



THE CAVES OF CALAVERAS THEIR SECRETS, HOAXES AND GEOLOGICAL BEAUTY

By Charity Maness

Since prehistoric times, caves have been used by man and animal alike for shelter. The caves dotting the landscape of Calaveras are no strangers to being inhabited.

While the majority of the caves in the area were found during the gold rush by miners searching for prime real estate glistening with gold nuggets, the native Americans made use of the caves centuries before leaving behind archeological artifacts that would tell a tale of their existence.

As time progressed caves began being used for storage of foods, churches, community gathering places and here in Calaveras County, people even used them for bar-b-ques and dance parties.

Many of the Sierra Nevada region caverns are believed to have begun their early formation some sixty million years ago, prior to the Sierra Nevada Mountains being lifted to their present height. Lazy streams flowed through the area for thousands of years allowing the formation of caverns out of limestone beds. As the mountains rose the water levels dropped and caves were left.

“Rainwater, acidized, and percolating downward through the limestone to find groundwater level, dissolved calcium carbonate and other

substances,” wrote Willard P. Fuller Jr. in the April 1964 *Las Calaveras*. “Some of this mineralized water dripped into the cave chambers and started precipitating on the walls commencing the build-up of the beautiful speleothem formations.”

Over time formations of stalactites, stalagmites and other mineral formations began to take shape. A stalactite is a structure hanging like an icicle from the roof of a cave, formed of calcium salts deposited



Cave dining was all the rage in Calaveras County in the early 1900s.

Calaveras Historical Society Photo.

by dripping water. A stalagmite is an upward-growing mound of mineral deposits that have precipitated from water dripping onto the floor of a cave. Some caves have such beautiful and delicate formations that if touched by the human hand they can break or the oil from the skin can stop the formation from growing.

Moaning Cavern

Originally called Solomon's Cave, the cave is a complex vertical solution cavity deeper than 140 meters in a band of permeable limestone west of the Stanislaus River near Vallecito. It is believed that Moaning Cavern was entered and used as early as forty to fifty thousand years ago.

Human remains, as well as those of animals, were found in the cavern; some possibly lost, some perhaps having fallen to their death, with the chance remaining that some may have been deposited there intentionally. The remains were found in 1851 by J. B. Trask.

On October 31, 1853 the *Daly Alta California* carried a story from explorers of the cave, "at a depth of 300 feet... came upon a collection of



The spiral staircase in Moaning Cavern. *Calaveras Historical Society Photo.*



Exploring Moaning Cavern by ropes circa 1920. *Calaveras Historical Society Photo.*

over 300 human bodies perfectly petrified; that the hall contains an immense number of stactytes (sic), some of which were incorporated with the bodies."

As gold mining waned in the area, the cave was abandoned, later to be rediscovered and named Moaning Cavern; the name derived from the moaning sounds which emanated from the mouth of the cave due to air currents and steep entrances. The indigenous people claimed the ghostly sounds caused by air currents within the cave were the eerie wailings of lost souls and avoided the cave.

On Christmas day 1921, Addison Carley an early adventurer and spelunker, went to explore the cave that moaned on his friend Dan Malatesta's claim. With the help of a windlass—a type of winch—Carley was able to make it to the bottom of the big chamber.

Legend has it that soon after Carley's spelunking adventure, tours of the cave began and the thrill-seeking tourists were lowered into the cavern in ore buckets with only candles or whale oil lamps to light their way.

In 1922 a spiral stairway, rumored to have come from a World War 1 battleship, was installed in the cavern so that visitors could descend to its depths with greater ease. There also exists news reports stating that Mr. Tangerman of the Stockton Iron Works was contracted to design and build the circular staircase which contains 150 steps and is enclosed in metal guardrails.

In the early 1950s, R. F. Heizer and A. E. Treganza of University of California Berkeley investigated Moaning Cave and found long bones and cranial parts of nine adults and two children. Along with these they found hundreds of bones and bone fragments as well as Haliotis (mollusk) ornaments, Olivella (small marine snail) beads, a cup shaped pipe bowl and an obsidian point. The deposits were estimated to date back to 1000 BC and 500 AD. By the 1960s it was estimated that approximately 100 human remains had been found.



Exploring Moaning Cave circa 1920. Calaveras Historical Society photo.

Explorations of the cave have been made to the depth of 450 feet, the bottom remains to be found and it is believed that up to 16 “rooms” may exist.

The Cave of the Catacombs

A report by California State Mineralogist Henry G. Hanks for the year ending May 15, 1884, claimed there existed a cave known as the Cave of the Catacombs near Cave City.

He wrote:

The caves of California have been in past times used as sepulchers, as attested to the human bones found in them. This was noticed by those who first came to the State after its acquisition by the United States, and it is probable that the Calaveras River was named from the finding of skulls in some of the caves on its banks. D.C.F. Winslow, writing to the California Farmer as early as 1854, mentions a small cave on the Stanislaus River in which human bones were found. An old Indian informed him that the bones had been placed there in a recent period. In August, 1881, I visited a cave then rediscovered in Calaveras County which contained a large quantity of human bones. I had hoped to find some relics that would throw some light on the history of the human race in this country... but was disappointed, for nothing was discovered to show that the bones were not those of Indians which had been laid there within a period not exceeding a century. Besides these, nothing was found beyond some charcoal which formed, probably, the torches of those who came to deposit the dead; although two men worked for a number of days washing the earth

of the floor in mining pans, by which any prehistoric implements would have been discovered, had any existed, no discovery of interest was made. This cave near Cave City was named The Cave of the Catacombs.

Though Hanks had visited the cave in 1881, names of other visitors were found dating back to 1850.

Some of the bones found in the Cave of the Catacombs were brought to San Francisco and placed in the State Museum. The cave’s discovery and subsequent displaying of the human remains created a bit of a media frenzy with unfounded stories about the cave at one time being a prison where men, women and children starved to death.

California Cavern

California Cavern was discovered in 1850 by Captain Joseph Taylor, a miner, who named the great cavern and its extensive passageway system Mammoth Cave.

Its location was described in 1851 as *situated on Wadie’s Creek, one of the tributaries of Cooti Creek, and is six miles distant from Carson’s Hill*, with exploration at that time by geologist J.B. Trask.

While some believe the cave may have been used by the native Miwok due to the grinding rocks found in the vicinity, there are rebuttals to this thought. Stories related to author C. Hart Merriam by Miwok elders explained the lack of use by the Miwok.

The Miwok believed in the existence of “Che-ha-lum-che, the rock giant who carries on his back a big basket, which, like himself, is of rock. He lives in caves and comes out only at night and wanders about seeking Miwok to eat. He prefers women. Of these, he catches and carries off all he can find. Sometimes he makes a crying noise like a baby to lure them. If they come, he seizes them and tosses them into his big basket and carries them to his cave, where he eats them.”

By 1894 Mammoth Cave became known as Cave City Cave.

Mercer Caverns

Mercer Caverns was originally called the New Calaveras Cave. The cave was discovered by down on his luck gold miner Walter J. Mercer when he stumbled upon the subterranean wonderland on September 1, 1885.

The next day, accompanied by friends Emile K. Stevenot—a mining geologist/assayer from Carson Hill, and E. F. Floyd—Murphy school master, Mercer began exploration of the cave in earnest.

During the early exploration of the caverns human skeletal remains were found: four adults, one child and one infant. Further down in the caverns remains of what was thought to be a prehistoric bear were found, but later discovered to be that of a long extinct Sierra Ground Sloth, *Megalonyx sierrensis*; a grazer during the last ice age.

In 1902 the cave was excavated by W. L. Sinclair, who indicated that due to the position of the bones the bodies had been thrown into the upper chamber of the cave through a small entrance.

Soon after the discovery cave tours began with a price tag of 50 cents per tour. The visitors used candle boards called glims to light their way. Each glim held 6 candles. The first visitors toured the caves by fixed ropes and ladders, holding the glim in their teeth as they descended the ropes careful of the flame and the hot wax dripping from the candles.

By 1885 tours were in full swing with a September 1885 news report in the *Calaveras Prospect* describing the cave and its wonders:

The first chamber in the cave is about two hundred feet long, extreme height sixty feet, and extreme width sixty feet. From the roof hang stalactites perfect in form and grotesque formation, particularly one called "Calveras Daisy". The space between the stalactites around the coral-like formations, some of which are as white as snow and delicately formed, glisten as if powdered by diamond dust as the light shone on them. The southern wall is white as if it were painted so; is perpendicular, and would claim the admiration of the architect for its regularity, for a distance of over one hundred feet... We satiated our thirst in full in the beauties seen in this apartment.

Shortly after the caves discovery Mercer built a home by the cave's entrance, followed by stairs plunging into the cave which made for an easier decent for visitors. In later years the home served as a gift store and ticket booth.

In 1888 while working on an exit in the caverns Mercer's rope broke and he fell approximately 30 feet, suffering neck and back injuries that are believed to have been the beginning of the rapid decline of his health. He succumbed to spinal meningitis on November 1, 1900, at the age of 46.

Calaveras Cave

The *Daily Alta* heralded the beauty and wonder of the Calaveras Cave in a July 26, 1860 article:

Everybody has heard of the Calaveras Cave. It is worthy of a visit from everyone. We were kindly escorted through its labyrinth chambers... we have not space to elaborate on its description. Its chambers are numerous and its curiosities as wonderful and striking as those usually found in marble caves... Some three hundred feet from the entrance is a small lake, never yet explored by boats, of the clearest water in the world... Two hundred feet from the entrance in the famous chamber of the Know Nothings, in which their dark councils and political complots were held during the year 1855.

It further advised cave explorers to set aside at least half a day for exploration, wear old clothes and carry no less than three candles.

The Know Nothing party was aptly named as when asked about the party's specifics members would reply "I know nothing." The Native American Party (Know Nothings) was an anti-Catholic and anti-immigration movement supporting native born protestant leanings defending what they perceived to be traditional religious and political views.

Natural Bridges

Though some refer to Natural Bridges as a tunnel, it is in actuality a cave with two entrances. Coyote Creek runs through the cave, which is decorated with stalactites and eerily prehistoric or alien looking calcite deposits.

While its exact date of discovery is unknown, James Hutchings wrote of Natural Bridges in his 1862 book "Scenes of Wonder and Curiosity in California":

"The entire rock formation of the vicinity is limestone, and various are the conjectures relative to the first formation of these natural bridges or tunnels. Some believing them to have been formed by the rocky deposit contained in, and precipitated by, the water of countless springs, issuing from the banks of the creek, that, gradually accumulating and projecting, at length united the two sides, forming these great arched passages."

The consensus among many geologists seems to be that they were formed by calcium carbonate-rich springs emerging from the side of the ravine that contains Coyote Creek. The springs flowed from the walls of the ravine, and as the water evaporated, minerals were left behind. These calcite deposits (or

travertine) eventually built up to the point that they spanned the ravine and temporarily blocked the flow of the creek. The water eroded a path through the bottom of the deposits, eventually carving a creek bed into the underlying marble.

A second cave exists just downstream from Natural Bridges with only one access and egress.

Canal Cave

Near Lake Camanche, on East Bay Municipal Utility District property lays a cave made of a shelf of softer rock protected by an over-hanging layer of sandstone. The cave could hold up to 20 people and was thought to provide protection from the elements in the summer and winter. A spring that ran near the east side of the cave provided water.

This cave was believed to have been used by the Yokut, with either the Yokut or their ancestors creating the cryptic pigment pictographs between 500 to 700 years ago. The pigments for the art could be made from local materials. Yellow was made from limonite, red or orange was made from hematite or iron oxide, white was gleaned from kaolin clays and black was often made from charcoal or manganese oxide. Once the materials were crushed they would be mixed with wild cucumber seeds, milkweed sap, or animal fat to produce the pigments presumably mixed in mortar holes found near the back of the cave.

While circles, water and snakes are prominent in the art, the interpretation of the art varies among archeologists but most base the art on spiritual designs. One



Cave art—pictographs—adorn the walls of the Canal Cave near Camanche Reservoir, now owned and protected by East Bay Municipal Utility District.

school of thought for the art was based on the foothill tribe legend of Guksu. Hundreds of years ago Guksu was thought to be the main powerful spirit of the foothill tribes. He was good or evil depending upon the manifestation of the ritual or story. In the first drawing, he is interpreted to be in the negative form. The story portrayed in the pictograph could be of Guksu, the evil spirit, inhabiting the cave and then leaving. This is depicted by one symbol of Guksu, his footprints at the entrance to the cave, the comet above the cave, and then circles representing the spirit leaving. The comet most likely was used as a symbol of evil. Many believe that the center of the comet was struck with the point of a spear to cause the evil to leave. This ritual may have been performed at the beginning of each ceremony. The center of the pictograph comet is much deeper than the surrounding rock.

Another thought was that the tribal Shamans may have produced rock art at the conclusion of their vision quest to illustrate the spirits they had seen and the supernatural events in which they had participated. The rock art may have depicted a shaman's spirit helpers, portrayed his supernatural alter ego, and graphically illustrated the manipulations and rites he may have conducted while in the sacred realm, which might include curing, rain making and sorcery.

The shaman's rock art site may have been a sacred place that served as his portal. During his altered state of consciousness, the cracks in the walls of the site were believed to open to allow him to enter the sacred realm.

Further proof of previous Native American use of the caves are the several mortar holes at the base of the spring. While the mortar holes could have been used for the grinding of food products as well as pigments, there is a belief that they may have also been used as divining pools.

The water trapped in the mortar holes would dissolve minerals from the surrounding rock, combined with algae and other chemical reactions a sheen would be produced on the top of the stagnant water. It is believed that the native peoples used these as scree dishes, looking into the patterns and colors of the surface to foretell the future.

When miners discovered the cave during the Gold Rush era they constructed a flume line to carry water to mining operations further down the Mokelumne River basin, destroying the lower portion of the cave.

Calaveras Mortuary Caves/Chambers

Winslow Cave

Considered a mortuary chamber, Winslow Cave was explored in the 1950s.

Located approximately 2 kilometers northwest of Murphys a small pit dug by University of California archeologists into sticky black clay 15 m below the cave entrance produced 1735 disassociated and mineralized human bones and fragments representing 12 adults, 3 children, and an infant. It is estimated that no fewer than 100 individuals had been dropped into Winslow cave. Charcoal found on the deposit surface may be attributed to torches tossed from above by Indians, early gold seekers, or just curious passerby.

This cave, like Moaning Cave, produced a number of Haliotis shell ornaments and some large projectile points, yet it also held quartz crystals, a human-femur implant and fish vertebrae beads. They also catalogued 4,300 Olivella shell beads. These finds date the cave's use to 300 AD.

Cave of Skulls

In 1867 a number of crania were removed from the Cave of Skulls just west of Abbotts Ferry, which lay just above Robinson's Ferry on the Stanislaus River.

Much like the bones found at the bottom of Mercer's and Moaning Caves, it was believed by the science community that the calcium carbonate-encrusted skulls reposed on the cave floor had not been buried deliberately.

O'Neal Cave

Located near the Cave of Skulls, the O'Neal Cave was described in a 1951 exploration as a 15 meter deep vertical shaft "choked" with human remains and animal bones along with some unspecified artifacts.

Cave Skull Hoax

On July 18, 1866, Josiah Whitney presented a paper to the California Academy of Natural Science telling a tale of how, what appeared to be an early human skull, was found at the bottom of a 130 foot mine shaft in Angels Camp, buried in gold bearing gravels that were later buried beneath million year old volcanic deposits.

The media captured the story the following day and it was reported in the *San Francisco Alta* that,

"The skull is, therefore, not only the earliest pioneer of this state but the oldest known human being."

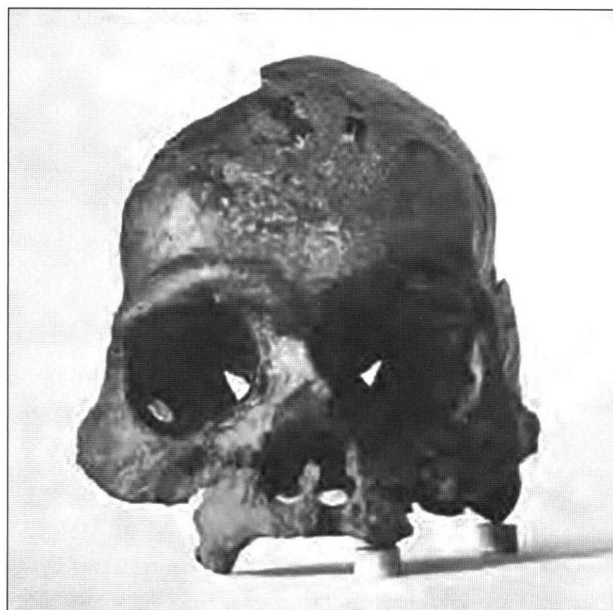
The skull was found by miner James Matson (Matteson or Mattison) who had sunk a mine shaft in the area beneath Bald Hill in hopes of making his fortune in gold. At approximately 130 to 150 feet, with no gold to show for his efforts, he found what he thought was a petrified tree root. Once he has extracted the object, he brought it to a friend in town who in turn brought it to a local merchant by the name of Mr. Scribner.

Mr. Scribner, in turn gave it to Doctor Jones in San Francisco. Jones sent it to the State Geologist Josiah Dwight Whitney as, at the time, the published volume of the State Survey on the Geology of California stated that man existed contemporaneously with the mastodon, but Jones felt this fossil proved that he was here before the mastodon was known to exist.

Whitney claimed it to be of Pliocene age, making it one of the oldest human fossils found. This claim would usurp Europe's position as having the oldest human fossils.

The skull and it's possible age was batted about from college to college, professor to professor, pitting creationists against evolutionists and scholar against scholar until, well, until the man truly responsible for the skull and hence the finding of said skull came forward with the truth; it was all a hoax.

While the hoax was well known throughout the town of Angels Camp, the skull had long since



disappeared into the hands of esteemed professors, which while specialists in their field, forgot to come back to the town and do a little investigative journalism.

Apparently, it was well known in town that Matson would continue to dig in his mine even if gold was not to be found. Scribner decided to take advantage of this by placing a skull at the bottom of the mine. As expected Matson found the skull and when it made its way back to Scribner he kept his lips sealed. Whether he meant to play the joke as far as it went is unknown, but none-the-less, the hoax was revealed.

Historian Ralph Dexter concluded about the entire affair:

"The desire on the part of miners to play a practical joke, the anxiety of archaeologists to prove the existence of early humankind in North America, the firm convictions and good faith of those involved in an honest mistake, and the confusion resulting from a mix-up of skulls, led to this long drawn-out controversy, unique in the annals of American archaeology."

Bret Harte (1836–1902) penned the poem "Ode to the Pliocens Skull" about the incident:

Speak O man less recent! Fragmentary fossil!
Primal Pioneer of Pliocene formation
Hid in lowest drifts below the earliest stratum
Of volcanic tufa!
Older than the beasts, the oldest Palaeotherium;
Older than the trees, the oldest Cryptogamia;
Older than the hills, those infantile eruptions
Of earth's epidermis!
Eo-Mio-Plio—whatso'er the 'cene' was
That those vacant sockets filled with awe
and wonder,—
Whether shores Devonian or Silurian beaches,—
Tell us thy strange story!
Or has the professor slightly antedated
By some thousand years thy advent on this planet,
Giving thee an air that's somewhat better fitted
For cold blooded creatures?
Wert thou true spectator of that mighty forest,
When above thy head the stately Sigillaria
Reared its columned trunks in that remote and distant
Carboniferous epoch?
Tell us of that scene,—the dim and watery woodland,

Songless, silent, hushsed, with never bird or insect,
Veiled with spreading fronds and screened with tall
club-mosses,

Lycopodiacea—

When beside thee walked the solemn Plesiosaurus,
And around thee crept the festive Ichthyosaurus,
While from time to time above thee flew and circled
Cheerful Pterodactyls.

Tell us of thy food,—those half-marine refectations,
Crinoids on the shell, and Brachipods au naturel,—
Cuttle-fish to which the pieuvre of Victor Hugo
Seems periwinkle.

Speak thou awful vestige of earth's creation,—
Solitary fragment of remains organic!

Tell the wondrous secrets of thy past existence,—
Speak! Thou oldest primate!

Evan as I gazed, a thrill of the macilla
And a lateral movement of the condyloid process,
With the post-pliocene sounds of healthy mastication
Ground the teeth together;

And from that imperfect dental exhibition,
Stained with expressed juices of the weed Nicotian,
Came these hollow accents, blent with softer murmurs,
Of expectoration:

Which my name is Bowers, and my crust was busted
Falling down a shaft, in Calaveras County,
But I'd take it kindly if you'd send the pieces
Home to old Missouri!

Rumors and tales of yet even more caves found along the Stanislaus River have been passed down through the oral history of locals, some tales larger than others, but many local youths recall swimming in underwater caverns as well as tunneling through previously undiscovered or unrecorded caves along that waterway.

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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; and the historic Red Barn Museum at 891 Mountain Ranch Road, also in San Andreas, which is open Thursday to Sunday, 10:00 to 4:00.

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 museums 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; Red Barn Museum (209) 754-0800.

July–September 2017

New Members:

Ronald Kemp—Converted to Lifetime Membership
Utica Water & Power Authority—Angels Camp
Robert Pentz—Lifetime Membership
Kiana Somers—Converted to Lifetime Membership
Sandy Wogec—Roseville
John & Betsy Moreland—Mountain Ranch
Carol Hart—Hathaway Pines
Dan Darling—Napa
Mike & Patti McComb—Mountain Ranch

Donations:

Roger Shipp—Wedding photo of Ray and Isabel Nielsen, cash donation
Deborah Ellison—Index cards and ledger for sales of supplies to local mining companies
Leo & Sharon Quintana—Victorian fold-out mirror, set of vintage coasters
William Lafranchi—Autograph album belonging to Amy Lafranchi of West Point dated 1888–1899, photograph, membership card for William Swithenbank for West Point Lodge No. 299
Gary D. Lowe—Cash donation
Erle & Raelyn Winkler—Cash donation in memory of Leland Fischer
Bill Wennhold—Ledger believed to have been used by Treat's Store in the 1800's; oral arithmetic book used by Lester Nuland, 1907
Judge Grant Barrett—Crystal ashtray and matchbooks belonging to Orrin K. Airola, framed photographs of Judge Douglas Mewhinney, Judge Joseph Huberty, Judge Grant Barrett, and Judge John Martin
Maria Kent Romaggi—Baby Jesus given by Father Kenny to Maria Kent Romaggi around 1958, used at St. Andrews Church
Rick Sprain—Postcard from the Poker Flat Resort Hotel
Wil Eberhardt—Sixteen pages of photographs and newspaper articles relating to the Eberhardt family
Lynn Sanguinetti—Cash donation
Daniel Myers—Calaveras Union High School yearbook 1937, Bret Harte Union High School yearbook 1936
C R. Demele—Indian grinding rock and pestle from Mokelumne River canyon
Phil Schlenker—Two gold pins from the Calaveras Society of San Joaquin County presented to Mrs. C. H. McGurk in 1920