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The Mammoth Cave Party

by Lynn Niedermeier

The sun had not yet risen over Frisbie Hall, the Center Street rooming house of the Western Kentucky State Normal School (now WKU), but outside some 50 students were noisily assembling for a five-day excursion. The girls wore shirtwaists and wide-brimmed hats, while the boys sported straw hats and red bandannas. Several horse-drawn wagons stood ready, one to haul provisions and the others to carry passengers. Many of the boys, however, were lining up in front of the wagons, ready to forgo the ride and walk the entire 28 miles to their destination.¹

It was a June morning in 1910. WKU's spring semester had just ended and the first summer term was about to begin—but not before this hardy band of students had partaken of the annual exercise in fun, fellowship and fortitude known as the Mammoth Cave trip.

The tradition dated back to 1897, nine years before WKU's chartering as a state institution, when Professor James R. Alexander of the Southern Normal School began taking his geology classes to study in Mammoth Cave.² The cave itself, known first to native Americans and then to Green River hunters and adventurers, had been host to curious tourists since the early nineteenth century—but for WKU students, the journey to this great natural wonder was as much a part of its appeal as the sights within.

Leading the Mammoth Cave trip was Professor Robert P. Green, who had assumed command after becoming head of WKU's geography department in 1907. His party would set out in familiar formation: an advance guard of hikers, wagons bearing the female students (together with those boys “who are affected by girls as steel is affected by lodestone,” in the words of one wag)³ and, bringing up the rear with his aides in the provision wagon, the Professor himself.

After some four or five hours, the travelers reached Dripping Springs, where they paused to eat lunch, bathe their blisters,⁴ and take shelter from the occasional morning thunderstorm. Wet weather made the remainder of the journey an even greater trial, for while the scenery grew more interesting, the “road” from Dripping Springs to the cave was hardly worthy of the name.⁵ As appetites grew stronger and legs weaker, Professor Green would fend off entreaties to make another rest stop.⁶ Local residents along the route grew accustomed to greeting the weary students, offering them water, giving

¹ Taken from descriptions in *The Elevator*, July 1910, 11; July 1911, 204; July 1912, 213.

² *Teachers College Heights*, February 1926, 2.

³ *Elevator*, July 1913, 331.

⁴ *Elevator*, July 1912, 214.

⁵ *Elevator*, July 1911, 205.

⁶ *Elevator*, July 1916, 333.

directions, and reporting on how far they had fallen behind the speedier members of their party.⁷

Indeed, as the Mammoth Cave Hotel came into sight, those on foot competed vigorously to claim the prize—a pair of shoes—awarded to the student who completed the journey in the least time.⁸ Record-breaking paces for the 28-mile trek grew more astonishing every year: 6 hours, 55 minutes in 1912, 5:45 in 1913, 5:35 in 1915, and a herculean 5:15 in 1916.⁹ After selecting a suitable campsite near the hotel, the champion walkers waited to greet the rest of their party, a process often culminating well after sundown with the arrival of the provision wagon bearing Professor Green.¹⁰ Once the group was reunited, everyone pitched their tents, drew out pots and pans to cook an evening snack, then fell into a well-deserved slumber.

The next morning, their underground adventure began with a traditional observance: expecting to be physically transformed by the dazzling sights that lay ahead, the students memorialized themselves in a “before entering Mammoth Cave” photograph. In need of attire that was both practical and modest, the girls appeared in homemade “cave costumes,”¹¹ outfits resembling gym suits that combined bloomers, shirts with elbow-length sleeves, and head scarves.

A Mammoth Cave party, 1916.



Over the next two days, lanterns in hand, the intrepid students toured all three of the available routes through the cave. Their well-seasoned guides impressed them by hurling lighted torches overhead to illuminate the cathedral-like spaces,¹² and amused them with a repertoire of ancient jokes. A wisecrack about the three-columned formation known as the Bridal Altar—that weddings were no longer held there because they “ran matrimony into the ground”—caused as much mirth in 1911 as it had in 1907.¹³ A boat ride down Echo River—“that lonely stream which so shunned man that it dug its bed far into the

⁷ *Elevator*, July 1912, 214.

⁸ *Elevator*, July 1913, 333; July 1916, 332.

⁹ *Elevator*, July 1912, 215; July 1913, 329-30; July 1916, 332.

¹⁰ *Elevator*, July 1910, 12.

¹¹ *Ibid.*; *Elevator*, July 1911, 205.

¹² *Green and Gold*, June 1907, 15; *Elevator*, July 1911, 206.

¹³ *Green and Gold*, June 1907, 17; *Elevator*, July 1911, 208.

depths of the earth”¹⁴—prompted comparisons to the mythical River Styx,¹⁵ and the acoustics never failed to evoke a chorus of some popular hymn. One of the students’ favorite stops on the tour was the space known as Monument Hall, where they could pile rocks in makeshift tributes to their teachers, school and state.¹⁶

Although their cave explorations were arduous, the students always made the most of their recreational opportunities. Games, songs and stories enlivened their evenings in camp, and the misadventures of their chaperones were a source of delight. Music professor Franz Strahm had to be pushed, pulled and tugged in order to draw his portly frame through the narrow cave passage known as “Fat Man’s Misery.”¹⁷ President Henry Hardin Cherry’s secretary, Mattie McLean, required rescuing when she attempted a swim in the Green River, only to find that “her head was down communing with the numerous fishes of the sea, and her feet were in the clouds.”¹⁸ Most agreed, however, that despite Professor Green’s self-proclaimed status as “tyrant of the party,” they would have followed him anywhere he might lead.¹⁹

One more task awaited the students on their return to school, namely to recount their experience, with emphasis on the humorous episodes, at chapel exercises after the commencement of the summer term.²⁰ Some incidents of the trip would change over the years, as wagons and foot transport gave way to buses and trains, but for the students of the Mammoth Cave party, their shared sense of discovery, comradeship and support of a WKU tradition were fond reminders that education need not be confined to the classroom.

¹⁴ *Elevator*, July 1911, 206.

¹⁵ *Elevator*, July 1912, 215.

¹⁶ *Elevator*, July 1910, 15; July 1912, 215.

¹⁷ Myra J. Logsdon, “My Memories of My Mother’s Visit to Mammoth Cave,” 1998, Mammoth Cave Vertical file, University Archives.

¹⁸ *Elevator*, July 1911, 209.

¹⁹ *Elevator*, July 1913, 333.

²⁰ *Normal Heights*, April 1923, 3.