



*A CALIFORNIA
CAVERN WAS
DISCOVERED BY
CAPTAIN
JOSEPH
TAYLOR IN
1850 AND
LATER VISITED
BY JOHN MUIR
- A MAN WITH
A PASSION FOR
THE NATURAL
WONDERS AND
LANDMARKS OF
CALIFORNIA ...*

UNDERGROUND MYSTERIES OF THE SIERRA NEVADA

BY SUZANNE PHILLIPS

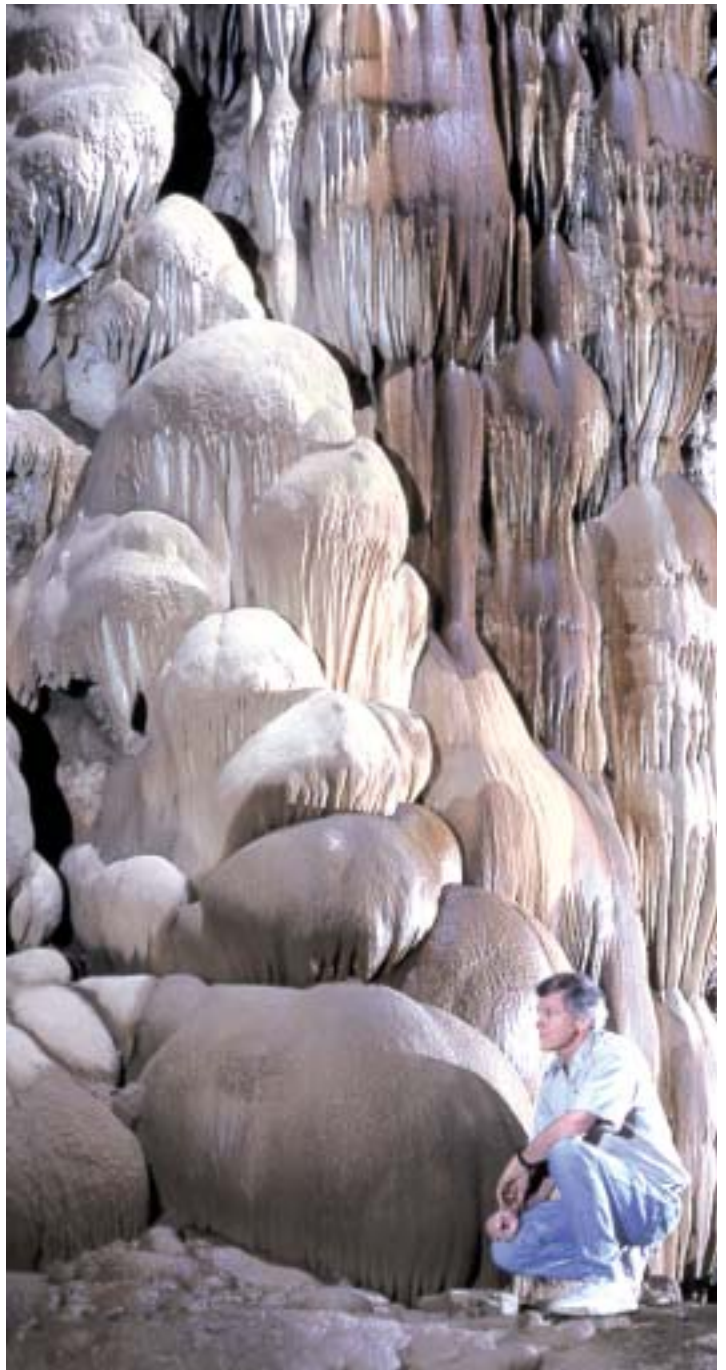
Scattered along the Sierra Nevada mountain range are four spectacular underground caverns open to the public. All offering guided family walking tours, many also offer extended expedition trips beyond the trails and deep within the mountains. Three tours are operated by one family-owned company with a long-standing love of caverns - the Sierra Nevada Recreation Corporation (SNRC). SNRC President Stephen Fairchild has described the experience of caving as being the closest most of us will ever get to exploring another world.

Caverns contain diverse and spectacular formations (speleothems). Among them, stalactites and stalagmites, which take many thousands of years to develop, drop from above and rise from below to create a unique underground world. Formed by tiny deposits of calcite left by water dripping or seeping through rock crevices into the cavern, or splashing against the walls and floor, their colors can vary from gray, blue, yellow, brown and red to a pure, translucent white, depending on the minerals carried by the calcium carbonate solution. The unique formations created in this slow process can sometimes be surprisingly massive or rather fragile and delicate.

The southernmost SNRC cavern is Boyden Cavern, located in the Kings River Canyon, Sequoia National Monument. The drive east on Highway 180 outside of Fresno is spectacularly beautiful. The bottom of the canyon, where the highway crosses the Kings River, reaches the parking lot for Boyden Cavern. Picnic tables overlook the rushing river. Tickets may be purchased from a rustic gift shop, nestled at the bottom of a formidable cliff. The tour cost is \$8 for adults and \$4 for children ages 3 - 13 (under 3 are free). The 5-minute hike to the cavern entrance is steep; however, visitors can just take their time and admire the scenery. Guides assist the tour as spelunkers wind through the cool cave interior of twisting, turning passageways and interesting speleothems leading to the history of the cave's discovery and geology. Many formations have been named for their resemblance to something familiar in this alien environment. There is a 40,000 year old stalagmite known as "Mother Nature's Wedding Cake" and a flowstone formation called "The Christmas Tree." With its well-lit interior and nearly level handrail-equipped trail, this cavern is not only beautiful, but also an easy stroll.

Boyden Cavern is open from the last weekend in April to the end of October. The family walking tour takes about 45 minutes and leaves approximately on the hour. Camping is available nearby at Princess campground, or at Cedar Grove or Grant Grove. (more information on area attractions and camping is available at: 559-335-2856)

Another grand cavern of the Gold Country, Moaning Cavern is situated 4 hours north in the historic Gold Rush region of the Sierra Nevada foothills in a tiny town called Vallecito. This cavern has an





Middle Earth Expedition at California Cavern Photo: Peter & Ann Bosted

ancient archaeological history, being the site of what are probably the oldest human remains in America. Uranium-thorium dating has determined one skull found here to be 12,000 to 13,500 years old. Some ancient remains are on display in the gift shop.

Moaning Cavern is a giant and impressive vertical chamber, large enough to hold the Statue of Liberty. During the tour explorers walk down a 100-foot spiral staircase built in 1922 from the deck of a World War I battleship to the bottom of the main chamber. After an enjoyable visit on the bottom, hearing about the history and geology of the cavern, the walk back up begins. The cost for adults is \$8.75 per person and \$4.50 for children 3-13 (under 3 are free). There are huge flowstone formations and mysterious "moaning holes" in the hard limestone at the bottom of the cavern. When emptied of water, they make a moaning sound as water drops into them. The strange, unnerving sound used to be heard above ground, before the gift shop was built, giving the cave its name.

If guests are up for an adventure, they can rappel 165 feet by rope into the cavern for an additional cost. This is an exhilarating, self-controlled descent that takes no experience, just average health and fitness and, of course, a significant degree of courage.

Moaning Cavern also offers above-ground gold and gemstone mining, a free nature trail and picnic tables. It is open every day year round. &Reservations are required for the Adventure Trip and for large groups doing the walking tour or the rappel.

California Cavern, State Historic Landmark #956, about 45 minutes from Moaning Cavern, is structurally very different. It is a horizontal cave, with a twisting, turning trail taking you into numerous highly-decorated chambers. Used as a dungeon by Native Americans, it was later discovered in 1850 by a miner named Captain Taylor who noticed a cool breeze coming from the rocks as he was setting up his targets for shooting practice. A mining camp called Cave City was established around the cavern between 1851 and 1875 with the population reaching a peak of 400. The cavern was an important focal point for residents who used it as the venue for dances, religious services, town meetings and weddings. At this time, it was named Mammoth Cave, and was visited by local literati including Bret Harte, John Muir and Mark Twain. It was also thought to have been used as a hideout by the notorious criminal Black Bart in the 1800s and was a meeting place for the secretive political "Know Nothing Party."

These days, there is little left of Cave City, but all that delighted early visitors to the cavern is still there to see. The 60 to 80 minute "Trail of Lights" walking tour is available at \$9 for adults and \$4.75 for children 3-13 (under 3 are free). Visitors can follow in the footsteps of John Muir who wrote of his visit in 1894 "...Here we lingered and reveled, rejoicing to find so much music in stony silence, so much splendor in darkness, so many mansions in the depths of the mountains, buildings ever in process of construction, yet ever finished, developing from perfection to perfection, profusion without overabundance."

In addition to the walking tour, California Cavern offers two wild cavern trips. These challenging expeditions wind through muddy, undeveloped parts of the cave not seen on the walking tour. Here high adventure activity takes place in a beautiful, unusual environment.

California Cavern is open May through October and also offers above-ground gemstone mining, a free nature trail and picnic tables set quietly among aged oak trees.

SNRC plans to open a fourth cavern later this year which promises to be something special! Black Chasm Cavern, Qualified for National Natural Landmark status due to the rare and beautiful arrays of helictite crystals in the appropriately named "Landmark Room," will offer family walking tours. Other rooms include the giant Hall of Arches and the Colossal Room which is 100 feet across and 150 feet deep with giant bridges lodged above deep, dark lakes. Opening of this cavern has been delayed from the original target date of spring, 2000; however, the owner, Stephen Fairchild, says he is confident

it will be open sometime this summer, adding another magnificent cavern to the mysterious list of cool, California caves.

For information on any of the caverns call: SNRC at 209-736-2708 or email at caverns@cavemtours.com. Much information is available from their web site at www.cavemtours.com, including detailed maps and directions, discount coupons and free school lesson plans.



Mammoth Cave Expedition at California Cavern Photo: Peter & Ann Bosted



A cool trip spelunking is available to those seeking subterranean natural wonders



CAVERN TOURS OF SIERRA NEVADA RECREATION

call: 209-736-2708 or visit www.cavernstours.com



The Jungle Room, California Cavern

CALIFORNIA CAVERN
State Historic Landmark #956 is open for walking tours from May through December and wild cavern spelunking trips from June through December (depending on water levels). Above ground activities include gemstone mining, a free nature trail and picnicing.

MAP TO THE CAVES



MOANING CAVERN
is California's largest single-chambered public cavern. It is open every day, year-round for walking tours, spelunking trips and the 165-foot rope rappel. You can also mine for gemstones, take a walk along the nature trail, and eat your lunch at their picnic tables.



Rappel team at Moaning Cavern



Christmas Tree formation, Boyden Cave

BOYDEN CAVERN
is open from the last weekend of April through October every year. Walking tours are available each day the cavern is open and leave about every hour on the hour. Picnic tables are provided next to the Kings River.

BLACK CHASM CAVERN
National Natural Landmark will be opening soon. Delays make it hard to predict an opening date, but updates can be found on their web site at www.cavernstours.com. However, one thing is for sure - this cavern is definitely worth waiting for!



Black Chasm Cavern rare helectite formations in the Landmark Room
Photo: Dave Bunnell

ONE CAVER'S LIFE PASSION

A STORY DEDICATED TO PUTNAM BOYDEN

"My heart pounded as I lifted my lantern to cast a flickering glow on the strange, eerie rock structures. Their shapes loomed out of the dark crystalline, bulky and impressive. I lurched slowly along the uneven rocky stream bed, my lamp casting only the meanest glow in this darkest place deep inside a mountain. I began to wish I had told someone of my intention to explore this unknown cavern in case I could not find my way out. I had heard stories of underground rooms that stretched on for miles and made sudden, deathly drops of hundreds of feet. I would have to be very cautious and was glad to have the reassuring presence of my faithful dog by my side.

As I slid and tripped my way further into the mountain, my fear was gradually replaced by fascination. Confronted by more and yet more marvels of nature, I started to imagine the place lit up by hundreds of flickering candles. It would be transformed into a magical fairyland! The long, arduous journey through the canyon began to seem very worthwhile.

Two days earlier, being a logger by trade, I had been resting from the rigors of my labor when some surveyors I know happened into the camp at Hume Lake. They told me of a cavern they had come upon when hiking through the Kings River Canyon, describing all manner of formations. "Boyden," they said, knowing my love of nature, "stalactites seem to flow from the walls like water, others look like garments hung in a wardrobe. You cannot imagine the spectacle. You must see it for yourself."

I determined myself too busy for such an adventure - the hike alone would take a day and then I may have trouble finding the entrance. However, the notion would not vanish from my mind. It seemed such an exciting prospect that the very next day I embarked on my trip. Taking small provisions for myself and my dog, I left the camp. The surveyors had left the previous day and since I had no particular friends among my fellow loggers, I did not tell anyone of my intention - except to let them know that I may not be back for a few days.

After an entire day of hiking down the steep canyon walls, I still had not arrived. I was concerned I had overlooked the landmark tree that the surveyors described to lead me to the cave. I set up camp next to the roaring river and thanked my good fortune in being able to spend my time thus. Earlier in my career I had spent my days in an office, composing and writing. It was a certain pleasure to experience this other kind of life.

I spent a warm, restful night under a deep black sky bejeweled with stars, serenaded by katydid, distant coyotes and the omnipresent roar of the river. I woke up full of vigor, packed up my supplies and was off! It was under an hour later that I spotted the tree - lodged high in the canyon cliff. It had one distinctive feature 'two arms entwined in

an Isadora Duncan pose. I caught my breath. The excitement was powerful. I launched myself up the cliff, grasping at tree branches to help my ascent. My dog climbed ahead effortlessly and stopped at some unseen point, barking noisily. When I breathlessly caught up with him, I realized he had found the cavern. The frigid breeze blowing from the entrance had caught his attention.

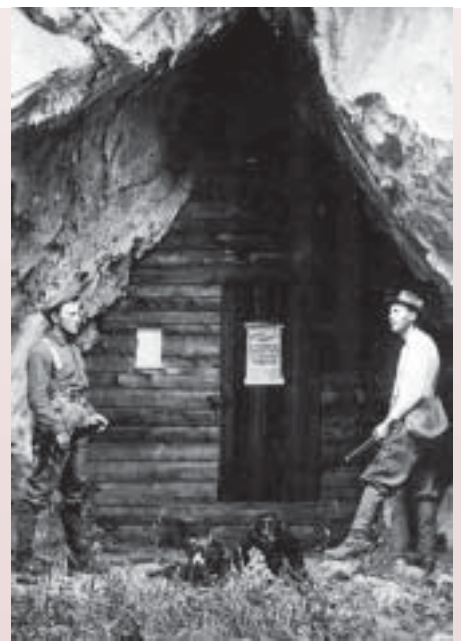
We approached the entrance peering into the pitch black darkness, the sound of a hidden stream echoing from the depths. I prepared myself two lanterns and lit one as I ventured slowly inside.

After the bright glare of the Spring sun, my eyes aided by my lantern, took some time to adjust to the darkness. Meanwhile, I noted the cool, moist air which was a tonic after my vigorous exertions. As my eyes began to serve me once more I noted the strange rocky formations. They seemed to loom towards me out of the murky blackness, white and ghost-like. My dog and I continued on with some misgivings that gradually gave way to wonderment.

After my exploration of the cavern, viewing its many splendors, I successfully found my way back to the surface. I felt a deep affinity with this strange environment that I am at a loss to explain. I was determined that it would be part of my life forever. I filed a claim with the Bureau of Land Management that very year (1907), constructed a wooden gate and began telling folks of this natural attraction they could view for a small fee. Word spread and people began to visit in groups, hiking a day through California's wilderness to get there. My candles had indeed made this a magical place and people were thrilled with the experience. They enjoyed the tours I gave, pointing out the formations I had endowed with fanciful names. As for myself, I enjoyed the solitude between those visits and took great pleasure in the delight of my visitors. They were good years.

And now here I am, twenty years later resting on my cot in the cabin I built with my own hands in my beloved canyon. I have so enjoyed these past twenty years, none more so. But now I am terribly ill. I have not eaten for three days and the bitter winter wind is tearing at my bones. I am afraid I will die unless I can find the energy to hike out of the canyon for help. I have decided to leave today. I do not feel strong but it is my only chance. I have packed up what I hope will be sufficient provisions. If this is to be the end, then I am thankful to say it is the end to an excellent life."

Putnam Boyden did not succeed in reaching civilization. He and his dog were caught in a snow storm and died under a ledge where they had attempted to take refuge. Legend has it that his dog never left his side and was found dead, laying on his master's chest.



Putnam Boyden (right) standing with friend at cavern

