



Quarterly Bulletin of the Calaveras County Historical Society
Volume XII July, 1964 Number 4

CAVE CITY CAVE

From **CAVES OF CALIFORNIA** by
WM. R. HALLIDAY

Cave City Cave was one of the best known landmarks of California during the 19th Century. Its history is closely associated with that of the gold in the State. Located in the heart of the Mother Lode Country at the 1650-foot level, it was one of the first caves discovered in California, in October, 1850, just two years after the discovery of gold at Sutter's Mill, 50 miles away. It is believed to have been the first commercial cave in California, and was used as a meeting place of a Know-nothing Lodge in 1855.*

The cave is located on the south bank of McKinney Creek north of the site of once-thriving Cave City, which is now completely obliterated except for the silt-filled reservoir behind the dam built in 1910 to retain the sediments from the placer mining.

At one time, a hotel housed the numerous tourists who visited the cave when it replaced the waning gold as the principal attraction of Cave City. Eventually, however, it too vanished as the prosperity of the area declined and the cave was finally abandoned. There are rumors that a major passage, now filled with silt, extended from the hotel to the main part of the cave but Muir (1876) did not mention such a passage. The construction of the dam has led to intermittent flooding of parts of the cave. The more fragile of its fine stalactites and other speleothems have fallen prey to vandals, and the cave shows few traces of its former glory. Even the original names of the rooms of the cave (six) have lapsed from memory.

*There was a very comfortable and commodious hotel situated near the entrance of the cavern. It was erected in 1853 by Messrs. Magee and Angel at a cost of \$4500. Charles H. Turrill's CALIFORNIA NOTES, printed in July, 1876, mentions that the Cave City Hotel was then gone.

From **THE MOUNTAINS OF CALIFORNIA**, by John Muir Chapter XV, "In the Sierra Foothills"

(Editor's Note: This chapter was written about a visit in 1876 to Murphys, and the first half of the chapter describes that town. Muir's description of the cave at Cave City is well worth our republication in LAS CALAVERAS.)

"Anxious that I should miss none of the wonders of their old gold-field, the good people (of Murphys) had much to say about the marvelous beauty of Cave City

(Continued on Next Page)



WALTER J. MERCER — 1854-1900

—Photo Courtesy of Mrs. Eva Stephens

MERCER'S CAVE AT MURPHYS

By **KENNETH CASTRO**

The following information is copied from a brochure printed by Mrs. Margaret Mercer, Proprietress, entitled: "Mercer's Cave, California's Greatest Natural Wonder, located at Murphys, Calaveras County. Mrs. Mercer was the wife of the discoverer of the cavern, and the cavern remained in the Mercer family until 1946. This brochure is quoted in its entirety—although part of this material may have appeared earlier in my report—to show the amazing amount of work and publicity which had been given to the cavern before 1946 by the Mercers.

"Situated in the heart of the Sierra, one and a quarter miles from Murphys, Calaveras County, California, and on the direct road to the 'Calaveras Big Trees,' is one of Nature's greatest wonders, the famous Mercer's Cave, discovered by Mr. Walter J. Mercer (now deceased), on Friday, September first, 1855, who had been prospecting for quartz in the neighboring hills that day, and was returning home in the afternoon, tired and thirsty, when he noticed some 'bay' bushes growing near a bluff of limerock in the thick chaparral. Thinking there might be water there, he made his way to the spot, but not finding any water, sat down to rest on one of the detached boulders beneath the bluff. There was a small hole or crevice in the rocks nearby, about large enough to force a hand through, and his attention was soon attracted to the movement of the dry grass, moss and leaves about this opening which seemed to be agitated by a strong draft of air from below. Placing his hand to the opening, he found such to be the fact and on dropping a stone into

(Continued on Page Three)

Cave City Cave

(Continued From First Page)

Cave, and advised me to explore it. This I was very glad to do, and finding a guide who knew the way to the mouth of it, I set out from Murphys the next morning. . . .

"The ride from Murphys to the cave is scarcely two hours long, but we lingered among quartz ledges and banks of dead river gravel until long after noon. At length emerging from a narrow-throated gorge, a small house came into sight set in a thicket of fig trees at the base of a limestone hill. 'That,' said my guide, pointing to the house, 'is Cave City, and the cave is in that gray hill.' Arriving at the one house of this one-house city, we were boisterously welcomed by three drunken men who had come to town to hold a spree. The mistress of the house tried to keep order, and in reply to our inquiries told us that the cave guide was then in the cave with a party of ladies. 'And must we wait until he returns?' we asked. No, that was unnecessary; we might take candles and go into the cave alone, provided we shouted from time to time so as to be found by the guide, and were careful not to fall over the rocks or into the dark pools. Accordingly, taking a trail from the house, we were led around the base of the hill to the mouth of the cave, a small inconspicuous archway, mossy around the edges and shaped like the door of a water-ouzel's nest, with no appreciable hint or advertisement of the grandeur of the many crystal chambers within. Lighting our candles, which seemed to have no illuminating power in the thick darkness, we groped our way onward as best we could along narrow lanes and alleys, from chamber to chamber; around rustic columns and heaps of fallen rocks, stopping to rest now and then in particularly beautiful places—fairy alcoves furnished with admirable variety of shelves and tables, and round mossy stools covered with sparkling crystals. Some of the corridors were muddy, and in plodding along these we seemed to be in the streets of some prairie village in springtime. Then we would come to handsome marble stairways conducting right and left into upper chambers ranged above one another three or four stories high, floors, ceilings, and walls lavishly decorated with innumerable crystalline forms.

"After thus wandering exploringly, and alone for a mile or so, fairly enchanted, a murmur of voices and a gleam of light betrayed the approach of the guide and his party, from whom, when they came up, we received a most hearty and natural stare, as we stood half concealed in a side recess among stalagmites. I ventured to ask the dripping, crouching company how they had enjoyed their saunter, anxious to learn how the strange sunless scenery of the underworld had impressed them. 'Ah, it's nice. It's splendid!' they all replied and echoed. 'The Bridal Chamber back here is just glorious! This morning we came down from the Calaveras Big Tree Grove, and the trees are nothing to it.' After making this curious comparison they hastened sunward, the guide promising to join us shortly on the bank of a deep pool, where we were to wait for him. This is a charming little lakelet of unknown depth, never yet stirred by a breeze, and its eternal calm excites the imagination even more profoundly than the silvery lakes of the glaciers rimmed with meadows and snow and reflecting sublime mountains.

"Our guide, a jolly, rollicking Italian, led us into the heart of the hill, up and down, right and left, from chamber to chamber more and more magnificent, all a-glimmer like a glacier cave with icicle-like stalactites and stalagmites combined in forms of indescribable beauty. We were shown one large room that was occasionally used as a dancing-hall; another that was used as a chapel, with natural pulpit and crosses and pews, sermons in every stone, where a priest had said mass. Mass-saying is not so generally developed in connection with natural wonders as dancing. One of the first conceits excited by the giant Sequoias was to cut one of them down and dance on its stump. We have also seen dancing in the spray of Niagara; dancing in the famous Bower Cave above Coulterville; and nowhere have I seen so much dancing as in Yosemite. A dance on the inaccessible South Dome would likely follow the making of an easy way to the top of it.

"It was delightful to witness here the infinite deliberation of Nature, and the simplicity of her methods in the production of such mighty results, such perfect repose combined with restless enthusiastic energy. Though cold and bloodless as a landscape of polar ice, building was going on in the dark with incessant activity. The archways and ceilings were everywhere hung with down-growing crystals, like inverted groves of leafless saplings, some of them large, others delicately attenuated, each tipped with a single drop of water, like the terminal bud of a pine tree. The only appreciable sounds were the dripping and tinkling of water falling into pools or faintly splashing on the crystal floors.

"In some places the crystal decorations are arranged in graceful flowing folds deeply plicated like stiff silken drapery. In others straight lines of the ordinary stalactite forms are combined with reference to size and tone in a regularly graduated system like the strings of a harp with musical tones corresponding thereto; and on these stone harps we played by striking the crystal strings with a stick. The delicious liquid tones they gave forth seemed perfectly divine as they sweetly whispered and wavered through the majestic halls and died away in faintest cadence—the music of fairyland. Here we lingered and reveled, rejoicing to find so much music in stony silence, so much splendor in darkness, so many mansions in the depths of the mountains, buildings ever in process of construction, yet ever finished, developing from perfection to perfection, profusion without overabundance; every particle visible or invisible in glorious motion, marching to the music of the spheres in a region regarded as the abode of eternal stillness and death.

"The outer chambers of mountain caves are frequently selected as homes by wild beasts. In the Sierra, however, they seem to prefer homes and hiding places in chaparral and beneath shelving precipices, as I have never seen their tracks in any of the caves. This is the more remarkable because notwithstanding the darkness and oozing water there is nothing uncomfortably cellar-like or sepulchral about them.

"When we emerged into the bright landscapes of the sun, everything looked brighter, and we felt our faith in Nature's beauty strengthened, and saw more clearly that beauty is universal and immortal, above, beneath, on land and sea, mountain and plain, in heat and cold, light and darkness."

Mercer's Cave

(Continued From First Page)

it, could hear it falling for quite a distance. Feeling that he was on the verge of some important discovery, though hardly knowing what, he went immediately to the Willard Mining Company's works, some three-fourths of a mile distant, and procured tools to enlarge the opening, and candles to light him on his way. Returning at once, he proceeded to enlarge the opening, till it would admit his entrance; and lighting his candle, he descended a steep incline about thirty feet, and in a few minutes found himself in the large cavern now known as the 'Gothic Chamber.'

"The first thing that caught his eye was the dependent masses of lichens which hang in groups from ceiling to floor. In the semi-darkness which was lighted only by his single taper, these seemed to him to be the decaying timbers of some deserted mine; and curious to know something of its history, he pressed on with his discoveries. Soon the cavernous nature of his discovery became apparent; and, almost frightened at his own boldness, he pushed his investigations until he came upon some human bones, half-buried in the accumulated debris of ages. About this time, the sound of falling earth and stones at the entrance warned him that the causes that had once probably closed the entrance might do so again, and only waiting to secure one trophy, the thigh bone of a man, he retreated to the surface.

"The next morning, a party was organized to further explore this subterranean wonder. Nearly all the forenoon was spent in exploring and examining the first chamber, though some of the more adventurous descended to what is known as the 'Organ Loft,' and a few even lower. But the necessity for ropes and ladders became apparent, and the explorers returned to town for better equipment. During the afternoon, and for several days following, parties explored the cave, discovering new wonders each day, till at last all its known rooms were explored.

"Then the work of further exploration was slow and difficult, almost dangerous, as many of the deep descents must be made by the aid of ropes and many of the passages were extremely narrow. Soon ladders took the place of ropes, and now substantial stairways, with solid and reliable railings have taken the place of ladders, and the narrow and difficult passages have been cut out, so that the cave can be traversed from end to end without any difficulty or danger, to a perpendicular depth of one hundred and fifty feet. The distance from entrance to exit is nine hundred and thirty feet.

"The interior of the cave is continually illuminated with electricity rendering the interior as light as day, and the visitor will find it easy to discern even the smallest spectacle that attaches to this great natural wonder. As for beauty and grandeur of its curiosities it excels all subterranean formations of nature and has so been pronounced by all who have visited it. The formation is of limestone and, according to geologists, has been formed from the dripping of water.

"There are seven chambers in this remarkable cave. The first, called 'Gothic,' is two hundred feet in length and sixty feet in width, while the height of the ceiling is fifty-eight feet. In front and a little to the left as we descend, the wall is a mass of glittering crystals, some tinged with the blue or red of the different minerals. One of these masses is called 'Miner's Blanket,' and another

nearby and to the right is of massive white folds that give out, on being struck, beautiful musical tones. In front of us as we stand on the platform is the 'Fairy Grotto,' guarded by 'The Twins.' To the right of the 'Fairy Grotto' is the 'Diamond Cascade,' sparkling like millions of diamonds. Still farther on to the left are the 'Angels' Wings,' considered by many the most beautiful sight in the whole cave. The two hang parallel from the ceiling, two feet apart, and are nine and one-half feet in length and two and one-half feet in width each.

"The next chamber is called the 'Organ Loft,' from the hugh mass that occupies the eastern side. This room is circular and is thirty-five feet high and ninety feet in circumference. Here are also found formations resembling fancied shapes, 'Pharaoh's Daughter,' 'Drunkard's Dream,' and many others.

"We pass from this to the 'Bear's Den,' through the 'Devil's Canyon' on to the 'Flower Garden,' so called from the beautiful white sprays and bunches of the finest coral. Next in line is the 'Coral Grotto,' 'Crystal Chamber,' and through a small passage, stopping long enough to examine a beautiful white curtain on our right, pending from the solid limestone roof and called 'Marie Antoinette's Lace.' This is five feet long, two feet wide and almost transparent. Here we also find the 'Bridal Veil Falls,' 'Snowbanks,' and many others.

"From here we commence to make the exit up through the 'Dome,' a distance of fifty feet. As we ascend the stairs, one stops to look back and gaze at a beautiful stalagmite rising from a projecting white slab of limestone named 'Simon's Thumb,' and immediately the old game 'Simon says thumbs up' enters one's head. So on until one has completed the circuit of the cave.

"The cave is now owned and managed by Mrs. Mercer, who always has good, careful guides to pilot visitors through, and the cave is open at all hours. Call and see Mercer's Cave while on a trip to the mountains."

This is the end of the brochure by Mrs. Margaret Mercer.

According to Mrs. Evelyn Mercer Stephens, all objects in the cave were named by her father and a Mr. Floyd, a school teacher at the Murphys Grade School. Mr. Floyd wrote a little booklet about the cave, which the Mercers used to sell at the cave for 25 cents.

I feel I should include some history on the Mercer family in this report on the cavern discovered by Walter J. Mercer in September, 1885.

His parents, William Mercer and Amelia Mercer, nee Stevens, both came from England. They met at St. Louis and were married in 1853.

Walter James Mercer was born at Salt Lake City February 11, 1854, while his parents were on their way to California, and he was brought to California when he was less than six months old. Later there were born William, Arthur, Ellen, Florence, and Martha.

The family came to Alpine County where the father, William, was superintendent of a mine at Silver Mountain, at Monitor, now called "Loop."

Walter came to Calaveras County in 1879 and began gravel mining at Douglas Flat; he had the "Old Judge Mine" there. He met Margarita Castruccia in Murphys, and they were married November 20, 1882. They had two children, Walter and Evelyn (now Mrs. Eva Stephens).

In 1885 Walter J. Mercer and F. S. Luckett bought the soda works at Murphys and for a number of years were

(Continued on Next Page)

OFFICERS OF CALAVERAS COUNTY HISTORICAL SOCIETY

San Andreas, California

President.....	Paul Lewis, San Andreas
Vice President.....	R. Coke Wood, Murphys
Editor.....	R. Coke Wood, Murphys
Secretary	Mrs. Sadie Hunt, Valley Springs
Treasurer	Mrs. Marian Brandt, San Andreas
Directors	Mrs. Alice Eldridge, San Andreas
	Claude Smith, West Point
	Harry Buchanan, Rail Road Flat
	Dr. Arthur Luhr, Murphys
	Mrs. Winifred Romaggi, Angels Camp

Las Calaveras is published quarterly by the Calaveras County Historical Society for the benefit of the members. Membership in the society is \$4.00 a year. Non-members may obtain copies of Las Calaveras for \$1.00 a copy. The historical material in this bulletin is not copyrighted and anyone is invited to use it. Mention of the source will be appreciated.

The Calaveras County Historical Society meets on the fourth Thursday of each month at the Courthouse in San Andreas. Dinner meetings are held each quarter at different places in the county.

EDITORIAL

The Calaveras Society was represented at the Eleventh Annual Meeting of the Conference of California Historical Societies by Mrs. Alice Eldridge and Mrs. Ethelyn Wood. It was held at the U. S. Grant Hotel in San Diego on June 18-20 with San Diego Historical Society as host and was presided over by President Irene Simpson, Director of the History Room of the Wells Fargo Bank of San Francisco. "There were 151 delegates registered, representing over 100 historical societies in California," reported Mrs. Eldridge at the June meeting of the Calaveras Society. She and Mrs. Wood also reported that the Conference adopted resolutions supporting Proposition No. 1 on the November ballot providing for a bond issue for \$150,000,000 to acquire more state parks for both recreation and for historical sites. Other resolutions approved by the delegates at the annual meeting urged the State Legislature to pass legislation requiring the study of California history and government for one semester in high school before graduation from the twelfth grade and also favored the creation of a state historical park in the old historic part of Sacramento.

Richard Bailey of the Kern County Historical Society will be the president of the Conference for 1964-65 and Walter Frame of the Sacramento Society will be vice-president. Richard Harville of the Humboldt Society will be treasurer and your editor was re-elected for the 11th year as executive-secretary. The 1965 Annual Meeting will be held at Sacramento in June. The delegates agreed that this year the greatest amount of effort should be expended by the different societies to organize junior historical societies and interest young people in our history.

President Paul Lewis appointed two important committees at the June meeting. One was the Nominating Committee with Willard Fuller as chairman and the other was a By-Laws Committee with Mrs. Alice Eldridge

Mercer's Cave

(Continued From Preceding Page)

engaged in the manufacture of cream soda, ginger ale, and orange cider.

Walter J. Mercer built the exit to the cave himself. While working on the exit, he fell thirty feet; he fell on his neck and shoulders and must have injured his spine. He developed tuberculosis of the spine, and died twelve years after the fall, on November 1, 1900, from spinal meningitis, at the age of 46.

Margarita Castruccia Mercer's father, Angelo Castruccia, was born in Italy and came to California around the Horn in 1849. He returned to the East and married Rosa Delecar and came back to California across the Isthmus of Panama. They had four children: Mary, Louise, Augustine, and Margarita (who was born in Melones December 31, 1866, and later became Mrs. Mercer). Augustine (called "Gus") owned the Armory Hall in Murphys at the time it was burned.

Notes on Mercer family history were loaned to me by Dr. Wood.

Walter J. Mercer, after discovering the cavern, filed a mining claim on the property where the cavern's mouth was located. He later bought other sections of ground around it.

As I stated earlier, the cavern remained in the Mercer family until 1946, and I believe everyone will agree with me that they did a tremendous amount of work in getting the cavern, which is one of California's greatest natural wonders, explored and developed.

KENNETH M. CASTRO
Murphys, California

as chairman. For the first time in 12 years the Nominating Committee will have to decide on a presidential candidate. As long as Judge Smith was living and willing to serve, no one wanted to change presidents. The By-Laws Committee will need to make several changes. There are no provisions for any standing committees in the by-laws and certainly there are a number of areas in which committees should be functioning, such as publications, finances, membership, essays and scholarships, programs, and a museum. Perhaps the time has finally come, with recent developments and the plans for a new courthouse, for the Calaveras Society to ask the Board of Supervisors to turn over to it the management and development of the county museum.

Plans were also made at the June meeting to continue our traditional policy of celebrating our secretary Sadie Hunt's birthday and at the same time assemble the winning essays. This is always a happy occasion and all members who can are invited to attend on August 6 in the yard of the Hunt Ranch in Double Springs.

The Conference is sponsoring a workshop in Yosemite at Wawona on September 13 for delegates from the member societies. The theme of the workshop will be the organization and operation of the small local historical museum. Resources people from both the state and national park services will serve on the staff and will attempt to provide practical advice on how to get things done with limited budgets. Mrs. Dorothy Firebaugh, our regional vice-president of Sonora, is chairman of the workshop. We hope Calaveras will be represented. Make reservations with Mrs. Firebaugh very soon if you are interested.