

A giant pharmaceutical company sponsors Mammoth Cave National Park with terrific changes. An informal tour of a former guide and a current guide reveal clues to a kidnapping and eventually plans for stealing a dangerous bacterium.

## **DARK GOES THE STAGE**

By Lance S. Barron

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# DARK GOES THE STAGE



LANCE S. BARRON

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## Eleven

### From Church to the Prince of Denmark

Keven leads the visitors along Broadway, the age-old trail for the Adena people, the peter dirt miners, tours from the early 1800s on up till now. The Civilian Conservation Corps reworked the trail with back-breaking thoroughness in the 1930s. Shovels and picks and wheelbarrows. The trail takes up only a part of the passage's sixty-foot width. We step up from the pavers onto a wooden boardwalk elevated above the clay beneath. We tread boards made of composite materials, but they used actual wood for the handrails and the foot boards on either side. Bob told me they used Florida cypress for the lint rails. He thought they built with reclaimed wood.

He also told me about the lint rails. "It drives the whole thing," he said. "The rails help keep the visitors on the trail, and the volunteers collect a lot of lint on a quarterly schedule. Lint from cave visitor's clothing somehow presents a hazard to cave life."

I wonder what in the world they do with it. I don't remember a lint ball on display in the visitor center. I can hear Bob's response, "Don't say that out loud. They may not have thought of a displaying a lint ball, yet."

\* \* \*

I walk along the edge of the elevated boardwalk and peer down at the trail where we would have wound our way up and down small hills of breakdown. The boardwalk diminishes my sense of walking in Mammoth Cave. After almost two hundred years of cave visitation, what does the boardwalk accomplish? Even with its lint rail. It accomplishes one thing. A quiet walk through a large passage with only the murmurings of visitors becomes a thundering stampede of Cape buffalo.

At the top of the small rise, I pause. I stare at the narrow ledge in the Kentucky Cliffs that conceals the top of the

Corkscrew. Prior to the installation of the steel tower at Mammoth Dome, tours used this steep, torturous passage equipped with ladders as a shortcut return up from Echo River and River Hall. They quit using the Corkscrew long before my first summer of guiding.

Reverend Hovey quoted one of the oldest published descriptions of Mammoth Cave—but did not identify the author when describing the Corkscrew,

*...among the Kentucky Cliffs, just under the ceiling, is a gap in the wall into which you can scramble and make your way down a chaotic gulf, creeping like a rat, under and among loose rocks, to the depth of eighty or ninety feet—provided you do not break your neck before you get half-way.*

The books and other publications of Reverend Horace C. Hovey, the noted late nineteenth-century minister and enthusiastic promoter of Mammoth Cave, provide an important record of cave history. While some cave-guide lore says a lost visitor discovered the way through the Corkscrew from River Hall following his cigar smoke, the formerly enslaved William Garvin discovered it when employed as a guide. Cave guiding came after Garvin served in a Black Army unit, Company M, 12th Heavy Artillery. Joy Medley Lyons, in her book *Making Their Mark: The Signature of Slavery at Mammoth Cave*, reports that because of Garvin's enlistment, his life history is more complete than others who did not enlist.

Older guides said the scrambling over boulders and climbing ladders made the Corkscrew a challenge, focusing the Park Service officials on the break-your-neck aspect in discontinuing its use. Installation of the tower at Mammoth Dome in 1953, eliminated the need for tours to backtrack their way to the entrance. Even through the Corkscrew. To get out, they had to climb the tower steps.

As the tour moves beyond the Corkscrew and crests the hill, the boardwalk changes to steps and descends to more concrete pavers at Methodist Church. The pavers disorient me even though they represent a minor change when set against the vastness of the great Mammoth Cave of Kentucky. They desecrate these age-old passages. Unreasonable, I know. To me, the pavers present a surface more slippery than the clay trail, but the guides say the pavers are skid resistant.

When we step off the stairs at Methodist Church, near absolute silence returns. Two wooden pipelines elevated one above the other, hold my attention. Pilasters of cave rock support the pipes. The saltpeter miners converted tree trunks into pipes by boring out the center wood using a spoon-bit auger. They used tulip poplar most often because the trunks grew straighter, and the core bored out easier than oak. They tapered the wood pipes on the ends with what resembled a giant pencil sharpener to form a “spigot and socket” type of joint banded with an iron collar. They joined the ends of the pipes to form pipelines.

The first pipeline transported fresh water, which came from the spring at the cave entrance to the second set of leaching vats yet ahead of us at Booth’s Amphitheater. The second wooden pipeline returned the leachate to the Rotunda where men hand-pumped it into a tank on a tower. From there, it flowed by gravity to the entrance for further processing. I am glad the pipes remain undisturbed.

Burton Faust, in his *Saltpetre Mining in Mammoth Cave, KY*, describes the saltpeter leaching operations and the construction of the wooden pipelines. Including a sketch of the giant pencil sharpener.

I catch up with the tour as Keven addresses them at the Church, a medium-sized chamber formed by the intersection of Broadway with a short passage coming in from the left. Hovey identified the side passage as Archibald Avenue.

“Welcome to Methodist Church,” says Keven. “You are looking at a side passage shortened aeons ago by



breakdown—the complete collapse of ceiling layers into the passage. No path exists beyond the top of the breakdown yonder.” He points out the top of the breakdown with his high-powered flashlight.

“Legend tells us local clergy held church services here for the Black enslaved men mining saltpeter during the War of 1812. Whether the miners worshiped here, we aren’t sure. Area ministers conducted church services here on an irregular basis after Mammoth Cave became America’s second major tourist attraction.” No one asks about the first tourist attraction. Maybe they’re all from Niagara Falls and already know.

On the left, a ledge called the choir loft juts out about twenty feet above the floor. Today, no choir. No singers dressed in royal blue robes spring from the blackened loft as in my dream. Across the mouth of Archibald Avenue and at the same elevation, hangs the pulpit. Today there’s no preacher either.

The deep black of the choir loft and pulpit results from uncounted torches made of cotton rags soaked in kerosene tossed by cave guides through the darkness of this chamber leaving layers of greasy soot undisturbed over many decades.

The highlight for the guides of the self-guided tour included throwing a torch or two at Methodist Church. During the decades before the park installed electric lights, guides threw torches to light the more distant recesses of a chamber or to highlight a particular feature. Throwing the light instead of carrying it allowed the guide to stay on the trail and not clamber over piles of breakdown with a lantern. After electrification, cave guides continued throwing torches to amaze visitors, display historic lighting methods, and not least of all, to entertain the guides.

Years later, park management ended torch throwing because of its effect on the biology of the cave. When torch-throwing originated, I never learned, but Reverend Hovey

does not mention it. He writes about burning magnesium or “red fire.”

An early report of a trip to Mammoth Cave published in an 1861 issue of *Dublin University Magazine* describes Bengal lights. These signal-flare types of fireworks produced a “blue, sulfurous flame casting a lurid glare on the rocky walls like lightning.”

The choir sang “Rock of Ages” in my dream. I’ve not heard anyone singing here or elsewhere in Mammoth Cave. The park invites the public for an annual Christmas sing in the Rotunda, but I’ve never been at the cave during the holidays.

I amble up the next hill with Randi right alongside. No one’s getting behind her on this tour. At the top of the hill, the visitors crowd the wood guardrails keeping them from tumbling into the second set of leaching vats. Across the trail, mounds of leached cave dirt lie where the miners left it—or where the CCC crews left it.

Plexiglas domes, white PVC pipes, and monitoring wells crowd this area. Sampling pumps emit low buzzes. The sponsor’s scientific equipment stands out in the open. They’ve made no attempt at hiding or disguising them. No sponsor employees lurk in the shadows off the trail.

The Reverend Hovey wrote about these piles of dirt.

*And now we pass along the great piles of dirt, and when we remember much of this material was brought to this locality in sacks, on the shoulders of slaves, from points often two or more miles away... we are impressed with the toil needed to procure materials for leaching.*

Some guides have described the miners’ work in the cave as pleasant because it was cool. And reports say the enslaved men experienced good health. Hauling bags of cave dirt—and mud—was back-breaking work, not to mention sloppy and slippery. The work may have been pleasant enough when

compared to chopping weeds in a Mississippi cotton field. But it wasn't pleasant.

After discussing this second set of vats, Keven directs the visitors' attention to Stage Rock, where a figure in shadow slumps.

"Randi, go ahead and turn on the spotlight," says Keven.

"It's not working," says the trailing law enforcement ranger.

"Folks, the wax figure there represents Edwin Booth, the famous Shakespearean actor of the late 1800s, and brother of John Wilkes Booth. When his career had somewhat recovered from his brother's assassination of President Abraham Lincoln, Edwin Booth delivered Hamlet's soliloquy from there on Stage Rock in 1876. He reported a satisfactory test of the cave's acoustics. I'm sure his fellow cave visitors enjoyed the extra treat."

With Keven's cue, Randi pushes another button, and we hear a scratchy noise, and then silence.

"Well, folks, it looks like our technology has failed in both light and sound. I don't suppose we have any Shakespearean actors with us today?" Keven says, smiles, and scans his group. A hand goes up. "Yes, sir. You are familiar with Hamlet's soliloquy? Come on up."

A man of some presence makes his way through to where Keven is standing. They confer, and Keven signals Randi to join them.

"Folks, we are in for a rare treat today. Mr. John Ammerman from Emory University is with us. He has written and starred in a one-man show, 'Booth, Brother Booth' and will perform for us today from Stage Rock." Randi escorts Mr. Ammerman up the stairs and onto stage rock, but not near the figure in shadow.

"Thank you, Keven. I have researched Mr. Booth extensively. I will perform this soliloquy as I interpret he would have done so in 1876. From William Shakespeare's

‘Hamlet,’ act three, scene one.” A pause. John looks up, raises his hand to his temple.

“To be, or not to be...”

“John Ammerman! This coincidence is even more spooky than my dream. This is fantastic! Barbara and I know John from his work at the Georgia Shakespeare Festival, and specifically, ‘Booth, Brother Booth.’ His voice resonates in this limestone amphitheater.

He concludes, “... Soft you now, The fair Ophelia! — Nymph, in thy orisons be all my sins remembered.” He pauses and takes a bow. It’s his audience now, overwhelmed. Enthusiastic applause breaks out with cheers. Randi escorts him back to the tour.

“Mr. Ammerman! What a fantastic performance. Congratulations. Thank you.”

Keven heads off the inevitable question by explaining that the set of shiny steel steps that John used to ascend the stage leads beyond Stage Rock to Gothic Avenue. He identifies the Star Chamber tour for those who desire a trip into Gothic Avenue. Murmurs ripple through the group. The visitors around John are shaking his hand and clapping him on the shoulder. He’s signing cave maps that some visitors have brought with them. I work my way toward them with my map.

Gothic Avenue occupies the highest, and thus, oldest level in the cave. The last tour I knew to include Gothic was the Bicentennial Tour in 1976. Now the Star Chamber tour takes visitors there by lantern light. In 1976, a guide dressed in period costume took fifteen visitors on an evening tour using simulated lard-oil lanterns and no electric lights. The Park Service provided realistic replicas of the lanterns, but the lanterns burned kerosene in place of bacon grease.

Barbara and I walked back in Gothic with Bob and Zona on a couple of photography trips. Barbara likes Gothic more than any other area of Mammoth Cave. Keven takes a few questions and moves the group on down the hill and around several curves toward the next stop at Giant’s Coffin.

I stare at the still figure standing in shadow on Stage Rock, high above the leaching vats. The outline stands in clear contrast with the back-lit limestone, but the details of the figure blur in shadow. Why doesn't the figure resemble the Edwin Booth of my imagination? It doesn't resemble John Ammerman at all. Bob's description made it sound more dramatic. This figure hangs too loose. A renowned Shakespearean actor with a slouch? And here, Booth portrayed Hamlet, not neighbor Verges.

I catch up with John as Keven leads the tour onward.

"John, I'm Walt. I met you at Georgia Shakespeare. I'm Barbara's husband. She volunteered in the office. Fantastic to hear you perform here. What a coincidence!"

"Hi, Walt. Of course, I remember you. What are you doing here?"

"Let's walk along," I say. "Well, I used to work here in the seventies, and we're back to see some old friends including Keven. My other guide friend, Bob, would have been here, but he had to work. We brought him and his wife Zona to see your show at Georgia Shakespeare when they were still in the tent. Absolutely flabbergasted!"

"Thank you. It was hard to resist when Keven asked about actors. To stand where I know Edwin Booth stood and deliver the soliloquy was too tempting. It was thrilling."

"Are you here alone? Where's Kathleen? How did you come to be here today?"

"Yes, alone. Rehearsals kept Kathleen tied up at home. I'm running a series of workshops for some colleges in the area. I remembered something about Edwin Booth having been here, so I took a day and drove over. Did you tell me he performed here?"

"Yes, I think so. We talked after Barbara and I saw 'Booth, Brother Booth' the first time. Outstanding." On the way down the hill, I say, "I had a dream recently about Mammoth Cave, and in that dream, I questioned the abrupt transition from total

faith at Methodist Church to the existential questioning of Hamlet.”

“It is quite a leap, isn’t it?” says John.

We pass more white plastic domes, tents, and vertical sections of PVC pipe.

With large numbers of visitors, guides don't have time to stop at all the features along this trail. I point some out to John including the bear reared up on Houchins outlined on the ceiling in black-stained gypsum crust against bare, white limestone. Wandering Willie's Spring, a brief pause at hearing the drip of water heading down to Richardson's Spring in the passage below. Cyclops Avenue on the left. I amble along enjoying the cave with John until Randi urges more speed.

## Twelve

### Giant's Coffin and Separation

We turn the bend and behold Giant's Coffin. A large block of limestone separated from the right wall aeons ago, lists to port. The rock carried its first English name *Steamboat*, but later guides adopted Grant's Coffin, after which it received its current name with fewer political overtones.

Keven stops the tour and tells them about indigenous people who visited the cave on a regular basis and then stopped about two thousand years ago, which times come from carbon dating of artifacts.

"The people of the Adena culture came into Mammoth Cave over three thousand years during what archaeologists call the Late Archaic and Early Woodland periods. They left behind enormous numbers of cane-reed torches, moccasins, breach clouts, gourd bowls, and ladders made from cedar trees. They reported these artifacts in incredible numbers. The early visitors to Mammoth Cave built bonfires from them." A collective gasp comes from the members of the tour. "Such actions today seem incredible vandalism to us. These early cavers scraped sulfate salts, primarily gypsum, from the walls. We know no more than that. We don't know what they did with the gypsum."

I miss the statue of the Adena man from my dream. New glass cases along the wall opposite the Coffin display a handful of artifacts left in the cave by these early visitors. Evidence of their activity stretches at least two miles from the natural entrance.

These visitors are enjoying the tour. Some groups can't manage a response to "Good morning." This group asks good questions and listens respectfully to Keven's answers.

"Was that figure at the Amphitheater intended to represent Booth?" says John.

"Well, I think so, but it's not very impressive, is it?"

“No. I’m not sure he would pass even for Richard the Third. Maybe Caliban. But not a role for Edwin Booth. Strange.”

Keven concludes his talk, and he waves me forward.

“John, excuse me for a moment.” I walk up to Keven.

“Be careful back there in the dark. The nine-thirty lantern tour will be right behind you. You should get to Blue Spring Branch before they catch up. Hide in there until they go by.”

“Did you realize I know John Ammerman? He blew us all away. We saw his production of ‘Booth, Brother Booth’ at Georgia Shakespeare.”

“I saw you two talking. Do you think this ties in with your dream at all?”

“Who knows at this point? Thanks for letting me tag along.”

“No problem. I’ll chat with Mr. Ammerman at the end. Be careful.”

I walk back to John, “I’m leaving you here and going off on my own. Enjoy the rest of your tour. It was great to see you on Stage Rock. Say hello to Kathleen.”

“Thanks, Walt. Good to see you and all my love to Barbara.”

I walk back to Randi. “I’m going to walk along Main Cave probably back to Mummy Ledge.”

“Well, you have the authorization. Be careful back there by yourself. Nice to meet you.”

“You bet. See you later.”

She moves off and herds the tour behind Giant’s Coffin. When the last visitor disappears behind the rock, Randi looks back, hesitates, then salutes and disappears.

The lights click off, and I pull out my flashlight.



## **Thirteen**

### **Main Cave to the Cataracts**

When I worked the self-guided Historic tour, we made a loop with six stops counting the entrance where we collected tickets from visitors. One loop in the morning and another after lunch. After twenty minutes, my replacement bumped me along to the next stop where I bumped the next guide in line. The guides made their fourth stop at Giant's Coffin.

A chain across the trail leading farther down Main Cave stopped most folks from continuing, and they kept the lights off on the first part of the trail taken by the Lantern tour. Most guides working the self-guided tour jumped the chain and sneaked back for a gander at the TB Huts during slow periods in their stint at Giant's Coffin. I never ventured back there while working. Too afraid of someone catching me away from my post. Too fresh from the Air Force.

In 1842, Dr. Croghan moved some patients into the cave for full-time residency in the first consumption sanatorium. Later they renamed the disease tuberculosis. He began with wooden huts in 1841 and built several stone huts in 1842 when the first patients arrived. The experiment failed. Two of the stone huts survive and visitors see them on the Lantern tour and the Star Chamber tour. A short way past the TB huts, the electric lights end. The park never installed lights beyond the huts along the Lantern tour route.

The Historic tour lights reflect off the ceiling, lighting my path as I stroll around one of the TB huts. How did living here full time affect the patients? Dr. Croghan based his idea for the hospital on the theory that the disease caused a rotting, a consumption, of the lungs. Since material such as wood, fibers, and bodies didn't decay in Mammoth Cave, he assumed the air would arrest the rotting of lung tissues. The patients spent their lives in total darkness and fifty-four-degrees. They depended on fire for light, heat, and cooking. Visitors reported smoke in Main Cave as thick as a London fog.

Few patients left the cave alive. Dr. Croghan buried the others in a little cemetery accessible on the Heritage Trail west of the hotel. The good doctor died of TB, and some historians think Stephen Bishop may have died of it. The estate buried him in the same cemetery as the patients. Some years later, a charitable visitor donated a granite headstone for Bishop. Has PharmARAMA found TB cysts in their soil samples from this area?

And what about fungi in the cave soil? Research has shown that fungal networks in forests provide a communication network that allows trees to communicate with each other. Why not a fungal network that allows Mammoth Cave to communicate?

\* \* \*

The Lantern tour continues along Main Cave illuminated by kerosene lanterns carried by guides and visitors. My route will be much the same, except I will turn and retrace my steps instead of continuing through Ultima Thule, Elisabeth's Dome, and exiting Violet City.

I check my pocket for the small LED light I always carry. A backup to the flashlight. Both have fresh batteries.

Once through the second chain gate, I go round the Acute Angle and beyond. My limited solo experiences in any cave makes me anxious doing this trip alone—in the dark. *Try not to run.*

The maintenance employees travel throughout the tour routes alone. The maintenance person who works at Mount McKinley on the Grand Avenue tour spends most of their day alone. Except for a few fifteen-minute periods when the tours stop for the restrooms. When I guided tours in the seventies, four Scenic Half-Day tours climbed Mount McKinley every day in the summer.

The passage continues wide and high. Gypsum covers the ceiling and upper walls. As Keven mentioned at the last stop, the Adena cavers scraped the lower walls free of gypsum as

high as they could climb on their single-rail, cedar-pole ladders. A few of the ladders remain. Earlier visitors and others collected them as souvenirs, scientific samples, or as firewood.

Beginning well over a hundred years ago, when the visitors arrived at Star Chamber, they sat on cold, limestone benches on the right side of the passage. The guides collected all the lanterns, leaving the visitors in total darkness. With the indirect light from three lanterns, they illuminated the “stars” on the ceiling representing the night sky, including the Milky Way according to Reverend Hovey. A guide grouped the remaining lanterns in his two hands and slowly walked from behind a small hill, simulating sunrise. The talented Lantern-tour guides accompanied sunrise with the crowing of roosters and sounds of assorted barnyard animals.

Hovey wrote that the Star Chamber display inspired Ralph Waldo Emerson’s essay *Illusions*. Emerson called it a theatrical trick. But he also wrote, “We should be content to be pleased without too curiously analyzing the occasions.” I’m having trouble with being content. I am far enough away from the Historic route that any sound is one I make. Any light is light I bring with me. Any monsters come from my imagination. I hope.

Hundreds of years of lanterns and thousands of years of torches have blackened the cave walls with soot. The soot sticks to gypsum, a mineral of calcium sulfate, precipitating out of the water in the pores of the limestone rock. The precipitate accumulates over enormous stretches of time and forms crusts inches thick. The torches of the early cave visitors deposited soot on the gypsum. The contrast of the soot-coated gypsum with limestone scraped bare of the mineral marks the limit of their reach up the walls.

Most of the light that ever brightened this section of cave came from burning cane-reed torches. The soot from more modern man’s two hundred years in the cave is insignificant to

that of the Adena folks who were in here for approximately three thousand years.

Archaeologists have not determined why the Adena people wanted gypsum. Gypsum and other salts forming on the walls and ceiling, being soluble in water, haven't survived outside the cave. No archaeologist has reported any site with gypsum artifacts in the park. Did the Adenans use it for paint? Medicine? Gypsum and some other salts found on the cave walls have a laxative effect. Particularly mirabilite and epsomite, which are also found on walls of the cave. Or did it have a ritual significance beyond our limited imaginations? No one has reported any evidence.

Today, we mine gypsum from bedded deposits buried deep underground and use it for making gypsum wallboard, one brand of which is Sheetrock™. No one has suggested the Adena folks ran a side-line in wallboard contracting.

In small spots, the blackened gypsum flakes off, revealing a layer of gypsum untarnished by soot. If the entire crust of gypsum falls off, the gray limestone underneath leaves a bright spot against the sooty blackness. These areas stand in sharp contrast—like stars against the night sky.

\* \* \*

I enter the Snow Room where heavy deposits of gypsum along with another sulfate mineral, mirabilite, encrust the walls and ceilings. Mirabilite crystals cover the breakdown and non-trail areas, giving the appearance of snow in the limited light. The guides named this room for the crystals of this salt that fall from the ceiling even if excited by only the heat from lanterns. The ceiling here is not black because soot does not stick to this mineral.

After Star Chamber and the Snow Room, I walk on toward Wright's Rotunda. I pass through the *S* Bend, which Hovey called the Sigma Bend, and look for the glow of blue light that signified the hotel's proximity in the dream. The blackness of the cave remains uninterrupted. No left turn with a steel gate.

In Wright's Rotunda, the rocks and the trail have not changed. No light, save my flashlight. The trail goes close along the right wall. My lone flashlight illumines little of the soot-blackened walls on the far side.

The room measures one hundred seventy-five feet in width and five hundred fifty feet in length. Hovey described this room in terms of a subterranean Nile River with the side passages looping back to the main passage equivalent to side streams flowing around islands in the *Nile River*. My flashlight, puny in such a space, fails except in lighting a small part of the ceiling. I see enough to determine the sponsor has committed no desecration here. Piles of breakdown cover the floor of the chamber. No hotel, no restaurant, no wine cellar exists as in my dream. The weird parts of my dream leave me unsettled, but the accurate parts make me worry for the safety of Mammoth Cave.

As I leave Wright's Rotunda, I scan the trail more than the passage itself. Tire tracks from one of the sponsor's battery-powered jitneys show in the clay. How did they get them across the steps at Methodist Church? PharmARAMA must have one cart for this side, and another for the Rotunda side. They can't come in through Violet City. Impossible.

\* \* \*

At a sharp bend in the passage, water from the surface enters through a vertical shaft that intersects the cave. It falls through the height of the passage, and once more enters the rocky bottom of the void where it discharges into Echo River, the main underground river in the cave, and from Echo River Spring flows into the Green River, thence to the Ohio, the Mighty Mississippi, and down the Mississippi to the Gulf of Mexico.

With no artificial light in this part of the cave, illuminating the falling water challenged the ingenuity of cave guides. Over the years, they devised a variety of ways of doing it. Magnesium flares, Bengal lights and, in more modern times,

cotton torches soaked in flammable oil thrown from a stick. The guides on the Lantern tour threw about 40 torches per tour. The guide flung torches onto distant ledges and lit up features or emphasized the size of a large room. Long-ago guides arranged handy pieces of breakdown rock at most stopping places on tours where the guide could stand “on the rock” above the crowd and *fill their buckets* with facts and tales about Mammoth Cave—and fling their torches.

Guides twisted strips of cotton cloth—undershirt material from a nearby garment factory worked the best—to resemble a twist of tobacco, which the Kentucky-born guides raised on tobacco farms knew all about. Because four Lantern tours per day required a lot of torches, the Lantern tour guides recruited new employees, including me, to help make them. We spent time in the guide lounge making torches and learning cave lore. Guiding at Mammoth Cave marked a golden time in my life.

The twisted torches included a loop at one end and a thick body of wound cotton at the other. The guides soaked the torches in kerosene, wrung them out, and placed them in a metal can. The lead guides wore the cans at their sides on leather shoulder straps. They carried a special, carved, hickory stick tapered from a comfortable handle to a slender end with a metal tip.

At the place the guides wanted additional illumination of some feature, they hung an unlit cotton torch on the metal tip of the stick and, holding the handle with one hand, ignited the kerosene-soaked cotton with a cigarette lighter. Then, they twirled it several times for dramatic effect. Once the flame was ready and the audience silent, rearing the stick back like casting a fishing lure, the guide flung it up onto a ledge or other suitable location. The twirling torch, first on the end of the stick, and then in flight, gave off a fluttering roar, adding to the drama. It burned for several minutes, depending on the amount of cotton and kerosene. An experienced guide

sometimes overlooked clearly stating to the novice an important tip. Hold on to the stick.

The Lantern tour guides threw forty or eighty torches a day, and that made them proficient and accurate. The genuine test of ability lay on a small ledge here at the Cataracts. If they could hit the spot regularly, they achieved a sort of master status, though never acknowledged to their face. The difficulty of landing the torch at the Cataracts lies in the ledge's smallness, the presence of extinguishing water, and the proximity of the wall that conceals the ledge. When guides missed this and other tough targets, cave rats caught the blame for kicking the torch off the landing spot.

Reverend Hovey wrote that he and Dr. Call crossed the Cataracts on a narrow ledge, describing this achievement with praise for themselves. They reference Dr. Bird—an earlier cave chronicler—who pronounced this point, "...the termination of the Grand Gallery." The end of Main Cave. The passage continues in reduced width and height, and without the grandeur.

\* \* \*

With water falling through the passage, sounds emanate from the cascade. I strain to make out voices. Guides have reported voices in the cave from here at the Cataracts and in more remote reaches away from the visitor trails. I hear through the water, "Help." A faint whisper riding the falls. I turn out my light. No light remains. Only the sound of the water. The voice is stronger. I switch on my light and point it toward the trail. A man sporting a full beard and wearing green coveralls stands in the middle of the trail. He grins.

"Howdy! I'm Orville. I'm with maintenance. Who might you be?"

I explain who and what and why.

"Well, good for you, Walt. Nice to meet you. I don't run up on folks all by their lonesome out this way very much."

“No, I guess not. Hey, Orville. That was you calling for help, wasn’t it?” I say.

“Hah! So, you heard it, too. I hear it every time I come by here. Weird. First couple of times, I have to admit, I trotted right up to the edge and looked in to see if anyone had fallen over. Then, after a while, I guess I kind of got used to it.”

“That’s really something. I’ve never heard of a voice here.”

“The tours don’t hear it. All those bodies must dampen the acoustics. You have to be alone to hear it. Leastways, that’s when I’ve heard it.”

“Thanks, Orville. I appreciate your coming by right now. Does anything else ever make you nervous while you’re in here by yourself?”

“You know Blue Springs Branch, don’t you?” says Orville.

“Sure. I’m headed back there now. What about it?”

“Well, there’s generally something happening around there and on over at Mummy Ledge. You sit still in the dark, there’s haints galore will come out to mess with you. I kind of like them now. But, man, when I first started. No sir. I paused for a little, felt that breeze on the back of my neck and trotted right on toward Violet City. Yes sir. Whether I was coming or going.”

“I’ll keep that in mind when I’m back there. I guess I better head on out or the Lantern tour will catch up with me. Nice talking to you, Orville.”

“Walt, you watch your step. Remember nothing back there will hurt you but yourself. I’m living proof of that. Take care.”

“You, too.”

Courtesy of the men who worked in the Civilian Conservation Corps, I cross the edge of the pit with ease and safety as have thousands of visitors before me. Three passages connect at the Cataracts, and I follow the center one.



When I walk into a large room in the cave like the Rotunda, and provided the lights are on, I become aware at once of the large underground chamber. With lanterns, and to some extent with a single flashlight, focused on the trail at your feet and no other lights, awareness of entering a large chamber like Chief City relies mainly on noticing the passage walls no longer run along either side.

A kerosene lantern or a lard-oil lantern—a cane-reed torch for that matter—projects a circle of light. A small circle of dim light. The light from those devices project little beyond the reach of the person carrying it. I travel in the relatively small circle of light of my flashlight, and beyond the light, only darkness. And so, I enter Chief City.

Without the cloth and kerosene torches, guides threw around lighting up the larger chambers, much less Bengal Lights or Red Fire, I miss the drama, but I push my flashlight beam towards walls that absorb most of the light and reflect little. A visitor here asked a Lantern tour guide, “I guess you go through a lot of batt’ries shining across these big rooms?”

The trail runs the long axis of Chief City, which at two acres, give or take, forms the largest chamber in the cave. Near the center a large mound of broken limestone slabs, called The Mountain, climbs near the ceiling. I flash the light left, right, forward, and upward. I whirl around. No one. No thing. No breeze. No voice calling for help. I’m bringing it all with me.

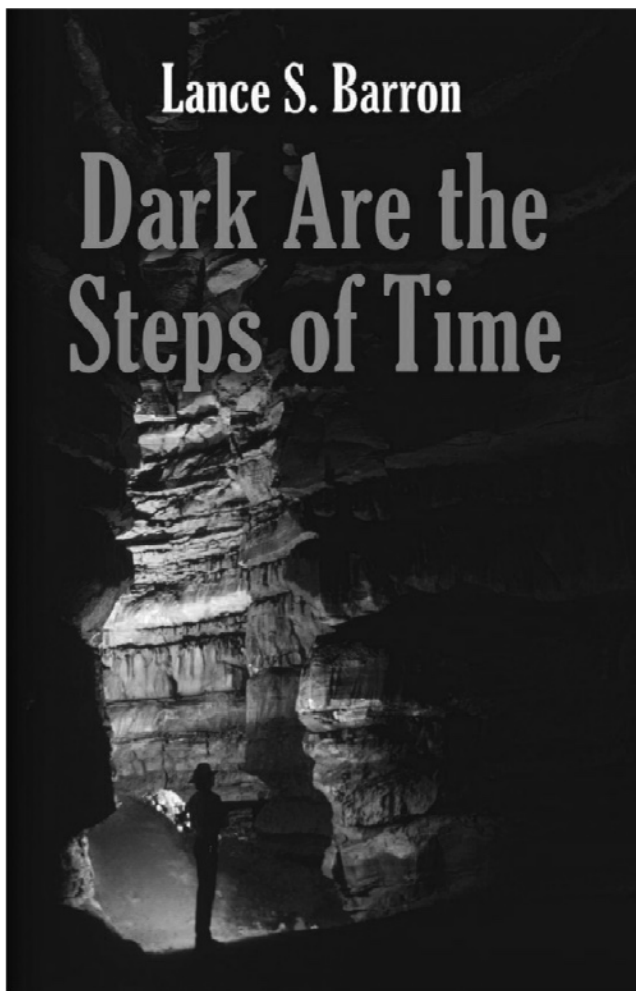
Here at Chief City, the art of torch throwing achieved its highest drama. The Lantern tour visitors saw the orange arcs of six or seven torches’ long flights and the flames at the landing spot. The lingering flames of the torches illuminated the vastness of Chief City. With an open camera shutter, Bob captured these arcs of light. In one sublime view, he painted this primitive underworld with flame and shadow.

Near the center of the big room, I switch off my light. The room goes dark. Total darkness. No star shine, no over-the-horizon glow of city lights, no reflection from low clouds. No light. None. In this extensive area, deep underground,

surrounded by dry, solid rock, no sound intrudes on the solitude. Reverend Hovey described it in this way:

*The impressiveness of Chief City is enhanced by the utter solitude, as the writer can testify, having been, on a certain occasion, accidentally forsaken by comrades and guides, and left alone on the subterranean mountain at the solemn midnight hour. Sitting solitary, with no better light than that given by a single lamp, and even extinguishing that faint luminary in order to enjoy the luxury of absolute silence and Cimmerian darkness, it was strange what a rush of imaginary sounds filled the place, and how the fancy peopled the dome with uncouth and mysterious shapes. What a relief it was to break the spell by the simple method of striking a match, and what company was found in the cheerful flame of my freshly trimmed lamp!*

I stand still and hear the ringing in my ears—the sound of blood moving through my eardrums. No other noise. No light. Perfect still and calm. Then, a faint rumble disrupts my reverie. No light, but a definite rumble. The tread of 40 visitors and their guides headed my way. The flare of my flashlight penetrates my wide-open pupils.

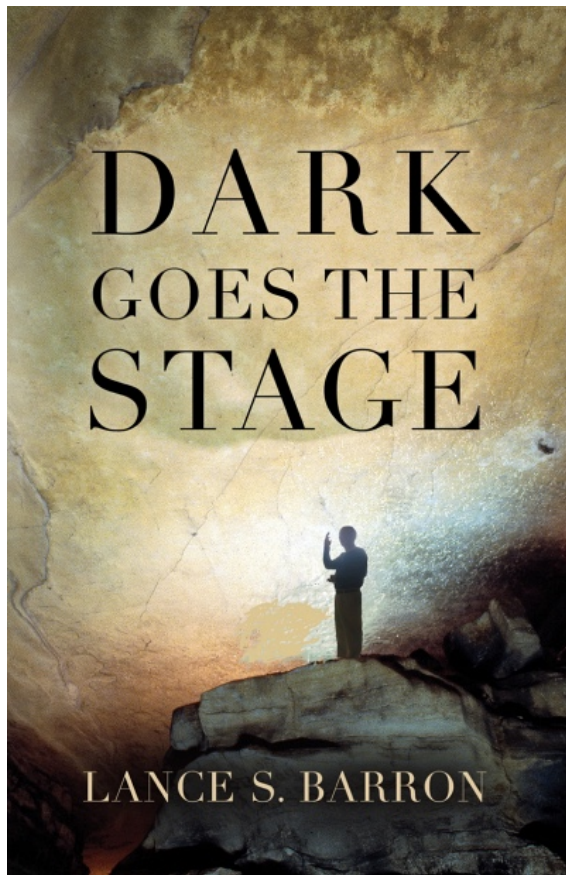


Lance S. Barron

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