

2015

Fountain Spring Cave, The Quest For The Unknown

I have always been fascinated by old local mysteries. When I first heard the story of Fountain Spring Cave in 2012, I was immediately captivated when I learned about the years of the relentless, endearingly optimistic search by some of the area's most notable young men. Their daring displays of courage and ceaseless fortitude, and what became of them and the cave they fought so hard to find, captured my imagination and snared me, body and soul. I could imagine what it was like to be Earl Kidd, and could identify with his quest for a personal Holy Grail, a long lost treasure waiting to be uncovered. And eventually, the idea crept on me that maybe I could finish what he had started, that I could find what may have never been found.

Earl Kidd was in his thirties when he purchased a large corner parcel, bordering 2 rural highways in Fillmore County around 1931. Here, at the south end of Fountain, Minnesota, known as the "sinkhole capital of the world", he would take advantage of this major route to Preston, the county seat of Fillmore County, by constructing a nightclub he named the Green Gables. A gas station was added, and soon thereafter sleeping cabins were constructed for weary motorists to spend the night. As you might suspect, Earl and his wife Florence put in long hard hours. Florence did all the cooking, and was famous for her pies and fried chicken. Earl and his lone employee handled everything else.

Original enterprise.

Earl and Florence had one daughter, which they named Marceline Adair Kidd.



During this time period, 2 major caves were discovered in southern Fillmore County. Both of these caves, Niagara Cave and Mystery Cave, were soon commercialized, and were receiving widespread attention. Both were located in remote cow pastures, far south of Earl Kidd's location, and although traveling and finding the caves was not easy, they proved very popular.

Earl Kidd knew that he was sitting on the perfect storm. His nightclub, gas station and campground was located much closer to Rochester, on the busiest paved highway in Fillmore County, and was well established. His business could skyrocket beyond belief, if only... he had a show cave.

It makes sense that every landowner in the town of Fountain, known as the "sinkhole capital of the world" should have a sinkhole on their property, and Earl was no exception. As fate would have it, there was a whopping deep hole on the far southwestern corner of his property!

The time was 1939-40, and the opportunity was ripe. Earl would seize it now - despite the turbulent times. (The Great Depression and the Dust Bowl were just beginning to wind down) and although Franklin Roosevelt was warning America that WWII was looming, the country longed for better days. Films such as *Gone With the Wind* and *The Wizard of Oz* reflected America's desire to delve into happier times, and Earl was determined to be a part of that.

Others had the same idea. A mere 2.5 miles away, a young man named Carl Schjoll, a former football and track star, died in July, 1937, while attempting to blast open a cave. Carl and Earl Kidd had similar show cave ambitions. Carl had been using dynamite in a 35' deep sinkhole, and when he climbed down into the sinkhole the next day he was overcome by lingering fumes.

Earl Kidd thought himself to be older and wiser, and had everything in place for a successful endeavor. Earl approached his project like Joe Louis, the national hero and world heavy weight champion of the day. His demeanor meant he would forge ahead with a one, two and three punch knockout.

Excavate this sinkhole, commercialize the cave beneath it, and open his own bank!

After the logistics were resolved, work began in earnest, but it is doubtful that Earl actually participated in the physical excavation process. He was already stretched thin, and, according to an interview with his elderly son in law Dean Kruegel, "Earl was more of a business man."

Earl had served as a sergeant in WWI, and was no stranger to the personal turmoil war causes. His worst fears materialized with the beginning of WWII. Everything changed for the worse, and 1944 seemed to be Earls last direct involvement in the excavation process of his fantasized show cave. Earls desire to complete his already established business and unveil to the world a beautiful show cave with a tri-fecta knockout punch was over. Earle leased the night club and gas station and moved the family to Rochester. Finally, in the late fifties or early sixties everything but the sinkhole, which had been "leased to an individual who was interested in developing the cave" was sold. Earl had passed the torch.

A vintage photograph shows a large generator positioned along the edge of the sinkhole. Wood posts supporting thick steel cables are visible, along with the generator. The cables were strung over the center of the sinkhole, and a large pile of limestone rocks can be seen in the foreground. And that's



about all we know, other than a report listed in the historical records of the City of Fountain, which state that a cave was found there but "never opened up to provide the spectacular caverns that had been hoped for."

That is where the original story stopped, and this is where my story begins.

About 75 years after Earl's attempt to discover a show cave on his property, I stood on the edge of the now collapsed sinkhole, peering 27' down, amongst a thick overgrown forest which had overtaken the site. How could anyone understand the intricacy of their plan? "Everyone is dead", I thought, "even their daughter, Marceline." Her surviving husband, Dean, stood beside me, explaining that to the best of his knowledge there was a cave somewhere below all of that rock. He gingerly unwrapped a towel, and slid out a stalactite, which he said Earl, his father in law, had found in that very cave. "When Marceline was a little girl she used to take this to her school for show and tell" he proclaimed.

Dean Kruegel presents the formation to John Ackerman. The formation was dated at the U of M to be 7,700 years old.

After a moment of silence Dean stated that it was time to sell this nostalgic patch of woods, and asked if I would be interested.



"Of course", I responded as I surveyed the broken, disintegrated and collapsed cable system which was tangled and wound amongst piles of dead trees.

The ink had barely dried on the contract when I began to hear conflicting reports from the surrounding neighbors. The reports ranged from "They never did find a cave down there" to "That cave stretched for one full mile." One elderly gentleman told the Fillmore County Museum that "I entered a sinkhole in town and traveled all the way to Earl Kidd's cave, where I exited." The only story I didn't hear was that Jessie James and his gang hid out down there. That surprised me.

I spent the fall, and part of the winter in 2012, clearing brush and trees from the sinkhole. In the spring of 2013 I embarked in what appeared like a NASA orchestrated interstellar space journey to solve this seemingly unsolvable and daunting mystery. Was a cave actually discovered down there? If so, how extensive was it?

It was apparent from the onset that I had two digging options. I would either have to play it safe and clear the sinkhole wall to wall, which would take a long time and a lot of effort - or pick a spot and dig straight down, constructing shoring around me as I dug deeper. I opted for the latter.

Knowing that the answer would only reveal itself after tons of rock and mud were excavated from the base of the sinkhole, I decided that a conveyor system would be a better option than an overhead cable wench. I called on Ron Merkel and Tony Becker, from Spring Valley, for their expertise in mechanical

marvels. Ron customized a 55' long hay lift, and after transforming it into a conveyor belt and maneuvering it through the forest, Ron and Tony helped me lower it down to the base of the sinkhole. One end of the conveyor protruded slightly over the top of the sinkhole, and the other end rested on the edge of a stout wood platform which I constructed at the base of the sinkhole. A custom



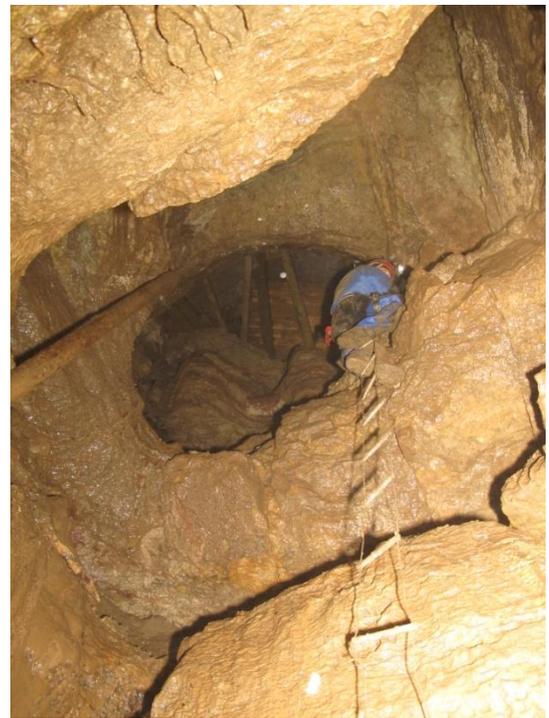
made steel tripod with an electric winch on top, was set up on top of the platform. The material would be dug up by hand, placed in buckets and hoisted up through a hole in the platform floor. From there the buckets would be dumped onto the adjacent conveyor and transported to the surface.

As I began to dig out the mud and rocks, I encountered artifacts such as metal conduit, which was used to protect electric wiring, rotted wood shoring, electrical insulators, and even a speaker system. No doubt this was used to communicate with the generator operator up on top.

I was really excited. Here was more proof that the original explorers were very serious about finding a cave.

After several weekends, and ten feet of progress, I could hear rocks and mud tumbling straight down into a void. Eventually I contorted my body so my eyes could peer down into the





void, and could not believe my luck! I saw open blackness! It was as if I had just been handed a winning ticket to the billion dollar Powerball. Just as I was bringing my head up from this black pit, a full bucket of mud fell off the platform above and crash landed on the back of my skull. In spite of my industrial strength helmet, my teeth snapped shut and my face was pushed into the muddy floor. White spots of light streaked across my eyes.

Life jolting reminders such as these, encourage the exercising of extreme caution by top side helpers, and give credence to the label "extreme adventure sport" when referencing caving.

Soon thereafter, our party of three promptly exited the sinkhole for lunch, walked next door to what is now the LaGables Mexican Restaurant, and celebrated the impending breakthrough. We all knew this was an extremely rare event. Typically these type of projects toil on for two or three years before yielding results.

When we returned I resumed widening the newly found hole. I pulled away some additional rock, and quickly slipped down into the discovered void. As I stood there adjusting my headlamp I quickly realized that I had indeed encountered a void, but unfortunately the entire perimeter was completely surrounded by rocks, mud, rotted wood beams and electrical conduit, which continued straight down through the plugged floor. I should have known better than to expect this cave to give up all its secrets so easily. Instead of searching further for more thrilling passage space, the remainder of the day was spent shoring up this cavity with rot resistant lumber.

The following Saturday I resumed digging downward, and was pleased that my shoring attempt had held. This was in spite of recent heavy rains which had increased the weight and pressure load on the shoring. Then, as I began to climb down the center of this room, to resume filling buckets, all four walls buckled under the extreme pressure. Without warning, the entire mass, including tons of muck behind the walls, came tumbling down into the void. I joined in on the ride down, but was relatively unscathed. That was it; the shoring concept was abandoned, and I began to clear the sinkhole wall to wall.

As I made perilous downward progress I unearthed evidence that the early cave explorers had created a fail proof wood shaft as they descended into the depths. Their shaft had to have been designed and engineered to hold back any forces mother nature could provide.

At the 20 foot depth mark, the nature of the project began to change. It was beginning to get downright scary. Tiny streams of cold water were running down the walls, and the temperature at such depths became colder, and light became imminently darker than it was earlier in the project. Even though it was blazing hot and bright on the surface, the temperature in the shaft was now a brisk 48 degrees.

I was constantly thrusting a 6' long steel rod into the floor, opening up small cracks so the soupy water would drain down into the depths of the earth. Left alone, I would soon be standing in a deep pool of slurry, unable to resume. Of course, the fact that water drained and left this shaft, combined with the fact that once in a while a gust of air would exhale up from below, was exhilarating to me. I was even uncovering rocks with white dots on them! White speckled rock is now well known amongst the caving community as an indicator that there is a large cavity below. Moist air rising from below causes calcium laden droplets to form on the bottom of the rocks. Once the droplets evaporate, white calcium dots are left behind. Find white dots and you will certainly find a large cave somewhere down below! I was also uncovering thousands of white dots up and down the walls of the sinkhole, which really bolstered my confidence in the project.

As I was digging in earnest, a tiny opening appeared. I wrenched a long jagged rock from the western edge of the sinkhole shaft. I laid down on the wet muddy floor and peered in. "This can't be possible" I whispered. Without hesitation I pulled back just enough rock and mud to gain access to this void. I slipped in and stared into open blackness. "This is it!" I exclaimed. I could see a floor 12 feet down, and noticed that the wide ledges at eye level were scattered with pristine sensitive formations. I climbed down and began to follow the passage, but could see that it ended abruptly just up ahead. I climbed back to the upper level with renewed hope this may lead somewhere, but learned that it also ended.

I could not see any signs that anyone had ever entered this spectacular portion of the cave. The fact that none of the fragile formations had been broken or sold (as was the custom) was also an indication that the early explorers had missed this cave segment. If this cave segment had been discovered in the late thirties, or early forties (as had been previously been indicated), the original explorers would have had to clear this sinkhole wall to wall.

My desire to know what had been discovered by Earl Kidd, what secrets had remained hidden from him, and how much he knew about this hoped for show cave, could be found somewhere down below. I vowed to follow the clues no matter the cost.

It was about this time that my volunteer help began to wane, and I was faced with the reality that I would have to hire help. The winch and conveyor system were running on a heavy load of electricity. And wet mud, coupled with large electrical equipment, weekend after weekend was like a game of Russian Roulette. Touching anything metal left us wondering when or whom may get zapped. (This in spite of the grounding rods). If that weren't bad enough, occasionally large rocks were deposited on the

conveyor belt that would flip over as they approached the top, and come racing back down toward the platform, like runaway bowling balls. A good hit may take the operators head off - or as my luck would have it, sail right back down the shaft and land on my head. After a full day of handling heavy buckets, everyone involved would proclaim their arms were one foot longer than when they began!

On a typical 2 day weekend I would have 2 paid helpers and one or more volunteers. I was desperate to finish this up. Heavy rains were loosening up the soil and rocks above the project, and that material would find its way down into the shaft, causing all kinds of problems. Large slabs which were attached to the sinkhole walls would occasionally peel off and come crashing down, sometimes grazing me, but mostly landing on the buckets, crushing them like grapes. Every time I would fill a bucket and shout "UP!" I would pull my knees up off the sticky greasy floor, and stand straight up against one wall of the sinkhole, hedging my bets that I was in a safer position. Tiny streams of freezing cold water would leach down the back of my neck and run all the way down into my underwear and beyond. I had no choice - if something did drop down I had less of a chance of dying in this position.

The neck pain from the earlier bucket incident was still a reminder that what I was doing was crazy. For the life of me I couldn't fathom anyone more maniacal than myself willing to endure or crazier yet, pay to endure, such dangerous conditions. I began to curse the original explorers; they were fearless.

Then one afternoon it happened. Despite a number of safety precautions, 3 stacked up empty buckets, which were perched on the edge of the upper level platform, somehow fell off, sailing down into the blackness. As I was bending over filling buckets, they landed squarely on my shoulder. When I woke up I pulled my face from the mucky floor and sat up. The first thing I heard was someone up top asking if John was dead.

I remember whispering "No, they weren't fearless, they were truly crazy."

Despite MRI's, drugs, physical therapy and an array of specialists, the nerve pain in my neck and back was not diminishing. But I had to press forward, the clues were sucking me in. I had uncovered a stout steel pipe along the eastern wall, and knew at once that when I reached the base of the pipe I would find it resting on a cave floor, serving as a base for their original shaft. I knew that these 4" diameter "well pipes" were only sold in 20 foot lengths, and pronounced that once I had reached the end of the pipe we would be dancing in the cave. Then, after many grueling and hair-raising weeks, the day came when I finally uncovered the "end" of the 20' long pipe. To my utter dismay I found a coupler attached to another pipe section! Now I was really beginning to get worn down. I had dug down a whopping 40', and still no cave.

I was now 67' from the surface, and still uncovering rotted shoring, which included massive old railroad ties. I had reached the point, and had pushed this project so hard, that my hands and arms were now numb because I had developed carpal tunnel. Combined with the electrifying neck and back pain, including the feeling that I had developed a hernia from lifting so many tons of material, what else could happen to me? I know that this was an obviously dangerous question.

Two weeks later, after following the pipe down another three feet, part of a wall peeled away from somewhere far above me, narrowly missing me. That night, during the 2 hour drive home, I hit rock bottom. The nerves in my neck and spine felt like they were on fire, and I could barely drive. I managed to get to the emergency room, where I was informed that I had come down with a severe case of Shingles. I was told that this nerve outbreak was unrelated to the nerve pain in my wrists, arms and neck.

Over the course of hundreds of hours, I had expended every ounce of energy to accomplish one goal: follow the traces which the original explorers had left, and enter the cave that certainly they must have discovered.

When I had reached the amazing 40' depth I had begun to uncover a slight 'V' shaped gap along the east wall of the shaft. Experience taught me that this gap was probably the beginning of a passage ceiling. "Follow it downward, and the gap should progressively widen, eventually giving way to air space" I proclaimed. Fellow cave explorer David Gerboth made his way down the shaft and agreed with my assessment. He was confident that the cave passage I had previously discovered, now high up in the shaft, was indeed related to the unknown cave below our feet. He also calculated that our unknown cave would be situated exactly opposite of that upper cave passage, only much lower. (Fractures that develop into caves typically run the same direction, at any depth) Once in a while I would stick my face into the "V" slot and feel a cool breeze wafting out. Even though I was a physical wreck, I felt more positive than ever there was a big cave somewhere down there.

Dave and I calculated that if my theory was correct about finding the cave at the end of the second pipe, like Dorothy waiting for Oz at the end of the yellow brick road, it would be encountered at a depth of 57 feet, or 84' down from the surface. (The calculations were based on the standard pipe length.) We also estimated that the cave would be discovered along the exact compass reading of the small cave segment I had earlier encountered.

But now both of my arms were numb most of the time, and a surgery date was scheduled. Combined with the nerve pain in my neck and spine, including what I surmised was a hernia, made it almost impossible to climb down the precarious ladder sections, which stretched into the blackness below, a depth equal to a 4 story building.

Fall was approaching, and I had no choice but to wrap it up for the winter. My mind felt like it was 30 years old, but my body was now 59 years old, and feeling like 100.

Part two

I was definitely not giving up. I was forced to use my mind to arrive at a solution, since my body



was rebelling. "Why not use our calculations to locate the cave from the surface" I pondered?

In the Fall of 2013, Dave and I plotted the estimated direction of the cave on the surface, and placed stakes where exploratory test holes should be drilled. This was not a long shot, we felt confident that our years of discovering caves would produce results. If there was a cave down there we would encounter it at 84 feet.

After months of begging the test hole driller to fit me into his schedule, he finally arrived on December 12, 2013. Several inches of snow had fallen the night before, and the temperature was a blustery 6 degrees above zero. Amazingly the drill rig did not get stuck in the woods, and despite the cold, the well seasoned beast snorted and bucked into gear. The task at hand was to drill 4 four inch diameter



exploratory holes, 100 feet deep under each stake we had placed.

Despite the bitter cold, and the aged rig on the verge of totally breaking down (needed to be serviced twice from the companies support team) the project continued. I stood there fighting the frigid wind, amid the deafening sound of the hammer drill, and kept my eyes fixed on the long drill bit, watching intently for any signs of the bit free falling. "Does it matter if my eye balls freeze solid?" I asked myself out loud.

Three holes had been drilled, and it was getting late. Several times it appeared as though the drill bit may have skimmed along a crevice wall for a few feet, but the depth readings did not correspond to our calculations. Despite the fact that I thought I had dressed properly, my hands, feet, and face were frozen. The wind chill was a killer.

I was nearing a mild panic state as the fourth and final hole began. Soon it would be dark, the driller would be gone, and I would find myself standing alone in this patch of woods, wondering what went wrong.

I began to resolve the fact that I would once again end up back at the bottom of that sinkhole in the spring. No, I was not giving up. I vowed to continue following the excavation relics to China if necessary, until I found myself standing in the cave I knew had been discovered in the 1940's. And if I reached the end and found nothing I would call it a day and move on.

At the 60' depth, I inched closer to the drill rig. Despite the fact that both of my hoods provided some protection from the deafening hammer drill, I couldn't hear my own incessant chanting, begging for the drill bit to hit the mark. At the 70' depth I felt nauseous, and had vivid visions of myself back down in that sinkhole come spring. I wanted to run back to my van to warm up, but I knew I needed to focus, and concentrate on the drill bit. A number of subtle things, both audible and physical, occur when a drill

bit nicks or slides along a vertical gap in the bedrock. Of course, during a direct hit, the drill bit immediately plunges downward, and the entire drill rig acts like it is having a seizure. I needed to be vigilant. I needed to keep watch.

At the 80' depth I just knew it was over. This was the fourth and final hole, and the sun was setting. I was having trouble seeing the tick marks on the drill shaft, which provided the depth readings, but really didn't care much. In fact I was now almost in a stupor, my eyes fixated straight ahead at the drill rod. I figured by now we had passed the 84' mark, and would continue down to the final 100' depth before shutting down the operation. As I held back my emotions, I began to turn around and walk towards my van. "Who cares", I exclaimed, "I will find more satisfaction and sense of achievement when I wrench that final rock out of the mucky floor myself, and slide down into the black abyss, just like the original explorer had done."

Then, in a split second, I saw the entire drill rod free fall into the ground. The drill rig shook uncontrollably as the driller frantically grabbed for the controls. He screamed "84 feet!" as he idled the machine down. My emotions were so frazzled that I didn't know how to react. I was frozen, and felt like crying.

The Cave Gods were smiling, I could tell.

It was pitch black as the driller packed up and finally drove out of the woods. A plume of warm steam was belching up through the test hole, creating quite a fog. I removed my gloves and warmed my fingers over the hole as I assembled the down-hole video camera. In spite of the bitterly cold it operated perfectly, scanning the shaft in high resolution, as I lowered it deeper and deeper into the unknown. Then, at 84' the camera rested on a slight mound of dirt, with three walls of bedrock visible just inches away. Obviously this was not a good sign, but as I twisted the camera cable from the surface, the camera soon swung around, exposing a slot into open blackness. Was this a side passage? Did the test hole encounter a crack along a main passage wall? Where were we?

As I headed for home I reminded myself that I tend to create more questions than I solve. Hmm.

The following spring, caver Al Lewerer and his niece Emily Hudson lower a high tech camera down the test hole to search for more clues.



Part 3

I felt like a cat looking into a goldfish bowl. I could not gain access to this void until a well driller could create a 30" diameter access shaft. Unfortunately the well driller who I typically use for such projects was experiencing equipment failure on the specialized rig used for such large diameter holes. Very few drilling firms actually possess such equipment, and combined with the fact that the rebounded economy meant that they were booked well into the future, even obtaining a bid was difficult. Winter turned into spring. Spring turned into summer. Summer turned into fall. And yes, as nature has it, fall turned back into winter.

On December 19, 2014, almost one year to the day the exploratory hole was drilled, and only one and a half weeks after undergoing a triple hernia operation, the driller I had chosen in August finally arrived. By the time the equipment was set up, and the myriad of mechanical breakdowns were resolved, drilling began in earnest. The temperature was 10 degrees - no surprise, since history tends to repeat itself.

The plan was to plug the test hole and then follow it down into the void with a 30" diameter bit. It was



paramount for the test hole to be tightly sealed so that the tailings and the bentonite slurry used to aid in the drilling process, could not run down the hole and into the cave, thereby depositing tons of slurry which could actually seal the cave itself. Sealing the cave was opposite everything I had been working toward. Several times during the drilling process I learned that the sealing process had "leaked slightly" but that "it was now under control."

At 2:15 p.m., on February 24, 2015, as I stood there in the snow, anticipating the impending breakthrough, the 30" drill bit broke through into the cave. All of the hundreds or thousands of gallons of soupy bentonite laden water disappeared at once. It did not take a rocket scientist to figure out where that creamy mixture ended up. Nonetheless, the Cave Gods must have been smiling on me again.

After all of the 20' long drill bit extensions were removed, I lowered my special camera down the hole. A clean rock floor and only a small open gap along the edge of the hole revealed itself. As I left the work site late in the day I was as bewildered as I had been one year ago. All of that water had gone somewhere, and had gone there quickly. I rationalized that there must be something big down there.

Part 4

March 14, 2015 would be the day of reckoning. Spring had finally arrived, and with it would herald a new beginning. Everything had awakened, and the earth seemed to come to life again. I felt invigorated, and my body had totally healed. No more Shingles, neck pain, carpal tunnel or hernia problems. I was back in the saddle and ready to complete my mission!

A custom made industrial strength electric winch and tripod had been made by Ron Merkel to my specifications, and was set up over the new entrance shaft. Fellow caver Kirk Moorhead and a team of other well seasoned cavers assisted in the assembly process. After the descending equipment had been positioned and tested, I secured myself to the steel cable and took a deep breath while my legs dangled over the hole.



Kirk Moorhead and John Ackerman prepare to descend down the shaft for the first time.



Kirk squeezes into the cave. Note the bentonite slurry.

As I hung from my seat harness, watching the veins in the rock pass by, and the sunlight fade away into the black abyss, I thought what a long journey this had been. I was more than ready to get on with it.

When my feet finally hit solid rock, I unclipped the steel cable and shouted up the shaft that I was O.K. As I glanced down at my feet, my heart sank as I discovered that there was only a small gap along one side of the floor. "So much for a big cave" I murmured. Soon I discovered that the gap was large enough for me to slip my feet through. Then my hips. Then my ribs. Then my head.

Quite surprisingly, I found myself standing up. I was in a cave, deep underground.

There was blackness ahead.

I stood in the passage and savored the moment, as Kirk made his way down to join me. Up ahead I could see a large intersection, and after Kirk wormed his way through the gap, we both walked slowly forward. As we approached the turn in the passage, the rock filled sinkhole that I had spent so many grueling hours in, came into view. There it was, like an old adversary from a bad dream. I had been so close, and yet so far away. No doubt seventy five years ago Earl Kidd stood at the exact spot which we were now standing.

As I glanced down, I was startled to see an old electric trouble light laying at the base of the collapsed rocks, the black cord winding up through the jumble of rocks. I could see nails protruding from the rock wall at chest level, where no doubt the cord and light used to hang from.

Yes, they were here. At once I felt flushed with vindication, but with a sense of appeasement.

As we rounded the corner, and began to walk down the 8' tall passage, it seemed to disappear into blackness. But no, after 35' the passage abruptly ended. Staring me right in the face was a 5' long star bit protruding from the wall, with a custom made support stand planted below it. Then I began to notice remnants of drill holes in the walls, along with other blasting artifacts jutting out of the walls, and sticking up through the mud floor, resting against the sides of the passage.

I broke the brief eerie silence, and softly exclaimed that "time stood still down here."

It was obvious that a major blasting operation had been in full swing, and for some unknown reason had been abruptly abandoned. I actually expected that we would uncover bodies under the mucky floor, which had now risen by three to four feet due to soil intrusion from past flood events.

Why did they expend so much time, energy and money, and leave so quickly? Why did they abandon their expensive tools? Why were they blasting the passages so wide and tall?

Part 5

One thing was for sure. Despite my reassurances that no drill slurry from the drilling process would enter the cave, the cave passages were thick with it. Adding to the misery, was the fact that the small stream of water which runs down the sinkhole and through the cave had certainly carried tons of this slurry with it, to points unknown. This small stream flows under the end of the passage where the blasting activity had stopped. Where does all this water go? Hydrologists have dye traced this water and know that it travels underground for approximately one mile before it exits out a magnificent spring. But for now it is impossible to physically follow it because the beginning of the route has been almost totally plugged with muck and slurry.

My theory is that when the original explorers discovered the cave, they followed this small stream passage for an undetermined distance before the passage rose back up in height. They would have reported the good news to Earl, who subsequently gave them a lease to commercialize the cave. The men were most certainly expanding the beginning of the cave to accommodate future tourists. Eventually they would have increased the low stream passage to walking height, until the passage naturally rose in height to accommodate the public.

But why did the blasting endeavor suddenly come to a grinding halt after all of their efforts?

It is impossible to answer that question until we follow the clues, which includes following the stream passage to discover what lies beyond. Unfortunately, that is not a possibility right now, due to many years of sediment intrusion, and the tons of slurry that had recently been pushed ahead, nearly clogging this stream passage.

There was only one option. All of the slurry must be removed from the cave, one bucket at a time. After that, the muck under the slurry mess that had been deposited over the course of 75 years would need to be removed from the stream passage, as it extends under the large passage. I was not happy.

Part 6

Wow! After 2 months of backbreaking work the final bucket of slurry was hauled up and out of the cave on May 9, 2015. We calculated that we had removed 7.5 tons of it. How many additional pounds were flushed deeper into the cave is unknown until we begin to excavate the nearly plugged 18" tall x 24" wide stream tube. That process cannot begin until the stream of water stops, which occasionally happens during a cold dry winter or a mild summer drought.

On a positive note, a lot of additional blasting artifacts were unearthed during the slurry removal process. We discovered another star bit, a long pry bar, a rake, a sledgehammer, a pipe wrench to turn the star bit while it was being pounded by a sledge hammer, an adjustable wrench that served the same purpose, a cold chisel, a pair of pliers, five wood tamping rods, and the prize...the actual large custom made bucket which would have been filled with blast rubble and hauled all the way up to the surface.

But one more thing - as I was walking knee deep along the mucky passage with heavy buckets in tow, I kept stepping on the edge of something below my feet. After about an hour of careful digging I managed to pull up a rusty bucket with remnants of dynamite sticks! Kirk Moorhead and I did some probing in the floor of both passages, and we have verified that three to four feet of sediment has washed into the cave since the 1940's. Who knows what other surprises are buried down there? As I walked in one spot with muck up to my knees, a black oily substance would rise from below, and spread out on the surface of the water. Maybe we don't even want to know what this could be!

And so here we were. Many questions remain. Especially the big one: Why did the explorers abruptly abandon the entire project and leave their expensive equipment ?



Kirk reaches the end of the main passage, where the blasting stopped. The water continues under the far wall where there is now a 4" air gap above the water. A stiff wind exhales out, indicating a large cave system beyond.

I had a hunch.

Kirk and I performed an accurate survey of the cave, and then duplicated it on the surface. Ah, the Eureka moment occurred when I learned that the blasting had ground to a halt at the exact property boundary.

My theory? After Earl gave the men a lease to commercialize the cave, they worked feverishly. As they inched closer and closer to the neighboring property line, the owner must have certainly been aware of the activity. The neighboring landowner was obviously on edge about the entire process because his property line actually skims along the western edge of the sinkhole! As the blasters trended towards his northwest boundary, it only makes sense that that the neighbor was communicating with the blasters (and the Sheriff) about what would happen if the explorers trespassed and used explosives under his land.

My guess is that once the blasters reached the property line, the owner gave them an ultimatum. Either pay a large percentage of royalty fees after the tours were underway, or face legal charges for trespassing - or worse. My guess is it evolved into the "worst" option. If these men were forced into giving half the tour money to Earl, and half to the neighbor, one would guess they had no option but to throw in the towel. But wouldn't they at least retrieve their expensive gear? Did the 84' tall wood shoring inside the sinkhole collapse while they were out to lunch, preventing them from returning? The answer to that is "no."

Ron Spong, a well known (now retired) cave explorer, recorded in his log book that "Elwin (Johnny) Johnson, who was the manager of Al Cremer's Niagara Cave, said that they had visited the cave in the early 1950s, and entered about 200 feet of passage that was accessible. He reported that the passage at the bottom of the pit was no longer being mined."

If this reliable report is indeed factual, it means that the entrance was still accessible during and after the entire blasting ordeal. So, the clues point to sudden abandonment. But for what reason?

Is there a major cave system just beyond the blasted passage?

I won't rest until I find the answer.

John Ackerman