the marks of the tools are still visible in the clay banks in the farther parts of the cave. There is a tradition that this clay was once mined for fire-brick but it would be very poor quality for this purpose. This cave is very wet with the result that it is rich in stalactites and stalagmites. Also it has a series of clay rooms, on three levels through which the water flows in wet weather. An interesting formation in this cave is the large number of "bathtub" basins of many sizes whose irregular vertical sides have been built up from the drip from the roof and which are usually full of clear, cold water. The walls in some places are almost solidly covered by the cave crickets and the ceilings furnish the roosting-place for thousands of bats. So far as we know this cave has never been excavated but from the abundant evidences of its use by man for various purposes, we are inclined to include it as another former home of the cave-dwellers.

The "Hogg Cave" also on the Hines farm is not so large as the other two but has several good sized chambers and contains very beautiful stalactites. It has two outlets in sinks a short distance away. The floor has not been investigated but on the surface were picked up a number of artifacts and one human femur which had been gnawed by wild beasts.

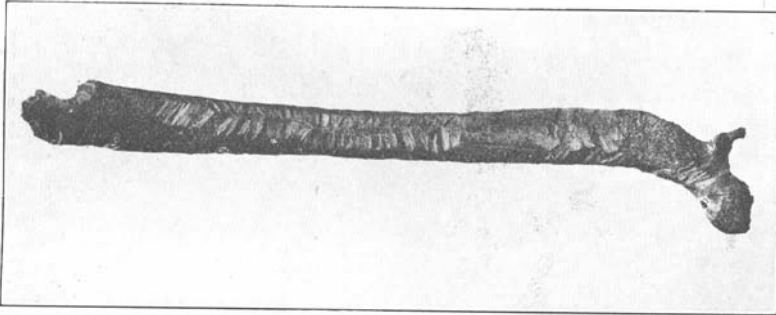


FIG. 70. GNAWED BY WILD BEASTS.
Human femur found in Hogg Cave, Wayne County.

Many caves, not in the true cavernous region of the state, are equally rich in indications of human habitation. The Phelps Cave in Fayette County has undoubtedly served such a purpose and is in fact so well suited for practical purposes that parts of it are now used for storing fruits and vegetables. It was in this

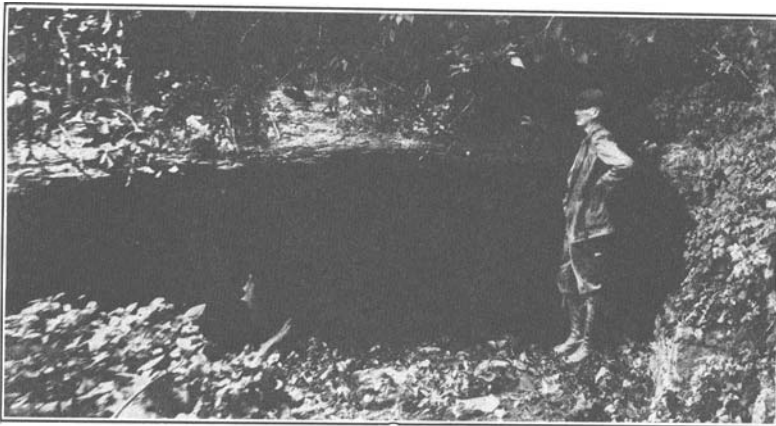


FIG. 71. ENTRANCE TO PHELPS CAVE.
In which were found bones which may have been those of a Pleistocene bear.

cave that the remains of what is apparently a Pleistocene bear were discovered.

A cave on the Breck Smith farm, also in Fayette County has yielded many human bones and artifacts in addition to one practically complete skeleton.



PHOTO BY A. S. HENDRICK

FIG. 72. BRECK SMITH CAVE.

A cave in Fayette County which has yielded a large amount of interesting material.

There is an interesting cave in Hart County about two miles west of Rowletts in which, according to local gossip, a "giant's skeleton" was discovered in recent years. Mr. R. E. Boyd kindly accompanied us to this cave and made long trips with us through the region in search of the "giant" which, needless to say, was not found. The cave, however, had unquestionably been inhabited and although the floor was thickly strewn with large rocks, yielded the usual collection of flint and shell.

Another cave in Hart County about four miles from Cub Run and 1½ miles south of Dog Creek which we visited is evidently the one described by Rafinesque. It contained a few flints and fragments of broken pottery but the floor was of solid rock and of course contained no graves.

About 2½ miles from Lawrenceburg in Anderson County on the Clifton Pike is a cave or tunnel which is about 800 yards

long, one end opening on the farm of Mr. E. Shelburn and the other on the farm of Mr. M. C. McBrayer. This cave, according to tradition was inhabited at the time of the early white settlers but when we visited it so much water was running through it that no investigation could be made.

A cave known as "Lynn's Cave" about 4½ miles southwest of Cub Run was rich in archaeological material. In addition to a number of flints, a needle, a war club and other artifacts, was found a very curious piece of either gold or brass bearing what seemed to be an Indian design but which was stolen from the finder before it could be identified or studied.

A cave on Dix River not far from High Bridge is locally known as "Boone's Cave," a name which signifies very little since there are dozens of caves along the Kentucky River which bear this name. This cave is a very old type, situated far above the water level and when examined contained tons of bat dung which covered the floor in places to a depth of many feet and was occasionally heaped almost to the roof. In this cave had been found, some years ago, a copper axe, which inspired the desire for its further excavation. A party of four worked in this cave for more than a week and during this time succeeded in moving most of the bat-guano and the other floor deposits; the result of our labors amounted to the finding of a single flint arrowhead of a common type which was not even perfect. However we do not doubt from the location of the cave, close to a good spring and with an excellent outlook, that it had been inhabited.

Other caves which we have examined and which are listed in a later chapter are much the same in structure and contents as the ones which have been described and the variations shown can usually be easily understood and explained by their location, size, contour or the conditions within them. As a rule, however, we believe that those suitable for occupancy were inhabited at some time or other and there is generally unmistakable evidence of this occupancy.

We feel quite sure, however, that the caves, like the mounds, represent more than one group of people. It seems reasonable to suppose that after one group had occupied them and had deserted them for one reason or another, a new group would move

in. Indeed, there may have been considerable strife for the occupancy of some particularly desirable cave and the tenure may often have been short for anyone group for this reason. Contagion or pestilence may have caused the abandonment of such a shelter, or the growing number of graves or the increase in population may have been the cause of a migration. Even the continued accumulation of trash and refuse may have induced the search for a new home since it may have been easier to find a new cave than to clean out an old one. Be that as it may, it is certain that during the long periods in which they were occupied they sheltered many human beings some of whom doubtless would have been surprised if they could have known of those who preceded or were to follow them.

The explanation of burial in the caves may be because of religious beliefs or long established custom or because of a desire to protect the graves or merely because the floor of the cave was never hard or frozen and was easy of excavation as compared with outside conditions. Whatever the reason, we are glad that it existed, for cave burials are conducive to long preservation of the remains.

The very fact, however, that the cave conditions are well suited for the retaining of evidence adds to the difficulty of judging the length of time represented. On the floors of caves we find ash-beds and the remains of fires but nothing to show whether these fires were built by ancient residents or modern hunters; on the walls we find marks and decorations but in these protected recesses weathering is very slow and the scratches may be ten or a hundred years old; hidden in the crevices are pots containing grain or pigment but whether they were left thereby the original cave-dweller or by the modern Shawnee we can not tell.

All caves are not equally suitable for occupancy by man or other animals and the type of cave has much to do with the probability of finding archaeological material. Other things being equal, a cave which is high and dry would be preferable to one which is low and wet, one that was large would be better than one which was small, and one which had high ceilings would be more comfortable than one which permitted only a stooping posture. If the opening of the cave is small or is difficult of

approach, we seldom find evidences of occupancy. If water flows through the cave either regularly or at intervals it usually rises so high during flood seasons as to wash all deposits off the floor and the only artifacts which we have ever found in such caves have been on high ledges. If the cave has a stone floor there is of course no possibility of graves. Caves which have more than one opening seem to be favored over those with a single entrance but we can give no reason for this unless it offered better means of escape in case of attack.

Generally speaking, those caves which are located rather high above the surrounding country, which have deep dirt floors and which open from a large entrance directly into a roomy cavern, have been the ones which have been the richest in evidences of prehistoric man. We have examined a number of caves or underground passages which opened from the bottom of a deep sink and have never found anything in them except animal bones. Of course some of the lower levels of the larger caves, such as Mammoth, are far below the surface but the approaches to these levels are usually not difficult and may often be reached from different directions and from different entrances.

The antiquity of the cave itself is of course a question of geology and to form such an opinion one must take into consideration many factors such as its position in reference to surrounding strata, terraces, peneplains, general physiography and especially with reference to the existing water table of the region. Naturally some caves are much older than others but most of them date so far beyond the time in which the archaeologist is interested that their geological age makes little difference. It may be assumed in general, however, that if a cave is high above the present water level, if it is situated on an ancient peneplain, if it has deep deposits of cave earth, if it has large numbers of stalactites and stalagmites or if it is much eroded, it is an old cave from the geological standpoint. On the other hand caves at or near the water level and now the source of streams may be considered as young. If the old caves are dry with no evidence of recent deposits of calcite or other carbonates it may be concluded that they are not only old but that the water level has sunk or that an ancient stream has been diverted from its course. In some cases the underground river of the cave may

represent the general drainage level of the surrounding country as in the case of "Echo River" in Mammoth Cave.

But whatever the age of the cave, it was doubtless the utilitarian aspects which appealed to primitive man. Ancient caves for the reasons indicated above would probably more often meet his requirements but there were doubtless times in which any sort of shelter would be acceptable.

Such were the homes of the cave-dwellers, homes in which no doubt many of them lived, died and were buried. In them are the few remaining evidences which keep their memory alive.

THE CATACOMB LEGEND

A myth which is often told and regularly finds its way into the public press, has to do with an extensive series of catacombs which are supposed to exist under the city of Lexington. The tale is probably nothing more than the figment of a well-developed imagination and there are absolutely no facts to support it, but because of its appeal to the fancy and its sensational nature, it always finds ready listeners. Limestone caves and spring water passages in the rock all of small extent are present beneath and in the vicinity of Lexington or elsewhere in the Bluegrass region. The catacomb story was apparently started by Thomas Ashe, an Irishman with a vivid imagination and a very slight respect for veracity, who visited this county in 1806 and on his return to England published in London in 1808 an account of his travels. In this account he described in great detail the extensive and magnificent catacombs beneath Lexington and the two thousand mummies, the idols, the spacious compartments and the altars which these catacombs contained. The legend was later referred to by G. W. Ranck in his "History of Lexington" published in 1872 and since that time has been repeated with many embellishments by other writers. Since there is no scientific foundation for such a tradition, we are forced to consider it merely a fanciful tale which has grown much in the telling.