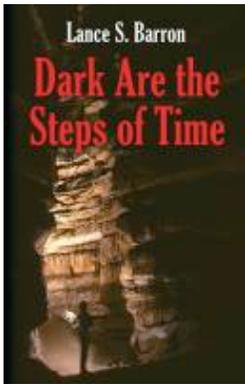


Lance S. Barron

Dark Are the Steps of Time





All but one member of the Mammoth Cave Wild Cave Tour led by Keven goes missing. Officials say they are just lost in the cave. Bob and Walt know better. When Bob and Walt go to find the tour, they suddenly find themselves in familiar passages, but virgin, or almost virgin, cave. What follows is a tour through Mammoth Cave as it once was as they struggle to get the cavers home.

Dark Are the Steps of Time

Order the complete book from

Booklocker.com

<http://www.booklocker.com/p/books/8348.html?s=pdf>

**or from your favorite neighborhood
or online bookstore.**

Enjoy your free excerpt below!

DARK ARE THE STEPS OF TIME

Lance S. Barron

Copyright © 2015 Lance S. Barron

ISBN: 978-1-63490-936-5

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted in any form or by any means, electronic, mechanical, recording or otherwise, without the prior written permission of the author.

Published by BookLocker.com, Inc., Bradenton, Florida, U.S.A.

Printed on acid-free paper.

The characters and events in this book are fictitious. Any similarity to real persons, living or dead, is coincidental and not intended by the author.

BookLocker.com, Inc.
2015

First Edition

One
Boone's Avenue – Mammoth Cave, Kentucky
(323 Million Years Later)

“Fire!” The strobes send bursts of high-energy photons flaring through the darkness, burning enduring images onto our retinas when they bounce back. The total darkness of the cave returns and is relieved by little red lights on strobes and by the screen on the back of the high-end digital SLR camera.

“Close.” Bob Cetera signals that the shutter is closed, and that people can switch on their flashlights and relax until the next shot.

“I think that worked just fine,” I say. “I didn’t see any direct flash.”

“Good,” says Bob. “Everyone hold your position.”

Bob makes more adjustments to positions for strobes and for the models clinging to the canyon wall. His voice booms up to the top of the underground canyon where Myrna and Barbara hold strobes for back lighting. With everything set, he begins his cadence of, “Ready! Open! Fire! Close.”

“Ready!” It’s not a question, but a command.

We anticipate the next command of *open*, but the sound of boots on the trail behind us interrupts.

“Bob! Bob, we’ve seen a ghost! Keven needs you to come up the trail. You and Walt.” It’s Craig, the first Wild Caver out of the Snake Pit earlier this morning. His headlight slings wild arcs of light around the limestone passage.

“What the hell?” says Bob, with cable release in hand. “You’re Craig, right?”

“Yes. Keven said to tell you that no one’s hurt, but he wants you and Walt to come right away.” Craig has run all the way, and he bends at the waist with his hands holding his sides, catching his breath. When he straightens up, his face shines with sweat and excitement. Not fifteen minutes before, Keven Neff had led his fourteen wild cavers including his tag-along federal agent past our position down into lower Boone’s

Avenue on the second leg of their Wild Cave tour in Mammoth Cave.

I hurry down from my perch above the camera, hoping for a real ghost. I join Bob, Craig, and Bob's wife Zona.

"Okay," says Bob. "Calm down. Tell us what happened."

"We saw a ghost! Oh, and he wants you to bring the lantern."

"You're sure no one's hurt," says Zona.

"Yes, ma'am. We're all okay. I don't know why he needs you. Maybe this is a new ghost?" says Craig, his breathing closer to normal.

"A ghost?" says Bob. "If there's a ghost, it's definitely a new one."

"Well, a ghost lantern, like. You know?"

"No, I don't know. Did you see the lantern and the ghost?"

"Just the lantern. We all saw it. Freaked some of them out, but not me," says Craig. He has had the benefit of the time it took to get back to us to settle his nerves. Yet, he did it alone. But, being alone may explain why he ran.

"Please hurry."

To Keven's adult son, Bob says, "Daran, why don't you come with us? Zona, I don't know how long this will take. Will you get everything packed up? We'll meet you back at Snowball as soon as we can. John, will you take an extra pack and escort the group back?"

"Sure. No problem," says John, still up on the ledge where he and his wife Pam have been standing in for intrepid cavers climbing in this canyon passage. I can tell in his voice the disappointment at not being included, but a national park employee has to escort the other members of our photography trip.

Pam climbs down, undaunted by the canyon height, with a smile on her face. "So much for my legacy as a Wild Caver."

"We'll be back," says Bob. Pam smiles and nods at John.

"Bob, should I go, too?" says Myrna, Keven's wife, still up at the top of the canyon.

“Could you go with Zona? You and Barbara?”

“No problem. Thanks.”

“Don't be long, okay?” says my wife Barbara.

“We may be escorting someone back to the surface for Keven.” I run through the roster of the tour and wonder who it could be.

“Walt, grab the Coleman lantern. Craig, you lead. Walt, do we have everything?”

“I have the lantern and my flashlight.” I wave up to the top of the canyon where Barbara stands. She waves back.

“Ready, Daran?” Daran swings his flashlight. “Let's go,” says Bob.

Craig strides off down Boone's Avenue.

“Bob, what do you think Dad's up to?” says Daran.

“Since Craig says no one is hurt, he must want us to take someone off the tour back to the elevator at Snowball.”

“What about the ghost though?”

“There's always a first time. Walt has always thought that there was an unnatural lack of ghost stories here in the cave, right, Walt?”

“It was surprising, yes. Was anyone giving Keven any trouble?” I say.

“No. Even that guy in the red hard hat has been quiet.”

Craig refers to the agent from the Department of Homeland Security who is along on Keven's trip to evaluate breaches in cave security that terrorists could exploit on cave tours. My earlier impression during our first photo session had been that Agent Rod had earned this assignment with something less than valor and critical thinking. I wonder if Craig would have picked up on any continuing conflict between Keven and Red-Hat Rod.

“We'll see what's going on when we get there,” says Bob, the solid, unflappable cave guide, even in retirement. Boone's Avenue continues its narrow winding way through a deep canyon of irregular ledges of limestone. The walls are close, but dark, and soak up quite a bit of the lantern light.

We come to a set of steep, steel steps — more of a ship's ladder.

Craig, with his headlight, leads us down. I get in the middle with the lantern. Looping back under the stairs, we scoot through Pinson's Pass and scramble down a rocky slope into the larger passage of Martel Avenue. We strike out along this passage near the lowest level in this area of the cave, where water dropping through vertical shafts often accumulates in puddles on the rock floor.

As a geologist, and former cave guide, I point out the nodules and beds of the Lost River Chert projecting black from the walls of the gray and more soluble limestone. I'm sure Keven pointed these out to the tour, but I can't resist.

Keven is standing with his back to us, and he's *filling their buckets* with more cave lore. Having guided at Mammoth Cave since the late 1960s, he has more stories about Mammoth Cave than he could ever tell on one tour.

"... so, for a very short time, visitors entered Mammoth Cave down a very tall and quite possibly shaky, wooden staircase from the Cathedral Domes entrance in the side of Houchins Valley. Although it was never clear, we think that the climb back up all those steps caused the cave entrance to be closed soon after it opened. Now ... Hey! Craig's back. Remember Bob? He photographed you this morning crawling out of the Snake Pit into Cleaveland Avenue? And Walt here guided tours in the seventies. Somehow Bob has convinced Walt to help him with cave photography. And, Daran, whom you saw crouched with a strobe in that last bend in the Snake Pit, has decades of cave experience, and also happens to be my son.

"Bob, we're making a brief stop here because we saw a lantern flying across the passage as we came into Martel. Right back there." He points to where we had climbed down. Before we head on out to Cathedral Domes, I wanted to chat with you." Keven steps away from his group and motions Craig to

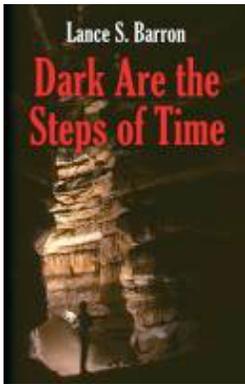
join his companions. At Keven's direction, I leave the lantern with the group. I wave at Dan Ross and his wife Sophy, whom I had met at the morning photo shoot. He's an FBI agent on his first cave tour. He's amused by the Homeland Security Agent.

With the yellow light from Keven's carbide flame the only illumination for us, I switch on my flashlight. Bob does the same.

"Fine," says Bob. The four of us stop about fifty feet away from the group. "You called us back here to chat?"

"I think we've seen a ghost. A ghost carrying a lantern," says Keven in an urgent whisper. He looks all around. The angle of the light exaggerates his serious expression. "I'm pretty sure we've seen an apparition. What I don't know is, whether or not it's some sort of special effect, or ... or something else."

"Dad! What did you see?"



All but one member of the Mammoth Cave Wild Cave Tour led by Keven goes missing. Officials say they are just lost in the cave. Bob and Walt know better. When Bob and Walt go to find the tour, they suddenly find themselves in familiar passages, but virgin, or almost virgin, cave. What follows is a tour through Mammoth Cave as it once was as they struggle to get the cavers home.

Dark Are the Steps of Time

Order the complete book from

[Booklocker.com](http://www.booklocker.com)

<http://www.booklocker.com/p/books/8348.html?s=pdf>

**or from your favorite neighborhood
or online bookstore.**