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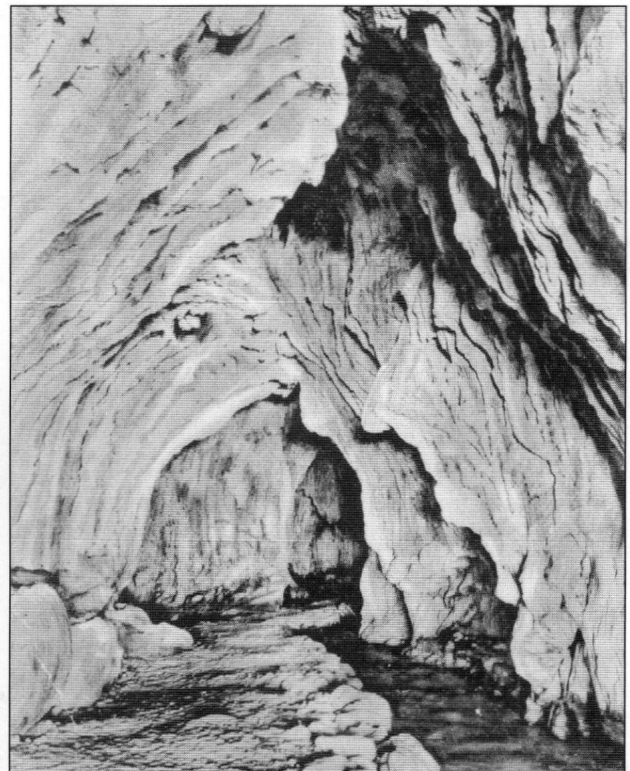
THE NATURAL BRIDGES OF CALAVERAS COUNTY, CALIFORNIA

Daniel S. Snyder

The Sierra Nevada range of California is justly famous for its towering granite peaks, glacier-carved Yosemite Valley, and giant *Sequoia* redwoods—but once upon a time, the Range of Light was better known for the mineral wealth concentrated in its western foothills. In those foothills the California Gold Rush began in 1848, bringing a great flood of immigrants from the eastern United States and all points of the globe. The Gold Rush catapulted California into statehood in 1850, only three years after the territory had been won from Mexico.

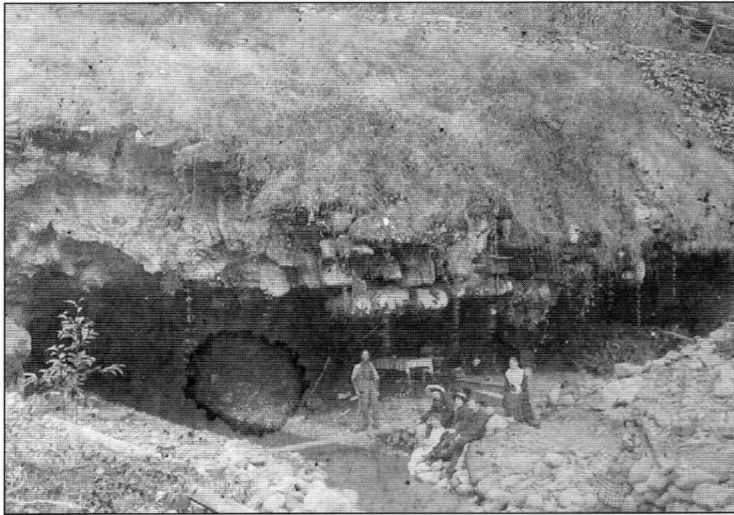
Despite the devastation wrought by miners searching for gold in all the streams of the foothills, the Mother Lode had scenic attractions of its own. Here and there throughout the district the miners found isolated lenses of metamorphosed limestone. Often the limestone contained caves, and a few of these were so extraordinary that they inspired reams of sometimes-turgid prose.

The largest concentration of lime rock in the Mother Lode is that extending from Sonora on the south to Murphys on the north. Deeply dissected



Upper Bridge 1908 postcard.

Collection of the author. Pub. City Drug Store, Angels Camp.



Upper Bridge picnic area circa 1880. Murphys Old Timers Museum.

by the Stanislaus River and its tributaries, this marble yielded numerous caves in the early days of European settlement and even today continues to surprise earnest explorers. Here are found two of the most remarkable wonders discovered during the Gold Rush. Nearly three miles below the old placer mining camp of Vallecito, Coyote Creek flows through two travertine tunnels a quarter mile apart. These are the Natural bridges of Calaveras County.

Description

Upon hearing these unusual landforms described as “natural bridges,” many imagine them to be rock arches like those in western deserts or along the sea coast. In fact, the “bridges” are spacious travertine caves, 250 and 180 feet long, over 20 feet wide and with ceilings up to 40 feet high. At no point in total darkness, their interiors are slathered in frothy-looking calcite tinted pink and green by algae. Crenulated flowstone, bulbous brimstone basins, stalagmites, large stalactites and thick ribbons decorate both bridges and give the Upper bridge the likeness of the interior of a gothic cathedral. Springs flow year-round within both caves, and deep pools, once filled with gold-bearing gravels, have been carved from the marble bedrock. While it is clear that the bridges are largely formed in spring-deposited travertine derived from the marble pods intersected by Coyote Creek, their geologic history is complex and now undergoing study.

As the Natural Bridges now stand, the openings underneath are large enough to carry the creek all year except during the highest floods. Though in summer often no more than a trickle, every winter Coyote Creek rages angrily through its canyon, slowing briefly in the tranquil pools beneath the Upper Bridge, then rushing a quarter-mile further to plunge into the Lower Bridge, at such times transformed into a fury of boiling waves and tree trunks.

During extremely wet winters now attributed to the “El Nino” and “La Nina” phenomena, the creek has been known to rise to the tops of the bridges. Long-time rancher Tone [sic] Airola reported to Ralph Squire that in 1906, slash from up-canyon logging washed down to form a massive jam at the Upper Bridge, forming a lake behind it that poured over the top of the bridge, 50 feet above the creek’s natural bed. Again, in 1985, Columbia resident Max Potter witnessed the creek so high that the entrance to the Upper Bridge had become a violent whirlpool. During such rare events, “water shoots from the lower end of the bridges at great pressure, jettisoning logs and boulders down the gulch” (Squire 1972).

Prehistory and early accounts

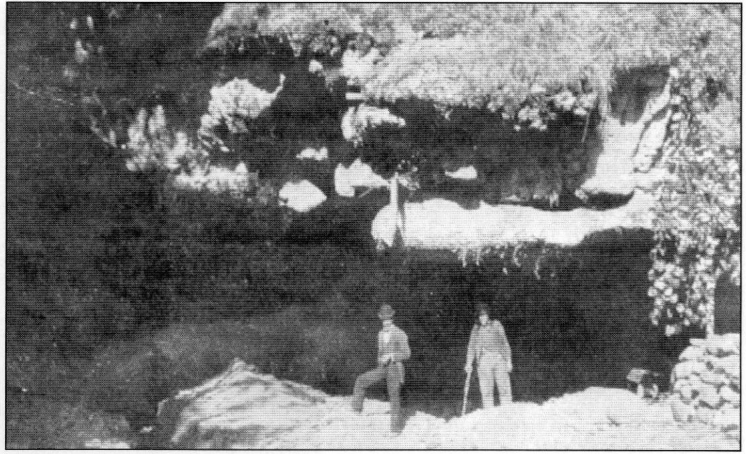
It is hardly accurate to say that the 49ers discovered the Natural bridges, for people have lived in their vicinity for thousands of years. One



Upper Bridge Dam circa 1880. Murphys Old Timers Museum.

of the earliest known groups in the area utilized local pit caves to bury their dead up to about 1,400 years ago, and at least two of their burial caves are located in the Coyote Creek drainage. Given these people's use of area caves as sepulchers, we may imagine that the Natural Bridges, too, held special significance to them.

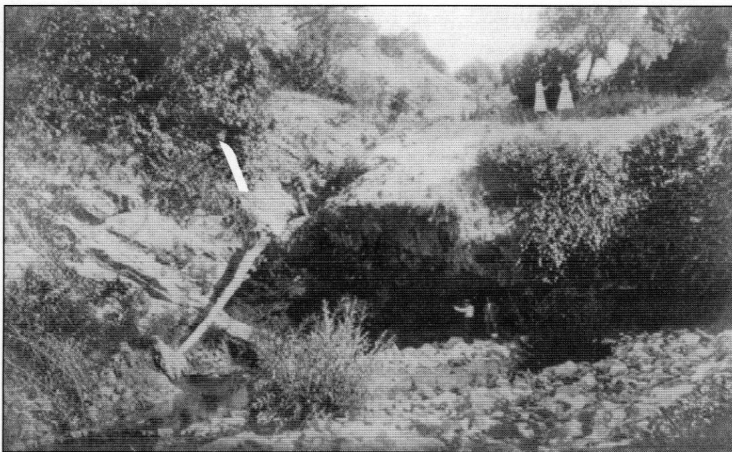
Their culture, however, remains enigmatic, for archaeological evidence suggests that before 1,200 years ago they had disappeared and a different people (probably the historic Mewuk) had moved into the area, bringing with them the technology of grinding seeds and acorns in bedrock mortars. According to ethnographers who recorded local indigenous traditions at the turn of the 20th century, and corroborated by Mewuk elders today, Northern and Central Sierra Mewuk held certain caves, perhaps most caves, in great dread, believing them to be the abode of the Chehalumche, people-eating rock giants who were particularly fond of young women and children. Told of the human remains found in area caves, Stanislaus River area Mewuk speculated as late as the 1920s that the bones were the remains of these creatures' meals. However, there is archaeological and historic evidence suggesting that in some circumstances, Mewuk would utilize horizontal caves for shelter and domestic activities. In any case, nothing seems to have prevented local people from living in the immediate vicinity of the Natural bridges, for bedrock mortar holes on the banks of Coyote Creek near the Lower Bridge attest to the presence of the Mewuk there.



Upper Bridge, circa 1900.
Murphys Old Timers Museum.

Euro-American miners arrived in the Stanislaus area mid-1848. Mining commenced that year at Carson Hill and nearby Melones and Robinson's Ferry, where Coyote Creek joins the Stanislaus River. In 1849 the Murphy brothers found rich placers 6 miles up the creek from Melones at the place named Vallecita (Vallecito), or "little valley" by the Mexican miners who flocked to the discovery. These prospectors of 1848-1849 doubtless knew about the Natural bridges, the upper being just 2.5 miles downstream from Vallecita and the lower only 3 miles upstream from Robinson's (later McLean's) Ferry. However, it is not until 1853 that we find the first published accounts of the bridges.

Many historic accounts of natural wonders are so excessive in their praise as to approach religious ecstasy, probably because the writers had never been exposed to anything like the landmarks they described. The difficulties of travel in the mid-19th century tended to limit most persons' experience to a narrow region, giving all but the wealthiest or most adventurous travelers a provincial outlook. Thus writers tended to describe points of interest in their locality as if these were among the greatest wonders of the world. Quite outside that class of writing however, is the account left to us by J.D. Borthwick, one of the best early chroniclers of the mining region. In 1857 he published his journal of three years of travels in California, including an 1853 visit to the Calaveras Natural bridges. Though evocative and even poetic, his description in no way exaggerates the beauty or significance of the bridges:



Upper Bridge and Hermitage circa 1915.
Collection of the author. Published by J.R. Lester & Co.

I had heard from many persons of two natural bridges on a small river called Coyote Creek, some twelve miles off; and as they were represented as being very curious and beautiful objects, I determined to pay them a visit...I traveled up the creek for some miles, clambering over rocks and winding round steep overhanging banks, by a trail so little used that it was hardly discernible. I was amply repaid for my trouble, however, when, after an hour or two of hard climbing in the roasting hot sun, I at last reached the bridges, and found them much more beautiful natural curiosities than I had imagined them to be.

...They were about a quarter of a mile apart, and their surface was, like that of the hills, perfectly smooth, and covered with grass and flowers. The interiors were somewhat the same style of place, but the upper one was the larger and more curious of the two. The faces of the [upper] tunnel were perpendicular, presenting an entrance like a church door, about twelve feet high, surrounded by huge stony fungus-like excrescences, of a dark purple-and-green color. The



Upper Bridge cabinet card, 1872.
eBay auction image Mar. 1999.

waters of the creek flowed in here, and occupied all the width of the entrance. They... gave a perfect reflection of the whole of the interior, which was a lofty chamber some hundred feet in length, the straight sides of which met at the top in the form of a Gothic arch. At the further end was a vista of similarly arched small passages, branching off into darkness. The walls were deeply carved into pillars and grotesque forms, in which one could trace all manner of fanciful resemblances; while at the base of some of the columns were most symmetrically-formed projections, many of which might be taken for fonts, the top of them being a

circular basin containing water. These projections were of stone, and had the appearance of having congealed suddenly while in a boiling state. There was a beautiful regularity in the roughness of their surface, some of the rounded forms being deeply carved with circular lines, similar to the engine-turning on the back of a watch, and others being rippled like a shirt of mail, the rippling getting gradually and regularly finer...The walls and roof seemed to have been smothered over with some stuff which had

hardened into a sort of cement, presenting a polished surface of bright cream-color, tinged here and there with pink and pale-green. The entrance was sufficiently large to light up the whole place, which, from its general outline, gave somewhat the idea of a church; for, besides the pillars, with their flowery ornaments, the Gothic arches and the fonts, there was...one of those stone excrescences much larger than the others, and which would have passed for a pulpit, overhung as it was by a projection of a similar nature, spreading out from the wall several feet above it. The sides of the arches forming the roof did not quite meet at the top, but looked like crests of two



The author paddling by flowstone in the Upper Bridge.

immense foaming waves, between which were seen the extremities of numbers of pendants of a like flowery form.

There was nothing rough or uncertain about the place; every part seemed as if it were elaborately finished, and in strict harmony with the whole; and as the rays of the setting sun fell on water within the entrance, and reflected a subdued light over the brilliant hues of the interior, it looked like a gorgeous temple, which no art could improve, and such as no human imagination could have designed. At the other end of the tunnel the water emerged from a much smaller cave, and which was so low as not to admit of a man crawling in.

The caves at each end of the other tunnel [the lower bridge] were also very small, though the architecture was of the same flowery style. The faces of it, however, were extremely beautiful. To the height of fifty or sixty feet they presented a succession of irregular overhanging projections, bulging out like immense mushrooms, of which the prevailing hue was a delicate pink, with occasional patches of bright green.

In any part of the Old World such a place would be made the object of a pilgrimage; and even where it was, it attracted many visitors, numbers of whom had...sought a little immortality for their wretched names by scratching them on a large smooth surface...While I was there, an old Yankee miner came to see the place...He thought [it] was quite thrown away in such an out-of-the-way part of creation. It distressed him to think that such a valuable piece of property could not be turned to any profitable account. "Now," said he, "if I had this here thing jist about ten miles from New York City, I'd show it to the folks at twenty-five cents a-head, and make an everlastin' pile of money out of it."

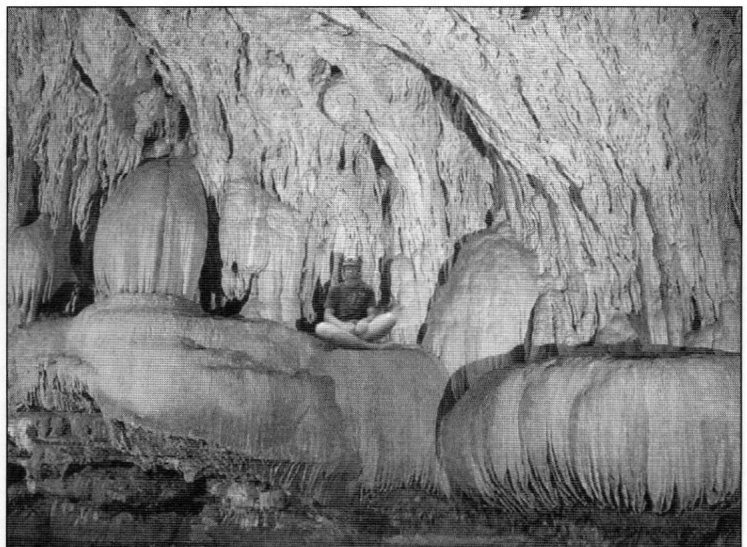
In Borthwick's description we can recognize the bridges as they appear today, with only a few exceptions. The earliest known interior photographs, taken in the 1870's, also show the bridges much as they appear now. Yet other accounts, reprinted below, refer to innumerable stalactites, noticeably

absent today. The rapid rate of travertine deposition within the bridges has obscured any stubs of such speleothems, and it is difficult to know with present evidence whether references to them were exaggerated. The occasional violent floods would seem to preclude delicate speleothems, except in protected pockets.

Aside from the removal of the sand and gravel that once comprised the floor of the upper bridge, the most notable change from early days to the present is the disappearance of a dripstone (or possibly cemented debris) "partition" dividing the upper bridge. It is described in all the earliest accounts of the bridge, but had been removed by March, 1857—doubtless to facilitate mining the gravels beneath the bridge.

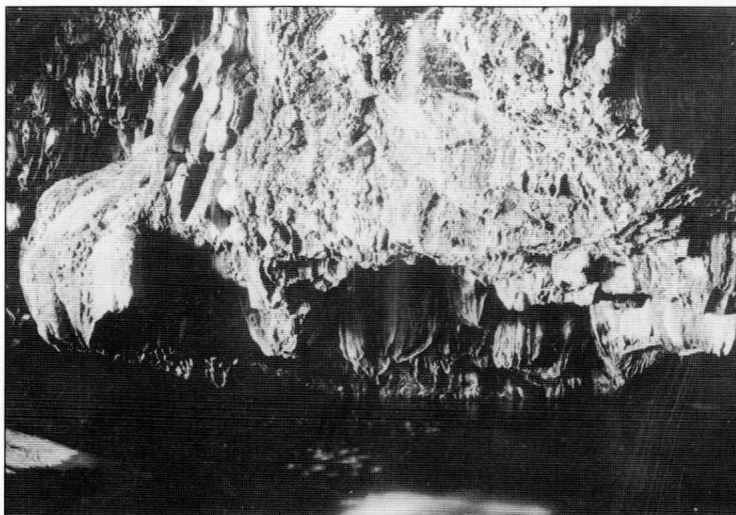
Isaac Baker, a daguerrotypist working in Vallecita in 1853, left a lengthy account of his visit and a painting of one of the entrances, both published in 1951 in the *Stanford Grotto Monthly Report*. He wrote:

...quite an unobtrusive object [the upper bridge] seems at first glance; the arch or entrance beneath being somewhat hidden from view by the surrounding bushes and trees, so much that by heedlessly keeping on the steep and narrow trail, one possibly might cross it unawares...Arches regular and irregular apparently upheld by naturally fluted pillars—drapery, novel and fantastic, hanging from the surrounding walls—monuments sacred to the memory of the departed auriferous



Large flowstones on the east wall, now undercut due to removal of gravels during mining.

gravels beneath as well as from the petrified specimens above, torn off and carried away by many a deprecator...We continue progressing inward, carefully wading the muddy stream, in rather a crooked route, for about a hundred yards, when we are suddenly brought to a full stop, for the very reason, that although we can look through into daylight, yet the pillars are here so thick as to form a solid partition, open only at the very bottom, where the water now quietly wends its way, whilst perforce we turn about to retrace our steps!...We once more emerge into "broad daylight" and mounting nearly perpendicularly, assisted in part by the branches of an accommodating tree are soon at the top of the "Bridge"! This we cross immediately, and descent to the outlet of the stream. And here we enter in a different manner. The top of the Bridge shelving over a great distance, and approaching finally so near the surface of the creek, that we are obliged to stoop to effect an entrance, when immediately we are in an *open* apartment, roomy and spacious, much resembling the one already described but smaller in every way. In one place here we notice a beautiful stream of water, clear and cool, issuing from some fissure in the rock, and flowing swiftly some distance from the ground...The only living thing except ourselves...being a reptile of the frog species, who being approached a little nearer than was welcome, by a sudden spring, and a good use of his swimming faculties afterward, "vamosed the ranch," leaving us to follow or not, as suited us best!



Upper Natural Bridge, looking at East 985 wall.

Below here on the same Creek about a quarter of a mile distant, is another Bridge somewhat similar. Though not so large or spacious yet there is a passage here completely through, and all-sufficient for *human* navigation! Piles of rocks thrown up on each side, show plainly that Gold has at least been sought for, in the bed of the stream here as elsewhere, and probably with success...Having, according to custom, broken off a few petrifications as specimens, we took a "long and linkering look" and made tracks for home!

In the early days, the only way to reach the Bridges was by following use trails up or down Coyote Creek, as Borthwick and Baker did. In 18563, a correspondent of the *Sonora Herald* suggested that a trail be built for visitors:

Nothing but limestone rock appears around; and so high are the banks of the creek, that the approach is steep. Yet by an oblique descent a good trail might be made, and these beautiful works of nature become easy of approach and attractive places of resort.

Within a year, a new road had been surveyed from Melones (Robinson's/McLean's Ferry) to Vallecita, via French Camp on the ridge to the east of Coyote Creek. This road appears to have followed the route of the present Airola Road up French Gulch. Writing in 1854, a writer known to us only as A.H.B. took this route to French Camp, where he or she turned off to visit the upper bridge (believing it, however to be the lower):

Soon after leaving McLean's we had to ascend a hill, situated to the right of Carson's [Hill], with a deep ravine between. It was not rough, but so steep and high that I grew dizzy when I looked down. A road is soon to be made, which will be much shorter than the one now used [via Angels Camp and Vallecita] but, at this time, it was only marked out, a narrow path, of a little more than a foot wide, winding around the mountain. Once fairly started there was no turning back, and I sat in terror for nearly half an hour, lest the horse should stumble or take fright. But we got safely to the top,

breathed easily once more, and were soon at French Camp, where we turned off the road to visit the natural bridges on Coyote Creek; we soon reached the nearest [bridge].

The Natural Bridges received lengthy notice in the March, 1857 issue of the popular *Hutchings California Magazine*. Hutchings' article included three romanticized but nicely drawn illustrations of the entrances. He describes the bridges as being located between Vallecita and McLean's Ferry, suggesting that was the road taken. Also of interest is the fact that the partition dividing the upper bridge had disappeared. A few excerpts follow:

"Here the great Architect
Did, with curious skill, a pile erect
Of carved marble."
CAREW

These bridges...hold a high rank among the varied natural objects of interest and beauty abounding in California. The entire water of Cayote [sic] Creek runs beneath these bridges. The bold, rocky, and precipitous banks of the stream, both above and below the bridges, present a counterpart of wild scenery, in perfect keeping with the strange beauty and picturesque grandeur of their interior formation.

The Upper Bridge

...Along the roof, or arch, hang innumerable stalactites, like opaque icicles, but solid as the limestone, or marble of which they are formed... Stalactites, springing from the bottom and sides, would appear like waxen candles, ready to be lighted, but for the muddy sediment which has formed upon them...

Approaching the lower section of this immense arch, its form becomes materially changed, increasing in width, while the roof, becoming more flattened, is brought down to within five feet of the water of the creek. The entire distance through or under this first natural bridge is about ninety-five yards.

The Lower Bridge

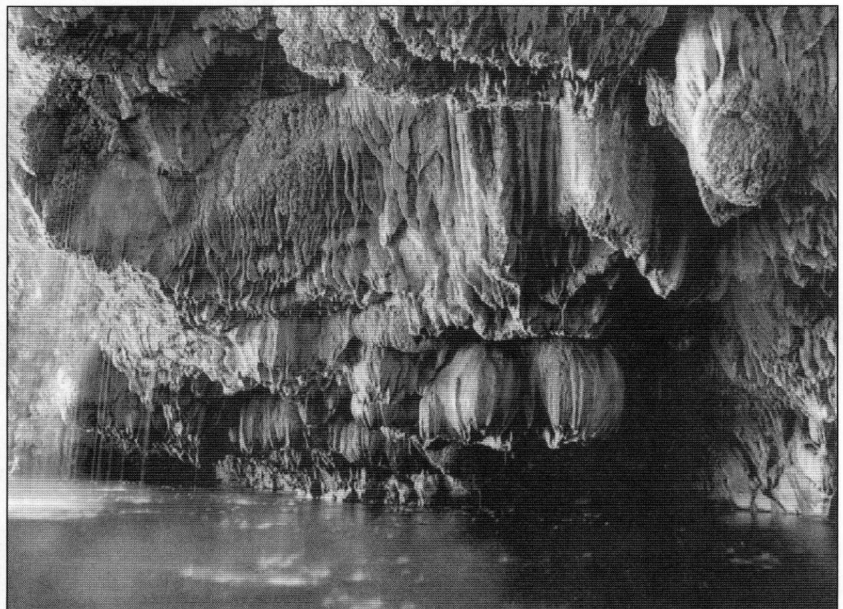
...Advancing beneath its wide-spreading arch, and passing another beautiful fount of water, issuing from a low, broad basin, wrought by nature's own hand, we arrive at a point where a roof and supporting walls present the appearance of a magnificent rotunda, or arched dome, sixty feet in width, but with a height of only fifteen feet.

Here, too, are numberless stalactites, hanging like opaque icicles from above, while the rocky floor, where the creek does not receive the trickling water from above, is studded thick with stalagmites of curious and beautiful forms...

[The caves] are objects of peculiar interest, and will well repay the summer rambler, among the mines and mountains, the trouble of visiting them. Our wonder is that so few comparatively, have visited these singular specimens of nature's architecture.

Parrott's ferry across the Stanislaus River was established in 1860 by Thomas Parrott and A. G. Bradbury, and by 1861 served as the scenic road for tourists traveling from the Sonora to the Big Trees via Columbia. Previously, travelers from Columbia to Vallecito crossed the Stanislaus some distance upstream at Abbey's Ferry, which soon fell out of favor and was abandoned.

The new ferry brought the possibility of tourism to the bridges, as noted by a correspondent of the *Sonora Flag* in December 1861:



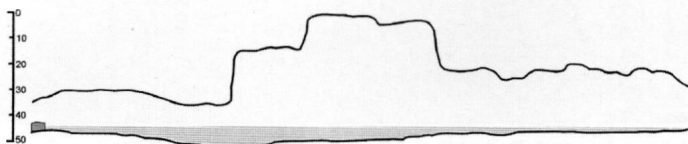
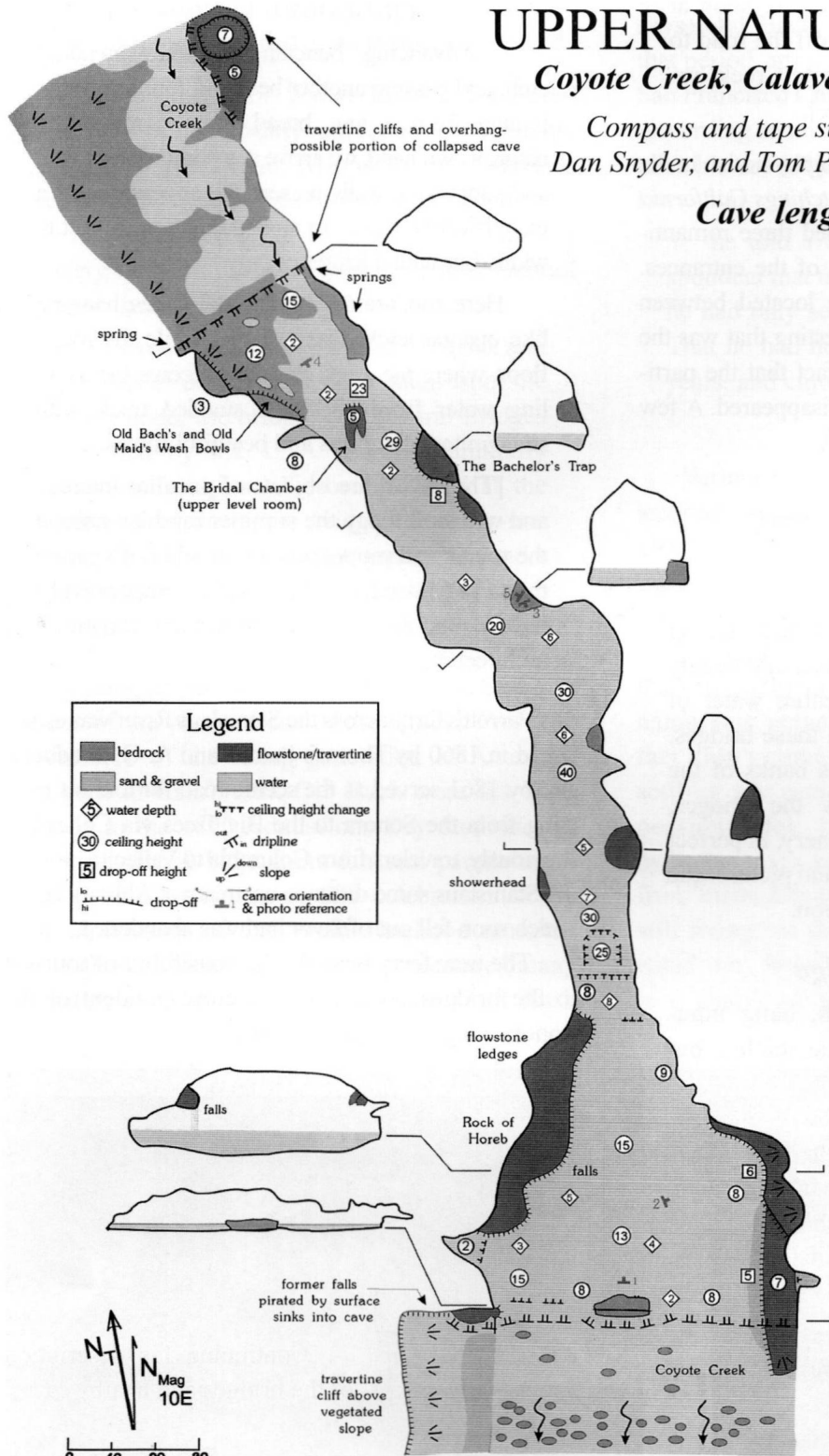
Perennial waterfalls and fluted flowstone in the Upper Bridge.

UPPER NATURAL BRIDGE

Coyote Creek, Calaveras County, California

*Compass and tape survey by Dave Bunnell,
Dan Snyder, and Tom Purciel on October 3, 2002*

Cave length: 250 feet



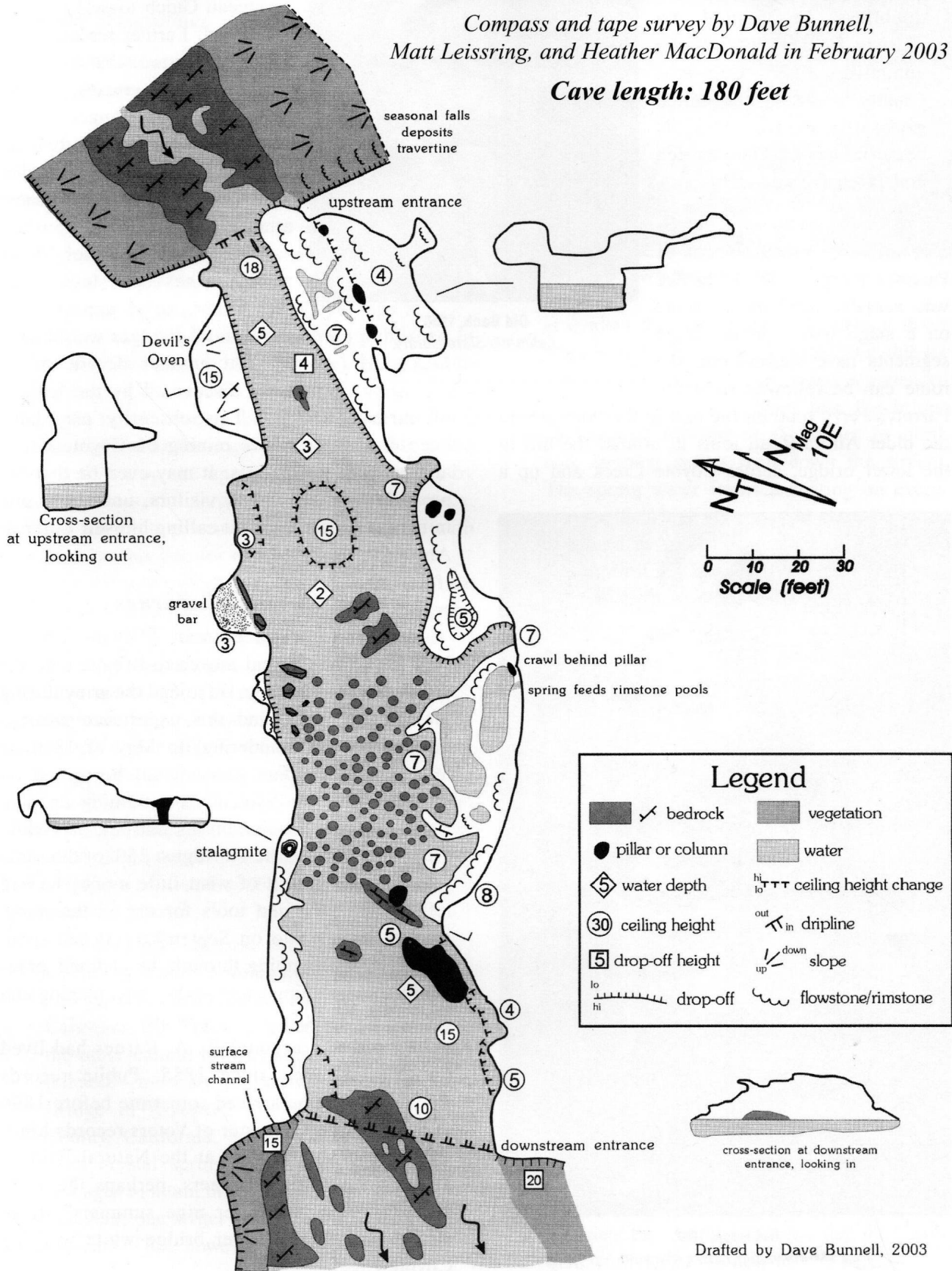
Profile view looking from the east, one-half scale

LOWER NATURAL BRIDGE

Coyote Creek, Calaveras County, California

*Compass and tape survey by Dave Bunnell,
Matt Leissring, and Heather MacDonald in February 2003*

Cave length: 180 feet



Drafted by Dave Bunnell, 2003

As [the bridges] are situated directly on the route to the Big Trees, they will doubtless be visited by tourists from all parts, who annually visit Calaveras County to see its unequalled grove of mammoth trees, its beautiful caverns, and its rich and extensive mines.

At some early time, probably after the establishment of Parrott's Ferry, the lower bridge was actually used as a bridge on a stage road. Though large segments have washed out, the route can be followed from the Parrott's Ferry road on the east at the point where the older Airola Road joins it, around the hill to the lower bridge, across Coyote Creek and up a



Old Bach, 1900.
California State Library.

tributary of Long Gulch, cresting a limestone ridge to continue up Krappeau Gulch toward the Red Hill Road. Further research will likely demonstrate that this long-abandoned road served as a cutoff from Columbia to Angels Camp, saving travelers the time it would take to go by way of Vallecito. The reason for its abandonment remains unknown.

Only one other brief 1860's reference has been located by the author, so it appears that the Natural Bridges would have to wait another decade to be truly discovered by the legions

of curiosity-seekers. This obscurity may have been due to the active mining on Coyote Creek and beneath the bridges. It may even be that the prospectors discouraged visitors, until only one miner remained, a hermit calling himself Lorenzo Anson Barnes.

"Old Bach" Barnes

L.A. Barnes was born in Allegany County, New York in 1823 and moved to Illinois with his family while still a boy. He joined the army during the Mexican War, and this experience whetted his appetite for wandering. In May of 1850 he left Chicago on foot carrying all he owned on his back and in a wheelbarrow. Joining up with various emigrant trains on his journey, he finally arrived in Sacramento on August 26th of the same year and spent most of what little money he had left on an outfit and tools for use in the mine. He left Sacramento on September 1st and spent several years tramping through, he claimed, practically every mining camp in the state, making and losing "fortunes."

By his own account, L. A. Barnes had lived on Coyote Creek since 1855. Public records show only that he arrived sometime before 1866 (when the Great Register of Voters records him). Barnes probably arrived at the Natural Bridges as one of a party of miners, perhaps the same company who "lived for nine summers" in an alcove beneath the lower bridge while working Coyote Creek.



Old Bach, 1892.
Murphys Old Timers Museum

While mining out the creek bed, Barnes found that beneath the upper bridge the gravel and sand had filled a series of five potholes in the limestone, ranging from four feet in diameter and five feet deep to 23 feet in diameter and 27 feet deep. *"It is positive,"* wrote the author of an 1885 article on the bridges (believed to be Barnes), *"that the basins were worn before the flow of gold began."*

In other words, he found gold—a lot of it—in the potholes. Barnes called his 60-acre mining claim at the upper bridge the "Good Luck" and for years it provided him with his only income.

A photograph from the 1870s shows Barnes standing in Coyote Creek in front of a large rock dam, seen from inside the entrance of the upper bridge. Modern visitors to the area have for years noted a large and rather enigmatic pile of angular stones stacked by the trailside high above the creek and just upstream from the upper bridge. Were it not for this photograph, it might



Old Bach.

Photo from the files of the Calaveras County Historical Society.

never have been guessed that these rocks are the dismantled remains of the dam in the photo. Surprisingly, no published mention of the structure has been found. From its present position it seems to have been a seasonal structure, stored during the winters out of reach of high water. It's likely that Barnes constructed the dam after the spring rains subsided in order to drain the upper bridge as well as supply the water necessary to run a sluice box to capture the gold in the sand mined from underneath.

THE "OLD BACH"

(Gratuitous advice posted on the Old Bach's cabin door during his absence).

Natural Bridges, Calaveras Co., Cal.
November 9, 1882.

I say, Old Bach, why don't you match
With some Calaveras maiden fair?

If just for you she might spare two
If you don't object to color of the hair.

The life you lead must be sad indeed;
Compelled to sleep by yourself alone.

No don't think twice, but take my advice,
And ask some maiden to your home.

(Signed) "JOAQUIN MILLER,
Poet of the Sierras."

To which, on his return, the Old Bach good naturedly replies (the advice undoubtedly is good, and might be pleasant to take, were there no impeiments):

Maidens now are hard to find,
And what is "worsen" still,
Money is what those maidens seek,
And that void is hard to fill.

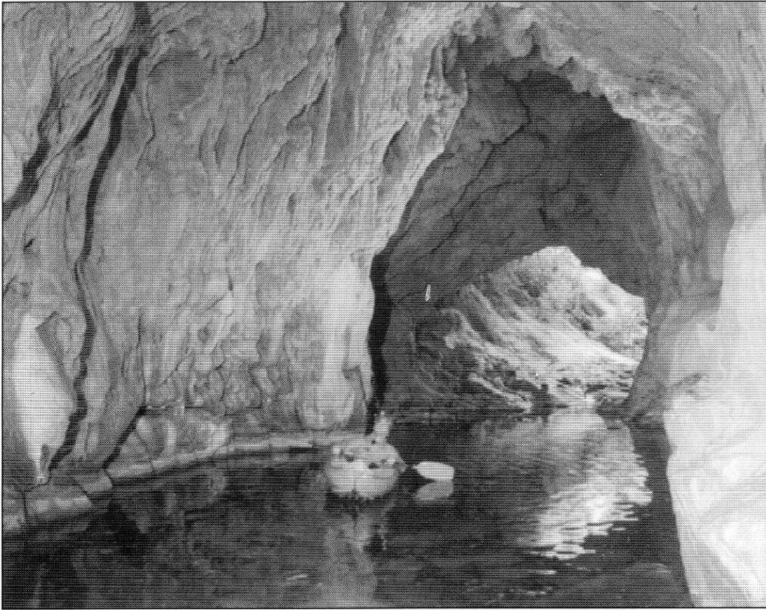
But show me the maid with cash in bank,
And plenty there for two;
Then I will jump for such a trump,
And not make much ado.

—OLD BACH.

Natural Bridges, November 13, 1882

—Mountain Echo, Angels Camp, Calif.

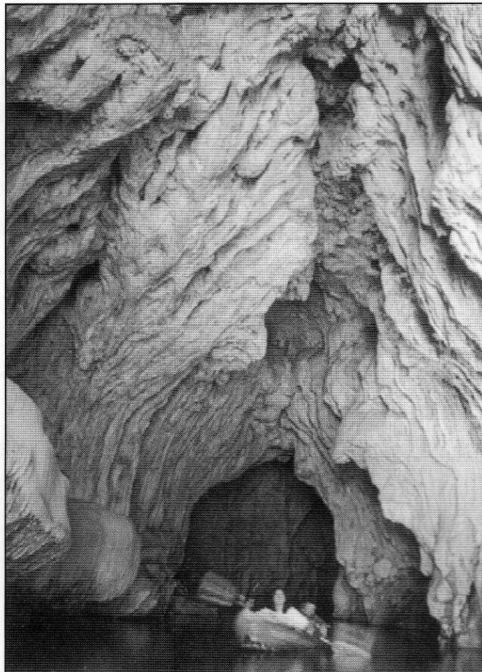
From the Calaveras Californian, Nov. 17, 1927.



Upper Natural Bridge.



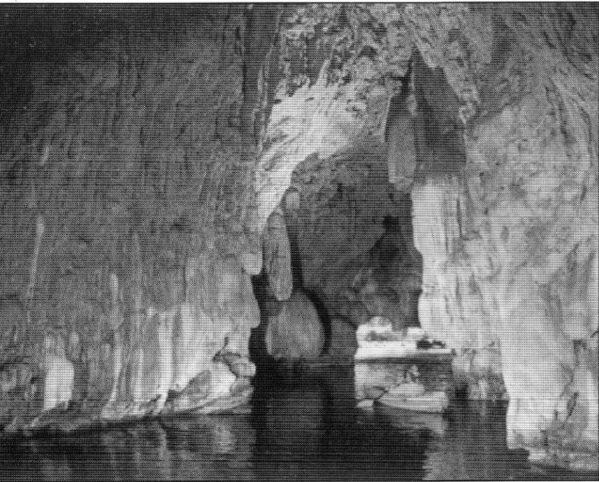
Laura Marsh by a perennial spring basin in the Lower Bridge. A small chamber can be entered through the openings above the flowstone.



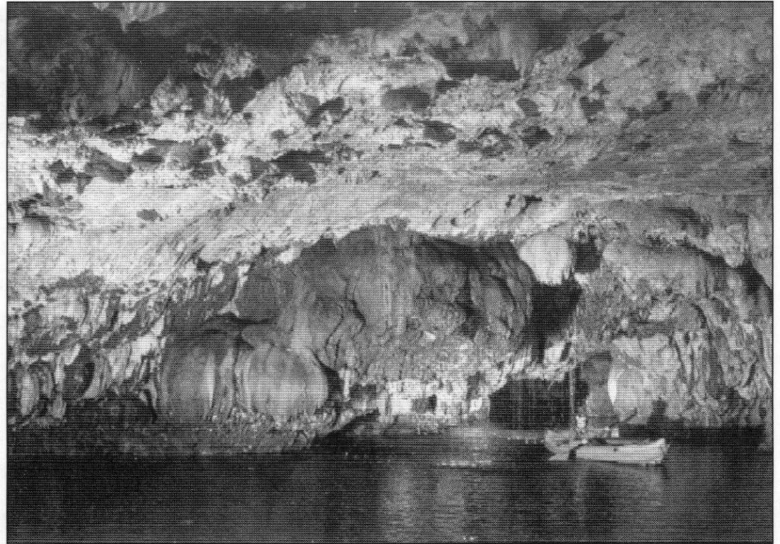
Upper Natural Bridge.



Upstream entrance of the Lower Bridge.



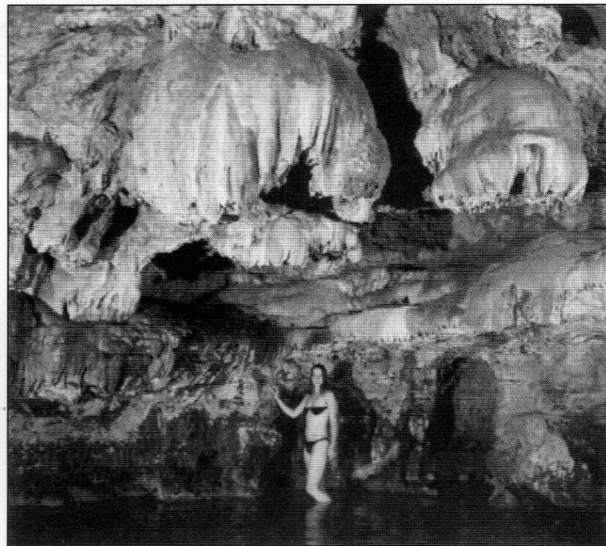
Upper Natural Bridge.



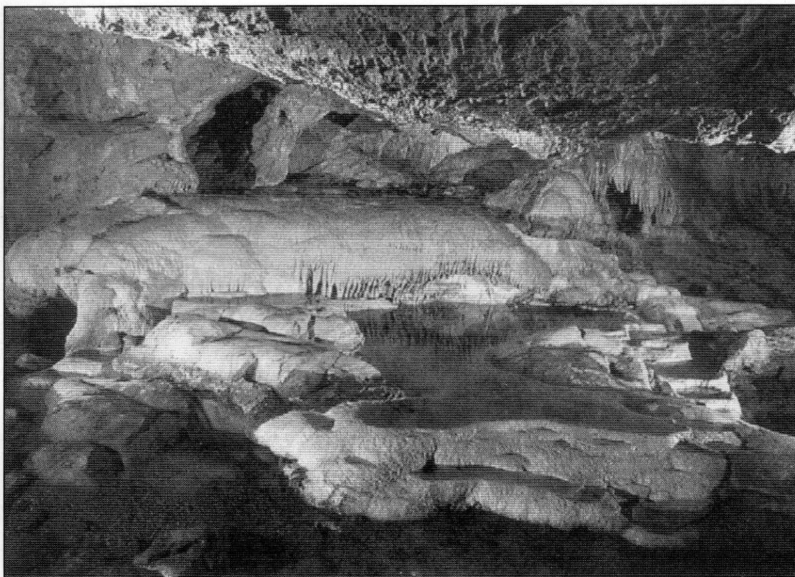
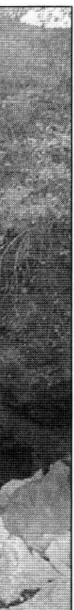
Upper Natural Bridge.



Looking out the lower entrance of the Lower Bridge.



Upper Natural Bridge.



Actively forming rimstone dams in the Lower Bridge.

Photos by the author.

The Bridges as Picnic Resort

At some point in the 1870s, Barnes decided to take advantage of the Big Trees traffic and improve the upper bridge as a picnic resort. From the old stage road connecting the Parrott's Ferry Road to the lower bridge, he blasted a wide trail to the upper bridge and built a gravel and sand path through the tunnel, confining Coyote Creek to a narrow channel along the west side during the dry season. In the narrows of the bridge (at the site of the removed partition) Barnes appears to have built some sort of platform or suspended walkway anchored to the wall by iron spikes that are still visible today under water. On the upstream side of this he must have anchored a ladder to the high balcony above the formation called the Pulpit, for numerous penciled signatures are visible on the west wall near another iron spike, high above the water.

The date of these improvements is not known, but reference in an 1886 article to the accumulation of calcite upon gravel heaped up 11 years before may indicate that they commenced in 1875. The following article published by Charles Turrill in 1876 doesn't mention Barnes, but suggests that he had already built the path through the upper bridge:

...Some one may notice as the stage passes a board sign on a tree, at the right, which points down a winding trail, and bears the inscription, "To the Natural Bridges." Should you be fortunate enough to have a seat with the

driver, which you should always secure when possible, he will probably give you an account of the bridges...As the stage does not stop, few ever visit these spots...

We pass under this stone entrance, following the sides of the creek, and soon find ourselves walking through a noble and natural Gothic vestibule, which opens into a room about forty feet wide and fifty feet high...As we approach the lower end of the passage, the roof gradually nears the water until, at the place where we emerge, it is not much over five feet above the stream.

Judging by Turrill's statement that few visited the bridges at that date but that a sign had been posted to direct visitors, L.A. Barnes had already begun his attempts to get the attention of the Big Trees tourist traffic.

By welcoming visitors to the bridges, Barnes also attracted the attention of the tax collector. The Calaveras County Assessor's Roll first lists Barnes, as well as his claim at the upper bridge, his cabin, furniture and dog (which was taxable) in the 1878-79 roll.

Interest in the Natural Bridges built steadily during the 1880s. From that decade through the turn of the century several photographs of the interior and exteriors of the caves have survived. One even appeared recently on eBay! These are usually posed outside the picnic platform beneath the downstream end of the upper bridge, and show long tables set up

beneath the bridge and the amiable proprietor with a pipe in his mouth, leaning on his unusual knothole cane, with visitors in Sunday best at his side or reclining by the creek in the foreground.

In 1883 the *Tourists' Illustrated Guide to California* gave the bridges a brief but glowing notice:

A short distance from this same road [that from Sonora to Murphys via Parrott's Ferry and Columbia], just after crossing the [Stanislaus] River, are two *Natural Bridges*, respectively 240 and 180 feet in length. The upper, or larger, bridge is quite a curiosity, and is less than



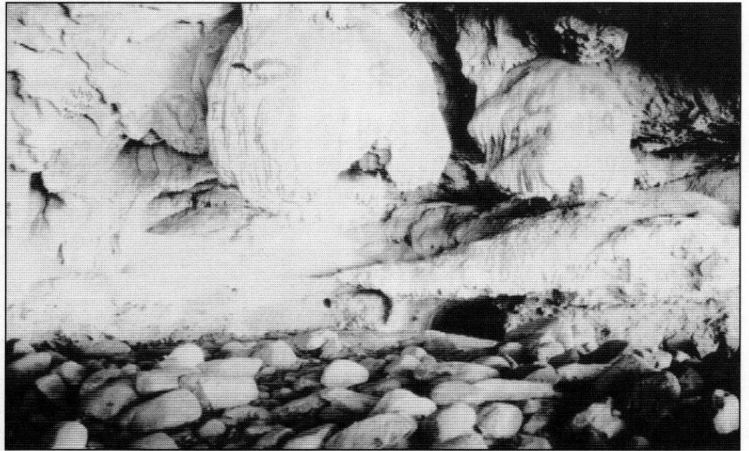
A picnic outing to the Natural Bridges, circa 1893.
Photo from the Calaveras County Historical Society.

a mile from a point on the regular road, and should not be missed by the tourist, who can get to it and return in half an hour to point of departure.

The Natural Bridges had now become a well-known picnic ground throughout the central state, and L.A. Barnes, nicknamed "Old Bach" on account of his perpetual bachelorhood, delighted in regaling visitors with his experiences of the Gold Rush. Going from hermit to local celebrity within a decade, he began appearing at county fairs wearing his 1850 miner's outfit, and selling "his books" (perhaps a pamphlet version of the description published in the 1885 Calaveras County history). He is said to have made a decent living from these appearances and his picnic resort, though it's clear he lived modestly and at the edge of his means. He had a tiny cabin atop the upper bridge, surrounded by grape arbors and large fig and mulberry trees. When the visitors went home, he lived alone with no one but his dog for company.

An account published in 1885 is believed from internal evidence to have been written by Barnes. It is remarkable for its accurate descriptions of features in the bridges, all of which are recognizable today, and for its theory of the bridges' formation, the most realistic up to that time. The account's writer had an optimistic plan to discover and open for tourists the major cave systems he believed existed in the hills adjacent to each of the bridges. The portion related to the bridges is germane and quoted in full below, but a section on the author's exploration of nearby caves has been omitted for brevity.

The Upper Natural Bridge of Calaveras County is located 3 miles from Vallecito, and 500 yards from [the] stage road leading from Calaveras Big Trees to Yosemite. Unlike all the other natural bridges known in the world [ed note—more are now known, e.g. the Tonto Bridge in Arizona], the two of Calaveras County, California, are a gradual formation from crystal spring water, requiring countless ages to attain their present magnitude and grandeur, one writer estimating it 42,000,000 of years. This, however, is but conjecture; it



Lower Natural Bridge.

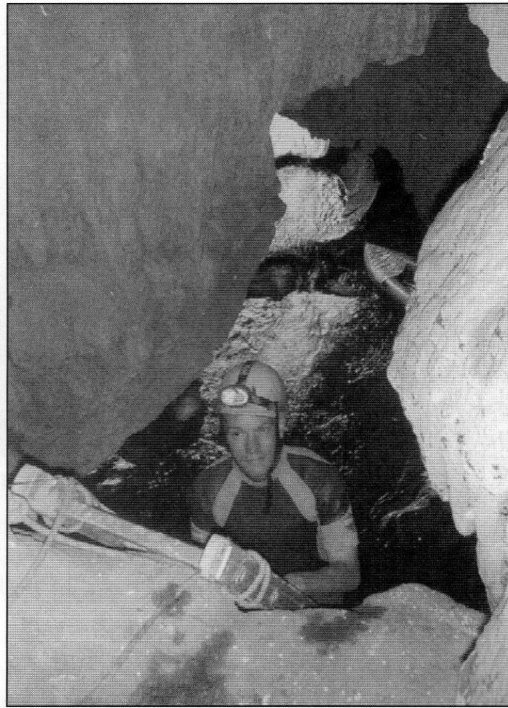
is evident that the spring was flowing down and parallel with the creek on the east side for many centuries before the bridge commenced forming. It is also evident that the bridge commenced forming at the upper or north end, forming across then down the stream. The spring water forms a coating on everything with which it comes in contact, heavy and hard as marble, but void of grit or ice [sic] until it reaches the level of the waters of the creek where it ceases to leave any trace. Positive measurement of 20 years' increase shows a trifle less than 1/8 of an inch. There is great reason to believe the mountain to the east is one great cavern containing a large subterranean lake which the proprietor hopes soon to open and explore.

This bridge [the upper] varies from 12 to 76 feet breadth of span, from 8 to 40 feet high, and 240 feet through underneath the arch. To see its beauty and magnificence, visitors must pass through underneath. It has no equal in the world. Underneath the bridge, worn in the solid marble, are seven basins, or tanks, round, smooth, and true, as if measured with square and compass, and turned by rule. The two smaller ones, always in view, side by side named the "Old Bach's and Old Maid's Wash Bowls," are one foot in diameter and one foot in depth; the others, in the center of the stream, are filled with water, rocks, and sand, varying from 4 feet in diameter and 5 feet in depth to 23 feet in diameter and 27 feet depth. Here is a study for scientific men. It is positive that the basins were worn before the flow of gold began.

As you go under this bridge [from the downstream end], you first enter a large circular space 76 feet in diameter and from 8 to 16 feet high. In one corner, as it were, hangs what has been named the "Rock of Horeb," from which flows a living stream to refresh the thirsty visitor. Here the eye can feast for hours upon the over-hanging wonders, never tiring. Passing the partition, which is six feet high, the span becomes narrower, the arch rising to a height of 40 feet, and hung in rich sparkling festoons, charms the vision of the beholder. Directly overhead is called the pulpit, where eight persons have sat at a time, singing for hours, listening to the echo of the voices resounding from wall to wall, charming the ear.

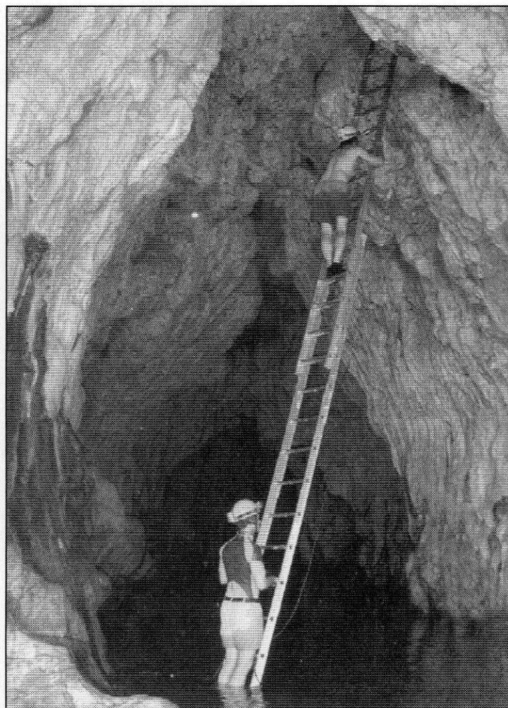
Passing on to the right is "Lover's Retreat," where many a tender pair have uttered tender words but could not be seen to blush. We next enter the Gothic dining room. In this chamber, upon entering it, the Right Rev. Father Ledera exclaimed, *"I have visited everything great and wonderful in the whole world that I have ever heard or read of except Calaveras Big Trees, and am on my way to them, but (clasping hands and, with a reverential smile, looking to the ceiling above) this is the masterpiece of Nature."*

A little further, and to the right hand, is the "Infant's Bath Tub," standing full of holy water, in which the old Bach intends to immerse his first born. Still further on,



Matt Leissring reaches the upper-level Bridal Chamber.

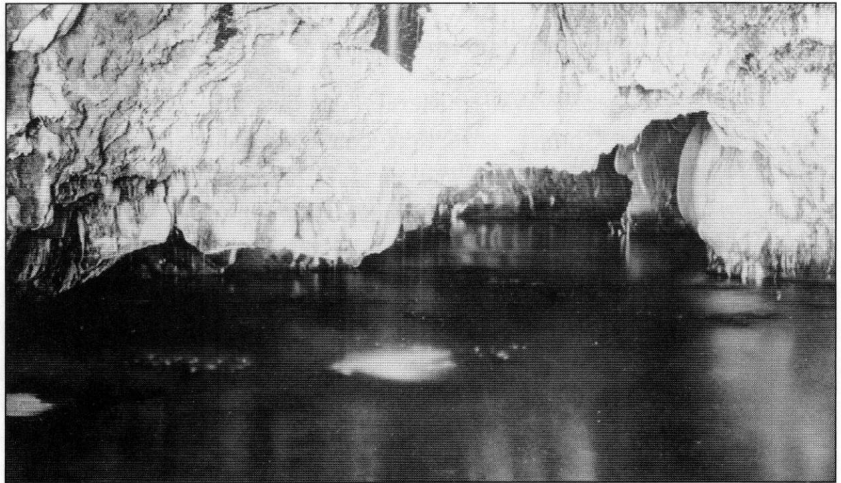
also to the right, is the "Old Bachelor's Trap," where many a girl has paid toll for crawling through it. Nearly opposite, and thirty feet high, is the "Bridal Chamber," which the Old Bach once entered alone; he remained but a short time, being so lonely; he descended and removed the ladder, resolving never to enter again until he was old enough to build a golden ladder, and enter in with his bride, pulling the ladder up after them. No pen can describe this vast arch so that one can realize it. No artist's pencil can portray its real beauty; it must be seen to be appreciated. Although but little known heretofore, it stands, nevertheless, without a rival in the world, the great masterpiece of Nature's handiwork. Our artists have given some sketches of the bridge, but its beauties can never be sketched.



The author climbing a ladder up to The Bridal Chamber. No historic signatures were found, but flood debris was seen.

Leaving the upper bridge we travel down the stream 540 yards, then enter the lower bridge. The first point noted on the left is the "Bridal Chamber," where it is supposed Adam and Eve spent their honeymoon. It now appears cold and deserted although in close proximity to, and directly facing the "Devil's Oven," in which things are generally supposed to be kept warm. This name was given the place by the first party of miners who ever visited the bridge. A vast dome on the right resembles a huge baker's oven, hence the name. Passing down and to the left, is the "Baptismal

Fount,” being a level surfaced tank entirely of the same formation as the bridge [that is, travertine], 6 feet long, 3 to 5 feet wide, and 18 inches deep, always full of crystal water. Passing on and to the left is a large cove called the “Miner’s Cabin,” in which lived for nine summers a company of miners while working in the creek. Passing out from under the bridge, and turning around, the eye meets a view that baffles all description. Unlike the upper bridge, this one in its formation rises and projects outward, overhanging the stream, having many small openings or caverns, some of which have been entered a distance of 30 feet [confirmed by caver Max Potter of Columbia]. From this point can be taken one of the finest stereoscopic views in the world. This bridge is 180 feet through underneath the arch, from 12 to 45 feet breadth of span, and from 6 to 15 feet high. This bridge is positively known to have formed from the water flowing from the mouth of an enormous cave, the entrance of which was over 150 feet high and the width supposed to be from 60 to 80 feet; the water, when coming to light and heat, evaporating, forms a crust, sloping back



Upper Natural Bridge, circa 1912.

Photo from the Calaveras County Historical Society.

with the surface of the mountain. This crust is, apparently, from 6 to 10 feet thick. The proprietor intends blasting away this crust formation, opening the cave for the travel of 1886.

This last hopeful comment clearly refers to what we now call Maynard’s Cave, the short open portion of a vertical fissure that appears to have supplied most of the travertine comprising the lower bridge. Viewing the bridge from the old road on the west side of the canyon, the grass-covered travertine deposit slopes up to this fissure quite noticeably. It isn’t surprising that Barnes hypothesized the existence of a large cave in the mountain; many cavers have imagined it since and it may well exist. The dimensions

of the hypothetical entrance are doubtless derived from the height of Maynard’s Cave above the stream, and the imagined trend of its walls if extended to the stream. However, it seems unlikely that such a large entrance ever existed.

Continuing his description of the bridges and nearby caves, the writer offers some insight into Barnes’ love for the property in his care:

When the proprietor succeeds in opening these caves, not one human being will ever be allowed to enter the place until he has first



Natural Bridges Cave, circa 1912.

Photo from the Calaveras County Historical Society.

signed his name to an obligation not to scratch, write, or in any way disfigure them.

In 1885, prospector Walter Mercer discovered another Calaveras County attraction conveniently near the Big Trees road: Mercer's New Calaveras Cave, still operated as a commercial cave under the name Mercer Caverns. An 1886 article on Mercer's discovery noted the proximity of the Upper Natural Bridge to the Big Trees route and adds:

...Coyote Creek was once rich in gold, and thousands of dollars have been taken from the channel under the bridge. The Natural Bridges are owned by Mr. L. A. Barnes, familiarly known as "Old Bach," who has lived at the south end of the upper bridge for thirty-one years. He is a genial, pleasant gentleman, and a fine specimen of the days of auld lang syne.

Perhaps as an outgrowth of his visits to the county fairs, or perhaps encouraged by the Stockton Parlour of the Native Sons of the Golden West (an organization of the rising generation of American men born in California), Old Bach wore his 1850 costume to the 1890 Admissions Day festivities in San Francisco. A huge street fair and parade organized by the Native Sons, this celebration of the 40th anniversary of California statehood attracted over 100,000 people and prominently featured many characters and tableaux of the bygone Gold Rush



Bill Storage at the downstream entrance of the Lower Bridge.

days. Old Bach, as an authentic representative of that period, attracted a great deal of attention and the San Francisco Chronicle published a drawing of him. According to an account of Barnes written 50 years after his death by Judge J. A. Smith, who evidently knew him,

he told a San Francisco Chronicle correspondent that until his trip to San Francisco that he had only seen one train, that at a distance! That he had not been in San Francisco for 40 years, and enjoyed his first ride in an elevator.

End of an Era

Various sources, including Judge Smith's recollections, information supplied the state library in 1955 by a friend of Barnes, Mrs. John Brunton, and Barnes' obituary in the Stockton *Record*, all agree on the basic facts of Barnes' life.

An oddity they do not mention, for probably the old bachelor told very few, is that his given name was actually Artemias A. Benjamin. This fact didn't come to light until those charged with settling his estate discovered the alias from his pension check. The federal government knew him by both names, so it appears he had nothing to hide from them. The probate officers learned of a sister still living, so that a familial estrangement seems ruled out. When and why he changed his name is a matter of speculation. No shadows seemed

to cloud Barnes' brow, for all who wrote about him loved him. Judge Smith recalled

He kept the walkways in repair and yearly after the spring freshets had subsided he removed the debris and kept the bridges in order. He enjoyed sitting in the shade of the trees and delighted to tell of his early experiences.

As for his bachelorhood, Smith claimed that

Around the old pioneer and miner there hangs the halo of a story of years ago—a story of a woman loved and a man who left the

comforts of civilization to make a fortune in the gold fields, before he returned to marry his sweetheart; the story of a woman who grew tired of waiting and a letter that reached the miner months after it was written, telling him he had been forgotten. If true, Old Batch [sic] had outlived it, as a cheerier, happier, better-natured man never lived.

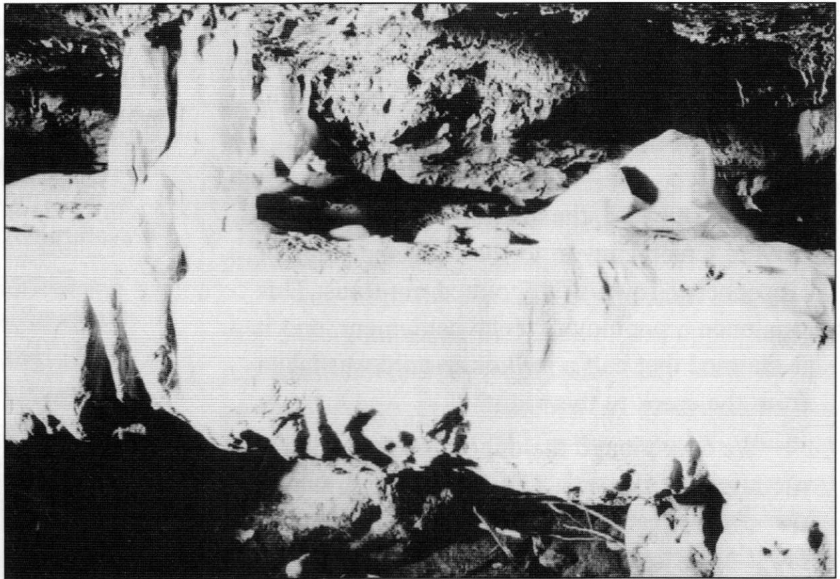
Barnes' friend, Mrs. Brunton declared that he was a great favorite with the Native Sons of the Golden West, and we see this in photographs of him decked out in NSGW pins and ribbons, including one donated by her to the State Library showing him smiling happily and puffing on his pipe.

While attending a Native Sons gathering in San Francisco in 1904, L.A. Barnes suffered a cerebral embolism stemming from arteriosclerosis and was taken from his quarters in the Helvetia Hotel to the Veterans Hospital at the Presidio, where he lingered 8 days before passing away on September 18. He was 81 years old and left many friends to mourn him. Being a Mexican War veteran, he was buried in the National Cemetery at the Presidio.

After his death, a Thomas Bishop and company jumped the Good Luck claim and in 1906 attempted to patent it, calling it the Marble Placer Mining Claim. Barnes' executors took legal action and settled two years later for \$350, not insignificant in those days. The estate's debts, comprised of two small bills for beer and soda provided to a picnic party, had been covered by Barnes' last pension check, so his estate was now well in the black. Old Bach had lived frugally.

Decades of Neglect

Without Barnes to maintain them, the improvements at the upper bridge fell into disrepair. Far from being forgotten, however, locals never ceased to visit this favorite place to escape the summer heat, and the Natural Bridges continued to receive sporadic attention from the press. In 1915, the Calaveras County brochure for the Panama-Pacific Exposition in San Diego featured them:



Lower Natural Bridge, circa 1912.

Photo from the Calaveras County Historical Society.

The upper bridge is flat and the higher side is covered with sharp straggling rock, while the lower side is carpeted with soft luxuriant grass. From here a trail leads down to the bank of the stream and then on under the slightly arched bridge of white limestone...Beautiful ferns may be found growing near the entrance. At one time beautiful stalactites hung suspended from the arch of the bridge, but they have been thoughtlessly and ruthlessly broken off by visitors in search of souvenirs. The space under the bridge makes an ideal picnic ground, and is always delightfully cool and pleasant.

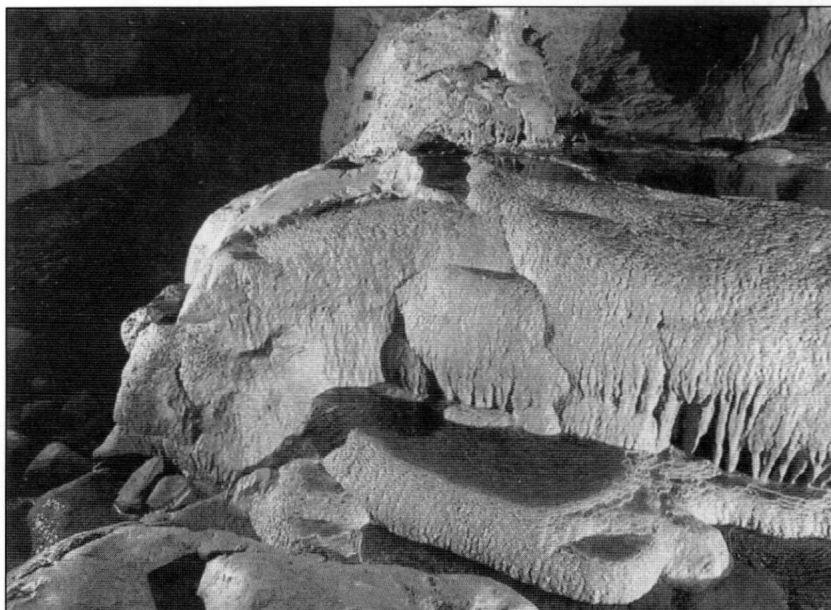
The walk along the banks of Coyote creek, from the upper bridge to the lower bridge, is very rough; but beautiful flowers and other forest shrubbery, that border the path, tend to make the walk pleasant. The lower bridge is not as picturesque as the upper one, and is not so easy of access because of the large boulders that strew the ground, but to those who prefer the wilder aspects of nature, it will be very attractive.

When in 1922, Addison Carley and others explored Moaning Cave (known to the 49ers as Solomon's Hole) and began preparations to open it to the public, the *Stockton Record* published a major feature on the cave and mentioned the Natural Bridges as a nearby attraction:

The natural bridges are only three-quarters of a mile away and the cave owners expect to feature the combined attractions in order to induce visitors to come up into the hills.

Leaving the cave we followed down the ridge toward the natural bridges. In the Coyote Creek canyon to the right the ruins of Gooseberry Town were pointed out to us. This was once a populous French settlement, and it is claimed that half a million in gold was taken from the creek in this vicinity.

We only visited the upper bridge, which is the larger of the two. The arch through which the stream passes is fully three hundred feet long. At its upper end this passageway is about 15 feet wide, and at the lower end it spreads out into a semi-circular chamber about 75 feet across. The limestone has formed stalactites and made a fancy roof which is tinted in shades of green and gray. The alders will be out soon, and this spot makes an attractive picnic ground. It is between 20 and 30 feet to the top of the bridge and on the roof is the remains of the cabin where L. A. Barnes once lived and conducted a little resort. A great mulberry tree, a large oleander [still alive in 2003] and two flowering quinces that were in full bloom are on the top of the bridge. A spring flows down to this point from the hillside nearby.



Actively forming rimstone dams in the Lower Bridge, from a perennial spring.

Again in 1928, the Stockton paper included the bridges in an article on the “resorts and nature-made wonders of Calaveras County”;

Probably one of the most attractive, yet least exploited spots in Calaveras county, is the Natural Bridges, located on Coyote creek...

The upper bridge, the most accessible of the two, is reached by a trail from the main road. Here is an ideal spot for picnics and outings...At the lower bridge it is possible to pass under the entire bridge along the creek side: this cannot be done at the upper bridge, owing to the narrowness of the opening at the upper side of the bridge...

After Barnes' death the place became rundown and has never been reopened, yet each year hundreds of tourists visit these bridges. A movement was recently launched in the county to have the State include the Natural Bridges in the State Park system.

It appears from the above that much of Barnes' gravel path had slumped back into the creek by 1928. Yet even at that late date the wide gravel picnic platform beneath the downstream section remained intact. By the time of the next recorded description of the bridges, published after the Stanford Grotto visited in 1951, most of that platform and the gravel beneath the upper bridge was gone, cleaned out for the last time when the Airola family, owners of the bridges up to the 1970s, gave friends permission to mine there. The upper bridge was transformed into a popular, though chilly and sometimes dangerous, swimming hole.

The group [Stanford Grotto expedition to Moaning Cave and the bridges]...visited the little-known Natural Bridges of Calaveras County. These two bridges are among the finest examples of limestone solution and deposition seen in California...

The explorers...were able to make out the ceiling of the main room in the upper bridge by the light of carbide lamps as they paddled through in the boat.

The bridges remain today much the same as when the Stanford Grotto visited them in 1951, save for the decline of a much-molested Townsends Big-Eared Bat maternity colony that in some years re-occupies the "Devils Oven" in the lower bridge.

Renewed Popularity

In the late 20th century, the ease of automobile travel and the development of a tourism industry based on the mining heritage of the region resulted in fresh interest in the "forgotten" natural wonders of Calaveras County. Three commercial caves delight visitors to the county today: California Caverns (first opened for tours from 1854 to about 1900 and reopened in 1980 by the owners of Moaning Cave), Mercer Caverns (open to the public since 1885) and Moaning Cave (open since 1922). The latter two are located in the Stanislaus River region, and contribute mightily to the draw of the historic mining towns of Angels Camp, Murphys and Columbia, the tourist-oriented wineries nearby, and water sports on the New Melones Reservoir. These local attractions and a population boom in the foothills and Central Valley have dramatically increased visitation to the Calaveras Natural Bridges and other Stanislaus caves.

In about 1970, members of the National Speleological Society's Stanislaus Speleological Association became aware of plans to build a new dam to raise the level of the Melones Reservoir to the 1,088 foot contour, obliterating the sites of the Stanislaus River ferries and several mining camps and flooding a spectacular whitewater rafting run and two caves of considerable recreational and biological significance. In opposition to the views of cavers who felt that the NSS should try to defeat the reservoir project, NSS New Melones Task Force chair Ralph Squire accepted the new reservoir as a given, concentrating instead on developing a cooperative relationship with the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers.

Squire believed that the most serious threat facing caves of the region (most of which are well above the reservoir take line) was not flooding but the increasing population of the foothills and Central Valley, expected to bring with it expanded quarrying, construction of vacation homes on lands bordering the reservoir, and an explosion in unmanaged recreational use of the caves. He saw the reservoir project as an opportunity to mitigate these greater threats, and worked closely with caver and Corps

manager Bob Martin to convince the Engineers to purchase additional karst lands on the borders of the project. The goal was a regional cave preserve unlike anything attempted up to that time, with the Calaveras Natural Bridges as its centerpiece.

Several years of negotiation resulted in the partial fulfillment of this dream. In addition to the Lower Natural Bridge, which fell within the take line of the reservoir (elevation 1,098 plus 300 feet out horizontally to allow for wave erosion), the Corps of Engineers purchased all known cave-bearing properties in the Coyote Creek drainage with the exception of the Moaning Cave property, already protected as a commercial venture. Also purchased were lands owned by the Calaveras Cement Company continuing several of the most ancient caves of the region. None of this would have occurred had it not been for the diligence of Squire, Martin, and the members of the Stanislaus Grotto who spent countless hours searching for caves in and near the project area.

The New Melones Task Force's proposed management plan for the reservoir caves caused a storm of controversy among western cavers. The initial draft provided for the construction of a visitor's center near the Natural Bridges that would educate the public about caves as well as issue permits for wild cave visitation. Members of the caving community protested that this visitor's center and the proposed designation of acquired lands as the "Stanislaus Cave Preserve" would bring unwanted public attention to the wild caves of the region. The Task Force relented on these points in the subsequent draft, but according to Squire (2003) the visitor's center was in the plan adopted by the BLM in 1978. Following the Bureau of Reclamation's successful bid to take management of the preserve away from the BLM, the 1978 plan was abandoned as impractical for budgetary reasons. In the revised cave management plan adopted in 1996, the Natural Bridges visitor's center is omitted entirely.

Meanwhile, the Natural Bridges have become ever more popular. Hoping to improve access to the bridges for families and seniors, Columbia College forestry students led a project to build a trail from the parking area on a bypassed segment of the Parrott's Ferry Road to the old stage road, rehabilitating that road and Barnes' trail along the canyon wall to the Upper Bridge. Although longer than the

use trail preferred by many visitors, this route has a much gentler grade and more shade.

In addition to placing a picnic bench halfway down and an outhouse, volunteers planted markers on the trail corresponding to entries in a trail guide describing various plants along the route. (Unfortunately, the outhouse has been removed and the trail guides are no longer stocked.) With ample parking and a sign prominently posted by the roadside, the bridges are now very easy of access. Too easy, in the view of many locals who considered the place their private retreat: the sign has been hacked down at least once. Now, every summer weekend brings hundreds of people to the upper bridge for picnicking, swimming, sunbathing, or gold panning, putting creek-side space at a premium. Many of the curious even wander downstream to the lower bridge.

The Bureau of Reclamation plans additional improvements along the lines of the work already completed by the Columbia College students. According to Ralph Squire, the reservoir project's inter-

pretive specialist means to install railings and picnic benches at the Upper Bridge within the next month to help cope with the increasing levels of use. Doubtless those who prefer to see the bridges kept in as natural a state as possible will be annoyed by this development.

Whether one admires them for their beauty and the restful environment they create (now best appreciated on weekdays or in the off season), or delights in the joy they bring to summertime picnickers and swimmers, the Calaveras Natural Bridges have regained their high rank among the wonders of the Sierra Nevada.

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The Natural Bridges of Calaveras County, California

Daniel S. Snyder

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The author wishes to acknowledge the excellent research of Art Lange, Edward Danehy and other members of the Stanford Grotto who contributed to that group's seminal Bibliography of Western Speleology. Also deserving of mention are Lorraine Kennedy of the Calaveras County Archives, the staff of the California State Library who in the 1930s produced an invaluable file of notes from the newspapers of the state and other resources, the Murphys Old Timers Museum wherein Dr. Richard Coke Wood collected several important photographs of the Old Bach and the bridges, and most important of all, chroniclers past and present together with those anonymous souls who thought it a good idea to preserve from destruction the newspapers and magazines from which much of this information derives. Last, but not least, my partner Martin Haye provided critical assistance in editing.

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(Ed. Note: author Dan Snyder was the recipient of this year's Peter Hauer Spelean History Award)

Calaveras County Historical Society

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The Calaveras County Historical Society is a non-profit corporation. It meets on the fourth Thursday of each month in various communities throughout the County. Locations and scheduled programs are announced in advance. Some meetings include a dinner program, and visitors are always welcome.

The Society operates the Calaveras County Museum which is open daily from 10:00 to 4:00 in the historic County courthouse located at 30 Main Street in San Andreas.

The Society's office is located in historic San Andreas, the Calaveras County seat. Visitors are always welcome to stop by the office for assistance with research, and are encouraged to visit the museum while in the area. The office is open Monday through Friday from 8:30 to 4:00, and the telephone number is (209) 754-1058, or contact us at: CCHS@goldrush.com.

New Members

The Historical Society welcomes the following new members:

December 2003

Jan Hovey, Murphys
Mr. & Mrs. Gary Giovannoni, San Andreas
A. Keith Lynar, Jr., Angels Camp

January 2004

Gary & Kim Brusseau, San Andreas
Margaret Strebeck, Bakersfield
John D. Lusar, Elko, NV

February 2004

Mrs. Pauline Lucier, Valley Springs
Nick & Kathy Baptista, Murphys
John & Ann Guirao, San Andreas
Bill & Nancy Norris, Mountain Ranch
Gail Conrado, Angels Camp

Donations

The Historical Society is grateful for the following donations:

December 2003

One antique wheelchair and one card table—Phil Alberts, Mountain Ranch

January 2004

Three Chinese busts—Jeanette Rupp, San Andreas

February 2004

One brass belt buckle—Herb Filben, San Andreas