

CASCADE CAVERN By Elizabeth Gray Hudson

As I reviewed newspaper articles, journals and early brochures about Cascade Cavern, I wondered if there has ever been another cave about which so much fiction has been written. She is really one of God's beautiful creations. But men who have wanted to play some part in her history, have told fantastic tales to describe her. She pulls at the heart of those who have known her and loved her. Some people have left impossible records about her. I'm afraid that I also fall into the class of her adorers. I will try to stick with the facts, but before this is over, you may find that I, too, have my feet mired in the mud.

How do I tell the history of a cave when the time we have known her has been only an instant in her life? Geologists say she was probably formed in the Ice age. Marine life left fossils, shells and coral in her chalk and limestone. Gravity has pulled two and a quarter square miles of run-off water through her with every heavy rain. Until sometime in the last one hundred years, there was not the natural opening that now is there. Nevertheless, it is safe to say that the water squeezed its way through the long joints of the cavern to join the large underground pool, whose bottom has not yet been touched.

Years of these torrents of water have shaped her large rugged forms. They have swept away innumerable fragile formations in an instant. These cave structures take centuries to build. They form slowly by the gentle seep of water downward through the layers of the earth. Each droplet deposits its minerals as it slowly cascades over the vertical formations; or clings briefly to the ceiling, before it is pulled to the surface below. There, it splatters and dehydrates, depositing more minerals. The remaining water trickles away, building as it goes. Mother Nature has great patience. She is very creative in shaping every object, floor, wall and ceiling. And no two are alike!

I am not going to say much about how caverns are formed. It is enough to say that she is not the same neophyte she was in the Ice Age. She is not the same haven that the Indians used for protection. She is not the same curiosity the early hill country adventurers explored. She is not the same mysterious wonderland probed by the first men interested in developing her commercially. She is not the same new recreational facility christened in 1932. She is not the same mature cave that she was before the latest flood. And she is not the same today, as she was yesterday. And the reason is, that she is alive and growing and changing every second. She can't be tamed. Nor would we want her to be dead and static.

The land, where the cave is located, was first chosen by William H. Steele and Ludovic Colquhoun, on February 9, 1842. They were the land speculators, who bought the unallocated patent #64, which had belonged to Jose Ramon Arocha. Arocha was entitled to a Land Grant because he was the head of a household at the time of the Declaration of Independence of Texas in 1837, and had remained loyal to the Texian cause, desiring independence from Mexico. The Grant, most likely, was located by the Surveyor, John James of Bexar County. The two men sold the land to Sterling Neblett of Virginia. He sold it to James Claiborne of Tennessee, who sold it to Jesse Busby of Memphis. But these men probably never saw the land.

CASCADE CAVERN By Elizabeth Gray Hudson

In 1875, Dr. Benjamin Hester, a well-known physician, and his wife, Jennie Knox, with one child, were moving to Texas from Memphis. They bought the land from Busby. Two years later, Dr. Hester, in poor health, turned the land over to his wife. After his death, Jennie Hester sold the acreage to L. W. Menn.

But Dr. Hester did not pass by unnoticed by the mysterious wonderland. He was the first local owner. So she took his name as her own. Hester's Cave was known particularly to the adventurous young men of Kendall County. Some of their initials were visible until recent times carved on the giant stalactite which blocked the passage near the front of the cave. Some of the identities were carved by Charles Dienger and the two Howard boys of Boerne, and Charlie Bull of Van Raub Nineteenth Century graffiti!

During the time of Dr. Hester's ownership, a prizewinning novel, entitled, *EIN VERSTEHLTES LEBEN*. written by Mr. A. Seimering, was printed in "Volksblatt," a German newspaper published in Cincinnati, Ohio. Seimering lived in the Sisterdale area from 1847 to 1853. He resided in San Antonio after the War Between the States. It is believed that he was familiar with the area. The story tells of a hermit, who hid himself in a cave at the time of the War. The foreword states that the tale is based on events that occurred in the early German settlements of the Hill Country. The book was translated and published in 1932 by May E. Francis under the title, *THE HERMIT OF THE CAVERN*. Many people considered the cavern to have been Hester's Cave.

In 1929, my father, Alfred Gray, contracted with the Menu heirs to buy their land for the purpose of establishing a dairy. He did operate Graymead Dairy for several years before the "Great Depression" shut it down.

But there was always the great black hole tucked away on the back of the property, a place for a Sunday afternoon's outing, a cave for the curious to explore.

During this same time, the Cartwright men were exploring caves near and far. Dan and Bernard were the only two that I remember. They were becoming quite knowledgeable about cave formations and development. Owners of caves were consulting them about commercial possibilities. Also, Carlsbad Cavern in New Mexico had just been named a National Park.

My first recollection of the cave is of the feeling of anxiety as Daddy and Bernard prepared to go beyond the great stalactite, which hid the unknown beyond. Flashlights, along with candles and matches to use in testing the quality of the air, were sealed in gallon molasses buckets to keep them dry. Also included, was a camera for taking pictures. They carried ropes and waders as they descended into the great gaping hole. In the 1880' s, there was only the round hole on top, through which explorers descended into the cave by rope. Sometime later the side of the cliff washed out and the men now crawled in over this tumble of boulders.

CASCADE CAVERN By Elizabeth Gray Hudson

For several hours on that hot fall afternoon in 1931, Mary Cartwright, along with my mother, Edith Gray, waited anxiously for the men to return. It was late in the afternoon before they emerged with their exciting news. What a day filled with emotion!

Underground, the men climbed over the boulders, crevasses and clay to reach the well-known giant molar-like curtain, which dipped into a lake of water. There they double-checked their gear. They put on their waders and ducked under the hanging formation. To their relief, the water was never more than wading deep. The lake was about fifty feet long and the bottom was solid rock with no deep pits.

On the other side, they reached higher ground in a long tunnel. When they recovered their lights and camera, they found, in front of them, a fairyland of increasing numbers of live cave formations. As they tunneled downward, they could hear the rushing water from the lake falling into a lower level. While they were slowly working their way down the muddy passageway, they became aware of a room opening up above their heads. They proceeded on, finding increasingly larger rooms, all leading downward.

Alert cavers are always aware of the danger of «black damp," or carbon monoxide poisoning. The two men carried lighted candles to test the air. These began to flicker as they descended into the lower rooms. Their breath began to come in shorter gasps, as they worked their way over the rocks and around the formations. Their head sensations warned them of the danger. They did, however, reach the large room at the end of the current cave. Imagine their amazement as they flashed their lights, for the very first time, around that great cathedral-like room with the curious domes in the ceiling. What had they found? What a wonderland they had just discovered! What a treasure!

They knew that they must leave immediately. As they retraced their path, they pledged to drain the lake, clean and light the passageways and to open the cave to the public.

Mr. Cartwright sent a very descriptive article, along with pictures to a San Antonio newspaper. It was printed November 22, 1931. A Mr. Frank Nicholson was newly released from employment at Carlsbad Cavern. He read the article. He had just found his new adventure!

Unable to finance the development of the cave himself, within two months, my father signed a contract with this man to develop the facility, leaving out Mr. Cartwright. In another month, they had interested an investor, Mr. E. A. Drake, of Canada.

Nicholson's imagination was limitless! He took Mr. Cartwright's description, replaced the original explorers with himself, and he magnified everything out of proportion: an underground forest of fifteen-year-old trees with gnarled roots; a 200-foot-long lake, deep enough to require swimming; a mile-long cavern 600 feet below the surface. In fact, there were three small live oak seedlings, two to three feet tall. The lake was fifty feet long and shallow enough for wading. And the back of the cave was one-third of a mile from the entrance and 120 feet below ground level. It's a good thing we didn't have truth-in-advertising laws in those days or we might have had a lawsuit on our hands.

CASCADE CAVERN By Elizabeth Gray Hudson

Immediately, blasting, washing with giant fire hoses, huge electrical cables, cement, gravel, and flagstones were to be seen everywhere. The place was as busy as a giant ant colony.

We lived back down the road. My brother was a toddler. He wasn't about to let all of that activity take place without him. I remember seeing my mother, one day, racing down the road on foot to get him as he toddled after Daddy going off to work in the truck.

On April 23, 1932, Attorney-General James V. Allred, later Governor of Texas, christened the new recreational facility, as "Cascade Cavern," with a bottle of subterranean water. There was a great barbecue for the South Texas Press Association. All of the surrounding dignitaries were invited. The women of my family spent all day making potato salad. Can you imagine how much potato salad three wash tubs of potatoes will make?

Mother nature gives and she takes away as she chooses. Originally, there were seven little waterfalls forming a gentle cascade trickling into the motionless large lake in the big room at the back of the cave. The water reflected the sixty-foot domed ceiling of the Cathedral Room, making it appear that there was a lower room as deep as that above. It was for this cascade that my mother named the recreational facility. Over time, all of it was torn away by ravaging floodwaters.

In the process of clearing the water, mud and clay from the cavern, many interesting archeological, geological and biological specimens were identified. A unique species of salamander was found in the lake room. It has done us the honor of taking Cascade Cavern as its common name. In addition, two kinds of unusual frogs have been identified.

But one of the most spectacular surprises has been the mastodon remains. In clearing additional mud from the front room to widen the passageway several years after the original excavations, a six-foot long tusk was uncovered, circled around a rock. Today there are only a few fragments of it left, due to early souvenir hunters, erosion from flooding and decay from the air flowing over it. At the time that it was discovered, there was flesh and hair around it. Both of them disintegrated as soon as the air contacted them, while the workmen stood and watched. The tusk was broken and so fragile it was decided not to try to move it. Also, the dry air would have turned it to chalk. In more recent times a mastodon shinbone appeared deeper in the cave.

In addition, bones of the saber-tooth tiger, the bison, and other more-recent animals have been found along with those of man. Indian artifacts, remains of guns, and interesting geological specimens were removed. Some were sent to the Smithsonian Institute in Washington, D. C., to the University of Texas in Austin, to St. Mary's University in San Antonio, and to other institutions for study and identification. Many of the items stayed here in the ticket office/museum, located at the end of the park, near

CASCADE CAVERN By Elizabeth Gray Hudson

the little cedar footbridge. In fact, it was filled with relics until all of them were stolen, while the facility was closed during World War II. What a disappointing loss!

Mr. Nicholson was with us for only a few months, as he was found to be issuing free passes to paying customers and pocketing the money. He went to Longhorn Cavern for his next adventure. But the ghost of his fiction comes back to haunt us continually.

To Mrs. Drake belongs the credit for the lovely park with meandering, flagstone sidewalks, dotted with beautiful Mexican tile benches and surrounded by the wrought iron fencing. She gets the credit also for the early practice of turning off the lights in the Cathedral Room, while the hymn, "Lead Kindly Light," was played. For the grand opening ceremony, an a cappella choir of local friends and family sang the hymn.

It was her brother, Byron Haltom, who took over the management of the concession, replacing Nicholson. The men of our family, our father, Alfred Gray; uncle, Alfred Gilliat; and my mother's cousin, Allen Pearson, served as guides for the daytime and evening tours.

Soon it was discovered that the cavern flooded with every heavy rain. A spillway was constructed to divert the water to the Cibolo Creek and a dam placed at the head of the ravine leading into the mouth of the cave. I have lost track of the number of additions that have been added to the top of the dam. AND STILL IT FLOODS! Over time it has been determined that when there is heavy rain, the water backs up from the lower level of the cave to meet the surging water entering from above.

During World War II, the concession was closed, except for weekends, when our family would spend the days there, making repairs and conducting tours.

Mr. Drake was unable to get money out of Canada for advertising. In addition, he read of a large lawsuit against the owner of another cave concession by a person who had been injured. The timing was appropriate, and Mr. Drake sold his \$60,000 investment for \$3000 within 24 hours of his decision to sell. What an eclipse!

This happened in 1943. Mr. Otto Peterson owned an amusement business in Minnesota, and he arranged for tours to this area. In the process of making such arrangements, the two men met and the sale was finalized. Because of his own poor health, Mr. Peterson, then, turned the lease over to Ed Lindberg in 1947.

From the beginning, there was the awareness of a lower level off of the Cathedral Room, because the floodwaters flowed out of the cave through the room's lower exit. They joined the large underground body of water, which is bordered by steep banks. To this day, the bottom of the stream has not been successfully probed. It is believed that in some way it is connected to an underground water table, or the aquifer.

After World War II, development of this lower level began. In the beginning, an airshaft had been drilled through thirty feet of earth into the top of the Cathedral Room to bring

CASCADE CAVERN By Elizabeth Gray Hudson

in fresh air. Now, the workmen used the same opening to pour concrete through linked units of stovepipe to build the center stairway and walks into the lower level. Few formations were found there, but I remember three curiosities: a room with many fossils, another with oyster shells the size of a dinner plate, and an area where there was rhythmic spilling of water over a formation, named "the pulsing heart."

Following the 1964 flood, Mr. Bridges, who contracted for the Cascade Cavern sign business for several years, joined a corporation of four other individuals to buy the lease from Mr. W. L. Balliew, who had owned it for six years. The families of these individuals worked, clearing away the tree and other debris, which had washed into the office building. In addition, they cleaned the passageways in the cavern. Following every flood, the walks and lighting required evaluation.

After extensive flooding in the early 1970's, the lower level was closed and the self-contained lake in the Cathedral Room was initiated. Mr. Bridges put a large tube through the lake, to conduct trips, especially arranged, into the deeper area.

About this time, Mr. Hilmar Bergmann identified and marked woody plants and grasses along the natural trails into the cavern and to the west of the park area. Wright's pavonia, at the mouth of the cave and the Texas mock orange were two specimens, rare in Kendall County, but located in this area.

Mr. Bridges, long interested in caves, became the sole owner of the lease in 1977. He introduced a magnetic house and swimming pool. In addition, he developed a Good Sam Park for camping, and opened two pavilions and a catering service. His family provided most of the labor.

In 1983, he completed the building of a theater, one of only four interpretive theaters in the United States, and dedicated it to our mother and father, Edith and Alfred Gray. His slide presentation of cave development and formations was one of the best promotional projects ever used up to that time. He encouraged speleological organizations to use the cavern for exploration and repelling. The Emergency Medical Service teams, regularly, learned vertical rescue through the original opening. Each year the Kerr County Trail Ride used the park for an overnight stop on its way to the San Antonio Live Stock Show. P. M. Magazine from Dallas and San Antonio, both, featured the park.

Early in 1986, the lease was sold to Jim Kyle and Jill Beardsley of Florida. Extensive rewiring was required. As a result of the fifty-year flood, which inundated the cavern in the spring of 1992, heavy-duty pumps were installed in the Cathedral Room. In December 1992, the filming of the movie, FATHERHOOD, featuring Patrick Swayze was on location in the cave for a week.

My father, Alfred Gray, passed away in 1957. Following my mother's death in 1975, my brother, sister and I inherited the property, and in 1977, joined in the formation of Boerne Land and Cattle Company. It is this partnership that now owns the land.

CASCADE CAVERN By Elizabeth Gray Hudson

I'm sure that the one, that we remember, smiles, patronizingly, as we relate her history. But I would wager that she is thinking, "If you only knew the things that I have seen in my lifetime!" And most of her secrets are safe.

On April 7, 1984, the Texas Historical Commission and John and Gladys Bridges unveiled a Texas Historical Marker, dedicated to commemorate the natural landmark.

(At the ceremony, Elizabeth Gray Hudson, daughter of Alfred and Edith Gilliat Gray presented most of the historical remarks listed above. In recording this version, history occurring after that date has been added.)

References:

Oral History from Edith Gilliat Gray, Edith Gray Caldwell, Alfred G. Gray, and Elizabeth Gray Hudson
Oral History from Mary Cartwright Oral History from John Bridges
Oral History from Jean Atkins
Oral History from Glory Felder
Oral History from Hilmar Bergmann
Skinner-Klee, Katherine, THE CASCADE CAVERN, researched material collected for the Texas Historical Commission and sent with the application for the Historical Marker Deed records in the Kendall County Court House
Periodical material and letters of Bernard Cartwright collected by Mary Cartwright
Several Cascade Cavern promotional brochures

Use of the material is granted, provided credit is given to the composite of references.

Compiled by Elizabeth Gray Hudson July 9, 1984. Updated: September 20, 1993.