

VOICES OF THE CAVE

TEXT FOR THE VISITOR CENTER FILM

Curiosity, wonder, an impulse perhaps to test, to dare. A human passion to know the secrets of heaven and hell. Such are among the urges that draw men into the dark womb of the cave.

Four thousand years ago in garments woven of tough grasses, Indians of the Adena culture explored Mammoth to a depth of two miles. We know of their visit because they left behind pieces of their clothing, their gourd and shell utensils, and even a few of their dead. Bodies dried out and mummified by the underground environment.

The famous actor Edwin Booth performed Shakespeare.

All visitors were shepherded through Mammoth by a new generation of slaves brought here in 1838 by the cave's new owner. Several became widely known as both guides and explorers. One of the more remarkable of these men was Stephen Bishop. Bishop haunted the cave, discovering one of its subterranean rivers, its great Mammoth Dome and other important rooms and passages.

For more than 100 years, these men and their

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The Adenas also mined gypsum, a crystalline mineral that forms on the cave walls. Why they mined it, we're not sure – perhaps for pigment in paint, perhaps for trade with other tribes and perhaps because they believed that the strange mineral produced inside the earth held magical properties.

Welcome to the Rotunda, the sixth largest room in the cave system here, but even more significant, a very important part of our history is located at this point.

In 1812, we had a mining operation that took place here. The year 1812 brought on another war with the British. A British navy blockaded our eastern seacoast, shutting off the supply of gunpowder from our allied friends. To defend itself, the nation was obliged to turn to new sources of gunpowder. One of them – Mammoth Cave. The soil in the cave floor contained large amounts of saltpeter which could be processed into explosives. As many as seventy slaves mined the saltpeter here until the war ended – providing over half of the gunpowder needed to fight the war.

Soon after the War of 1812, Mammoth became a world tourist attraction.

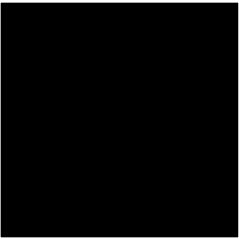
descendants comprised the core of the Mammoth Guide services.

Some continued to probe far reaches of the cave. Always seeking to know what surprises still lay hidden - shining their oil lanterns into the primal darkness.

"The Lord is my Shepherd, I shall not want. He maketh me to lie down in green pastures." Religious services also were conducted here in the middle of the 19th century. It must have seemed a likely place to instill sinners with the fear of God.

The preacher would often gather lanterns of his flocked around his feet on a stone pulpit. He could then preach at length without fear of defection among the faithful.

In 1842, Dr. John Croghan set up the world's first hospital for the treatment of tuberculosis. He had hoped the almost constant temperature and humidity would somehow cure the dreaded disease. When Dr. Croghan's experiment ended less than a year later, five of the patients were dead. Five others died soon thereafter. Smoke from cook-fires no doubt added to their agony. Within seven years, the doctor also died, a



victim of the disease of which he tried so desperately to find a cure.

In its essence, secretly and silent. Inhospitable to creatures of the sensuous sunny upper world. Yet, the cave echoes with the voices of men on the trail of excitement, profit, refuge, even salvation.

We are still peeking at the mysteries of Mammoth with headlamps, ropes, and raw courage. But the cave is more jealous of them now. An amphitheater, a bottomless pit, or a Mammoth Dome is seldom the reward of a modern caver at the end of a long dark day.

In the words of Stephen Bishop, "Mammoth is a grand, gloomy, and peculiar place – and a place not soon to give up its last deepest secret."