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UNFATHOMABLE DEPTHS: THE MANY LAYERS OF MOANING CAVERNS

by Theodore Rossier

“It makes the average cave look like a rat hole,” claimed a *Stockton Record* correspondent after descending into Moaning Caverns in Vallecito in the early 1920s. Although he was referring to the physical size of the caverns, this quote holds true in several other aspects. Many tourists visit the caverns each year, and as they walk down the elaborate 100-foot-tall spiral staircase and step onto the stone floor of the main chamber, what they may not realize is that the very ground they stand on is rich in history and legend.

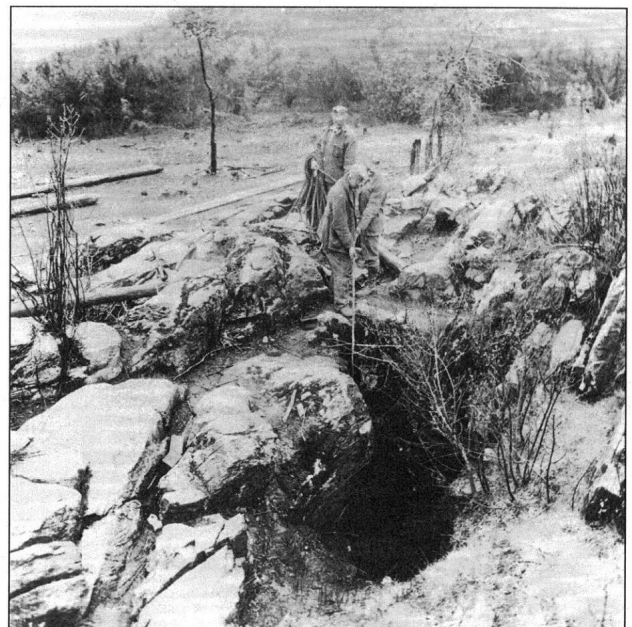
Throughout the Ages

Spanning thousands of years, many different groups of people have come into contact with Moaning Caverns. The first discovery of Moaning Caverns is attributed to those who first populated California. Being home to more Native Americans than any other state, it likewise was also the most tribally diverse.

Among the many tribes which populated California, those that had the most influence in the region were the Me-Wuk. The “Old Ones,” believed by the tribe to have inhabited the area since the very beginning, laid the

groundwork for the Me-Wuk, and are still revered by their descendants as the architects of their culture.

Some of the old villages around the Moaning Caverns area were A-Nuk-Ta and A-Koo-Ta-Nuk-Ka. These and



The original entrance to Moaning Caverns is explored with ropes.

(Courtesy of Calaveras County Historical Society)

other villages housed the Me-Wuk foothill population. The Me-Wuk population totaled 33,000–50,000 before large-scale foreign contact.

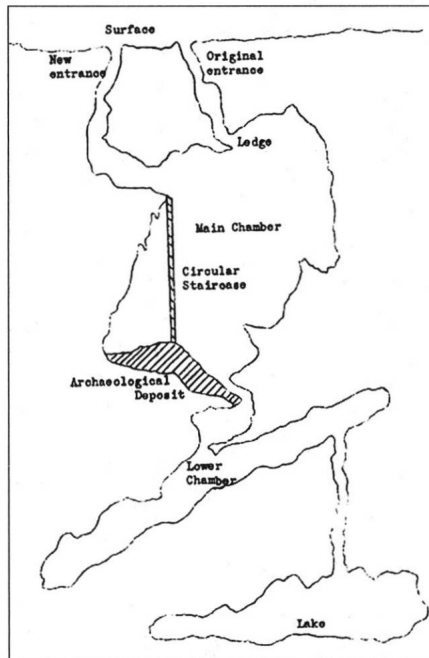
The Me-Wuk were able not only to survive, but thrive, in part by utilizing routes and trails connecting to other areas. In the Sonora Pass and Mono Lake areas, the Me-Wuk traded with their eastern neighbors in the higher country for goods such as obsidian.

Similar to the arriving Argonauts years later, the Native Americans heard the moaning sounds emanating from the caverns, which inspired the Me-Wuk legend of the Che-ha-Jum-che, a stone cave monster which emerged from the cave at night to feast on humans.

C. Hart Merriam, the author of *Dawn of The World*, states that the Che-ha-Jum-che “makes a crying noise like a baby, to lure them. If they come he seizes them and tosses them into his big pack basket and carries them to his cave, where he eats them.” According to a *Desert Magazine* article titled “Lost Souls of Moaning Cave,” Moaning Caverns was thought to be an “entrance to the underworld,” and the moans were the “eerie wailing of lost souls.”

The Me-Wuk legend of cave monsters is a tale told common to other caves in the area. Many names are attached to this Mother Lode monster, but Yayali is the most common. While the Che-ha-Jum-che seems to be attached almost exclusively to Moaning Caverns, Yayali is a monster that knows not just one cave, but several. As told by Julia Reed of the Tuolumne Me-Wuk, interviewed in the book *Ghost Town*, this creature was “built more or less like a man except he was about three times as big, was all covered with shaggy hair like a grizzly... Yayali would sleep all day in his cave, and after nightfall he’d go out... from one rancheree to another, looking for pine nuts and Me-wuk meat, the only things he would eat.”

Those who later explored Moaning Caverns found another explanation for the moaning sounds. Bottle-shaped holes in the ground, ranging from 4–10 inches in depth and formed naturally due to erosion over millions of years of dripping water, were responsible. Water dripped down into these narrow holes and created noise, the natural acoustics of the caverns amplifying and reverberating the sound all the way to the surface, distorting the sound into



This cross section shows the main features of Moaning Caverns. (Courtesy of University of California, Berkeley)

a moan. These noises were reportedly heard up to a quarter of a mile away.

The first written account of Moaning Caverns dates from 1851. At that time, the caverns were referred to as “Solomon’s Hole” and rumored to be long-abandoned Spanish gold mines. When the miners attempted to lower themselves to the bottom, the depths of Moaning Caverns appeared to be never ending. Even when flaming torches were thrown into the cavern, it was impossible to distinguish the bottom.

Moaning Caverns was explored by John Trask, a mineralogist under contract by the California State Legislature, later in 1851. This venture is detailed in the December 7, 1851, issue of the *Daily Alta California*. Trask made note of the torches dropped by the exploring miners before him, as

well as a vast array of human skeletons scattered across the stone floor, but made no “attempt to speculate on these remains, or the age in which they may have been deposited.” However, due to the shape of the skulls, Trask stated that they were “strongly presumptive of high antiquity.”

The French were another documented group to delve into its depths. In 1853, a man named Alhine and several others in his company descended into the caverns, which they referred to as “The Cave of the Sepulchre.” The details are covered in the October 31, 1853, issue of the *Daily Alta California*. Like Trask, they also reported finding skulls that were of “a race distinct from the Indians.” They claimed to have found over three hundred human bodies, perfectly petrified, some even partially encased by stalactites. Several of these skulls, as well as other curiosities found, were removed from the caverns, and displayed in local businesses and homes, many in San Francisco.

There were likely several undocumented expeditions carried out in the following years, but all discovered the same truth. These dangerous adventures yielded very little gold, and as a result the practical appeal of the caverns was nonexistent to the Argonaut.

Between 1871–1921, miners gradually abandoned the area, and took with them their experience and knowledge of the caverns. Superstition filled this vacuum, and for several decades the history of Moaning Caverns became as dark and mysterious as their depths.

What Lies Below

Although no official expeditions took place, some old timers recalled descending into these caves with a rope ladder as youths. One piece of evidence is a whiskey bottle dated 1886 that was discovered in the caverns sometime after 1921. Although it may simply be aged whiskey left by one of the original spiral staircase constructors in the 1920s, it isn't outside the realm of possibility that its date reflects its deposit.

In mid-August of 1921, locals Addison Carley and his two friends, Clarence Eltringham and Dan Malatesta, set out to explore the cave on Malatesta's claim. Aware of the rumors and legends, Addison descended into the cavern, and soon came to the conclusion that his hand-made lowering apparatus, a rope tied to an oak tree, was insufficient. A second attempt, on Christmas Day that same year, proved a success. Using three hundred feet of rope, run through a windlass, Addison reached the bottom first, followed by his two friends. Although the legend of the Che-ha-Jum-che had been disregarded, fear and uncertainty still festered in the air as they came across the ancient human remains and derelict mining equipment.

Although ignored by past miners, the three explorers found another method of finding their fortune—tourism. By 1922, it was no longer a rare venture to descend into the caverns because of commercial investment. On anchor points in the stone walls, the remains of which are still present to this day, there was a winch with a bucket attached. For a small fee, a candle-bearing sightseer could be lowered to the bottom of the cavern in the bucket.

When asked of the price of this original bucket tour, Serena Barth, current manager of the Moaning Caverns Adventure Park, humorously states, "We don't really have any records of that. We like to joke that it costs five cents to go down, and twenty-five cents to come back up."

Later that same year the spiral staircase was completed, fashioned from parts of a World War I dreadnought battleship, likely the USS Wisconsin. Only when this phenomenon of architecture was installed could it truly be said that humans finally rose past the depths of Moaning Caverns, but at a cost.

Because of the addition of the spiral staircase and other renovations including lighting and modern fixtures, as well as the moaning holes being stuffed full of trash and welding debris, the natural acoustics of the cavern shifted, altering the infamous moaning sound. Although these holes were later cleared, what caused Moaning Caverns' fame was compromised forever.

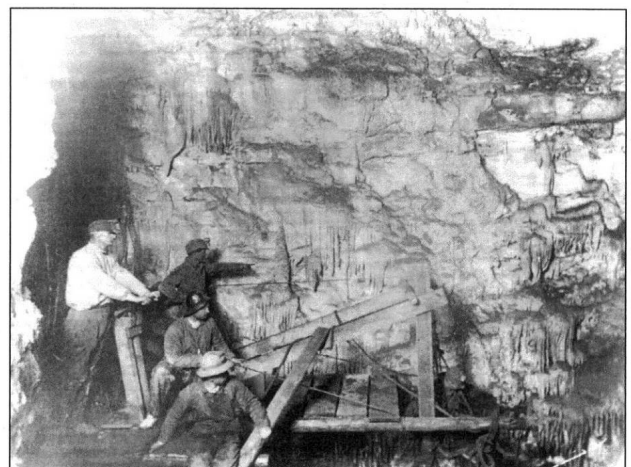
Almost as notorious as the moaning sounds are the vast array of human remains found both on and in the cavern floor. The skeletons bring up two particular questions. How, and why, did so many people find their final resting place inside Moaning Caverns?

Possibly the most popular theory, as well as most controversial, is that it was used as a cemetery or burial site by Native Americans. The steep vertical shaft above ground could receive a body quite easily, sliding downwards 45 feet until it would free fall another 125 feet to the main chamber's floor.

The Me-Wuk in the area were unlikely to have explored the depths of Moaning Caverns, as the caverns were seen as very sacred, holding great spiritual significance, a physical remembrance of the Old Ones. In fact, Moaning Caverns is still held in this regard by the local Me-Wuk, and many refuse to enter its depths, viewing such an act as disrespectful.

Likewise, those who inhabited the area believed that the Che-ha-Jum-che, the stone cave monster, feasted on human flesh, so it is unlikely that the Me-Wuk would have chosen Moaning Caverns as a burial ground. Merriam reports that when asked of this, the Me-Wuk would "look with horror on the suggestion that they or their ancestors might ever have put their dead in caves. They ask: 'Would you put your mother, or your wife, or your child, or any one you love, in a cave to be eaten by a horrible giant?'"

It is important to note that with thousands of years of human activity, and extensive trade networks, many people came into contact with the area, all with their own cultures and belief systems. Some may have believed in the cave monsters while others may have not, and thus



A group of men explore Moaning Caverns during the 1920s.

(Courtesy of Calaveras County Historical Society)

Moaning Caverns may have been used for the purpose of burial in isolated instances. However, the likelihood of it being used recently for such a practice is slim.

In September of 1950, Moaning Caverns was surveyed by two archaeologists, William J. Wallace and Donald W. Lathrop of the University of California Archaeological Survey. Wallace reported that it would have been physically impossible for anyone to reside inside. He found many bones embedded in layers of dripstone or encrusted with stalagmite, but found no evidence of burials.

It is likely that the vast majority of human remains found were the result of people sporadically falling in over thousands of years. Alternative theories that have been passed around include murder or disposal of the dead during plague and wartime. In combination with the amount of remains found below and the extended time frame, it is difficult to narrow it down to one single explanation. In spite of this, due to the cultural beliefs and customs of the area, some theories take precedence over others.

The oldest human remains found at Moaning Caverns are the skull of a young adolescent female found in the 1950s and dated to be 12,000 years old. The skull, formerly on display for public viewing, was returned to the caverns after much effort from the local tribes. Tribal frustration towards the displaying of ancestral human remains is not uncommon.

Waylon Coats, the cultural resource specialist of the Chicken Ranch Tribe of Me-Wuk Indians, speaks on this issue, asking "How would you like it if someone found one of your ancestors and put their skull and bones on display?"

In a similar fashion, Barth states that she would not want to "display indigenous human remains without permission," adding that "the last thing I would prefer to do would be to offend our local indigenous people, or any indigenous people. I wouldn't want to do that."

Echoes of the Past

The region became populated with more and more gold seekers as the Me-Wuk were gradually driven out, and the old tales of the indigenous were slowly replaced with the new legends of the miners. By 1920, the cave was rumored to be a bottomless pit to the

center of the Earth, a vacuum where no air could exist, or perhaps even full of poisonous gasses, making it impossible to enter.

One story recalled by Barth is that of "Maggie's Corner," a small hollow located near the midway point as one descends the staircase. Like most legends, there are many versions, the most popular of which is that "Maggie" was married to someone who helped build the spiral staircase. While waiting for her husband to finish for the day, she got bored and decided to explore, crawling into the corner which would come to bear her name. After squeezing herself beyond her limits, Maggie's dress was caught on sharp rocks. Stuck, she had to wait for someone to eventually find her and pull her out.

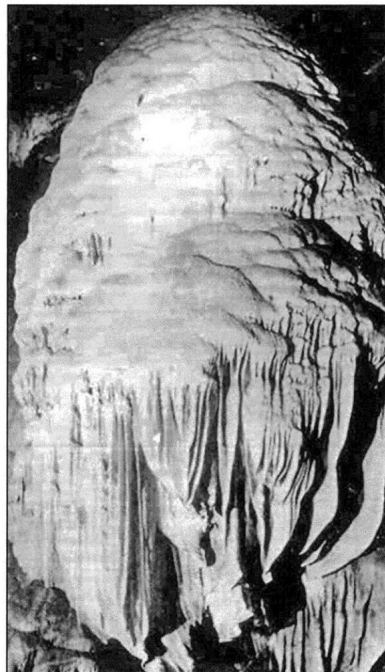
Another interesting subject Barth brought up is that of the "Missing/Hidden Chamber." John Trask wrote about several different rooms and chambers of Moaning Caverns, all of which have been documented and verified, except for one. There was one chamber mentioned which no one seems to be able to locate; it exists only in this report. Old timers in the area will occasionally speak of this hidden chamber, claiming that it is indeed real but collapsed years ago. Barth offers her own explanation on this matter, stating that "Trask was probably describing a different cave in the area," and that he "put it in as a part of the Moaning Caverns cave system."

The stories of Moaning Caverns, whether told by the Me-Wuk or by the miners, are an essential component of its history. Exotic mystery swirls in its chambers, just as it has for thousands of years.

Barth wraps up with this conclusion: "I try not to pass on anything that I haven't at least read in an article, or read in a journal, heard from sources that are more trustworthy than just word of mouth. That's how I tend to approach it as a manager, and how I encourage my staff to approach it; try not to pass on too many rumors."

An Interview with Waylon Coats

Similar to the tourists and scientists, the Me-Wuk hold the caverns with great interest, but for very different reasons. Moaning Caverns is seen to this day as a very sacred place to the indigenous people.



Moaning Caverns is home to many interesting geologic features, such as this 27-foot-high formation. (Courtesy of Calaveras County Historical Society)

Although religious and cultural beliefs vary around the world, respect for one's ancestors is near universal. To the Me-Wuk, the prospect of people entering into Moaning Caverns could be compared to someone treading on top of a grave. Rather than venturing down into its depths, Coats recommends instead to simply let the remains and cave rest.

Coats speaks for many tribal members by stating that Moaning Caverns should not have become a tourist attraction in the first place. Although it is very unlikely that such a change in course could be made, at least not in the near future, that's what the tribes wish to see. Besides the points previously discussed, one reason why indigenous views of certain parks may be poor is due to the monetization of Me-Wuk beliefs and history, often without the consent of local tribes. Perhaps it is this communication vacuum between the two parties that has caused such a variety of myths and legends to be born. With the recent removal of indigenous remains from display, at least some progress has been made.

Many aspects come together to form this unique feature in Calaveras County. History, legends, human remains and geologic noises create and enhance the story of the caverns. Whatever you choose to focus on is your choice, and as Coats states, "Whatever you get from it is what you get from it."

Because much opinion and speculation has been brought to the table, it is difficult to find universal truths. Coats responds, "The opinions happened way before our time, and those are a part of the Old Ones, and how they had to take care of the lands, and so whatever they did, we leave alone. It's not for us to change. Leave it be."

During the course of the interview, Coats addresses not only Moaning Caverns, but the area as a whole.

"I think we're missing a bigger picture here of 'What about the indigenous people of our area?' We are focusing too much on Moaning Caverns and Yosemite... but we're not tackling the main problems... Two generations ago, my grandmother's grandma could go outside and look at grizzly bears and wolves and tule elk. Two hundred years, that ain't nothing. Can you imagine what's going to be around two hundred years from now if we keep going the way we're going?"

Moaning Caverns is a cave like none other found in all of the Mother Lode, and is rich in geologic and human history. The caverns have received perhaps the largest share of attention among the caves of Calaveras County, both from the average sightseer and academic scientist. However, an essential component is often neglected; the views of the Me-Wuk. By seeking their counsel, a new



This artist rendition depicts Che-ha-Jum-che, a giant that the Me-Wuk believed inhabited Moaning Caverns.
(From Dawn of The World)

perspective comes to light, and a new layer is added to the unfathomable depths of Moaning Caverns.

About the Author

Theodore Rossier is an aspiring young mind from neighboring Stanislaus County. Born in Stockton, raised in Oakdale, educated at Columbia Community College in Sonora and currently at Stanislaus State University in Turlock, his outside perspective allows him a unique outlook on the history of Calaveras County. With a deep anthropological interest in California Native Americans and the California Gold Rush, his studies naturally found him in Calaveras County and later the Historical Society, where he continues to develop and grow his knowledge and experience.

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Calaveras County Historical Society

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Museum Hours of Operation

Downtown & Bookstore	Red Barn
Daily	FR-SA-SU
10:00 am-4:00 pm	10:00 am-4:00 pm

**Remember! Historical Society Members pay
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2022 Coming Events

Membership Meetings

Thursday, September 22

Copperopolis Armory
695 Main Street

Alvin Broglio of CalTel will be speaker,
"History of CalTel"

Thursday, October 27

San Andreas Town Hall
24 Church Hill Road

70th Anniversary Celebration
"Tribute to our Founders"

Thursday, November 17

Mountain Ranch Community Club
8049 Washington Street

Tribute to our Veterans
Irene Perbal will be speaker,
"The Invasion of Normandy"

Angels Camp Museum Lecture Series

Blacksmithing

Brian Connery—October 2

Fossils in Mokelumne Hill

Greg Francek—November 6

MiWuk Tribe Presentation

Rollie Fillmore—December 4

Recent Donations

Ted Allured—Calaveras Cement Company films,
photos and newspaper clippings

Carolyn K. Carroll—Ostermann family materials

Chinese Northwest America Research Committee—
Book on Chinese in North America

Clopei Days—Bear Valley photographs

Dom Nuccio—Metal cutting tool

Oakland Public Library—Collection of Calaveras
County materials

Ken Snyder—Judge Gottschalk certificates

Robert L. Vaughn Jr.—Stereographs of Calaveras
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Roark Weber—County government briefcases